

What were the 1960s about?: An Education and Pirate Radio

By David Walsh
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The decade of the 1960s receives a good deal of attention in English-language films and television. There are movies and series that focus on the early part of the decade, ‘on the eve,’ so to speak, of the great tumult, and those that concentrate on the upheavals of the late 1960s. In either case, the latter events are seen as a turning point, perhaps even as a barrier between ourselves and people who lived before then.

Various generations recognize themselves in or take as their point of departure the world that emerged after the middle of the 1960s; a distinct minority at this point probably identifies favorably with the reality of the 1950s and early 1960s, even if they are the appropriate age to do so. The gap is not simply a matter of age, but one of culture and sensibility.

Rightly or wrongly, the earlier decade in the US—and Britain as well to a certain extent—is associated with conformism in every sphere, the Cold War and its paranoia, sexual repression and enforced female submissiveness, continued racial apartheid in America, and cultural blandness, while the late 1960s and beyond conjure up images of protest, the ‘counterculture,’ flexibility, openness, and so forth.

As the years have passed, the ‘liberated’ 1960s (extending into the early to mid-1970s), like a prominent sandbar in the middle of a river caused by waters receding on both sides of it, are now seen not only as separated from the years that preceded, but by those that *came after* them. The 1980s and 1990s have now become virtually synonymous in much of popular culture with greed, individualism and selfishness.

There is some truth to this general sense of the course of things, but also a good deal of superficiality and over-simplification. Almost no artist ventures, in any event, to explain *why* a particular social mood transforms into another, quite different one.

For too many, the 1960s are surrounded with a golden halo; the decade is seen as a utopian moment, an era of promise that inexplicably turned into its opposite. (For example, filmmaker Roman Polanski, no less, told an interviewer not long before his most recent legal troubles that the decade “was a time of great aspirations and hopes and joy in general.” “You don’t see any of that in the world now?” Polanski: “I see the contrary, really.”)

It may be unreasonable to expect filmmakers and other artists

to develop a thorough grasp of the postwar economic conditions, the Cold War political settlement, as well as the complex processes that undermined all that and led to the crisis and radicalization of masses of people in the late 1960s. It is no easy matter either to come to an understanding of the historical and ideological difficulties that helped produce the stagnant, reactionary climate prevailing for the past 30 years, along with its definite limits. However, without a greater degree of insight, most of the works about the 1960s will continue to fall short.

An Education, directed by Danish filmmaker Lone Scherfig, with a script by Nick Hornby, is an appealing work in some ways. It has a talented cast, an attractive and convincing period look, and unfolds carefully. It is spoiled, however, by a rather predictable script and a conventional denouement, and the narrow outlook to which it seems to subscribe.

Sixteen-year-old Jenny (Carey Mulligan) is living in a London suburb in 1961. She listens to French music and longs for something more than her cramped, dull family life. She meets the older David (Peter Sarsgaard), Jewish, a bon vivant, something of a mystery man as to the source of his income (which turns out to be quasi-criminal). She goes to concerts and clubs with him and his friends, eventually on a weekend trip to Oxford and even an excursion to Paris. “You have no idea how boring my life was before I met you,” she tells him. David seduces and fools her parents into permitting her all these adventures. In the end, he proves to have one secret too many.

The intelligence of the actors and the subdued quality of the goings-on can’t conceal the essentially stereotyped and self-centered nature of the piece, based on a memoir by journalist Lynn Barber. Fine British acting here, unfortunately, primarily serves the purposes of making clichés quite appealing and ‘lifelike.’ Alfred Molina as Jenny’s impossibly penny-pinching and conservative father, Emma Thompson as her prim, anti-Semitic headmistress, and Olivia Williams as an apparently sexless, spinsterish teacher *nearly* perform charmingly enough to make one forget that their characters are not genuine human beings, but static, stock figures whose essential purpose is to show off the subtler, more fluid personalities of Jenny and David. (Here, in individual human form, we are presented with an opposition between characters who belong to the previously staid epoch and those who point

toward the more culturally and sexually adventurous days to come). We are encouraged to snicker along with Jenny and David at the expense of nearly everyone else, a notoriously bad sign.

Barber, who writes for the *Observer*, sees the early 1960s and her adolescence from the following point of view (in a 2008 article): “Feminism came too late for me. By the time *The Female Eunuch* was published in 1970, I was 26 and had already gone through all the conflicts and double-binds that made being a girl, and especially a clever girl, so difficult in the Fifties and Sixties.”

Via Hornby’s script, this take on the period finds its way into the film, which is all about Jenny’s development, *her* choices, *her* future, *her* inner anguish ... This is the latest in a series of recent ‘coming-of-age’ films in which the protagonist finds his or her way at the end, leaving everybody else in the lurch. ‘As long as I’m all right, well, then ...’ It’s distasteful. Why should we care terribly much, whether ‘clever’ Jenny goes to Oxford—first choice—or ends up marrying a successful man—second and least favored choice?

In London at the time, there were still bombed out buildings from World War II. A more enlightened filmmaker, Terence Davies, noted in his recent *Of Time and the City* that the British population in the 1950s “survived in some of the worst slums in Europe!” But the critical question to some was whether they could get into the right university and make a proper career for themselves. Unhappily, all the considerable acting (and technical and design and cinematographic) talent on display in *An Education* can’t make that particular sow’s ear into a silk purse.

Pirate Radio (known as *The Boat That Rocked* in Britain) is a much sillier, less ambitious film from Richard Curtis (writer of *The Black Adder* for television, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, writer-director of *Love Actually*). Set in 1966, the movie purports to deal with the phenomenon of “pirate radio,” i.e., stations that set up operations off the southern English coast on ships and broadcast pop music at a time when the BBC hardly played any at all. The British government eventually cracked down on the operations and managed to halt most of them, before the BBC itself began programming rock and roll in earnest in 1967.

This is also a coming-of-age story. This time the adolescent in question is Carl (Tom Sturridge), who comes aboard one of the radio-broadcasting ships to stay with his ‘godfather,’ Quentin (Bill Nighy). We see the quirky collection of disc jockeys through his eyes, as he navigates his way, somewhat tortuously, toward his first sexual experience.

Curtis deals with the various characters and disjointed episodes in a cartoonish manner, by and large. Especially caricatured are a villainous cabinet minister, played by Kenneth Branagh, and his assistant (Jack Davenport). The film portrays them as diehard “family values” Tory reactionaries, appalled by rock and roll’s ‘filth’ and ‘pornography,’ when, in fact,

Labour was in power at the time and the persecutor of the pirates was none other than “left” Labourite, Anthony Wedgwood Benn. From the attention to detail that Curtis pays in this regard, one can adduce the general historical truthfulness of the film as a whole.

Nonetheless, despite their naïve, sentimental, and formulaic propensities, none of the New Zealand-born writer-director’s films are without their charms and amusements. He has a way with words and a decided soft spot (all too softheaded at times) for foolish, scheming, lecherous humanity. Nighy is, as always, a comic delight, even though *Pirate Radio* does not give him much to do. The single word “languor” in his mouth, for example, accompanied by the right body movement, becomes an entire personality study.

In Curtis’s somewhat primitive view of things, the 1960s prove to have been about sleeping with whomever you liked, vaguely anarchic attitudes, and listening to loud music. Curtis evinces a nostalgia for the decade. He has the star American disc jockey, “The Count” (Philip Seymour Hoffman), tell young Carl, when the film slows down for one of its few reflective moments, “These are the best days of our lives.” But at least the heady days, now long since past, were not without their life-altering consequences: we are told by a closing title, in all apparent seriousness, that half a million radio stations now play pop music all day and night.

The writers and directors of both these limited films thus have this much in common: they tend to reduce the rebelliousness of the 1960s to the desire of sections of the middle class, with whom they identify, for a more comfortable, more expansive existence. Small change indeed.

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