

THE WHITE BUS

*“There’s never been an age
like the one we’re living in.”*

Mayor Blunt (Arthur Lowe)

In his preface to Lindsay Anderson’s Diaries, his leading man of choice Malcolm McDowell called *The White Bus* “an incredible film that stands alone was a great work of art, but which served as a master’s sketch for the big painting on canvas... It is brilliant, and it is quite unlike any British film that had been made before it.” The “big painting” to which McDowell refers is *O*

Lucky Man! (1973), the middle section of Anderson’s state-of-the-nation trilogy which began with Cannes winner *if...* (1969) and was completed by *Britannia Hospital* (1981).

But the ideas and moods of all three films can be found in tantalising embryo within *The White Bus*. This 47-minute marvel follows a nameless young woman (Patricia Healey) who flees her London desk-job for Manchester, where she takes a somewhat bizarre civic tour on the eponymous conveyance that encompasses industry, education and culture. The droll, episodic screenplay saw Anderson collaborate with *A Taste of Honey*’s Shelagh Delaney, adapting the latter’s short story into a comic/sinister fable that packs more layers and concepts into its brisk running-time than the vast majority of feature-length films.

The sense of viewing 1960s Great Britain through unfamiliar, even alien eyes is partly explained by the presence behind the camera of the great Czech cinematographer Miroslav Ondříček, in the first of his three collaborations with Anderson. Ondříček’s vision of Manchester—which alternates between monochrome and colour film—is that of a grand, darkly gothic, strangely deserted metropolis, sometimes oneiric and sometimes apocalyptic, which our near-silent, unflappable, observantly wide-eyed heroine navigates as if in the throes of an out-of-body experience. “SEE YOUR CITY” is the legend emblazoned on the side of the *White Bus*, and the film-makers combine their efforts to render urban spaces in radically fresh, original and stimulating ways. “Everywhere we go,” wrote Anderson in his diaries of a location tour around the city centre, “one thinks—why has none of this been on film?”

At every stage along the bus’s itinerary ill-tempered comment is provided by the city’s bumptious Lord Mayor (Arthur Lowe), whose credo in this city “deeply stained with the rust of industry” is that “money is the root of all progress.” Anderson and Delaney counterpoint the Mayor’s self-aggrandising monologues with the trilling, slightly robotic tones of the middle-aged official tour guide, played by Julie Perry in what seems to have been her sole big-screen appearance.

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Perry, who had previously appeared as a fortune-teller in a very early episode of *Coronation Street*, turns in a quietly astonishing performance here, expertly and subtly milking the comedy in every straight-sounding line, every casual slip of pronunciation (“integreal”; “currigulum.”) It now seems inexplicable that Perry’s talents were never again employed in cinema. Another belated debutant in *The White Bus* was, however, destined for considerably greater exposure: a 29-year-old Anthony Hopkins, visible for all of eight seconds, makes a decent stab at a Brecht song—in the original German, no less.

Given a limited UK release despite its unorthodox running-time, *The White Bus* was originally intended as part of a Woodfall portmanteau with the other episodes directed by Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson. In the end the trilogy—sometimes known as *Red White and Blue*, sometimes as *Red White and Zero*—has been very seldom shown theatrically. The production was ill-starred from the beginning; Reisz dropped out and was replaced by Peter Brook, who contributed a frantic, antic 15-minute short, *The Ride of the Valkyrie*, starring Zero Mostel as a bad-tempered German opera-star struggling through London traffic to a Wagner engagement at Covent Garden. Richardson’s 35-minute *Red and Blue* is even more of a curio, an extended, lushly sophisticated, romantic reverie starring Vanessa Redgrave as a daydream-prone nightclub chanteuse.

Featuring songs by French chansonnier Cyrus Bassiak (better known as Serge Rezvani) somewhat awkwardly translated into English, it includes Michael York in one of his very first screen appearances. York pops up as a circus acrobat, during an early sequence in which Redgrave delightedly (and delightfully) gets to ride an elephant, while as another of her beaux Douglas Fairbanks Jr is agreeably typecast as a suave American millionaire. In effect an extended pop-video (*avant la lettre*) for the EMI long-player *Vanessa Redgrave Sings Songs From Red & Blue*, the film is now one of the more esoteric footnotes in the multi-faceted Woodfall story