

IDEOLOGY, POETRY, AND INSTITUTION: A REPRESENTATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOL LIFE IN LINDSAY ANDERSON'S FILM "IF...."

IMAN A. HANAFY

Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, Faculty of Arts, Benha University, Egypt

ABSTRACT

This study is based on the representation of British public school life in Lindsay Anderson's film "If...", particularly in relation to the ideology and conventions governing public school as an institution which is supposed to provide a genuine education. Lindsay, the film director introduces a fictional construct of public school world while not real, it has much to say in a fictitious manner. Lindsay avoids the realistic for a condensing poetic force. This poetic expression can be the most expressive in speaking the truth and giving a voice to the unheard. "If..." lays bare the inherently political nature in British public school. The school basic tenet is to nurture political agenda that determine the role of power and ideology in the socio-historical construction of such institution.

KEYWORDS: Ideology, Educational Institution, British Public School, Poetry, Imperialism. British Empire

INTRODUCTION

"If..." is a British film that was released in December 19, 1968 and distributed by Paramount Pictures. It was produced and directed by Lindsay Anderson. The film stars Malcolm McDowell, Richard Warwick, and David Wood played the roles of Travis, Wallace, and Knightly. They are the Crusaders who launch an attack on the custom and tradition of their school. "If..." is mainly a criticism of British public school life.

This study is based on the representation of British public school life in Lindsay Anderson's film "If...", particularly in relation to the ideology and conventions governing public school. As an important educational institution, the primary role of the school as a conveyor of ideology proved dominant. "If..." lays bare the inherently political nature in British public school. The school basic tenet is to nurture political agenda that determine the role of power and ideology in the socio-historical construction of such institution.

As a work of art, the film swings between white, black, and color photography in which reality and fantasy merge. Anderson, the film director introduces a fictional construct of public school world while not real; it has much to say in a fictitious manner. Lindsay avoids the realistic for a condensing poetic force. This poetic expression can be the most expressive in speaking the truth and conveying a real picture of public school in Britain during the sixties. Michel Duran explains:

Anderson does not deny himself access to fantasy. He blends the outmost realism with the vagaries of his imagination, just as he mixes together black and white and color. In the process he throws off the rational spectator but delights the true cinema lover.

Traditionally, British public schools refer to educational institutional independence which is not based on religion or social classes. These schools are exclusively boys' boarding schools that are under public administration. It is basically

boarding school in which the schoolboys are separated from their child lifestyle and protected cosmos.

Whatever the local organization, mass schooling institutionalized the separation of children from society. School was a universalized space specifically designed to hold children. It was a space in which teachers developed their professional role, educating and disciplining the young. Control was in the buildings, the space created, and in the material contents of this space- furniture and equipment. Under the influence of school architecture the child was transformed into a schoolchild, into a subject of school culture (Burke and Grosvenor 65).

In general, these schools are evolved from grammar schools to gain the prestige of being the cradle of English gentlemen. Their main aim of is to educate the sons of officers and administrators of the British Empire.

Anderson's "If..." has been thoroughly reviewed as an attack on the system, a revolution against traditional education. The winner of the Palme d'Or at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival, "If..." severely criticized the system of British public school life. It totally focuses on the negative aspects of such institution as being outdated and damaging. Yet, no much attention has been paid to the film's imperialistic ideology which is employed in the hidden curriculum of British public school at that time. For years, public school ethos is to promote ideas of service to Crown and Empire. Its ideology is to shape prestigious gentlemen who will bear the heavy burden on their shoulder to help Britain enlarge its Empire. Its goal is not to promote academic success, but rather to enhance character and spirit. The schools tend to adopt strict discipline and duty-bound, Nathan Roberts states that "they taught boys those habits of obedience, self-command, and authority necessary for a future role in public life and the administration of empire."

Lindsay Anderson, the director of the 1968 film "If..." is the son of the Empire. He was born in India and educated at Cheltenham where the action of the film took place. In *Never Apologise: the collected writings. Lindsay Anderson*, Anderson himself reports that he attended Cheltenham College in the late thirties. (36-7) This explicit link between what happens on the screen and Anderson's own experience becomes the focus of François Gault writing for Le Coopérateur de France in 1969, highlighting the autobiographical information, which adds to the film a "confounding degree of exactitude and veracity". Besides, the script itself is based on the schooling experience of the scriptwriters, David Sherwin and John Howlett who were educated in Tonbridge School in Kent and conveyed much of their experience for the content of "if...". Their collaborations with the director Lindsay Anderson provide a faithful picture of English public school life. Apparently semi-autobiographical, Anderson asserts the presence of the director side by side with the author when he declares that the director is "a central figure that cannot stand alone" (*Never Apologise: the collected writings. Lindsay Anderson*199) in the process of filmmaking.

Though the film was scripted before the students' activist movements in the 1960s, the relation between the film and the current events at the time gives the film a prophetic feature which stands as a witness to the social and cultural upheavals at that time. The film was made at the time of the May 1968 civil unrest in France where students protested against the principles and beliefs of the traditional institutions. In Britain, students also expressed their frustration and staged sit-ins in different places in London. Thereby, the film is viewed as a historical text which portrays what is happening at a given moment in time. The reviewer Jamie Russel explains:

Anderson captures the spirit of youthful rebellion beautifully, linking it with the sweeping political changes that were dominating the headlines through the photos of Mao, Che Guevara, and Vietnam that

adorn the walls of Mick's bedroom.

Moreover, the film foregrounds this issue even further. It provides the interesting counterpart between the general contexts of the student's revolt to the social disturbance influencing Europe at the time. (Izod et al.)

However, Anderson insists on the film's general theme, that there is no relation between the film and the social and cultural events. In the "Notes for a Preface to the Published Script", Anderson and Sherwin illustrate the point convincingly:

Essentially the Public School milieu of the film provides material for a metaphor. Even the coincidence of its making and release with the world-wide phenomenon of student revolt was fortuitous. The basic tensions, between hierarchy and anarchy, independence and tradition, liberty and law, are always with us.

(Never Apologise: the collected writings. Lindsay Anderson 120)

Anderson lays emphasis on the universality of the film, referring to Dr. Johnson's aesthetic concern. In *The Lives of the English Poets*, Samuel Johnson asserts that "great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions and in descriptions not descending to minuteness" (14). In the film, Anderson portrays the dilemma of boarding public school life in which the schoolboys protest against everything the school stands for. Anderson emphasizes:

Any school – particularly any boarding school – is a microcosm; another inducement for anyone who hankers, as I always do, for that kind of poetry which can claim 'the grandeur of generality'.

(Never Apologise: the collected writings. Lindsay Anderson 113)

The microcosm of school is largely presented as a world isolated from outside world in which students face all kinds of negligence and inattentiveness. When Jute, a new student asks for help because he cannot see his name on the form lists hanged on the information board, he is dismissively repudiated by Stephens because as a "scum," i.e. a new boy, he should not speak to seniors. In addition, senior boys; whips have given an authority to coerce and punish. Those whips are the perfect whose job is to maintain control and discipline in the school, instead they strike fear in the hearts of their fellows by their intimidating character. In his welcome speech to the new boys, Mr. Kemp, the housemaster refers to the whips as their "new family", and advises them to expect the "rough and tumble" that accompanies any family.

Further, Mr Kemp is easily manipulated by the whips into giving them a free hand in enforcing discipline. The whips enact rituals of control and unjust exercise of power. Rowntree, the chief whip, reflects his disgust for Travis' attack on him as an assault on those middle class values praised in headmaster's talk and chapel's sermon, declaring that "Travis threatens the stability of the house." This attack results in unjust and cruel whip to Travis. This subjective punishment by the whips is articulated as a source of real anger and defiant attitude. Travis responds:

The thing I hate about you, Rowntree, is the way you give Coca-Cola to your scum, and your best teddy-bear to Oxfam, and expect us to lick your frigid fingers for the rest of your frigid life.

Travis' submissive reaction in thanking Rowntree before leaving the punishment room is a powerful expression of the contemptuous prejudice of the schoolboys which are actively established under threat of a whipping.

Teaching in public school has always been linked to control, either physically within school walls, or with a corporal punishment. Traditionally, school corporal punishment is an official punishment for mischief done by schoolboys. It involves beating the student a given number of times in a generally systematic and planned ceremony. The scene during

which the three main protagonists in “If...” are being whipped because of being a general nuisance and danger to the house is an evidence for which the public school’s convention works assumes further significance. Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence"(112) is particularly useful for an examination of punishment practices as symbolic enforcement of a cultural domination in the hidden curriculum. This hidden curriculum reinforces and reproduces the ethos of British public school in cherishing the imperial British character. The manner in which this type of violence operates through taken-for-granted ethos of schooling contains politics. The unjust dominance of the whips which results in whipping Wallace and Knightly four strokes of the cane each, while Travis gets ten for his offensive reaction against the chief whip is a practical immediate recognition of social classifications and of hierarchies. It demonstrates the way the social hierarchy of society is recreated by the school.

The customs of public school is mainly based on the existing hierarchy of students; fagging; the term employed to describe a traditional British educational practice in which a junior schoolboy is serving senior schoolboy, the whips. It aims at preventing anarchy and lawless tyranny. The fag system allows the schoolboys to understand and accept that if one were to become a leader, one first had to become a follower and obey orders from those of higher status. The junior boys fag for older boys while they are under strict discipline and feel such a responsible duty, aiming at providing the best models. The fagging system is recommended in public school to emphasize manliness and decency. In contrast to possible expectation, in the film storyline, this fagging results in harsh discipline, and corporal punishment. The frenzy perfect are permitted to whip the juniors to keep discipline. Fagging is also associated with sexual abuse at the hand of the whips. While Bobby Philips is scumming for Rowntree and his fellow whips, the senior boys discuss him as though he is meat. In this unexpressed desires, Philips is accused of “purity”. Mischievously, Rowntree arranges for Philips to be Denson's personal fag.

Moreover, the regime of bullying is one of the reasons of the underlying tension that have been developing in British public school. Throughout the film, bullying becomes the apparent behavior among schoolboys. The film begins with the start of a new term where students are viewed running in the corridor amid the uproar, clamor and chaotic atmosphere and the schoolboys are fighting together. Stephen ostensibly breaks up a fight, only to condemn the victim “a fat Jew”. The scene in which Biles has been bullied is more striking; he is tied upside down and has his head flushed in the toilet pan. Further, Wallace and Knightly fence in the gym, soon joined by Travis; as they fight, they pronounce heroic statements, “death to tyrants” chasing Travis and cutting his hand: “real blood!” says Travis, incredulous. The exercise of bullying between schoolboys has negative consequences for the general school climate. It eliminates the rights of boys to learn in a safe environment without fear. Consequently, it damages the character of the students who bully and their victim.

In the film, Anderson gives a further picture of aggression and hostility in his portrayal of the relationship between teacher and schoolboys. Schoolboys are exposed to ill-treatment even from those who should be most trustworthy. The teacher of geometry slaps Brunning on the back of his head, for no reason, and then slipping his hand inside Jute’s shirt to painfully pinch his nipple. This rude and disrespected behavior of the teacher creates a feeling of resentment among schoolboys. Further, incompetent and careless teacher is also noticeable in the scene when the history teacher enters the class on his bike handing back their holiday essays. Whip Denson’s is “bad”; Travis’ essay was lost “somewhere in the Mont Blanc tunnel, but I’m sure it was good.” The master tries to engage the boys in discussion of the origins of the First World War, but in vein. A complete lack of response results in the teacher setting some writing. Oblivious to the corruption within these revered walls, the headmaster's speech is a parody of the system of education at that time:

Education in Britain is...a nubile Cinderella, sparsely clad, and much interfered with! (sniggers from the whips) Britain today is a powerhouse of ideas, experiment, imagination. Why, everything from pop music to pig-breeding, from atom-power stations to mini-skirts, and that's the challenge we've got to meet. There are boys in college in whom the muscles of creativeness are flexing, the pinions of imagination twitching: that's what makes my job worth doing; what makes college an exciting place.

This traditional system of British public school has adverse physical, psychological and educational outcomes. This is shown in the three protagonists' increased aggressive and destructive behavior. The three repels (the crusaders) are in their study drinking vodka. Wallace is smoking in the armory. Travis imagines a nuclear apocalypse. He is firing on montages of pictures on his wall. He preaches that "there's no such thing as a wrong war: violence and revolution are the only pure acts. War is the last possible creative act." Then, he takes a razor from his drawer, and cuts his hand. He does the same for Wallace and Knightly, the three becoming blood brothers; they swear: "death to the oppressor"; "the resistance"; "liberty". "One man can change the world with a bullet in the right place", says Travis, and he gets live bullets from his window ledge.

The protagonists find themselves occasionally having to break school rules for reasons the viewer can identify with, and might get severely punished when caught – but they have not embarked on a total rebellion against the school as a system yet. They can see the false authoritarian regime and its abuse and corruption, but their experiences are immature and juvenile. Travis is a "hair rebel", who feels suffocating of casual violence of the cadres of such institution. This is viewed in his experiment of auto-asphyxiation where he voluntarily clamps his face with plastic bag. Listening to the Sanctus from the MissaLuba, a religious choral work merging boys' voices and African drums; significantly, when the drumming speeds up into a rage, Travis takes the song back to the beginning. He is not yet ready for the rebellion. He cuts pictures from his magazine; it depicts a lion, in a tree, waiting.

Therefore, in such an institution of arbitrary violence and cruelty, the school house is filled with nuisance and neurotic fury. The analysis of the film as a document of the social and cultural concern opens a window onto public school dilemma. It exposes the barriers that stand against change and development. Anderson is a revolutionary, making a political polemic in the angry days of 1968. Herein lies the home, say Grosvenor and Lawn, of the myth about education, "this who we are and this what we do"; sacrifice, public service, the struggle for education and the coming into the light. And behind it all, control, and power. (359) Existing education system seems to foster brutality and violence and hinder elevating the status of education. The three protagonists, Mick Travers, Johnny Knightly, and Wallace challenge the status quo. They protest against the conventionality of their boarding school.

The attack on the system starts when the crusaders hurt the chaplain badly. On maneuvers, the crusaders are forced to take the most tortuous route through the scrub, only to be charged by Peanuts and his troop, and their "yell of hate". Mr. Thomas attacks them with a thunder flash; "You're all dead", he cheers, "I've won". While the trainees take tea, the crusaders starts shooting, first the tea pot, then the army lorry, and finally bayoneting the trembling chaplain. So the crusaders are punished; the headmaster states that "I take this seriously...very seriously indeed. The Reverend Woods might have been quite seriously hurt- do you realize that? Now, I want you to apologize to him, is that clear?" The headmaster slides open the long drawer over the fireplace; from which emerges the chaplain. The boys shake his hand. Then the headmaster closes the drawer. In this scene, Anderson fuses the poetic element and challenges the audience's expectations in terms of a realistic portrayal of the storyline. It may best be thought of as a fiction which rouses wonder

through elements of the impossible. In the process of filmmaking, Anderson consciously uses poetic elements in which social and political issues are frequently examined through the very medium of the departure from reality; “the one thing that can rarely be said of fantasy is that it has nothing to do with reality.” (Hunt and Lenz 2)

The combination of fantasy and reality is the basic means of any representation. The poetic element of the film does not mean unreal but is the core of the filmmaking process. The film provides an illustration of the human dimension behind the script and explains the creative dynamic elements which become an intrinsic part of the production of the film. “If....” is meant to be considered metaphorically in which the audience goes beyond the surface image and penetrates the reality of its particular world. In his attempt to clarify his poetic in putting the chaplain in the drawer, Anderson, as a director, provides evidence of the dialectic which he places at the heart of his artistic practice as a whole:

I used to throw myself against reality out of which I can create something – but to create that reality is very hard for me. I only seem able to work through some kind of dialectic. (*The Diaries*174)

However, the question remains, why is the chaplain in the drawer? He is an image, “a phantom of authenticity which always ends up just short of reality” (Ward 71).

As a work of art, the film is a special place for moving pictures: “The whole dimension of everyday life with its infinitesimal movements and its multitude of transitory actions could be disclosed nowhere but on the screen.” (Burke 33) The text of cinema not only uses languages, but pictures and images which the public consciousness is usually aware of. During the process of filmmaking, Anderson accuses Sherwin, the scriptwriter for not having written one single line of dialogue between the protagonists from the scene of punishment for shooting the chaplain until the very end of the film. Sherwin’s replies, “It’s called poetry, Lindsay – the poetry of cinema” (Sherwin 23). Curiously, this silence in the novel sparks the imagination from which the viewer makes sense of the world. Such is the power of cinema, with each individual sovereign, and each interpreting according to his own experiences. And wonderfully, these ideas liberate the viewer from his world of simulation since the viewer’s imagination is forced to fill the blank spaces left by the writer.

The schoolboys’ sense of liberation is also portrayed in a poetic manner. Anderson, the film director has the instinct of a poet. His reality is so defined by image and imagination in which the line blurs. In the scene where Travis and Knightly flee from the school and steal a motorbike running in the open road, they meet The Girl in a café. The Girl encounters Travis in a fantastic wrestling, taking the shape of the tiger to express her freedom against men servitude. The three of them take the bike going round the field with The Girl’s arms out wide to embrace the world and enjoy the exhilaration of real freedom. The emphasis on freedom is also viewed in Mrs. Kemp wanders in the boys’ dormitory, naked, patting the wash basins while the schoolboys and masters are in military training. This fusion of the fictitious into the storyline brings a fundamental aspect of Anderson’s directorial practice in which the distinction between what is real and what constitutes poetry is irrelevant. In an interview with Joseph Gelmis, Anderson states:

In returning to a kind of basic realism which can accommodate both naturalism and fantasy or poetry or whatever you like, we’re only getting back to a tradition which silent filmmakers enjoyed quite freely. I wouldn’t like to say, ‘Now it’s fantasy. Now it’s real’. Because the whole point of fantasy is that it is real. And that there aren’t in life any rigid distinctions between what is real and what is fantasy. Our fantasies are part of our reality. (106)

Anderson puts the audience in touch with the spirit of liberty in relation to gender. Although the school in the film is

exclusively boys public school, the presence of the girl; a character of whom we know nothing except her sex, is indicative. The affirmation of the girl individuality puts the frame work of the film. It deals with one moment of reality; the oppressive reality the characters are living. It is just one expression from a world ruled by ideas of dominance and suppression. Anderson's subtle metaphor is used carefully and self-consciously to perceive both male and female self-expression and self-assertion. The Girl is seen again when Travis looks through the telescope, he finds The Girl, brushing her hair. She waves to him as if it is a symbol for stressing her own existence and at the same time it is a signal to launch an attack. Later, The Girl joins the crusaders in the final scene of the film, while they are clearing the place, they find biological specimens, among them a fetus in a jar, and The Girl keeps it locked away in a cupboard. The metaphor of a fetus in a jar is very expressive and meaningful because it portrays the truth of existence. Anderson creates a poetic understanding which mixes freedom with the ontological thrill of fertility and productivity. It is a symbol of constant re-creation which intimately connected to the protagonists' dreaming of freedom.

However, In "If..." Anderson is careful to make the headmaster appears as liberal and civilized British who always cares for his schoolboys. After bayoneting the chaplain during the school's trainee field exercises, the headmaster compellingly delivers a magnificent speech on the merit of adolescence. He considers the performance of the three boys as an instinctive characteristic which should not be blamed for. They have the right to assert their own personality so punishment would be pointless. He attempts to justify the three boys' violent reaction, to seem reasonable. But his speech has betrayed him when he reminds them of the fees of the public school. The headmaster explains:

I think you boys know that I keep an open mind on most things. And on one thing I am certain: short hair is no indication of merit. So often I have noticed that it's the 'hair rebels' who step into the breach when there's a crisis, whether it be a fire in the house, or to sacrifice a week's holiday in order to give a party of slum children seven days in the country. But of course there are limits; scruffiness of any kind is deplorable- I think you'll go that far with me. Now, the fees here are at present £643 per annum, which works out at about 15 guineas a week; this is no mean sum. It is the salary, for instance, of the average trainee supermarket manager ...

Consequently, the three repels are ordered to clear up the neglected detritus beneath the auditorium stage where they discover a large stack of forgotten weapon: rifles, machine guns, and bullets—the tools of their freedom.

The speech of the headmaster reveals implicitly the ethos of such an institution. His praise of the behavior of the three repels which comprises rebellion could be of most service to the Empire. He understands this; this is why he praises the "hair rebels" as the ones most likely to "step into the breach when there's a crisis." The headmaster liberal speech seems to subvert the school's ethos of control and domination, still, the school, is confined within a sense of Empire-building which creates and produces its own ideological practices. It reflects and supports the ideological assumptions behind the idea of Empire.

The construction of British public school is the product of what Smith called "National identity"; it is the foundation of this identity which perseveres and strengthens the cultural continuity of nations. It normally adheres to an inherent system of observance of rules that govern the imperialistic character unique to England. In Smith words, national identity may be defined as

the maintenance and continuous reproduction of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and

traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations, and the identifications of individuals with that particular heritage and those values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions. (30)

“National identity” provides a strong community of antiquity and restores a collective faith of the glorious past and its mythological value; British Imperialism. The British public school has been shaped as an official institution in which serving the Empire is paramount. In the film, Anderson draws attention to the school motto in the whip, Denson’s pocket: “I serve the nation.” Harber cites Paulo Freire, the radical educator as claiming that “all education is inherently political” and that “any education offered as part of the existing system in an oppressive state and society will simply reproduce the ideas and interests of the oppressors” (17). The resultant is a fixed identity of Englishness.

“If...” with its blatantly socialist notion, implies features about military training establishment. Public schools were seen as miniature England: models to build the future generation. In “If...” the public school mirrors England itself, or most probably, the whole empire with the social structure and the deep feeling of being part of a great country. To strengthen this view, the school is a proper place to form and refine English leadership. In the part entitled “forth to war”, Anderson indirectly refers to the political aim which underlies the educational system that governs the British public school. “The son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain,” preaches the reverend father. “You’re all corrupt. You’re all sinful. You’re all met to be punished.” The boys, in trainee uniform, listen in silence. “The one betrayal that can never be forgiven is desertion. Jesus Christ is their commanding officer, and we are all deserters”.

In “If...”, the director, Anderson creates a socially constructed school community which reinforces dominant educational paradigms perceived by the people in charge of this institution, and constitute a mental image of their affinity; as part of the same nation. In the final scene, General Denson emphasizes the importance of “honor, duty and national tie.” In the film, the concept of nation and nationalism has been created to serve political ends. It is highly connected within the context of nation-states frame and its sovereign supremacy. Benedict Anderson states that a nation is “an imagined political community,” because

regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

In his construction of public school, Anderson succeeds to delineate the myth of Empire-building and precipitate anti-imperialist sentiments, particularly amongst the British students who are becoming influenced by the revolutionary thought of the sixties. From this point, Anderson’s public school story takes the first step against ex-imperialistic nation.

The last part of the film the “Crusaders” draws the viewers to the conclusion; revolt is inevitable. On the occasion of their school’s Founders’ Day, the crusaders launch their own attack; they have set fire beneath the stage. As the audience flees the fire in panic, the crusaders, accompanied by The Girl have taken up position on the college roof, shooting at the parents, teachers, chaplain and students. When the headmaster calls cease-fire, the firing briefly stops. He appeals to the boys to see reason; “Boys, boys, I understand you.” But The Girl who takes out the pistol from her belt to deliver the coup de grace, shooting him between the eyes. A hail of bullets spur the guest of honor, General Denson to lead a counterattack, a shoot-out ensues.

CONCLUSIONS

The film's finale is momentous; Anderson succeeds to deliver a message which includes within it a cautionary note insisting that the British public schoolboys become suspicious of the old values that threaten to destroy all that it has achieved. Despite the many changes that have taken place in education during the 19th and 20th centuries, Anderson's representation of public school life make a connection with the ideological background that governs the educational system at that time. It explains the principles, ethical, as well as practical, by which an educational institution has produced. The ethos in question is less an academic one than a class-conscious code of behavior, speech, and appearance. In such an institution, the function of discipline is the mechanism for a new mode of domination that constitutes the character of the schoolboy with its potential socio-political identity.

The impact of the public schools in Britain was historically immense. It has an intense and direct influence inculcated in British citizens. The false ideology which British public school founded on; serving the Empire leaves a negative impact on the management of public school. It also hinders any kind of reform to build a noteworthy educational system. British public schools tend to be traditional institutions that impose a system of discipline that is damaging and harmful to the character. Its ethos is to breed hatred and prejudice. Anderson has thus superbly concentrated on portraying this picture of public school in which boys are turned into a threat to their community.

In addition, "If...." is a proverbial film in which Anderson starts the film with the following aphorism displayed on the screen:

Wisdom is the principal thing;
therefore get wisdom:
and with all thy getting
get understanding.

Individually and collectively, the film stimulates the viewers to think deeply, more critically, more thoughtfully, about the unspoken assumptions to conceptualize public school as an institution that shape the role and identities of the individuals in their community. The description of public school as an institutional community, with large administrations whose primary purpose is to serve the Empire illuminates the gap between what the individual needs and the huge administrations that shape the world. Hence, "If...." alludes to the possible conjunctions of all conditionals, "If..." we do not listen to the words of wisdom, the confrontation between how we regard good education and how we view the nation is inevitable; "If...." we do not understand the danger of the established system of education, we are going to bear all the consequences that follow-- confusion and decay.

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