VERA DRAKE [2004], directed by Mike Leigh, 125 minutes

The film addresses the issue of abortion. As Reinhold Niebuhr noted, a moral choice is one where, whatever option is chosen, there will be a sacrifice of value. This is certainly the case with abortion, a difficult and emotional choice under the best of circumstances. Where abortion is illegal, the choice is made even more difficult for poor women. For those with resources, safe abortions may often be undertaken even where abortion is supposed to be prohibited, another example of differentiation.

The film is set in the early 1950s in London. As in the U.S. at that time, abortion in Britain was illegal. It is legal in Britain today and, in fact, much less of a political or controversial issue than in the U.S. The U.S. in the early 1950s was a place of increasing prosperity. This was not the case in Britain. Even though Britain had been on the winning side in World War II [which ended in 1945], the war had almost bankrupted the country. Wartime rationing of many foods continued well into the 1950s, as the film shows. Life was very grim for many British people. Things started to get better in the late 1950s and, by the early 1960s, there was the “Swinging London” scene and, of course, the Beatles, who had grown up in the deprived atmosphere of wartime and postwar Liverpool.

British voters came out of World War II with the hope that things would be different than in the pre-war years. Britain had always had a large number of poor people and, in 1945, the voters replaced the wartime government led by Conservative/Tory Party leader Winston Churchill with the first Labour Party [socialist by U.S. standards] government to have a parliamentary majority. This government instituted a number of social programs, the most important of which was the National Health Service, then and now providing “free” and universal medical care. The problems the government encountered in implementing other programs led to some disillusionment and the Conservatives returned to power in 1951, but retained a number of the other party’s reforms. Looking at the teeth of some of the people in the film, it is clear that the new health and dental programs came too late for many. It is interesting to see how many times characters in the film say “Can’t complain” [when, actually, they have solid grounds for complaint] and how, many times, a cup of tea is seen as being of comfort in a difficult situation. The film provides a perceptive picture of time and place as well as the real world of choices when it comes to abortion.