

fresh film festival

Study Guide



The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

Tony Richardson, Britain, 1962, 94 mins

Rachel Thunder

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962)

Cast

Micheal Redgrave	Reformatory Governor
Tom Courtenay	Colin Smith
Alec McCowen	Brown
James Bolam	Mike
Avis Bunnage	Mrs. Smith
Joe Robinson	Roach
Dervis Ward	Detective
Topsy Jane	Audrey
Julia Foster	Gladys
John Brooking	Green
John Bull	Ronalds
Raymond Dyer	Gordon
Philip Martin	Stacey
John Thaw	Bosworth

Crew

Director	Tony Richardson
Producer	Tony Richardson
Script	Alan Sillitoe
Cinematography	Walter Lassally
Editor	Antony Gibbs
Production Design	Ralph W. Brinton
Costume Design	Sophie Harris
Music	John Addison

Production Company	British Lion Film Corporation
Runtime	104 mins
Country	Britain
Language	English
Colour	Black And White

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner: Synopsis

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner is based on a short story by Alan Sillitoe and tells the story of a working class teenager Colin Smith (Tom Courtenay) who steals some money from a bakery in Nottingham. When he is eventually caught he is sent to H.M. Borstal, Ruxton Towers, a reformatory school for boys. Whilst he is there it is discovered that he has a talent for long distance running after he beats Stacey, another inmate, during a training session.

The Governor (Micheal Redgrave) is delighted with his new find and is now convinced that Ruxton Towers will beat the public school Raleigh in the Cross-Country Challenge Cup, and in turn improve the image of the borstal. Smith is given the freedom to train alone outside the walls of the prison each morning, and relishes in these moments freedom. The Governor's attitude to the inmates is perhaps best expressed when he tells Colin, "you play ball with us and we'll play ball with you".

Colin's friend Mike from Nottingham turns up in the borstal one day, and is shocked and disgusted to hear that Colin is regarded as the Governor's favourite and asks Colin, "Whose side are you on?". However, when the day of the race arrives Colin surprises everyone when he deliberately fails to win the race in order to spite the authorities and, in particular, the Governor.

Throughout the film the scenes in the borstal, which are shot in the present, are intercut with flashbacks to Colin's life in Nottingham, revealing to us the reason why he stole the money.



The Director: Tony Richardson

Tony Richardson was born in Shipley, West Yorkshire in 1928. He completed his education in 1952 with a degree in English from Oxford University. After Oxford, he worked in BBC television drama, and in 1955 formed the English Stage Company. It was his production of John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) which set the theatre "new wave" in motion and gave birth to the "angry young men". Richardson belongs to the generation of British film directors which includes Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz, all of them university-trained middle-class artists who were sympathetic to the conditions of the working classes and determined to use the cinema as a means of personal expression. In 1955, Richardson co-directed his first short film with Karel Reisz (*Momma Don't Allow*) which became one of the original productions of the "Free Cinema" movement, the movement which preceded the British New Wave. In 1958, Richardson and John Osborne formed Woodfall Productions, an independent production company which would finance their projects and bring the new wave in theatre to the cinema. Richardson's realistic treatment of the works of John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger*, 1959), Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*, 1961), and Alan Sillitoe (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962), would infuse British cinema with the "kitchen-sink" realism Richardson had helped to encourage in the British theatre. Richardson's career with Woodfall ended with *Tom Jones* (1963), which won four Academy Awards including Best Director. Richardson continued to work in film until his death in 1991, at which point he was living in Los Angeles. However he would never regain the same success of the sixties. His approach is regarded as inventive, creative and challenging to his audience.

Other Films Include:

The Loved One (1965); *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1967); *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968); *Hamlet* (1969); *Ned Kelly* (1970); *A Delicate Balance* (1974); *Joseph Andrews* (1977); *The Border* (1982); *Hotel New Hampshire* (1984); *Blue Sky* (1991).



British New Wave

The British New Wave in cinema occurred between 1958 and 1964. It coincided with the social and cultural changes occurring in Britain largely as a result of the emergence during the 1950s of a youth class which marked a radical change in music, fashion, and sexual mores. It was the era of “kitchen-sink” drama, of a gritty new realism on stage starting with John Osbornes play *Look Back in Anger*, directed by Tony Richardson for stage in 1956 and for screen in 1959.

The British New Wave stems from a number of sources which included the kitchen-sink theatre of realism (mentioned above), and a radicalised documentary tradition of the Free British Cinema, which preceded the New Wave. The Free British Cinema group’s work focused on the youth and working classes at work and in leisure, while the New Wave focused on the youth and working classes growing up in a culture of increasing mass communication. Some of the dominant social problems dealt with were alienation caused by the culture of mass communication, failure in relationships, prostitution, abortion, homosexuality, and unemployment.



Stylistically the movement tended to lean towards a documentary realist tradition which preferred to shoot on location, particularly in the northern industrial cities, the use of black and white fast film stock (which gave a grainy, newsreel look to the images), and natural lighting. Stars were never used in these productions, however many of the actors who performed in these films found star status: Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, Richard Burton, Micheal Caine.

The majority of the films were based on books and plays written by authors who had experience of working-class life: Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night, Sunday Morning, Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*), Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*), David Storey (*This Sporting Life*). The filmmakers who dominated the New Wave were Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz. Richardson’s screen production of *Look Back in Anger* is generally regarded as the first New Wave film. With Richard Burton playing the lead protagonist Jimmy Porter, it is seen as the first of the “angry young men” films, followed by Albert Finney in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960). The difficulties of single motherhood and the loneliness that social marginalisation imposes on homosexuals are central themes to *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961). *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963), questions the Rugby League business with its corruption and commercialism, and the brutality which can develop in a relationship when there is little communication.

The Title : The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

The Title of a film can often provide an explanation to what the film is about. Consider the following questions in terms of the title of this film.

- (1) What expectations does the title create?
- (2) What does it suggest the film will be about?
- (3) How important is the word "loneliness" in the title? Can you think of an alternative?
(e.g. sadness, victory)



Style: Black and White

The British New Wave filmmakers chose to shoot their films in black and white even though colour was becoming the more popular choice. This came from a tradition of documentary filmmaking, and added to the sense of realism which these films wished to portray. When colour began to be used in the 1930s it was felt that it tended to connote fantasy not reality. It was felt that colour was a problem for reality because it could "distract and disturb the eye", Hence it was used in musicals and fantasy pictures. Black and white was reserved for use in other genres of film like the war movie and the documentary. It was also the preferred choice of the Italian Neo-Realists and the French New Wave.

In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* the use of black and white adds to the sense of hopelessness and poverty. Nottingham is portrayed as a grey industrial city, in which there is little for the

youth to do but partake in petty crime and avoid the authorities. Similarly the borstal has little charm about it, it appears cold, damp and dismal. The Smiths tough living conditions are also emphasised through the use of black and white.

Discussion

- (1) If *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* had been shot in colour try to imagine what colours would have been chosen for Colin's home and the borstal. Would these colours convey the sense of cheerlessness? Do you think colour would be as effective?

Task

- (1) Through the use of colour/collage and photography (where available) redesign one of the locations of the film, (e.g. the borstal dormitory, the Smiths living room).
- (2) Write a short passage describing Colin's first impressions of the borstal. What colour and texture is the



exterior of the school, the dormitory, his bedclothes, his uniform, etc.

Style 2: Flashback

A flashback is a narrative device used in film to go back in time to an earlier moment in a character's life and/or history. The spectator is given visual and aural codes to signify the beginning and ending of a flashback. Normally there is a fade (one image will fade to black and another will fade in) or dissolve (a transition between two shots, as the outgoing scene gradually fades out it is being replaced by the incoming shot), often on the face of the person whose flashback we are about to witness, and occasionally a voice-over by a narrator (generally speaking that of the person whose flashback it is). The image shifts from past to present.

The flashback plays an important role in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, taking up approximately half of the running time. Colin Smith's life before he was sent to the borstal is revealed to us through these flashbacks. They provide us with an explanation to how he ended up in reformatory school. They reveal his family life, his father's death, his friendship with Mike, and his relationship with his mother and with Audrey, his girlfriend. Within the film the director signals these flashbacks by focusing on Colin's face and allowing the sound to die. However, this is not consistent and occasionally it is not obvious that a flashback is taking place.

Discussion

Did you find the shift from past to present through the use of flashback in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* easy to understand or was it sometimes confusing?

Task

Can you think of any other films in which the flashback is used? Write a short passage describing how the audience knew that this was a flashback? How did it affect the narrative?

Editing

Editing refers literally to how shots are put together to make up a film. At its simplest there are four categories of editing: (1) chronological editing (2) cross-cutting (3) deep focus and (4) montage. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* contains excellent examples of two of these forms of editing: Cross-cutting and Montage.

The sequence in which the boys are singing *Jerusalem* in the borstal hall is cross-cut with the recapture of Stacey. Cross-cutting is the linking up of two events which are running simultaneously. They are interdependent and are important to the narrative. Cross-cutting can increase the visual and emotional impact of the film, hence while the boys are singing this old English Hymn which encourages British pride and patriotism, one of the boy's colleagues is being beaten by the borstal guards.

Montage editing came out of the Soviet experimental cinema and is largely associated with the director Sergei Eisenstein (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925, and *October*, 1928). Montage is fast, jerky and abrupt, and is based on the idea that by placing a number of different images one after the other in quick succession the overall meaning of the images can be changed. Towards the end of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* we see Colin running in the cross-country race. This sequence is intercut with sequences of montage in which we are shown a collection of images which have already taken place,

e.g. his father, his mother, his father's employer, the Governor, Mike, Audrey. By placing these images side by side the effect is far greater than when they were seen in their original state and reflect the pressure which Colin is under.

Task

- (1) Can you think of another film or television commercial in which these types of editing are put to use?
- (2) Sound can also be edited in a similar fashion, can you recall any moments in the film in which there is a montage of sound?

Characterisation: Colin Smith

Colin Smith (Tom Courtenay), is portrayed as a determined, angry young man, who through much introspection is trying to understand his place in this world. He is introduced to us in the opening sequence of the film running down a country lane and through the use of voice over he tells us what it means to run.

“Running has always been in our family, especially running from the police. Its hard to



understand, all I know is you've got to run. Run without knowing why, through fields and woods, and the winning post is no end, eventhough barmy crowds might be cheering themselves daft. That's what the loneliness of the long distance runner feels like”.

Already we are aware that Colin is a very reflective youth, and in the next scene, as he is being transported to the borstal, we can tell by the expression on his face that he is a very singular character. He does not partake in the conversation with the other inmates even when he is provoked by one of the boys. Instead he is watching the countryside as it speeds past, perhaps pondering on his loss of freedom.

Within the borstal he makes his attitude to the establishment very clear when he responds to Stacey's advice about never forgetting who holds the whip in the borstal.

“Do you know what I'd do if I had the whip, I'd get all the coppers,governors, posh whores, army officers and members of parliament and I'd stick'em up against this wall and let'em have it. Because that's what they like to do to us blokes”.

After the brawl with Stacey, some of the other inmates accuse Colin of being the Governor's favourite, to which he responds, “I'm nobody's favourite”. They cannot understand why he does not escape



now that he is allowed to train on his own outside the borstal gates.

“What’s the point in scarpering. Best thing to do is be cunning and stay were you are. I’m going to let them think they’ve got me house trained, but they never will...”

While time passes in the borstal, Colin discovers that the only way to escape from this dismal environment is by running, but running on his own terms, not to advance the ambitions of the Governor. He refuses to become the model prisoner or the model consumer. At home he is sickened by his mothers desire to fill the home with symbols of affluence, in particular the television, which is the cause of arguments and unhappiness. In an act of loyalty to his dead father he burns the ten pound note his mother gave him from the insurance money.

When Colin throws the race at the end of the film, this is his ultimate act of defiance and also the greatest sign of his willpower and determination. It would have been so easy to have won the race and in turn basked in the praise of the Governor, and reduced his time in the borstal. But instead, for the sake of his principles, he chose to lose and faced the consequences.

Task

- (1) What do you think would have happened if Colin had won the race? How would the Governor and the inmates have reacted towards him? Write one or two scenes that you think would follow.
- (2) How would you describe Colin’s relationship with his mother and his father? Colin seems to be the person most affected by his father’s death. In approximately 200 words describe these relationships, drawing on a number of scenes from the film.
- (3) Imagine yourself as one of the inmates at the borstal. Write a description of Colin from your point of view, looking in particular at his behaviour towards the Governor and/or Stacey.
- (4) What do you think the Television symbolises in the film? Why is Colin so against the television? Explain the scene in which the boys watch the Prime Minister making a speech on the television. Why do the chose to mock it?

Final Task

- (1) Take a scene from the film and describe how the director uses the various elements of filmmaking to create this scene. Focus on the sound, the music the cinematography, the editing, the costume, the art direction (set or location design), and the characters. Use written descriptions and/or drawing, colour and collage or any other available medium. This could be done in a team in which each person is given an area to focus on and involves interaction amongst the group.

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