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Family Life

Realism in the cinema has come a long way since Zavattini's woman buying a pair of shoes. In the last few years in Britain, possibly as a reaction against the sentimental romanticism of Free Cinema, realist cinema has been characterised by a fundamental pessimism, the very antithesis of the post-war Italians' brave confidence in the miraculous potential of the man in the street. Films as variously in touch with reality as *Up the Junction*, *The Whisperers*, *Kes*, have created their own iconography: depressed suburbia, bleak industrial wastelands, the seedy bureaucracies of schools, hospitals, labour exchanges. A kind of negative didacticism prevails, engendered in the spate of television 'documentary' plays about the rejects of an affluent society.

Ken Loach's *Family Life* (MGM-EMI) is a fairly typical example. It began life as a television play, *In Two Minds* by David Mercer, a case history of a girl's mental illness constructed out of interviews (by an unseen camera 'voice') with the girl and her parents. For the big screen (and why it's on the big screen in these days of media interdependence is a good question) Mercer has expanded his original play, writing in an extra character and a few scenes where 'action' rather than talk predominates. The basic interview format has been retained, with the difference that the 'voice' is now a three-dimensional character—a sympathetic psychiatrist—a visual identification which in itself amounts to an implicit admission that the cinema is somehow less immediate than the television screen.

It's not difficult to see what attracted Loach to the subject. *Family Life* is an illustration of the controversial theories of the psychiatrist R. D. Laing: environment rather than inadequacies of self as the root cause of mental illness. Like *Kes*, Loach's new film is an indictment of a society straitjacketed by norms. It opens with a suburban panorama, row upon row of statutory sameness in the now familiar metaphor for environmental conformity. We then cut to a London underground station, where a girl sits numbly watching the trains go by until someone decides to remove her. She is escorted home by the police, which starts her parents asking questions. Gradually, as the girl, Jan (Sandy Ratcliff), and her parents (Bill Dean and Grace Cave) talk to a psychiatrist, it emerges that she is mildly schizophrenic. Her case history unfolds episodically: an unexceptional lower middle-class background; parents who have done everything for her except allow her the luxury of her own inclinations; from herself a respect for her parents' will arising partly out of love, partly out of a reluctance to follow her elder sister in severing relations with them. From this has developed a gradual deterioration in her own self-respect, characterised by casual affairs, an unstable relationship with her current boyfriend, an unwanted abortion, and a progressive mental detachment.

This progress from occasional distractedness to advanced schizophrenia and finally total withdrawal is charted with a harrowing inevitability. And every stage in Jan's decline is shown to be prompted by a wilful adherence to conventional modes of behaviour, whether familial (her parents project their own unadmitted failures on to her) or medical (the 'progressive' psychiatrist, whose group therapy methods seem to be helping Jan, is replaced by a hospital board decision which blithely ignores the success of those methods). Her only positive response is from her boyfriend, whose temporary encouragement stems less from understanding Jan than from his own vaguely defined hostility to authoritarianism, clumsily symbolised by his and Jan's spray-painting of her father's garden gnomes.

Jan is last seen as a lecture theatre guinea pig, seeming by her mute withdrawal almost to acquiesce in the psychiatrist's pronouncement that there are no discernible environmental factors in her case. The film is a depressingly convincing demonstration of the howling inaccuracy of that diagnosis; nearly every scene has been a stage in the elaboration of a point of view diametrically opposed to this traditional analysis. In their interviews with the sympathetic psychiatrist, and in their stumbling attempts to communicate with their errant daughter, Jan's parents reveal themselves as inflexible bigots hamstrung by their own inhibitions. Her mother is a classic demonstration of the stifling vacuity of suburban gentility, registering dismay at every deviation from her own circumscribed norms, shocked into comment, for instance, when the psychiatrist's secretary actually calls him by his Christian name; her father, who admits to the indiscretion of marrying above his own point on the social scale, also admits—with a barely suppressed tinge of regret—to a lack of sexual satisfaction in his marriage (his wife is 'not like that' because she had 'a good upbringing').

That Jan's illness is rooted in her 'failure' to respond to environmental pressures is established beyond doubt; and in the film's episodic framework, established to devastating effect. One's misgivings about *Family Life* stem not so much from its accuracy as a clinical case history as from its way of assembling the 'facts' of that case history. Inevitably schematic in its structuring of these facts, the film undermines its persuasively realist centre by overstating its case. Jan's parents are immediately recognisable as types; and paradoxically, that is precisely what obstructs one's belief in them as real people. Like the sportsmaster in *Kes* (though admittedly less energetically), the actors have been encouraged to play to a preconceived notion of people as types, recognisable certainly but recognisable for their caricatural accuracy rather than the picture they present of the infinite unpredictability of real people. The result is a kind of scripted improvisation which rings only partly true because one is constantly aware that the characters are activating conditioned reflexes in one's own mind (the traditionalist psychiatrist is white-coated; the gnome-painting episode comes immediately after a cosy denunciation of the horrors of suburban conformity, and so on). *Family Life* is a lot more 'real' than the overrated *Kes*; but a film which has prejudice as its theme doesn't gain from playing on the prejudices of its audience.

DAVID WILSON

'Family Life': Grace Cave, Sandy Ratcliff