

**From *In Two Minds* to *Family Life***

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I've been asked to say something about the background to the films *In Two Minds* (1967) and *Family Life* (1971).

It began in the 1950s, in a respectable working-class suburb of Birmingham. I am in the sixth form at a local grammar school. And I fall in love. Like all adolescent love, it was intense and scary and...wonderful. But unlike most adolescent love, this one lasted. Her name was Topsy and she was fifteen.

Cut to ten years later. We are living together in a flat in London, we are both actors, and life is going much better than we ever thought it might. I was doing extremely well. When, in your middle twenties, you have your picture on the front of the *Radio Times* and you're given the number one dressing room at the Television Centre, you think: this can't last. She was doing even better. She had also been on the cover of the *Radio Times*, in a two-hander she did for the BBC with Dame Edith Evans. Then Tony Richardson asked her to be in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), with Tom Courtenay. And Tony was going to Stratford to do a season, and he asked her to join the company, playing number two to Vanessa Redgrave. But John Schlesinger had asked her to play opposite Tom again in the film version of *Billy Liar* (1963), which was to be shot in the North of England. After a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, she decided on the film. I had to stay in London because I was about to go on location to shoot the third part of a David Mercer trilogy about the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament, where I got shot to death by both sides on the Berlin Wall.

This, by the way, was not shot in Berlin; it took place in a disused brewery in Watford. Such is the glamour of filmmaking.

There were no mobile phones then, so we kissed and parted: she went off to location. That was the last time I saw her.

Nearly three weeks later, she returned to London. John Schlesinger had sacked her, saying he was getting nothing. Nothing was coming from her eyes. He recast with Julie Christie, which was Julie's big break. Topsy was overweight; personal hygiene had gone out of the window. Her hair was lank, she talked very slowly and what she did say did not make an awful lot of sense. She was chain-smoking and drinking heavily, and was only really interested in the content of the fridge. I was, understandably, distraught and puzzled, and naively thought: "Well, it's all been too much for her: she needs a lot of love."

But I was about to go off on location, so she said she might pop home for a few days, and I said, "That's a very good idea: your mum will look after you." She went home to Birmingham. Her mother took one look at her, and took her round to the GP. The GP took one look at her and sent her up to Highcroft Hall, which was the local bin. The psychiatrists there immediately plugged her into the mains, an initial six ECTs, and dosed her with the new drugs that they were very enthusiastic about at the time. I heard about this, and tried to remonstrate with them, angry and distraught; and they said: "You're not family, and you're not married. You have no status." They were correct.

She came back to London when I finished filming, and I tried to look after her. It was extremely difficult. I gave up acting to look after her. And this went on, and on. There seemed to be no change. She went to the psychiatrist at the Royal Free: the same response from them. Not helpful. Eventually, after two or three years, I was at the end of my tether, and more or less in a state of depressed incompetence. She went home to her mum. Even she found her very difficult. This went on and on.

She died in January 2014, of lung cancer. I was there, our son Will was there and also her family. At least we knew *then* what was the matter with her.

Eventually, I pulled myself together, and in a manic defence against depression, I threw myself into work, burying my grief. As a producer at the BBC, one of the first things I did was to commission a screenplay from my friend David Mercer. I'd read *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1960) of course, as everyone else had, and I followed it up, learning about Laing's work with Aaron Esterson. David Mercer was himself in analysis, or to be more accurate, he went to visit an analyst a few times a week. But he was intellectually engaged. I asked Ronnie – Dr. R. D. Laing – to lunch. He brought Ute with him; it looked like a fairly new relationship. He was very helpful, agreeing to be the technical consultant on the film. David and I spent a couple of afternoons with Aaron Esterson, a very helpful man. He talked to us at length about his work with families. We also spent a day at Villa 21, the experimental ward that David Cooper was running. It was in a bin just outside London, it might have been Friern Barnet – no, Shenley. It was a most illuminating day for David and me, where, in this protected environment, people lived and were just allowed to *be*. There were

very few drugs used, and no ECT of course. No constrictions. People were just *allowed to be*. That impressed us very much. Out of all this, David and I talked. We also often talked with Ronnie, going in the evenings to his house somewhere in north London. I can't remember where now. The evenings would go into the night. David Mercer was a drunk. And like most drunks, the more he drank the more pompous nonsense he spoke. I'm not a drinker. I don't really drink...that much. Compared with David, I'm a teetotaler. Ronnie was drinking parallel with David, more, if anything. And the spirit bottles would just...go. I was agog. But Ronnie was just as lucid. Every sentence had a subject, a verb and a predicate. And they included the most complex subsidiary clauses. And I would be listening to what he said, of course, but also – technically – I would wonder: How was this sentence going to end? He'll crash and burn; or he'll do an "er" and an "um" and add a non sequitur. Never. These long, complicated sentences he would bring to a satisfied conclusion, landing them gracefully on a full stop. You're the experts here about psychiatry, but I can tell you that as an English stylist, Ronnie will live.

He was very helpful to me. David wrote a screenplay; I asked Ken Loach to direct it, because we were, and still are, very close. Ken had no interest whatsoever in the subject matter. He didn't read any of the books that I forced upon him. But he is exceptionally talented at teasing out authentic performances that have an emotional truth. I trusted that. Upon transmission it caused a considerable stir. William Sargant from the Maudsley who was a consultant psychiatrist, made an absolute idiot of himself, but of course it didn't make me feel any better. Why would it? But I couldn't let it go. So I said: "We'll do another one!" And David Mercer said, "We've done it! What are you talking about?" I pressed him and pressed him, and in the end he said

yes. But his heart wasn't in it. He delivered a perfunctory first draft, didn't want to do any rewrites, and understandably didn't want me to work on it. Ken was easier to persuade, because this was going to be a cinema film, called *Family Life*, and directors always like to work in the cinema. So we made *Family Life*. It didn't do much in this country; it was just a puzzle to everyone. It happened to be a hit in Paris, because the intellectuals in Paris were just cottoning on to Ronnie, and so everybody flocked to see it.

I'll close in a moment, but I just want to say something about this "blaming the mother" and this whole idea about families. The clear impression we got from Aaron Esterson was that there had been no attempt to blame the mother. It was an attempt to explore the dynamics within a family. But of course, as someone earlier said, in those days in particular, the mother was the dominant person in the home, and most of the interviews were with her. The fathers were at work and less available. Aaron seemed a man who was not inclined to make judgments. Because as soon as you start blaming, you cease to understand, and he wanted to understand. He wanted to tease out the dynamics.

I went into the films with that idea, and really tried to impress on David and on Ken that we were not blaming anybody, we're not attacking mothers. Ken found women who would describe themselves as ordinary housewives. For in *In Two Minds* and in *Family Life*, neither was a professional actor. The way we work with actors is that an actor must see the character from the character's point of view, that's the only point of view they have. We were not interested in blame either.

I should add that neither film is about Topsy or her family. They're not even based on the case histories, although there is a case in *The Divided Self* called Julie, which was a starting point, certainly for *In Two Minds*. And yet in both films, the audience blamed the mother. I feel some responsibility for that. In both films these women were dominant. But worried and concerned and not understanding, of course. We tried to avoid blaming the mother. I'm still not sure why we failed.

*Family Life*, for me, is not as good a film as *In Two Minds*. *In Two Minds* is a low-budget, black-and-white, shot-in-a-hurry, hand-held film. *Family Life* is a more glossy film for the cinema, a bigger budget. But it seems to me that *In Two Minds* captured and distilled the essence of that family difficulty; and the performances are even better than they are in *Family Life*. If you see both films you'll make up your own mind.

## References

Laing, R. (1960) *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*.  
London: Tavistock Publications.

## Filmography

*Billy Liar* (1963) dir. John Schlesinger. Vic Films Productions and Waterfall  
Productions.

*Family Life* (1971) dir. Ken Loach. EMI Films.

*In Two Minds* (1967) dir. Ken Loach. BBC1.

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) dir. Tony Richardson. Woodfall  
Film Productions.