

# Close Encounters with the Real: The Films of Mike Leigh

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## Özet

### Gerçekle Yakın İlişkiler: Mike Leigh Filmleri

*Bu makalede, İngiliz film yönetmeni Mike Leigh'in filmleri, temel mizansen öğelerine ve Leigh'in film yönetimiyle ilgili yaklaşımının anlatım yapısı özelliklerine odaklanılarak metinsel ve bağlamsal olarak incelenecektir. Leigh'in çalışmalarına sürekli yöneltilen üç eleştiri yeniden ele alınacaktır: Alt-sınıf karakterlere yönelik gözle görülür alçakgönüllü bir tavır, kadın karakterlerde stereotip kullanımına yönelik eğilim ve hikayelerin içinde varolan daha geniş politik konulara yönelik ilgisizlik. Söz konusu yeniden değerlendirme temelinde, yönetmenin filmle "gerçeği yakalama" doğrultusundaki belirtilen amacının ne derece gerçekleştiği belirlenmeye çalışılacaktır. Bu konu, zorunlu olarak sanatta gerçekçilikle ilgili epistemolojik tartışmalara yönelik birtakım çıkarımları da kapsamaktadır. Makalenin vardığı sonuç, yönetmenin kendine özgü hazırlanma, tekrarlama ve doğaçlama yöntemlerinin Leigh filmlerindeki karakterlerin, ilişkilerin ve diyalogların son derece gerçekçi sunumunun temel kaynağı olduğu yönündedir.*

**anahtar kelimeler:** temsil etme, doğaçlama, ideoloji, toplumsal gerçekçilik, Mike Leigh

## Résumé

### Rencontres fermes avec la réalité: Les films de Mike Leigh

*Dans cet article, les films du réalisateur britannique Mike Leigh sont analysés textuellement et contextuellement, en se concentrant sur les éléments importants de la mise-en-scène et la structure narrative caractéristique de l'approche directorial de Leigh. Trois critiques récurrentes du travail de Leigh sont réévaluées: une condescendance perçue dans son comportement envers les personnages de la classe inférieur, une tendance de stéréotyper les personnages féminins et la négligence des dimensions politiques plus larges inhérentes dans la narration. Sur la base de cette nouvelle réévaluation, une tentative de déterminer dans quelle mesure l'intention déclarée du réalisateur de « capter la réalité » grâce au film a été réalisée; un débat qui nécessairement implique un débat épistémologique concernant le réalisme en art. La conclusion de l'article, est que les méthodes de préparation, de répétition et l'improvisation propre au directeur sont principalement responsables de la représentation réaliste d'un caractère exceptionnel, des relations et de dialogue dans les films de Leigh.*

**mots-clés :** *représentation, improvisation, idéologie, réalisme sociale, Mike Leigh*

## Abstract

*In this essay, the films of British film director Mike Leigh are analyzed textually and contextually, concentrating on the key elements of mise-en-scène and narrative structure characteristic of Leigh's directorial approach. Three recurrent criticisms of Leigh's work are re-assessed: a perceived condescension in his attitude to lower-class characters, a tendency to stereotype in the female characters and a neglect of the broader political dimensions inherent in the narratives. On the basis of this re-assessment, an attempt is made to determine how far the director's stated intention of 'capturing the real' on film has been achieved, a discussion that necessarily involves some implications for the epistemological debate concerning realism in art. The conclusion of the essay is that the director's distinctive methods of preparation, rehearsal and improvisation are primarily responsible for the exceptionally realistic representation of character, relationship and dialogue in Leigh's films.*

**keywords:** *representation, improvisation, ideology, social realism, Mike Leigh*

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## Introduction

'I am not concerned with making esoteric, obscure kinds of films,' British film director Mike Leigh told an audience at London's National Film Theatre in 1997. 'My films can talk to anybody about real things' (Watson 2004:165). The problem is that, although neither esoteric nor obscure, the majority of his works are difficult for cinema audiences accustomed to Hollywood's dramatic and glamorised versions of life, requiring an alertness and sensitivity to the detail of character and dialogue in order for what Leigh has called 'the extraordinariness of the ordinary' (Carney and Quart 2000:14) to reveal itself.

Leigh's work to date consists of eighteen feature films and over twenty stage plays, written and released during the last thirty-five years. Of the films, ten were made for the large screen, seven of which, generally regarded by critics as embodying the director's most influential and mature work, have been selected to exemplify the argument of the present essay, namely *High Hopes* (1988), *Naked* (1993), *Secrets and Lies* (1996), *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), *All or Nothing* (2002), *Vera Drake* (2004) and *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008). Some reference will also be made to one of Leigh's earlier works, *Abigail's Party* (1977), which remains the most widely-viewed of all his films, appearing first on British television, where it attracted sixteen million viewers and 'a permanent place in the nation's affection' (Coveney 1997:114). Mike Leigh's reputation as an original and provocative filmmaker was confirmed by the award at Cannes for Best Director in 1993 (for *Naked*) and of the Palme d'Or for Best Picture in 1996 (for *Secrets and Lies*).

Leigh's cinematic style is spare and unelaborated, the settings unglamorous, the incidents 'modest, unspectacular' (Rafferty 1991:104). The subject matter seems utterly prosaic - ordinary people doing ordinary things. The narrative presentation is simple and straightforward - no flashbacks, no unreliable narrators, no violations of chronology. The style is unrheterical in the extreme - no editorial razzle-dazzle, visual sublimities, or acoustic stylization ... Leigh's work is difficult but in a different way from the canonical modernist works. The demands are less on our intellect and knowledge than on our capacities of sensitivity and awareness.

(Carney and Quart 2000:241)

The camera is largely static, with a notable absence of tracking shots - Leigh's aim is for the camera to be 'unobtrusive' (Fuller 1995:xxvii). There is 'a documentary look to his work' (Lay 2002:90), a characteristic shared with the

films of Ken Loach, the pre-eminent director of realist films in the British cinema of the last fifty years. Other parallels have been drawn with Loach (Carney and Quart 2000:7; Lay 2002:89), although Loach's concerns are more overtly political, historical and international. Leigh's cinematic milieu is exclusively English and suburban. With the exception of *Topsy-Turvy* and *Vera Drake*, the historical context of the films is contemporary, and the thematic emphasis is on conflict and relationships within families and socio-economically marginalized groups. The male characters are cab drivers, plumbers, shopkeepers and chefs, the women work in supermarkets and hairdressers, and their homes are normally located in suburban housing estates. Leigh's preference for such settings has led to the categorisation of his films as 'social realism', of which there has been a strong tradition in British cinema since the 1950s. It is true that stylistic and thematic similarities can be detected between Leigh's films and, for example *Family Life* (Loach, 1971) or *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), but there is a humorous and at times farcical element in Leigh's work which is uncharacteristic of social realism as a genre and Leigh's concentration on the family separates his work from the more directly political priorities of the majority of directors within this category.

The most distinctive aspect of Leigh's directorial style is in his approach to the film-making process. Initially, there is no text, not even in outline, but only a basic idea. There are typically three to five months of preparation during which the actors immerse themselves in the chosen setting and themselves develop the characters they will play, with the narrative finally emerging from the interaction between the characters as they have evolved. Leigh's method is to work individually with the actors, so that 'as far as the overall picture is concerned, each actor is kept in the dark' (Watson 2004:29). What Leigh aspires to, in his own words, is 'the spontaneity of the theatre' (Buruma 1994:7). This process is collective to a degree unprecedented in mainstream cinema, yet it is the director who makes the crucial decisions, as Leigh himself has emphasised: 'Filmmaking has to be in some way collaborative,' he has remarked, but he himself remains 'very much in control of it' (*ibid*:70,77). Leigh is unarguably the sole author (*auteur*) of the films that appear under his name.

## **Methodology**

The methodology adopted by this paper emphasises a textual, and to a lesser degree contextual, analysis of the selected films, examining the elements

of mise-en-scène, characterisation and narrative structure which combine to produce Leigh's distinctive directorial style. The contribution to the development of character and dialogue made by Leigh's unique approach to the film-making process is also assessed, and an attempt is made to situate Leigh's work within broader generic categories - in particular that of British social realism - insofar as this is appropriate.

Leigh has suggested that all his films 'aspire to the condition of documentary' (Movshovitz 2000:32) and that his aim is to capture 'some kind of actual emotion' on the screen (*ibid*, 88). Given his rejection of the glamorous and the melodramatic, his innovative approach to collaborating with (little-known) actors and his criticism of British cinema for its preponderance of 'pastiche Hollywood fare' (Movshovitz 2000:119), a critical assessment of his work is obliged to highlight the question as to how far his work has been successful in achieving a representation of 'the real'.

His work has been criticised - sometimes outspokenly - in three significant ways. It has been argued that his female characters tend to be stereotypical, that he is guilty of condescension in depicting the speech and behaviour of the 'lower classes', and that his emphasis on the familial and the personal implicitly denies or distorts the political dimensions of his characters' problems. These accusations, if justified, would in different ways cast doubts on his attempt to represent reality on the screen. This essay will therefore address these three issues in turn before proposing some general conclusions on the definition of, and limitations to, 'the real' in cinema, and their implications for the wider epistemological debate concerning realism in art.

### **The Representation of Women in Leigh's Films**

The portrayal of women in Leigh's films - their character and role - was queried by the critic John Hill (1999, 2001), who saw in the portrayal of certain female characters, notably Valerie in *High Hopes* and Monica in *Secrets and Lies*, a tendency to stereotype. Both are childless women with an obsession for home decoration, with the implication that the latter serves as compensation for childbearing, which is thus indicated as a woman's 'proper' role. Or, as Nick Haeffner expresses it with a slightly different emphasis: 'Valerie's desire for commodities is a sublimated form of her frustrated sexual longings' (Haeffner 1997:130). Hill also points out that childless women in Leigh's films are not

offered 'any alternative kind of fulfilment in the form of work or activity outside of the home' (Hill 1999:194).

Hill identifies this attitude towards women as matching the tradition of British working class realism 'which not only criticised the "corruption" of the working class by consumerism but characteristically associated superficiality and an "excessive" interest in acquisitions'. High Hopes, he claimed, partly reproduced 'conservative (and indeed Thatcherite) values regarding the family and women' (Hill 1999:198). His argument is supported by Samantha Lay, who detects in Leigh's female characters similarities to the way women were portrayed in the films of the 1950s and 1960s (Lay 2002:87).

It hardly seems an anti-feminist proposition that certain women seek 'compensations' for childlessness. In an ideal world, they would not need to, perhaps, but undeniably it is sometimes the case. Leigh's films draw attention to the phenomenon, but there is no evidence that the director saw this as deplorable, and much evidence throughout his work for his sympathy for women trapped in unhappy marriages, for single mothers, and for girls abused by their boyfriends. Leigh himself found the charge of sexism 'outrageous and offensive' pointing out that the actresses involved in his films have been of strongly feminist conviction and would not have agreed to take part in productions susceptible to the accusation of sexism (Carney and Quart 2000:277). Haeffner observed that 'Leigh represents the male characters as more inclined to retreat into romantic daydreams of success than the women characters, who tend to be more sceptical, pragmatic and realistic' (Haeffner 1997:137), and the view that the women in his films are depicted as stronger than the men - or at least more honest and more forthright - was proposed by several critics of *All or Nothing* (Watson 2004:177).

Leigh's response was to emphasise that the film was 'not about stronger women and weaker men' but about 'a symbiotic relationship' (Watson 2004:177), a term which seems accurately to describe the director's even-handedness or impartiality part in respect of gender, matching his intention of showing what is rather than what *should be*. A significant example of this is to be found in *Naked* (1993), the film among his works in which occurs the clearest and most brutal representation of the abuse of women by men. Film critics broadly agree that the appearance of *Naked* marked a departure from, or at least a distinct development of, his earlier works (Carney and Quart 2000: ch.13;

Watson 2004:104ff.). The protagonist, Johnny, repeatedly charms his way into the affections of women before abusing them physically and verbally, and even stealing from them. Carney's reading of these scenes is that there is a sense in which 'the women are active collaborators in their own pain and rejection' (Carney and Quart 2000:229). The women are indubitably depicted as resilient and confrontational. The real villain of the piece, Jeremy, is threatened with emasculation by one of the women he has abused, and Johnny, a young man of unusual mental agility and wit, is frequently challenged by his girlfriends.

There is no ambivalence in the film's standpoint regarding Jeremy, who is depicted as an aggressive, brutal person, deserving of the worst. What disturbs some viewers, one suspects, is Leigh's apparent reluctance to adopt the same unmistakable position regarding Johnny, whose violence in word and deed is tempered by his astute commentary on the world around him. According to his own account, Leigh wanted the character of Johnny to pose a problem for the viewers. 'If the film works,' he said, 'you go away from it locked in debate' (Fuller 1995:xxxix). On the one hand, they would condemn his actions and on the other they would admire a kind of blunt honesty in him as well as his intelligence. Perhaps the nearest cinematic parallel is to be found in the character of Alex, protagonist of Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* (1972), another film which disturbed rather than reassured its viewers. (The celebrated American critic Pauline Kael expressed herself shocked and disgusted by Kubrick's evident sympathy for his 'hero' (Kael 1972:*passim*).

The issue as to whether there is in the film an acceptance or indulgence of the sadistic element in Johnny's sexual relations was examined by Watson (2004:120ff), who concludes by reasserting the director's insistence that he has deliberately left his audience with a dilemma. As Leigh has said in another context: 'You do not walk out of my films with a clear feeling about what is right and wrong. They're ambivalent. You walk away with work to do. My films are a sort of investigation. They ask questions' (Movshovitz 2000:103/4). Watson also emphatically rejects the charge of misogyny levelled against Leigh by John Caughie in his entry in *The Companion to British and Irish Cinema* (Caughie and Rockett 1996:100), arguing that an unprejudiced viewing of all Leigh's films reveals ample evidence of the director's perceptive and sensitive treatment of his female characters. Certainly *Naked* is unrepresentative of Leigh's work as a whole, not only in its frank depiction of sexual abuse but also in its unremitting focus on a (violent) male character as protagonist. Quart pointed out that it is the

only one of Leigh's films to employ 'visual and acoustic stylizations', the only one in which 'the drama moves inward, out of the world and into the mind...'. It suggested to him, 'if not a loss of confidence in his previous expressive project, at least a serious change in direction' (Carney and Quart 2000:278, f/n 2). The films that followed indicate that *Naked* constituted an area of work to which Leigh has not so far wished to return.

### **Class and Condescension**

The second, and perhaps more powerful, criticism that has been levelled at Leigh's work is that he has adopted an attitude of condescension, in other words a degree of snobbish superiority, to the groups of characters which he portrays. As with all socially aware cinema in Britain, his films are necessarily concerned with the issue of social class - necessarily because class in Britain, with its associated symbols or tokens of speech, dress, house furnishings and manners, lies at the heart of social and professional interaction. As Medhurst points out, 'Leigh's England is ... primarily concerned with that fractious, disputed zone where upper working class meets lower middle' (Medhurst 1999:7). Such fine distinctions are only conceivable in England. It is not, as it is in the U.S., only or mainly a question of wealth. It is also about style, confidence, demeanour, taste. In *Abigail's Party*, for example, British viewers immediately identify the central character, Beverly, as a member of the lower-middle-class aspiring to the next rung of the social ladder. Her social aspirations entail the adoption of certain tastes and opinions which she must pretend to have mastered. It is the pretension that British audiences find comic, and much of the humour of *Abigail's Party* depends on this. When the play was first shown, in 1977, several of the reviewers accused Leigh of condescension. Denis Potter, an eminent playwright of the period, wrote in *The Sunday Times* that the play was 'based on nothing more edifying than rancid disdain ... it was a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred, about the dreadful suburban tastes of the dreadful lower-middle-classes' (Potter 1977). Reviewing *Naked*, sixteen years later, Andy Medhurst, in *Sight and Sound*, found the film 'patronising' (Medhurst 1993:7), while *Sunday Times* columnist Julie Burchill accused Leigh of 'British class prejudice at its worst', seeing in all Leigh's films 'an impotent, slightly preening rage at the rather sweet pretensions and foibles of the English working class, over and over' (Burchill 1993:5). In *New Statesman*, Jonathan Romney described *Naked* as 'Mike Leigh's blast of hatred' (Romney 1993:34).

Such strongly expressed views are hard to account for, especially in the case of *Naked*, where it seems impossible to explain which character or group of characters might have been the target of the director's 'rage' and 'hatred'. As we have seen, Leigh's attitude to Johnny in *Naked* was marked by a notable degree of tolerance and understanding. One suspects that the reviewers read the film as implying that all members of London's underclass were violent, thieving and sadistic, even though this is nowhere indicated in the text.

The case of *Abigail's Party* is different, partly because it was a much earlier work. In addition, it was not a feature film but, in Coveney's words, 'a hastily made television studio play ... flatly photographed [and] crude' (Coveney 1997:112). Being a television drama, the 'crudity' extended also to the methodology of rehearsal and character development. Perhaps as a result of this, a lack of subtlety in the characterisation is detectable compared to Leigh's later work for the cinema. The humour, too, is more accessible: Beverly, with her ludicrous pretensions and lack of self-awareness, provides an easy target. Yet she provokes not only laughter but embarrassment, the source of which goes deeper than the simple comedy of the ridiculous. As Watson points out: 'Most of us are probably not so different from Beverly and Laurence [the husband] as we like to imagine ourselves being. Is this not the real reason we find ourselves wincing with embarrassment when we hear Beverly and Laurence coming out with their platitudes and banalities and wanting them to pass for wisdom?' (Watson 2004:70). This observation suggests something very far from condescension in the direction of the film. It indicates, on the contrary, an attempt to make the audience more aware of their own 'foibles and pretensions'.

The justification for dwelling on this point - even though Potter's criticism refers to a studio film made over thirty years ago - is that Leigh's stated objective is to look for real emotion, real moments. This cannot be achieved to any meaningful degree if an element of condescension or class prejudice is present in the way the author sees his characters. Quart argued that Leigh successfully 'captures the emotional drives and inwardness as well as the speech patterns and tastes of his characters ... satirizing them while simultaneously respecting their feelings and selfhood', but also accused the director of occasionally 'reducing his characters to their class stereotypes' so that 'their class and culture become the prime definitions of their identity' (Carney and Quart 2000:7). Yet Carney took the unusual step of stressing his

disagreement with his co-author over this reading (*ibid*:247), and Watson too is emphatic in his denial of the charges of caricature and stereotype in Leigh's work made by Potter, Burchill and Caughie (Watson 2004:8ff). Certainly, there is no lack of evidence in Leigh's later work for the director's sympathy with his characters - in *Secrets and Lies* and *All or Nothing* and *Happy-Go-Lucky* and it may even be argued that such sympathy constitutes the essence of Leigh's approach to rehearsal and character-creation. There are however characters in the films - Jeremy in *Naked*, Jason in *All or Nothing* - who appear to be considered unredeemable. Beverly too may belong to that category. Even when her husband dies of a heart attack, partly caused by her continual persecution of him, she evinces no feelings of horror or remorse. She is not only pretentious, snobbish, hypocritical and vain, she is immune even to the normal human emotions. This puts her beyond redemption, in the same way as Jeremy's relentless cruelty and Jason's unexplained and dangerous aggression.

Leigh's own social background was very different from that of the majority of his central characters, Jewish middle class as opposed to Protestant working class. The same disparity between an author and his literary milieu can be found in Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo, or between James Joyce and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, or between Martin Scorsese and Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver*. Clearly it is possible for an author or filmmaker to identify with the plight of his or her characters through an act of imaginative sympathy. Yet, as Coveney points out, it was after Potter's 1977 article that reviews of Leigh's work began to contain such words as 'condescending' or 'patronising' (Coveney 1997:119).

Finally, the most effective antidote to such criticism is to be found in Leigh's most recent works, where what is remarkable in the films is the director's impartiality, not only in terms of gender but in insisting that all the central characters should be developed and understood, no matter how unpleasant they may at first appear. An example of this is the character of Rory, the angry, obese and foul-mouthed son of the protagonists of *All or Nothing* (2004). This slovenly teenager is violently rude to his parents, his sister and the neighbours, refuses to look for work, lies on the sofa all day, insults his mother's cooking while devouring it greedily, and his every other word is an expletive. The following exchange between mother and son after supper may serve as a brief illustration:

(Rory has finished his food. He puts his knife and fork on the plate.)

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Rory: That was shit.  
(He gets up and lies on the sofa).  
Penny: Rory!  
Rory: What?!  
Penny: There's no need to talk like that.  
Rory: Fuck off!  
Penny: Rory, will you stop being rude to me, please?  
Rory: For fuck's sake! What is your problem?!

(Leigh 2002:87)

The father is weak in front of his son and the mother powerless. Yet there are clues in the text that the boy's extreme rudeness and idleness is a function of his obesity and that his behaviour towards his parents is as much a result of their unhappiness - and consequent failure to deal with him in any sensible or positive way - as of an innate disposition. When he falls seriously ill and is rushed to hospital, it is the occasion for the family to unite. The final scene of the film takes place around his hospital bed. Father and mother have rediscovered their love for one another; even the sister, depressed and almost wordless throughout the film, manages to smile. Rory is gratified at being the centre of attention.

This by no means constitutes a happy ending, or a suddenly happy, united family according to the Hollywood model. The mother still has to work filling supermarket shelves, the daughter to clean up after old ladies in a care home, the father to count the pennies in order to fuel his taxi. Rory is still obese and unemployed. All that is allowed them is a moment of happiness, the possibility of happiness. Yet it is still, as Watson comments, 'an astonishing metamorphosis' (Watson 2004:180).

*All or Nothing* was received unfavourably by the majority of reviewers, the words most commonly applied to it being 'miserable' or 'misery'. One reviewer labelled Leigh 'Britain's leading poet of cinematic miserabilism', and elsewhere the film was referred to as 'grim' and 'gruelling' (reviews in *Cinemascope*, *Washington Post*, *The Observer*, *Le Monde*, *Village Voice*, quoted in Watson 2004:166). Watson admitted that the film was 'undeniably difficult to watch' (*ibid*). Since Leigh had proved, with *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), that he was capable of creating popular mainstream drama, the question arises as to why in *All or Nothing* he should make domestic misery the subject and theme. The likely answer is that he was returning to familiar territory - the contemporary urban wasteland - where he could give expression to the particular issues that

above all intrigue him. Carney quotes him on what may be his key preoccupation:

For most people in the world ... life is hard work; it's tough ... It's about coping. Most movies are about extraordinary or charmed lifestyles. For me what's exciting is finding heightened drama, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

(Carney and Quart 2000:14)

It can be argued that *All or Nothing* is Leigh's most poignant, well-scripted and well- designed film to date, and that the single most important element in the direction is the degree of sympathy and sensitivity shown by the director towards unlovable, almost charmless characters. The acting, in particular that of Timothy Spall playing the sullen, hurt, overweight father, was also exceptional. As Haeffner points out: 'Some of Leigh's regular cast of actors approach their roles in ways which question their status as victims ... invest[ing] their potentially pathos-ridden roles with an active heroism' (Haeffner 1997:137).

### **Politics and Ideology**

The third of the controversial issues deriving from an examination of Leigh's work revolves around the presence or absence of a recognisable ideology in the films. Some critics have argued that the lack of a coherent political stance in Leigh's work constituted a denial of the significant political dimension in the plight of the working classes, implying an element of unreality, or avoidance, in the films. John Hill describes *High Hopes* as 'one of the few films of the period [the 1980s] to attempt to give a positive embodiment to traditional socialist values', but contradicts this assessment by criticising the film for its protagonists' lack of involvement in 'any more broadly based social or political community' and accusing the film of finding solutions in 'the virtues of the privatised family' and thus reinforcing 'scepticism about more collective (or "socialist") forms of political action' (Hill 1999:196/7). Hill clearly identifies socialism with the forms of openly political activity associated with trade unions and pressure groups, and is unwilling to acknowledge the political validity of collective effort at the level of household or other small-scale social unit. Similarly, Samantha Lay suggested that 'the focus on the private or the personal undermines the social message and meaning as we focus on the individual or family and their struggles without making connection to wider political, economic and social factors' (Lay 2002:121).

While it is true that there are no overt political statements in Leigh's films, his work contains unmistakable political ramifications, not only in the collaborative approach to filmmaking - reminiscent of the artists' cooperatives of the 1960s - but because it is at the collective rather than the individual level that resolutions of conflict, anxiety and moral dilemma are to be found in the texts. This political dimension is underlined by Leigh's preference for social milieus characterized by limited means, restricted opportunities and often depressing or bleak physical environments. There was, too, a specific hostility to the Thatcherite agenda of the 1980s. Talking of *High Hopes*, Leigh aimed to 'express the frustration and confusion that a lot of ordinary socialists like myself were feeling' (Fuller 1995:xx). His concern remained centred in ordinary people, 'their struggles to cope, work and survive in difficult circumstances' (Movshovitz 2000:32) but, as Haeffner has argued in the context of *High Hopes*, 'although much more concerned with the private sphere (the home, the family), the disaffection with institutional left politics is very apparent, and a clear form of immanent critique comes across as Leigh tries to salvage socialist values appropriate to the actual lived experience of working class people in the 1980s' (Haeffner 1997:143). The emphasis here can be given to 'actual lived experience', in contrast to the Thatcherite concern for 'family values' which rightwing apologists had placed at the heart of the moral and intellectual agenda of Thatcher's government and which on examination meant nothing more than the maintenance of the status quo against the 'disruptive' forces of unionism and socialism. The treatment of the upper-class couple in *High Hopes* is notably more schematic than that of the lower-class couple, and Laetitia, as Haeffner points out, sometimes seems 'a mouthpiece or cypher for Thatcherism' (*ibid*:128). The following excerpt from the screenplay shows Laetitia putting pressure on her aged neighbour, Mrs. Bender, to move house, because her rundown flat 'lowers the tone' of the neighbourhood, which is becoming, in the current expression, 'gentrified'. Mrs. Bender has locked herself out and Laetitia has reluctantly let her into her own house and offered her a cup of tea:

Laetitia: Rather a large house for one person, wouldn't you agree? Milk?

Mrs. B: It's my 'ome.

Laetitia: Yes, it is at the moment, I grant you that. Sugar?

Mrs. B: No.

Laetitia: Fine. I'm not sure it wouldn't be better appreciated by a professional couple or even a family. Biscuit?

Mrs. B: Thank you. (*She takes one.*) I've always lived there.

Laetitia: Yes, well that's as may be, but times change. I think you'll be the

first to agree that you'd be far better off buying yourself a nice little modern granny flat.

Mrs B: Where would I get the money from?

Laetitia: If you want to put your house on the market I think you'll find you've been sitting on a goldmine. Do you have all your original features? Cornices, fireplaces?

Mrs. B: Got a fireplace, yeah.

Laetitia: *Et voilà*. Bring in the estate agents.

Mrs. B: But it's not my 'ouse.

Laetitia: Ah ... it belongs to a member of your family?

Mrs. B: It belongs to the council.

Laetitia: Oh? Well mercifully you people do have the opportunity to purchase your council property nowadays. I'd snap it up if I were you. Then, of course, one resells.

(Leigh 1995:200)

The passage contains many nuances of class difference - Laetitia's use of French (*et voilà*), her assumption that the old woman owns the house, the middle-class colloquialisms ('snap it up', 'granny flat', 'mercifully', 'then, of course, *one* resells'). To her, a fireplace is 'an original feature' the purpose of which is to increase the market value of the house, to Mrs. B, simply a place where you make a fire. Finally, Laetitia uses the expression 'you people' to describe, and denigrate, anyone of a lower class.

In his interview with Graham Fuller, Leigh confessed to a bias in *High Hopes* in favour of the 'the goodies' as he put it, and against 'the baddies' (Fuller 1995:xx). No doubt an obvious bias does constitute 'an agenda' of a kind, even if not directly political, but the context of the Thatcherite era in Britain, with its exceptional political intensity and class resentment, is clearly a crucial factor. After it had ended (with Thatcher's forced resignation in 1990), the mood of Leigh's work changes - although *Naked* (1993) implied a statement about the new underclass produced by Thatcherite politics and free market economics. Leigh returned to a more questioning, indirect approach in *Secrets and Lies* (1996), marked by more subtle characterisation, spare or even minimalist dialogue and an understated emotional poignancy. The story concerns the reunion of a mother with her illegitimate, and half-caste, daughter, but the racial element forms only one strand in a narrative which concerns tolerance and compassion and, according to Leigh 'is also about goodness' (Movshovitz 2000:107).

*Topsy-Turvy* (1999) might superficially seem the least likely of Leigh's films in which to find evidence for the importance of the collective, dealing as it does with an early twentieth century theatre company based on the historical D'Oyle Carte Opera Company and their performances of Gilbert and Sullivan light opera. For this film, Leigh abandoned his customary sparseness of mise-en-scène, substituted vivid colours and bright lighting for his usual muted settings, and dressed his actors in period costume, complete with flamboyant cravats, elaborate waistcoats and top hats. The company in question is strictly hierarchical, yet even within this strict hierarchy, Leigh highlights the necessity for collaboration between its members, especially in the lengthy episode in which the director is persuaded by a group of players to reinstate a scene which in their opinion should not have been cut. In his analysis of this scene, Watson claims that it is the *company* that is the true protagonist of the film, emphasising by way of example the 'generosity and sensitivity' of the theatre owner in his dealings with subordinates. He also suggests a parallel between this situation and Leigh's own way of working with his actors (Watson 2002:159-161). What Leigh represents is still far from democratic, but *Topsy-Turvy* was determined by the historical context, in terms of hierarchy and etiquette as much as costume and manners. There was thus a limit to what Leigh could depict in terms of democracy within the company unless he was prepared to ignore the requirements of historical accuracy, which his fidelity to them in all other respects suggests he was not. The ending of the film, which focuses on the theatre director's childless marriage and pregnant mistress indicates that Leigh's concern with the personal is maintained.

With *Vera Drake* (2004), Leigh also used a historical setting, the London of the 1950s, telling the (fictional) story of a well-intentioned woman who performed abortions for 'young ladies in trouble', without charging a fee, thus as a philanthropic service, albeit an illegal one at that time. The socio-economic background is that of the depressed post-war working class. Vera's husband is a car mechanic, her flat small and sparsely furnished, her household finances counted in pennies. After complications during one of the operations, a client seeks professional medical assistance, resulting in discovery by the police, followed by the prosecution of *Vera Drake* and her public disgrace. Vera had regarded her work, somewhat naively, as a form of charity, while the law, as well as her neighbours and acquaintance, regarded it as crime. What saves her from humiliation and despair is the continuing affection of her husband, and it is this relationship which stands at the heart of the film. When the husband learns

what his wife has been doing, he is at first disbelieving, then deeply upset and shocked and, finally, supportive. The film invites no debate on the rights and wrongs of abortion; from the start, the audience is invited to take Vera's part, the fact that she offered her services without charge serving as a powerful inducement. The issue raised by the film is not the rights and wrongs of abortion, but the political issue of legal and medical systems which outlaw backstreet operations by unregistered practitioners while providing no viable alternative. This official short-sightedness and inflexibility is implicitly contrasted with the affection, constancy and even wisdom of the central relationship. There is thus a discernible anti-establishment sentiment at work in the film, as well as an argument for a more discerning and sensitive attitude on the part of the authorities, an argument having as much force in the first decade of the twenty-first century as sixty years earlier. There is also, perhaps, an implied contrast - considering Leigh's work as a whole - between the straightforward virtues of the Drake household, with its simple amenities, lack of economic aspiration and few possessions, and their counterparts twenty or thirty years later, whose lifestyles are more complex, self-discipline less in evidence and behaviour more erratic.

In these two films, Leigh expanded the parameters of his work in terms of historical setting and *mise-en-scène*, appearing to aim at a more popular and accessible cinema. *Vera Drake*, with its backstreet abortions, police investigation and trial, follows a narrative trajectory more familiar to mainstream drama, while *Topsy-Turvy*, as Higson points out, shares many of the features of British heritage cinema (Higson 2003:68). In his review of the film, Medhurst, for whom Leigh is 'Britain's greatest living playwright', is obliged to highlight the more 'daring' aspects of the films that distinguish it from the 'usually ultra-conservative format' of heritage cinema (Medhurst 2000:36,37).

Leigh is thus variously seen by his critics as a deficient socialist (Hill, Lay), an innovative leftwing ideologue (Haeffner), a quasi-conservative (Higson, Hill) and a director whose work transcends and transform the usual political agendas (Watson). The lack of a consensus lends credence to the director's denial that any of his work could be described as 'films with an agenda or films that are simply political tracts'. 'None of my films draws conclusions; none of them has simple answers,' he told Fuller (1995:xix).

### **Conclusion: Representing the Real**

A major problem in an overall assessment of Leigh's work is that of categorisation, the most important critical function of which is to legitimize comparison with other directors and other films. Leigh's films are not directly comparable to those of the social realists, not to Loach with his Marxist vision, his essential solemnity and his internationalism, not to Frears (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*) with his more orthodox interest in plot, and not to the commonly cited masterworks of 1960s British realism by Reisz, Anderson and Richardson with their tense narratives and mood of passionate, usually humourless, conviction.

Samantha Lay opted for the term 'social surrealism' to describe Leigh's distinctive authorial style (Lay 2002:89ff), contrasting it with the 'documentary realism' of Ken Loach, but she produces no convincing explanation of what in Leigh's work is surrealist. There are no dream sequences, Daliesque symbolism or inexplicable intrusions into the diegetic world and Leigh adamantly denied the description of surreal for certain scenes in *Life is Sweet* (Fuller 1995:xxxiii). One example does suggest itself, from *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008), Leigh's most recent film. In this film there is a series of scenes involving driving lessons given to Sally, the central character. The inflexibility, awkwardness and paranoia of the instructor make these lessons an ordeal even for the carefree ('happy-go-lucky') heroine. Her attempts at light-hearted chatter and friendliness are sternly repudiated. The instructor introduces a mnemonic, 'En-Ra-Ha', to remind the learner of the importance of checking her side and rear-view mirrors. Whenever he is irritated - which is often - he shouts out this mantra: 'En-Ra-Ha! En-Ra-Ha!' There is undoubtedly an element of the surreal in this repeated expostulation of incomprehensible sounds by a man so excessively anxious and paranoid as to be himself rather surreal. It becomes evident that he is growing infatuated by his student, although his way of expressing it is to become ever more censorious and irritable. There is comedy here, naturally. As with Beverly in *Abigail's Party*, his lack of self-awareness makes him ridiculous. Yet there is also something tragic in him, which is brought out as Sally gently makes it clear that any relationship between them is impossible. Eventually, the viewer is drawn to feel sorry for him. This combination of comedy and tragedy is more characteristic of Leigh's films than are the occasional traces of surrealism.

The term 'heightened realism' is used by Quart (Carney and Quart:234) to describe the 'distillation' of realism, caricature, satire and distancing which he sees as constituting Leigh's treatment of his characters. Watson prefers 'traumatic realism' (Watson 2004:17,166), arguing that 'the traumatic journey' in which are encountered 'shocks that break through our protective shield' lies 'at the centre of Leigh's work' (*ibid*:133/4). Although each of these terms has its particular relevance, I would argue that neither of them give sufficient weight to what is indubitably the most original and distinctive aspect of Leigh's directorial approach, namely his collaborative, improvisational method of preparation and 'constructive rehearsal' (Lay 2002:90), which above all shapes both texts and performances. An outline of this method has been given in the introduction to this essay, but a fuller account is necessary. The following is a somewhat abbreviated version of the process as described by Carney.

Leigh begins with a group of actors (not stars) who themselves must exhibit a single-minded, rigorous devotion to the work. Some actors are unable to adjust and fall by the wayside during the process. They arrive with lists of people they know, and Leigh picks the character he is interested in, bearing in mind the general area the film is going to explore. He then sends the actor off to research and build the personality by creating an entire history and giving him or her emotional depth and a psychological and social structure. It is crucial that the actors maintain some critical distance and not become overidentified with the characters they are playing - they should demonstrate objectivity and refer to the character in the third person. Leigh makes it clear that these are not acting exercises where actors must be inventive, but an exploration to capture both the surface and heart of the person they are playing. Once he sets the characters, Leigh introduces his actors to each other and has their characters interact and improvise together in situations he has devised. He demands secrecy from the actors so none of them knows more about the other characters than what they would normally share. Meanwhile Leigh is building dramatic conflict between the characters and constructing a plot, forcefully moving it all toward a final rehearsal period when he gives the improvisations final shape. It is then that he expands, contracts, and refines the characters and dialogue, and the three-to-five months of improvisation are distilled into final language. Leigh works closely with the actors to get the right word and gesture before he begins shooting. Short scenes are often the result of hours of improvisation. When the film goes before the camera, there is a final script, and Leigh adheres to it. He is in total control of the set, collaborating on a shot's setup with his cinematographer, gauging the amount of light that is necessary, attentive

even to the color of a folder a character is carrying and taking care that the music and sound are just right.'

(from Carney and Quart 2000:11/12)

The justification for reproducing this lengthy passage is that a genuine appreciation of Leigh's work depends on grasping the uniqueness of his method and the way in which it determines the film as screened. Timothy Spall, who has repeatedly collaborated with Leigh in this way, has described Leigh's method as a 'science he has invented to achieve what he does' (quoted in Watson 2004:27). The results of this meticulous 'science' are not only scenes and dialogues which seem to approach closer to 'the real' than those of almost any other filmmaker but also performances of extraordinary depth and skill, attested by audiences and reviewers alike. Coveney recounts how viewers of *Home Sweet Home* (1982) were convinced that the handicapped girl must have been played by an actual invalid (Coveney 1997:161/2); Carney refers to the performance of Hannah in *Career Girls* in which 'one always senses the insecurity and profound pathos that lie just beneath Hannah's aggression' (Carney and Quart:13); Lay describes how the actors 'become the characters they portray down to every imagined tic and mannerism' (Lay 2002:90); Rafferty claims that 'Leigh's unusual film-making process is designed ... to bring forth acting that is pure and direct' exemplified by 'a stunning scene ... of mutual unguarded honesty' in *Life is Sweet*. Watson comments: 'Whatever else is to be said about Leigh's work, it is obviously driven by a pursuit of the real' (Watson 2004:27). It is at moments such as those quoted above, surely, that he most nearly succeeds.

Yet the director himself cautions: 'No work of art is truly naturalistic. Art is not real life, and has to be organised, designed and distilled because it's dramatic. There is nothing accidental, it's all contrivance. What is real is a very complicated, epistemological question' (Movshovitz 2000:132). This remark serves as a reminder to the critic that 'reality' on the screen cannot be considered in absolute terms, but only in terms of the degree to which reality can be successfully represented, the art of which, in this or any other medium, is a matter of deliberate and skilful artifice - to which Leigh by means of his idiosyncratic 'science' has made a unique contribution.

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