

John Schlesinger: *Billy Liar* (1963); *Darling* (1965); *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967)



I don't know if Schlesinger was fixated with losers: it certainly looks like it, from this trio of his most famous movies. He had a slight decline, but went on working for years: I remember especially his TV films, *An Englishman Abroad* and *A Question of Attribution* – and they were also about losers (Guy Burgess and Anthony Blunt).

His losers here start fairly desperate, with Tom Courtenay in the last shot of *Billy Liar* returning home to his semi-detached parents; then Julie Christie (Courtenay's fantasy-piece in *Billy Liar*) going back to her rich Italian husband in *Darling*. They then bottom out, with Dustin Hoffman's death on the greyhound bus in *Midnight Cowboy*, so far down it's hard to imagine anyone bottoming out any deeper. *Cowboy* was a huge sensation in its day, but it's very hard now to recapture the sense it created of bold new frontiers: frankness about sad gigolos, frankness about sad old faggots who wanted to be beaten up in the loo ... no-one had gone so far in depicting sadness before. Now sadness is with us all the time (this is the year of *No Country for Old Men*); and *Cowboy* is merely depressing, for all the excellence of Schlesinger's Manhattan location shooting, for all the innocence of Jon Voigt, and of Hoffman's preparedness to look and (you could say) smell as bad as he could, in so far as he could, in a non-oderiferous medium.

Much of *Darling* has dated even more badly, helped again by our memory of what seemed the startling new territories it too was embarking upon. Either I had forgotten, did not recognise, or was deprived by the BBFC of, the brief encounter with cunnilingus to which we're treated in the DVD (Laurence Harvey seems to go down on Christie for two brief shots); and the Parisian sex-show was certainly, in 1965, deprived of its male participant, so that they all seemed to be watching the lady's lone activities.

Harvey was never better cast than he was here, as a slimey, impotent fixer and party-pimp: harder to take is Dirk Bogarde as a tele-journalist with a cultural conscience, and as Christie's good, straight-sex angel to Harvey's bad, bent one. All the time you're tortured with the thought that Bogarde would be more at home at one of the interesting Manhattan parties portrayed in *Midnight Cowboy*.

Two years after *Darling* was released, Mick Jagger and a Mars Bar hit the headlines, and *Darling* began to look tame.

So thank God for Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, and thank God for Dennis Coop. Doubtless Schlesinger had a lot to do with it, but *Billy Liar* is so well-written, so funny (which no-one ever claimed for *Darling* or *Midnight Cowboy*), so inventive visually, and so superbly photographed (by Coop) that it seems as good in 2008 as it did in 1963.

There's a moment in Truffaut's *Tirez sue le Pianiste* (1960), when one bad guy affirms to another that if he's lying, he hopes his mother will drop dead. Truffaut shows her in one corner of the screen, dropping dead. *Billy Liar* has moments like that every five minutes. They mitigate our horror at the pit the protagonist digs for himself with every mendacity and cringe-making self-delusion he constructs. We like to think that he'll eventually make it as a script-writer, but so many of his dreams are fleshed-out, not by his imaginative way with language, but by the way the film itself creates what they would have been, had he had the budget and the visual invention, that we doubt it.

No, what was truly revelatory about *Billy Liar* was its take on the way the media stuffed us with trash, and had been doing so ever since the war. Godfrey Winn is / was bad enough as the smarmy disc-jockey: what is perhaps impossible to recreate now, if you didn't live through the fifties, and hear the mind-numbing *Have A Go* (on the Light Programme every Tuesday at 7.30), is its iconic presenter, Wilfred Pickles, bullying, blinding (though never of course effing) his way through every sentence he speaks.



Wilfred ("Give him the money, Mabel!")

I'd love to know if Pickles saw playing Billy's dad – the cause of Billy's constant retreat into fantasy and fibbing – as a sort of coming-out, a way of atoning for the way he and the BBC had been insulting and patronising us for the most of the previous decade. It was a considerable burden of guilt, and *Billy Liar* seemed, for everyone, not just Pickles, a new dawning.

Nowadays we have *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!* Which lasts twice as long as *Have A Go*, costs several thousand times more to produce, and is watched by even more millions who still have nothing better to do than be patronised and insulted.

Far from the Madding Crowd inhabits another world: it's the only good Thomas Hardy film there is. Polanski's *Tess* was so dull I nearly walked out, and Michael Winterbottom's *Jude* handicapped itself by cutting the last fifth of the plot (presumably in case people laughed), and by demonstrating what a totally impossible character Sue Bridehead is, even when played by Kate Winslett. No-one's ever made a film of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Where *Billy Liar*, etc., are urban, *Far From* is rural; where they're claustrophobic, *Far From* is, I suppose, "agoraphile"; where they're economical, *Far From* is leisurely.

Certain scenes stay with you forever. I first saw the film, in the first week of its release (at the Odeon Marble Arch), and dreamed that night of sheep going over a cliff, and of bad sheep-dogs being shot. Sheep lying down bloated and having to be skewered is another item in my nightmares, as is tying down hayricks single-handed in a gale. If all this indicates Gabriel Oak to be the film's most memorable character, it's unfair – Troy, Boldwood and Bathsheba have their proper share of highlights: it's just that Oak and his beasts are somehow at the heart of it all, which is right.

The fairs, parties, singsongs and rural entertainments are all put together with great expertise.

It's the wretched Boldwood who is I suppose the character closest to one of Schlesinger's losers, listed above. His erotomaniacal fixation is clinically conveyed – yes, you really see the

dozens of presents he's collected for Bathsheba, neatly packaged in his dresser: what you're not told is that in the book these are used by his lawyer as evidence that he was crazy all along. Instead, Schlesinger gives us a pull-back shot of Peter Finch, dramatically lit in his condemned cell. Boldwood ought to be, above all, boring: Finch is too charismatic.



The film is photographed by Nicholas Roeg, and he makes Maiden Castle look stunning (he must also get the Oscar for history's best photographer of sheep). It's at Maiden Castle, however, in Troy's sword-exercise demonstration before Bathsheba, that the movie can't beat the book:

In an instant the atmosphere was transformed to Bathsheba's eyes. Beams of light caught from the low sun's rays, above, around, in front of her, well-nigh shut out earth and heaven – all emitted in the marvellous evolutions of Troy's reflecting blade, which seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere specially. These circling gleams were accompanied by a keen rush that was almost a whistling – also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand.

Never since the broadsword became the national weapon had there been more dexterity shown in its management than by the hands of Sergeant Troy, and never had he been in such splendid temper for the performance as now in the evening sunshine among the ferns with Bathsheba. It may safely be asserted with respect to the closeness of his cuts, that had it been possible for the edge of the sword to leave in the air a permanent substance wherever it flew past, the space left untouched would have been almost a mould of Bathsheba's figure.

Schlesinger, Roeg, the editor, Terence Stamp and Derek Ware his sword-instructor, do their best, but can't even come near the power of Hardy's sexual metaphor. The cinematic Bathsheba never appears to be in danger.

There are some things, you suddenly realise, that films can't do.

Julie Christie as Bathsheba is much more inside her part than she is in *Darling*, and infinitely better than she is as Lara in the lamentable *Dr Zhivago*.

But the dog who helps Fanny Robin up the hill to the poorhouse isn't big enough.