

## Document Citation

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## FILM REVIEW: ACCEPTABLE LEVELS

Made by Frontroom Productions and the Belfast Film Workshop, in association with Channel Four. Colour, 102 minutes.

This is a new fictional film set in present-day Belfast, about the war and the distortions of British TV coverage of it.

A fictional TV crew set off to Belfast to make one of a series of documentaries about children. They embark on this enterprise with a typically English blend of arrogant ignorance — even the title of their film is doubly at fault: 'Britain's Children/Ulster' (for Northern Ireland isn't Britain and Ulster isn't Northern Ireland!).

Within that framework we are introduced to a family living on the Divis Estate, and their community. *Acceptable Levels* opens with the teenage son being gratuitously beaten up by British soldiers. The nine-year-old daughter Roisin agrees to be interviewed for the TV programme, but while the interview is taking place her friend Jackie is shot dead outside by a plastic bullet fired by soldiers. The TV crew rush out and film her poor mutilated body and a neighbour screaming 'Will you show this on your British TV?!' Roisin and her sister reluctantly agree to do a further interview about this tragedy.

The rest of the film shows what happens to the documentary before it will finally hit the TV screens as a bit of sentimental nonsense, identical to what we see in real-life TV. The director says at one point, 'Yes we know what happened, but let's hear the other side' without apparently noticing the appalling cynicism of his statement, and goes off to interview the Army Public Relations Officer. Both the Army and the RUC fob him off with patent untruths ('There was a riot') but he is unprepared to nail them as lies.

Even worse, the footage of young Jackie's death is a bit 'rough at the edges', and anyway it makes the programme too long, and anyway they don't know the whole story... A string of rationalisations whereby the TV crew prefer to misbelieve the evidence of their own eyes rather than question their own corrupted ideology which we see being reinforced by their sexual skirmishings and drunken high-life in the Europa Hotel.

And so we witness an entirely credible transformation from the full footage of the interviews plus the killing, to an edited version which merely shows the first interview and Roisin at the end in tears expressing the hope of just surviving somehow. The entire sequence of Jackie's death falls to the cutting room floor. TV viewers are to be shown the standard picture of Ireland in which suffering and violence are somehow just part of the landscape — without explanation, without cause, and therefore certainly without a solution. The commentary on the final version pontificates, 'Good and bad founder on the realities of extremism', whatever that is supposed to mean.

*Acceptable Levels* is an excellent film, which takes the time and trouble to expand on the lives of the Irish characters and contrasts their reality with the debased values of the TV crew. It should really be dedicated to Julie Livingstone and Carol Ann Kelly, whose deaths in 1981 are so accurately and movingly mirrored by the fictional death of Jackie in the film.

ABOVE: TROOPS OUT,  
February 1984

RIGHT: THE TIMES,  
2nd March 1984

## NORTHERN IRELAND.

No, come back, don't go away. I know the words are a switch-off, but **ACCEPTABLE LEVELS** (Hampstead Everyman, from Sunday) is a marvellously slanted assessment of the running-sore situation there — which, at the very least, jolts us into realising that there are real human beings participating in the horror.

I find the hook upon which the fiction hangs — that of TV compromise — blunted by a too-simplistic appreciation. But as an organised piece of cinema from director John Davies, and the new Frontroom company, it is a film only too rare in that it clutches you into its situation with a strangehold grip.

It lacks the tragic poetry of *Angel*, but its narrative strengths and really quite remarkable acting — I understand some were recruited on the spot — involves us utterly.

BBC TV documentary maker Simon (Andy Rashleigh) and his film crew descend on the McAteer family, Roman Catholics living in the notorious Divis Flats. The young daughter, Roisin (Tracey Lynch) is to be the subject of one of a series called Britain's Children. Life in strife-sundered Ulster is to be seen through her eyes.

One of Roisin's girl

# THE POWER AND THE POLEMIC

friends is killed by a plastic bullet fired by a British armoured vehicle. The aftermath film by Simon is accusatory, but gradually he cuts it away from his finished documentary. For aesthetic reasons.

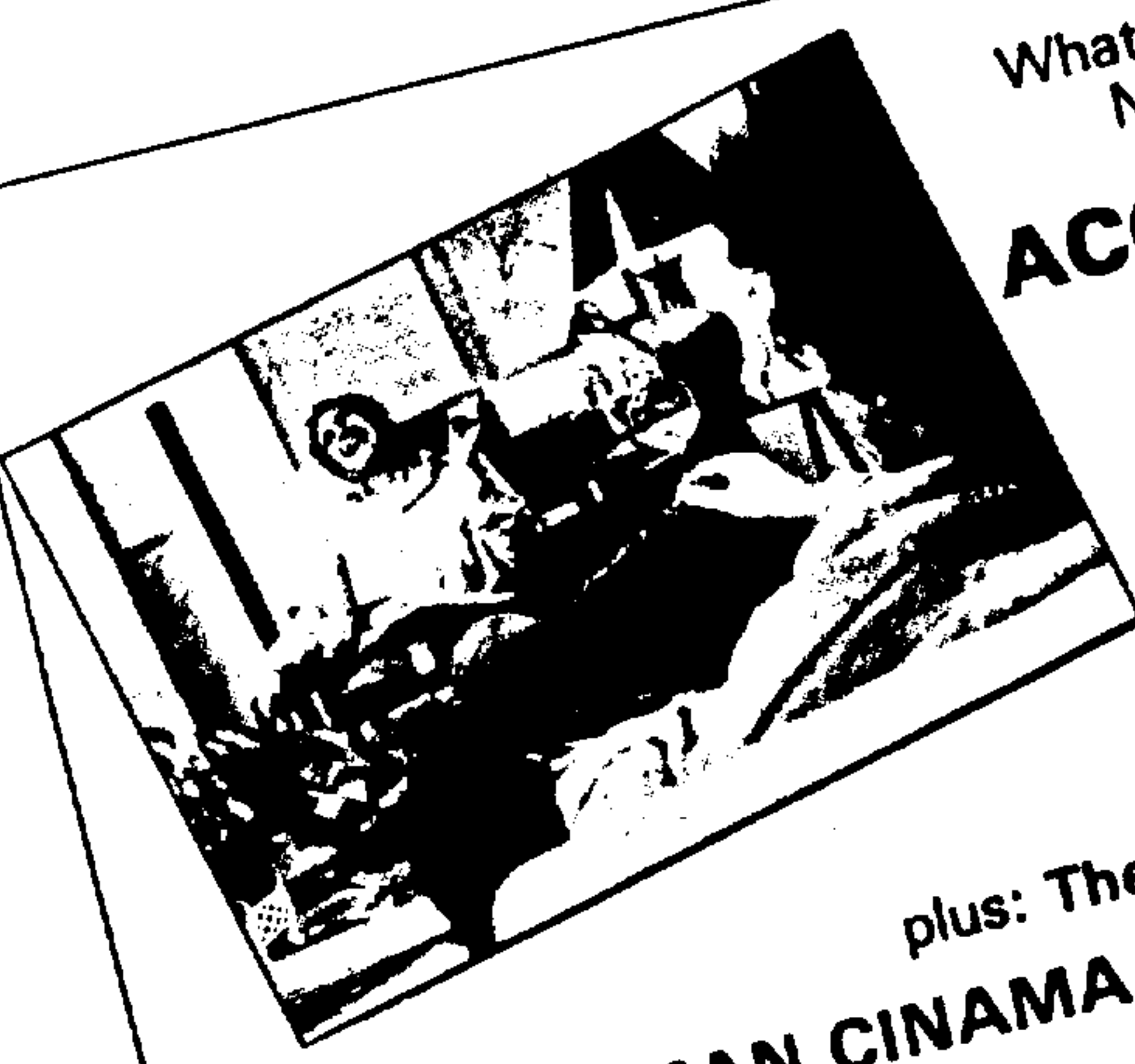
So far, so indictable. And having made TV documentaries I know there is the danger of such compromise. What is naive is that the cynicism of so many journalists in such a situation would not work to the advantage of the anti-Brits. The film-makers, after all, would not be working in isolation.

This belief that everyone in the media is on the make is a cosy thought to comfort the agony of such a time. Where the film really comes into its own is in the character studies — Roisin's mother, played by Sally McCaffery, is tremendous — and set-pieces of action within bars and on the location which ache with authenticity.

I have my doubts about the polemic, none at all about the power. Please don't miss it.

LEFT:

Tom Hutchinson  
HAMPSTEAD AND  
HIGHGATE EXPRE  
2nd March 1984



What does TV see in Northern Ireland?

## ACCEPTABLE LEVELS

a feature film  
by John Davies  
(Maeve, City Farm)  
A Frontroom Production

British premiere  
March 4-6, 8-10  
plus: The Ploughman's Lunch

EVERYMAN CINAMA opposite Hampstead tube 435 1525







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Returning to Belfast, the scene of a former triumph, 'Maeve', director John Davies and the Frontroom production team have produced another thoughtful and pleasing film about the situation in Northern Ireland. A British TV crew assemble in Belfast to make a documentary, one of a series about children in Britain. Immured within their barricade of script, cameras and determined objectivity the motley crew barge into young Roisin's life eyeing the disorder amongst which she lives for possible locations but not really seeing anything until the death of a child, killed by a rubber bullet, forces them to briefly face what is around them. In its themes and preoccupations 'Acceptable Levels' (Everyman) is quite similar to an earlier British feature about documentary journalism, 'Giro City': compromises are made, images junked, ideals sacrificed to the jealous god 'Professionalism'. The contrasts between the film crew and their subject are simply pointed and the ironies, suitably loaded, smartly trip one another domino-like. The message is clear: whatever the final cut of the film the job and the situation will continue as before. But this moral has a dangerous double edge for a film such as 'Acceptable Levels', one that will not have been lost on its makers and will certainly not escape its audience. (Frances Dickenson)

**Britain**



GREAT BRITAIN 1983

## Acceptable Levels

Sun 4 Dec 4.00

Director: John Davies

Production Company: Frontroom Productions Workshop in association with Channel Four

Screenplay: Gordon Hann, Kate McManus, Elin Hare, John Davies, Robert Smith, Alastair Herron

Photography (Colour): Robert Smith

Editor: Elin Hare

British Distributor/Export Agent: Frontroom Productions, 79 Wardour Street, London W1E 3TH

Leading Players: Andrew Rashleigh, Kay Adsheed, Sally McCafferty, Roisina Brown, George Shane, Fran Barber, Peter Dean, Patrick Higgins, Tracey Lynch, Laura Gorman, Ian McElhinney, Derek Hailgan, Paul Jesson

Running Time: 100 mins

London Film Festival Choice

*Acceptable Levels* deals with complex and controversial issues in an unsensational but dramatically effective style. A television producer making a documentary series about 'ordinary' young people decides to base one of the episodes on a Catholic girl in West Belfast. What begins as a routine assignment gets out of control when the presence of the film crew precipitates a tragedy. John Davies (co-director of *Maeve* and *City Farm*) builds a skilful and intelligent study of media responsibility out of an apparently loose structure, taking us step by step through the production stages of the TV documentary and the minor decisions which have major consequences for the people involved on both sides of the camera. Davies draws unexpected humour and tension from an intractable subject, and fine performances from a cast of professional and non-professional actors.—Clive Hodgson.

■ 'Acceptable Levels' (15) (John Davies, 1983, Br) Tracey Lynch, Kay Adsheed, Sally McCafferty. 102 mins. In the early 1970s Reginald Maudling said that the best hope for Northern Ireland would be a return to 'acceptable levels' of violence. This film sets out to show not only what those levels mean in practice to the Belfast community, but the precise mechanism by which they are made acceptable to the English public. It achieves this through a cleverly worked out plot which traces step by step the making of a BBC documentary about children in Belfast: as we watch the English film team interviewing a schoolgirl on the 'notorious' Divis estate, the gap between the inhabitants' day-to-day experience and the director's search for shock value combined with sentimentality becomes more and more apparent. When the girl's best friend is shot dead by a plastic bullet, the crew rush down to get 'live footage' while angry women shout at the camera. By following this footage down BBC corridors and into the bin, the plot brings us finally face to face with the Divis family about to watch the documentary and forces us to anticipate the betrayal of their expectations. Such script devices provide the film's great strength, and the acting is excellent; unfortunately its staging and imagery don't match up in inventiveness or concentration. If its style were as sharp as its politics, the message might be still more powerful. Even so, it is a lucid, dramatic statement about the responsibility of those in the media to the people they photograph, and the abuse of that responsibility in pursuit of 'acceptable' news and entertainment. (Judith Williamson) ('Acceptable Levels' plays at the Everyman; see *Independents* for details.)

ABOVE:  
CITY LIMITS  
March 2-8 1984

ABOVE: TIME OUT, March 1-7 1984

The strength of John Davies's *Acceptable Levels* (Hampstead Everyman from

Sunday, 15) lies in its seriousness and verisimilitude. Modest in scale and consistently gripping, the picture concerns itself, as have several recent independent British films, with media ethics.

In this case the setting is Belfast, where a TV crew are involved in making a documentary about Ulster childhood. The focus is split between observers and subjects: on the one hand, the professional interlopers, wearily facetious over the boeuf bourguignon at the Europa; on the other, marooned in the Divis Flats, the poorly-off family on whose daughter their attention fastens.

The media team are not shown as cardboard opportunists, but as people coping with a difficult job, and though their programme predictably fails to contain the protest that their subjects try to make, the film does not seek to draw a diagram or deliver a lecture. Rather, it makes its effect through a persuasive, and sometimes humorous, impression of Belfast's everyday life.

LEFT:  
Tim Puller  
THE GUARDIAN  
1.3.84.

ABOVE: LONDON FILM FESTIVAL  
1983



79 WARDOUR STREET LONDON W1 734 4603



# Today's television and radio programme



Andrew Rashleigh: *Acceptable Levels*  
(Channel 4, 10.00pm)

● Five down, three to go. Beryl Bainbridge's eight-part odyssey *ENGLISH JOURNEY* (BBC2, 7.20pm) has now got well and truly into its stride. And Miss Bainbridge, who is new to this kind of thing, has got into hers. What is clear is that she is not inhibited by the formidable shadow of J B Priestley that follows wherever she goes, and it had never stood so close so her as it does in tonight's film, because this is the one in which Miss Bainbridge visits Priestley's home town of Bradford. His old house does not have a commemorative plaque outside. There is a vague reference to a love-hate relationship between the city and its famous son, and the omission is left at that. In fact, you will note a general reluctance to doff caps in Priestley's direction in the whole of tonight's film, except for a visit to his old

## CHOICE

school (97 per cent of its intake are Asians) and a bus ride across his beloved Dales (still 100 per cent Yorkshire). Instead, Miss Bainbridge concentrates on the social and educational repercussions of Bradford's ever-growing immigrant population; the decline and fall of the Wool Exchange (venue of an antiques market one day a week, and, on two others, a meeting place for reminiscing merchants who read *The Times*); the city's chief executive whose belief in equality for women comes to a grinding halt at his own front doorstep; and a tourists' guide, a startlingly photogenic girl of Polish origin, with whom Miss Bainbridge assiduously does not discuss the Brontës

although they sit and chat in the Haworth churchyard that is only yards away from where the Brontës' mortal remains lie mouldering.

● Other highlights: John Davies's thought-provoking film *ACCEPTABLE LEVELS* (Channel 4, 10.00pm) in which local people in West Belfast and imported actors are so carefully stitched together that the seams scarcely show; and *GOING ON* (Radio 4, 8.15pm) Maureen O'Brien's play, in which Miss O'Brien as a sorely-tried daughter plays second fiddle to Patricia Hayes's nagging toothache of a mother. As drama, the play does not develop too well, but as a study of cruelty fuelled by self-pity, it will take a lot of beating.

Peter Davalle

12 THE SUN, Monday, April 30, 1984

## THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF *Sun* TELLY

10.00-11.55 **FILM: Acceptable Levels** (1983). First in a new Eleventh Hour New Waves season. This movie tells of a TV crew, making a documentary about a Catholic girl in Belfast, who encounter a tragedy while they are filming. Sun rating: Might be worth a view. After all, there's not much on the other channels.

## GUARDIAN

30.4.84

10 0 **ACCEPTABLE LEVELS.** The Eleventh Hour slot, showcase for experimental and alternative film-making talent moves back an hour for a New Waves season of recent British movies — with *Ascendancy* and *Ghost Dance* among the already-acclaimed productions to come. It begins with John Davies's challenging film about a TV crew, filming a documentary in Belfast and sparking tragedy by its presence, which underlines the complex issue of the media's role and responsibility in reporting current events. 11 55 Close.

Daily Mail, Monday, April 30, 1984

10.0 **ACCEPTABLE LEVELS:** First in a series of 'new wave' films wholly or partly commissioned by the channel. It is a drama about a TV crew making a documentary on the streets of Belfast whose apparently routine observation of a Catholic family in the Divis Flats precipitates a tragedy. Professional actors and local residents worked side by side to create a study of media portrayal of recent current events. 11.55 CLOSE.

### MONDAY

#### Acceptable Levels

KAY ADSHEAD

Made for Channel Four, but shown with great success at last year's London Film Festival, this Frontroom Workshop Production deals with a dramatic and provocative situation in Northern Ireland in an unsensational but highly effective fashion.

Piecing his film together in a fragmented but skilful way, director John Davies makes the most of the tension (and unexpected humour) that emanates from the subject — the death of a girl from a British soldier's bullet while a film crew is making a documentary there.

[1 hour 55 minutes] TVM, 1983

TV TIMES  
28 April — 4 May  
1984



10 00-11.55 "ACCEPTABLE LEVELS" (1983). Topical drama set in Belfast where a TV crew is making a documentary on the lives of the residents of the strife-torn city. Eventually their involvement with one family precipitates a tragedy. The film, which received many critical plaudits on its recent London cinema release, examines the controversial issue of the media's responsibility for the events they report upon. First in a season of "new wave" films.

22 *The Daily Telegraph*, Monday, April 30, 1984

## THIS WEEK'S FILMS



Sunday  
Times  
29 April

## MONDAY

### Filming life or lies

THE BBC - and all who quail in her - is not going to be happy about tonight's remarkable drama *Acceptable Levels* (10.00-11.55, C4).

The first of eight feature films from *The Eleventh Hour* tells of a BBC camera crew shooting a film about children in Belfast then filleting out the spiky bits to make it acceptable for broadcasting.

But acceptable to whom? To the army which seems to have accidentally killed a little girl with a plastic bullet? To the Catholics in Divis Flats whose outrage is caught on camera? To the BBC producer who has to decide whether the incident is "relevant" to his routinely caring film? Or to Television Centre and its concern for balance and the broader picture?

Some viewers may dismiss *Acceptable Levels* as an anti-army film, especially when a bland military spokesman says of the killing "There's nothing the IRA likes better than the death of a child, even if they have to do it themselves."

In fact its theme - about superficial reporting and the media's nervous preference for safe emotional images - is much more profound.

Exceptionally well made and with some outstanding performances - notably by Tracey Lynch as the Divis child Roisin and Kay Adshead as the BBC researcher dithering between conscience and her career).

*Acceptable Levels* (C4) is a fiction about a television crew that travelled only as far as Belfast, though from the disorientation some of them felt, it might just as well have been Africa too. John Davies's film - already seen and briefly reviewed in the cinema - is very good on these incidental shocks.

They go to make a documentary about the effect of the Troubles on children, and home in on a family living in the Divis Flats, an area of hard Republican sentiment where the foot patrols tread warily. While they are filming the young daughter in the flat, they hear a child outside has been hit and killed by a British soldier's plastic bullet.

They have not seen the incident but they hurriedly film the angry and agonised reaction. Davies's main concern is with how that material - which at first seems so central, urgent, and dramatic - becomes an embarrassment to the producer, who by one small compromise after another finally reaches the point where he drops the sequence altogether.

Like *Giro City* a couple of years ago, *Acceptable Levels* concentrates on distortion or suppression of the truth while bypassing the issue of how the presence of TV cameras affects the actions of groups who need publicity as much as they need anything. And to ignore that may itself be a kind of distortion. The acceptable level of violence depends which end of it you are on.

Evening  
Standard 1 May.



### Lucy Hughes-Hallett Last Night's View

IF CENSORSHIP always took the form of a uniformed thug with a blue pencil, it would be relatively easy to combat.

But as *Acceptable Levels* (Channel 4) the first of the new wave series of British feature films, set out to demonstrate, it's seldom as straightforward as that.

A television crew, headed by the apparently sensitive producer, Simon, set out to make a documentary about childhood in Belfast's Divis Flats. While they're indoors filming an interview with little Roisin McAteer her friend, Jackie, is killed outside, apparently by an Army patrol taking pot-shots for fun.

Initially the crew respond with elation. Film of the dead child, of the shocked, grieving people and in particular of a woman who waves the fatal rubber bullet in front of the camera crying out: "Show that on your British TV!" looks like a journalistic coup.

But Simon panics. The process whereby this meaty piece of documentary is transformed into a concoction of inoffensive saccharine is charted in John Davies's film with a kind of desperate humour which is even sadder than outrage.

Roisin's sister saw the soldiers, she saw Jackie, she heard the shot, but she was looking the other way when it was actually fired. The Army claim there was a riot going on.

Can Simon accuse British soldiers of wilful child-murder without more proof?

Then there is the matter of taste. Swigging strong lager in

the cutting room with an impassive editor, Simon gets cold feet. A few minutes have to be cut for purely practical reasons. Viewed strictly aesthetically, the killing is a mistake. It makes the rest of the documentary look mannered and precious.

As Simon puts it, ordering the editor to cut it out, "It's sensationalism, it's cheap."

And so the truth is lost, not because the bigwig commissioning editor ever said he didn't want the truth—he never even sees it—but because Simon knows perfectly well that no boss likes scandals and official enquiries, and the funding for Simon's next project will depend on whether the editor enjoys working with him.

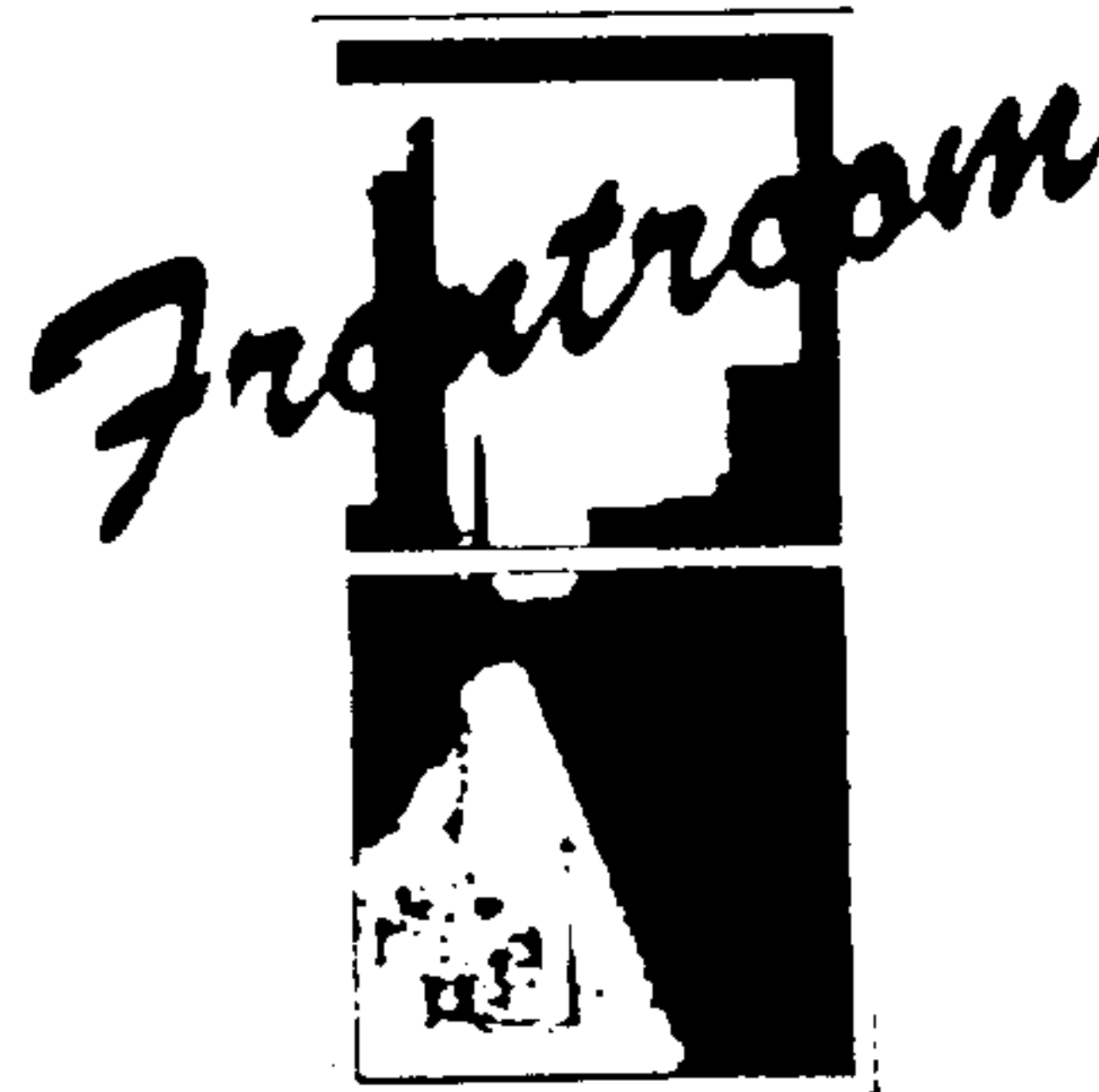
Both of the film's two worlds are realised with wit, finely understated acting and insider knowledge. Sally McCaffery is a gutsy, immensely likeable Mrs McAteer, capable of playing Mother Courage at home then giggling like a schoolgirl with her fellow cleaners at work.

Her family's life is recorded with fly-on-the-wall style realism.

The television people seem equally real, both the white wine-sipping "creative" types and the whisky-swilling technical crew. Tellingly, it is the cameramen who are frightened of going back into Divis after the shooting.

Simon, who imagines himself haloed by his "caring" reputation, never considers for a moment that he might be seen as an agent for British imperialism just like the soldiers.

THE GUARDIAN 1.5.84  
Hugh Herbert



79 WARDOUR STREET LONDON W1 734 4603



# LONDON FILM FESTIVAL 1984

## PRESS DIGEST

THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE, 11 DECEMBER 1983



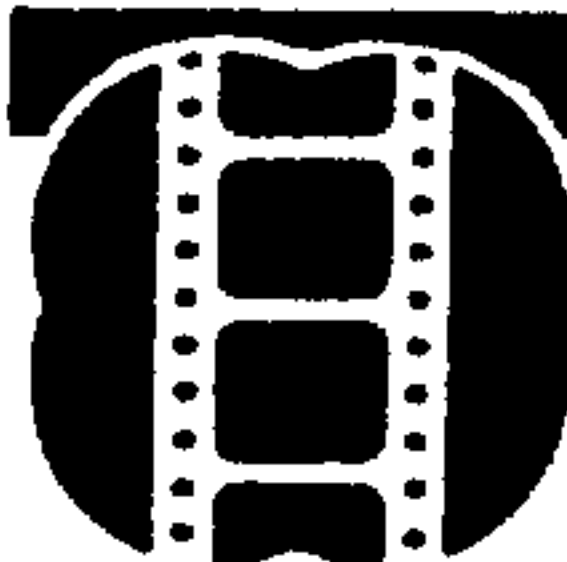
Lindsay Duncan and Stephen Rea in 'Loose Connections'



'Rumble Fish' fellows: Nicholas Cage, Vincent Spano, Matt Dillon and Christopher Penn

says the series researcher. "The mother cleans at the local school, the father's unemployed, but the little girl is very articulate." The researcher is the only member of the patronising TV crew who develops any genuine sense of awareness during the making of the documentary, and media responsibility (more so the lack of it) is one of the key issues raised by the six-person workshop team who collaborated on the film.

The film has no pretensions towards being a definitive examination of the Northern Ireland story, and it may be criticised (unfairly) for this. However, it is particularly effective in its picture of a family who try to remain at a safe distance from the violence and how they respond when it confronts them, in the well-observed detail of their community, and in its perception of how the facts of the situation are presented by the media to the British public.



### Comedy

In Richard Eyre's *Loose Connections* Stephen Rea drops his Belfast accent to play an opportunistic working-class Englishman who cons his way into sharing a middle-class feminist's car on a journey from London to Munich. This comedy of manners, written by film school graduate Maggie Brooks, opens promisingly with a witty parody of *Blue Collar* in a scene where a group of helmeted women assemble a car to a pounding score similar to Jack Nitzsche's in the Paul Schrader movie.

That the humour is sustained for much of the movie is almost entirely due to Rea's infectious performance. He's so good that newcomer Lindsay Duncan is clearly out of her depth in his company and this creates a serious imbalance in what is mostly a two-hander. Given the film's preoccupation with sexual politics it is frequently naive and dubious; the classic Tracy-Hepburn comedies of 40 years ago were far more aware in this respect.

It was probably inevitable that

any festival with a 150-strong programme of films would include a few of the unceasingly popular theme of adolescent youth. London chose well when they picked *The Heartbreakers* and, especially, *Zappa*. Both movies are set in the 1960s, which is not terribly original nowadays, but they're a long way from the imbecilic *Porky's* and *Lemon Popsicle*.

In *Zappa* (the title refers to a pet fish, a recurring motif in this year's festival movies) Danish director Bille August builds intelligently on an unpromising opening to draw a subtle picture of three confused Copenhagen youths who are misunderstood or dished out lip service by parents caught up in the trappings of a materialistic society. There's a dark side, too, to Peter Bringmann's *The Heartbreakers* which takes its title from the pop band formed by a disparate quartet in a small West German town in the early 1960s. It convincingly explains how the group members happened to find an affinity with the rebellious lyrics of Pete Townshend, and Bringmann has assembled a good young cast, although the movie might have benefited had he been a little more ruthless in his cutting.

Director Henry Jaglom would also have been well advised not to allow Karen Black indulge herself in song time and again in his otherwise amusing comedy of mismatched and frustrated lovers (played by Black and Michael Emil) in *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?*, a distinct improvement on Jaglom's last film, *Sitting Ducks*. Ruy Guerra's Mexican movie, *Erendira*, written by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was quite uneven in its account of a young girl forced into prostitution by a domineering grandmother (Irene Papas), but the elaborate visual design of the movie held an odd fascination. Gianna Amico's meandering Italian sex comedy, *Enough is Enough*, survived on its rich, earthy dialogue and performances.

Festival director Ken Wlaschin can be well pleased with his 11th and final London Film Festival. He takes over the Los Angeles festival next year and will be replaced in London by Derek Malcolm, film critic of *The Guardian*.

occasional flaw, but it remains a compelling, worthy and provocative drama which confirms once again Lumet's ability with actors through the remarkable performances he elicits from Hutton, Lindsay Crouse as Rochelle, and Ilan M. Mitchell-Smith as the young Daniel.

There's a strong naturalistic quality to the performances in *Acceptable Levels*, the new film by John Davis, who co-directed *Maeve* with Pat Murphy. Again, as in *Maeve*, the setting is a Catholic area of Belfast — this time, the Divis Flats — where the daughter of a working-class family is chosen by a TV crew as one of the subjects in the documentary series they are shooting.

"I think they sound promising."



above: Lindsay Crouse in 'Acceptable Levels'



## TELEVISION / Violence: to cut or not to cut?

SELF-CENSORSHIP, taking the easy option that ensures least disturbance all round, is not confined to news and current affairs programmes about Northern Ireland. It is not confined to television. It is a human weakness, or alternatively a sensible recognition of the realities, which deserves the examination of drama and does not need coupling with the most obviously emotive issue of the day.

For this reason it is a pity that John Davies's *Acceptable Levels* (C4), launching a new season of "Eleventh Hour" films, should have mixed its absorbing account of compromise in the cutting room with another drama of violence and mendacity in Belfast.

The all too plausible screenplay is built around a television documentary team making the Belfast programme in a series about children in various parts

of the United Kingdom. Those of the team interested in the content generally see it as an opportunity for Good Television. People constitute so much material to be theorised about and used.

Only Sue the researcher (Kay Adshear) is inexperienced enough to wear her liberal conscience on her sleeves. When she appeals for the assistance of the McAteer family in the run-down Divis flats she really believes that publicity about the hardships of the ghetto will help.

The resulting interview with nine-year-old Roison McAteer (the ever reliable Tracey Lynch of course) is interrupted when a schoolfriend outside is killed by a British rubber bullet. The producer Simon (played with precise verisimilitude by Andy Rashleigh) now has footage that is rather more than Good

Television, in fact rather more than he wants.

In the cutting room he finds good professional reasons for removing the naked violence and reducing Roison to two minutes of palatable piety. "You can't slap the audience in the face with sensationalism, that would be cheap," he tells himself and his obedient editor. His executive producer is pleased, everybody is pleased; Mr Maudling's return to "acceptable levels" of violence has been achieved.

Mr Davies's direction is very efficiently executed and he provides a useful eye-opener for anybody inclined to accept television current affairs at face value. He has also provided more discomfort for the sarcastic Belfast policeman in the film who looks forward to yet another documentary about "the poor underprivileged nationalist minority."

4

## Acceptable Levels, de John Davies.

Le meilleur des films irlandais présentés. Une équipe de la télévision britannique arrive à Belfast pour faire un documentaire sur la réaction des enfants devant les « événements ». L'équipe s'installe dans une famille ouvrière du quartier de Divis Flats. Pendant le déroulement d'une interview de la famille, une tragédie authentique arrive pratiquement à leur porte : une petite fille est tuée par une balle en plastique. Leur préoccupation est de savoir jusqu'à quel point intégrer cet événement « secondaire » à leur projet initial d'émission... Va-t-il faire déborder le sujet de son cadre ? Va-t-il parler avec une exigence qui demande à être entendue ? Ou est-ce simplement un accident qui - indéniablement tragique et immédiat - ne les concerne pas ? Présenté ainsi, les différents morceaux de l'intrigue se présentent comme une énigme littéraire, un élégant problème éthique. Mais le film est riche et complexe. Ce que Davies cerne en particulier avec une rectitude magnifique et une abondance d'exemples significatifs, c'est l'absence absolue de compréhension entre les victimes de la classe ouvrière, qui sont l'objet de l'émission, et leurs interrogateurs/interprètes qui appartiennent à la classe moyenne. La scène semble préparée comme pour une comédie - peut-être après tout *Acceptable Levels* est-il une comédie ! (comme *Meantime*, dont je parlerai dans un moment). Davies connaît tous ses personnages - l'équipe, les producteurs, les preneurs de son, les policiers, les femmes, les enfants - avec la rare pénétration d'un maître. Sa vision, me semble-t-il, combine l'acuité et une humanité judicieuse. Une absence de marque : l'IRA n'est présente ni dans l'image ni dans le dialogue. Curieuse lacune dans un film si riche par ailleurs sociologiquement.

Mark Le Fanu

POSITIF Revue de Cinéma 277  
Mars 1984

□ ANOTHER part of the world that is not getting a fair break is Northern Ireland, according to John Davies's sharp, cynical film *Acceptable Levels* on Channel 4 last night.

The movie concerns a BBC TV team making a routine documentary in Belfast's notorious Divis Flats. A crisis of conscience arises when a little girl is killed by a British Army plastic bullet while the film crew is close at hand.

But will their scoop, and the wrath of the local inhabitants, ever reach the TV screens of Britain?

The film, acted by a mixture of professionals and estate dwellers, showed the subtle processes by which the disturbing sequence is dropped from the programme.

*Acceptable Levels*, launching a new season of British made-for-TV films, was persuasively directed. Much of the Belfast brogue was incomprehensible to me. Sub-titles would have helped.

10.00-11.55 ACCEPTABLE LEVELS (Channel 4): A film in the 'Ploughman's Lunch' tradition, which takes a hefty, satirical swipe at media burkes and serves it up as ever-so-subtle realism. In this (most enjoyable) piece, a TV crew is making a documentary in Belfast's notorious Divis Flats. When a little girl is killed by a plastic bullet, it looks as though it might make good television. But there are other interests to consider and little by little the substance of the documentary slithers on to the cutting room floor. Directed by John Davies who made the BFI feature, 'Maeve.'

DAILY MAIL  
1.5.84.

THE OBSERVER  
29.4.84



79 WARDOUR STREET LONDON W1 734 4603



## London Fest Reviews

(Continued 1984)

VARIETY

Wednesday, December 14, 1983

### Med Allt A Hreinu

(On Top)  
(ICELANDIC-COLOR)

London, Dec. 5.

A Bjarmaland s.f. production, produced by Jakob Magnusson. Features entire cast. Directed by Agust Gudmundsson. Screenplay, Studemenn, Gudmundsson; camera (Eastmancolor), David Bridges; editor, William Diver; art director, Anna Th. Rognvaldsdottir; music, Studmenn, Grylurnar. Reviewed at London Film Festival, Dec. 4, 1983. Running time: 102 MINS.

With: Egill Olafsson, Ragnhildur Gisladdottir, Eggert Thorleifsson, Jakob Magnusson, Anna Bjornsdottir, Valgeir Gudjonsson, Tomas Tomasson, Thordur Arnason, Asgeir Oskarsson.

A musical from Iceland has to be a novelty, and though "On Top" is a very slight affair it has the merits of good humor and bouncy music. Inspiration seems to be the pop films of nearly 20 years ago that launched The Beatles and The Dave Clark Five, though level of comedy and invention here is comparatively low.

Slight plotline has a mixed girl-boy group split up and go separate ways, with the girls trying to grab gigs away from the boys. Musical numbers aren't confined to the concerts themselves as the characters break into song at every opportunity, and so do the people they meet (there are even singing cops!)

Film has apparently been a big hit in Iceland, where its director, Agust Gudmundsson, is known as a pioneer, having helmed the very first Icelandic feature film, "Land And Sons" as recently as 1980; this is his third effort.

Despite pleasant musical numbers, appealing players, bright photography and unusual locales, film won't make much of an impact internationally. Storyline, which has been thin from the beginning, simply stops when the male group arrive in Copenhagen thinking they've got a date at the Tivoli (it was a hoax on the part of the girls). They arrive, and the film simply stops, making for a frustrating finale.—Strat.

### Acceptable Levels

(BRITISH-COLOR)

London, Dec. 2.

Frontroom Productions, with Belfast Film Workshop. No producer credit. Directed by John Davies. Features entire cast. Screenplay, Gordon Hann, Elin Hare, Alastair Herron, Kate McManus, Robert Smith, Davies; camera (color), Smith; editor, Hare; art directors, Herron, McManus, Smith; additional music, Nick Garvey. Reviewed at British Film Institute Theatre, London, Nov. 30, 1983. Running time: 103 MINS.

Sue ..... Kay Adshead  
Simon ..... Andy Rashleigh  
Tony McAteer ..... Patrick Higgins  
Roisin McAteer ..... Tracey Lynch  
Kathleen McAteer ..... Sally McCaffery  
Frank McAteer ..... George Shane  
Major Green ..... Paul Jesson  
Jill ..... Frances Barber  
Andy ..... Ina McElhinney  
Ricky ..... Derek Halligan  
Lawrence ..... Dooyne Byrd  
Father Docherty ..... Michael Gormley

A scathing attack on the way the British media, specifically television, operates in Northern Ireland, "Acceptable Levels" is for the most part a strong, gutsy film about the making and un-making of a tv documentary.

A BBC team is making a series of programs on Britain's children: one episode is to be set in Belfast and to concentrate on the effect of the "troubles" on kids. Sue, a researcher, becomes friendly with the McAteer family whose young daughter, Roisin, she sees as typifying the attitudes of Catholic children. Simon, a celebrated producer, arrives, and a local camera/sound crew is hired.

During the filming of an interview in the McAteer home there's trouble outside in the street: one of the child's girlfriends is dead, apparently killed by a plastic bullet. The crew films the body, and later interviews other children who accuse the British soldiers of firing indiscriminately into the crowd and who also deny there was any kind of riot, which the British claim was the reason for the shooting. However, back in London, Simon gives way to various subtle pressures (mostly of his own making), and the dynamic footage ends up on the cutting room floor.

All of this is powerfully told, and much of it rings true. The setting-up of the interview, the presence of soldiers and subtly bullying police in the streets, the tv crew enjoying excellent food and wine in their hotel after a hard day in the slums — details like these are forcefully presented. It's unfortunate, then, that the film's impact is blunted by excessive length and discursiveness, problems also to be found in John Davies' previous film about Ireland, "Maeve." No less than six writers worked on "Acceptable Levels," and it shows: there are clear indications of a "committee" at work behind the scenes instead of one filmmaker's personal vision. Consequently, the film rambles along for the first 40 minutes or so, and includes scenes which work in themselves but which add nothing to the overall film and could easily be excised. Editor Elin Hare

wasn't nearly ruthless enough. An added problem is that in some of these early scenes the Belfast accents are virtually impenetrable: English subtitles seem mandatory for screenings outside Ireland.

With some modifications, "Acceptable Levels" could attract quite a wide audience; certainly festivals are indicated. But this is one of those instances where a little less would be very much more. Acting is very good down the line, and the camerawork of Davies' long-time collaborator Robert Smith is tops.

—Strat.

### Seventeen

(DOCU-COLOR)

London, Nov. 20.

A De Mott/Kreines Film Production. Produced, directed, photographed and edited by Joel De Mott and Jeff Kreines. Production assistant, Peter Esmonde. Reviewed at the London Film Festival Nov. 19, 1983. Running time: 112 MINS.

"Seventeen" is an intriguing documentary film that offers an insider's perspective on a group of working class kids as they pass through their final year of high school in the Indiana town of Muncie.

The project was commissioned as part of the "Middletown" series for PBS, but shelved because of the bad language and immoral behavior depicted in the film.

However, nothing in the pic, which was made by two filmmakers who lived with their subjects for a continuous 12-month period, rings untrue. And although the kids are rude to their teachers, smoke dope and get drunk, the portrait of the community is sympathetic.

Central character in the docu is a hyperactive girl whose relationship with a black schoolfriend causes many problems. Although she postures somewhat to the cameras, the result is candid and revealing.

Concentration throughout is on the white community and how it relates to fellow blacks in scenes that include uproarious cooking and government classes, basketball matches and a drunken "kegger" orgy.

Dramatic themes such as the pregnancy of a black schoolgirl and a fatal car accident are followed through within the pic which, nevertheless, remains episodic in structure. —Japa.

Continued



## IN PRODUCTION

# ACTT to check on conditions of franchises

By Juliet Rix

THE first two-year franchises granted by the ACTT to film makers under the ACTT/Channel 4/BFI workshop declaration will be reviewed by the Union this month to make sure that the companies are keeping to the conditions of their franchises.

Also, this week the ACTT has redrafted the declaration itself to incorporate work on video. The rewrite will be submitted to C4 and the BFI for approval, but it's expected to go through without opposition.

The move into video is likely to stimulate productions aimed directly at television, although the material coming out of the nine fully franchised film workshops often ends up on C4, which part-finances several of the groups, even if that's not its primary destination.

Now, 18 months into the two year franchises, most of the companies have at least one television film in production, in development, or awaiting transmission on C4.

In London, the six person collective, Newsreel, finished shooting last week on a fiction film provisionally entitled *Mothering*, directed by Joy Chamberlain and produced by Andy Metcalfe. The 52 minute film, which will probably be screened on C4 in the autumn, was shot on 16mm film and is "a sort of soap opera about mothering in general and nurturance between women", says writer Gillian Slovo.

Newsreel is now starting shooting *Inevitable Power* (working title), "looking at the history of nuclear power, why particular decisions about it were taken and whether the people who took them would do the same again. It will also look at where nuclear power and weapons meet, and whether they feed each other; if so which feeds which."

Metcalfe and Paul Morrison will direct from a script by Stephen Lowe. "It is a variation on a docu-drama but the two elements are not totally integrated. There are doc parts and drama parts," says Slovo. The film is expected to be just over an hour long and will be transmitted on C4 in late 1984 or early 1985.

Amber Films in Newcastle use a similar technique of weaving drama into a documentary background, although they do it largely to ease the problem of strong local accents in the areas in which most of their films are made.

Two such films are currently in progress, one on boxing in Hartlepool and one on Seacoaling in Northumberland. In development at Amber, which is 30 per cent funded by C4 is a "political drama" about the North East Labour leader T. Dan Smith, who fell from favour in the Poulson

scandal in the early 1970's. Smith may even play himself in the film.

Amber does not limit itself to docu-drama and two animation films, totalling about 15 minutes are also in progress: *Urban Isolation*, and an allegory about freedom and education, *The Eel*, by local writer Tom Haddaway. The animator is Judith Tomlinson.

The Leeds Animation Workshop, as the name suggests, works almost exclusively with brush and pen. It has just completed titles for 51 Per Cent's new C4 series *Just Sex*, which transmits in the spring, and will be starting work in the summer on a three and a half minute title sequence for *Print It Yourself*, also for C4.

Back in London, Cinema Action is nearing completion of a 25 minute musical described as "a black doo-wop operetta". The stage production came from New York but it was shot here and is now being edited.

Frontroom films in Wardour Street has had a recent success with *Acceptable Levels* directed by John Davies; about a TV crew working in Northern Ireland. It opens at the Everyman Cinema next month and will be shown on C4 in the spring. Frontroom has a contract to provide C4 with two



SUCCESS: Frontroom Films' *Acceptable Levels*

more feature style films, one of which should start shooting in the summer, although Frontroom has to renegotiate the agreement before it starts. "because the declaration isn't really set up for full scale drama," they say.

Trade Films of Gateshead is also doing drama however, with *Ends and Means* recently completed and, due for transmission on C4 in June. The film starts in 16th century Italy with Machiavelli lecturing from his works and follows a merchant traveller through time to 20th century Newcastle, where a Tyne boatmen reveals the continuing relevance of Machiavelli against the background of industrial decay. *Ends and Means* is produced by Ingrid Sinclair and

directed by Stuart MacKinnon.

Trade is currently putting together a programme from 22 hours of material recorded during the last general election when the team interviewed, Tyne and Wear people about their attitudes to politics at various stages during the election campaign.

North East films in Yorkshire is also talking to "ordinary people" in two non-fiction films — they prefer not to call them documentaries — about towns in the North East. The *Saltburn* project is directed by David Haddington and *The Rosedale Project* by Peter Bell, who will produce them both.

Finally, the Sheffield Co-Op, an all female group largely funded by the BFI and specialising in films

about women, has two films coming up on C4; the recently completed *Red Skirts* about the 1915 Glasgow rent strike, and *Jobs For The Girls*, a drama due for screening in the spring. The co-op is currently researching a film about Birth control, which it hopes to sell to C4.

Frank McGerrigan, who oversees the workshop from the C4 end says that C4 is just beginning to reap the crop from seed money put into the workshops 18 months ago. "So far we are delighted and we believe that they will continue to provide us with material we will want to show, especially now that the declaration is being extended to video," he said.

## Gemini, the winning pair...



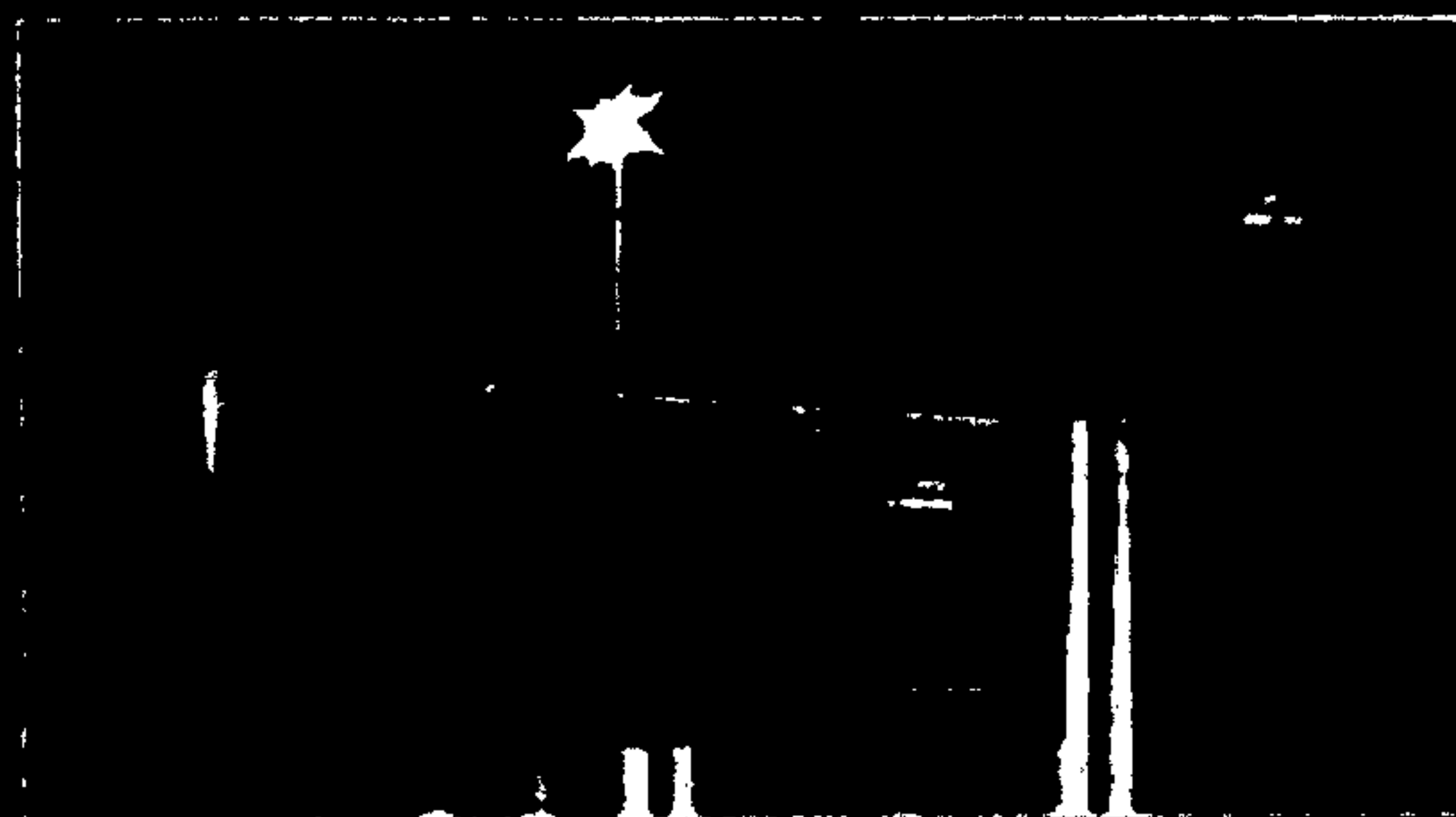
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