

## Biographical and Cultural Introduction

Mike Leigh was born in 1943, the son of a Jewish doctor whose father had come to London from Russia. All of Leigh's grandparents were Yiddish-speaking immigrants (he even had a great-grandfather who was editor of a Zionist newspaper before World War I), and Leigh is both proud and critical of his Jewish background.<sup>1</sup> However, it has only been in recent years that he has begun to talk openly about his ethnic past and been a member of a socialist Zionist youth group, Habonim.<sup>2</sup> However, after visiting Israel under Habonim's auspices in the summer of 1960, he became disillusioned with Israel's policies toward the Arabs and dropped out of the movement. It wasn't until 1991 that he was willing to go back to Israel, accepting an invitation to attend the Jerusalem Film Festival, which was showing *Life Is Sweet*.<sup>3</sup>

Leigh's family kept a kosher home and were active Zionists, but neither has he been traditionally religious nor, as an adult, shown any interest in or formal identification with Jewish communal and cultural organizations. Despite these feelings, his Jewish roots are an undeniable part of who Leigh is, though they are a private rather than public aspect of his life. Those roots are also a factor that, he admits, have contributed to his being an outsider and rebel. Jewishness, however, has never been the subject of his art (excepting the unpleasant, middle-class Jewish characters in *Hard Labour*, who live in a house only two doors from where he grew up), though he has talked vaguely of making a film about the world of his parents and grandparents. Still, the shouting and general tumult of a certain type of Jewish family life has affected how he depicts family interaction in his work. Further, Leigh holds that there cannot be anything more Jewish than the tendency of his films both to posit

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978-0-521-48043-7 - The Filllls of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World

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questions rather than provide answers and to take pleasure in both lamenting and laughing at the human predicament.

Leigh grew up middle-class in a grimy, industrial working-class area of Salford, Lancashire, a city near Manchester that he sees as looking just like a Lowery painting.<sup>4</sup> He went to predominantly working-class primary and grammar schools, and by choice has lived in working-class areas most of his life. Even in those early years, Leigh felt ambivalent about his own class background – he was the doctor’s son in a working-class neighborhood – and conscious of the effects class has on people’s lives. He was, in his words, “an insider and outsider, all at once”<sup>5</sup> who was culturally bilingual, a boy living in a middle-class family whose deepest sympathies rested with working-class people. But those sympathies never meant that Leigh affected a working-class persona (as a number of middle-class young people do in present-day England). He never aimed, as an adolescent, to become or pretend to be a worker; it was the artistic and bohemian life that attracted him then and he still identifies with now.

Leigh was not much of a student and left grammar school at seventeen with only three O-levels (passing O-level exams is an ordinary academic achievement, whereas passing A-levels is a mark of academic excellence and necessary for entry into the best universities), though he did act in school plays. He then entered the Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts (RADA) on scholarship. It was a school that prepared “its students to become actors who would get on with the job, working competently with discipline and with the minimum of fuss.”<sup>6</sup> Though at this point in his life Leigh had not yet defined his notion of theater, he found most of RADA’s much respected course of study sterile and unsatisfying, and he peripatetically went on to study at the London Film School, the Central School of Art and Design, and the Camberwell College of Art. It was Camberwell that provided Leigh with what he considers his one profound experience as a student: “I was in a life drawing class at Camberwell one day when I suddenly had this clairvoyant flash. I realized that what I was experiencing as an art student was that working from source and looking at something that actually existed and excited you was the key to making a piece of art.”<sup>7</sup> What that gave Leigh as a filmmaker, playwright, storyteller, and an artist generally was a sense of freedom. “Everything is up for grabs if you see it three-dimensionally, and from all possible perspectives, and are motivated by some kind of feeling about it.”<sup>8</sup>

The experience at Camberwell provided Leigh with a powerful epiph-

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any about the direction his art should take, but his singular, idiosyncratic approach also was nourished by the cultural and social currents of the early to mid-1960s. There was no one influence that Leigh looked to as his artistic or intellectual model, but the era was one in which the rebellion of the young against the materialism and political exhaustion of an older generation had become a commonplace. During this period in England, jazz clubs, “happenings,” and beat poetry flourished, the theater saw Beckett’s and Pinter’s plays produced, the massive CND marches took place, the Beatles emerged, and of course the British New Wave cinema of directors such as Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, and Karel Reisz appeared (they made Leigh aware that the everyday world he knew could be put on film). Nevertheless, as a passionate filmgoer, Leigh was less influenced by the relative directness of the English realists than by watching the more complex, lyrical, and textured films of the French Nouvelle Vague and the work of directors like Jean Renoir, Satyajit Ray, Ermanno Olmi, and especially Yasujiro Ozu.

Leigh’s first creative efforts, however, were not in film but in the experimental theater of the late sixties. There were stints at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford under Peter Hall, the East-15 Acting School, the Royal Court Upstairs, and the Manchester Youth Theatre. From his very first play, *The Box Play* in 1965, however, he was primarily motivated to work in the theater as a means of acquiring sufficient skills to make films. For Leigh, “theatre is secondary,” and despite the fact that he wrote twenty-two plays, his prime passions were always involved in looking at and shooting films. There is no question, however, that working in the theater gave him a true understanding of what actors go through in the creation of character. In addition, throughout his film career he has remained a theatrical presence, devising plays that the Royal Court and the Hampstead Theatre Club produced (*Abigail’s Party*, *Ecstasy*).

Leigh’s film career began with his first theatrical release, *Bleak Moments*, in 1971, and took off when he began to make films for the BBC in 1973. By 1988 he had directed eight low-budget features and a number of short films for television. So before Leigh achieved widespread critical recognition for full-fledged theatrical releases such as *Life Is Sweet*, *Naked*, and *Secrets and Lies*, he spent years making original, sometimes brilliant, films for television. Because these films were small in scale and most often dealt with daily life and relationships, they did not garner the same critical considerations as his theatrical releases. Leigh, though aware of how budgetary limitations constricted what he

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could do stylistically with these films, never saw them as any less important than his theatrical releases.<sup>10</sup>

The whole category of television film is problematic, as much of Britain's film output is either made directly for television or subsidized by Channel Four and the BBC for theatrical release and then television presentation. As a result, some of Britain's best directors, Stephen Frears, Ken Loach, Peter Greenaway, Alan Parker, Richard Eyre, and Alan Clarke among them, have made a significant portion of their films for television. These works were strikingly different from the formulaic made-for-television films in the United States. A number were personal works dealing with British themes. Almost none of the films adhered to the American disease-of-the-week genre (breast cancer, AIDS) or that other staple, tabloid cinematic re-creations of true stories of child and wife abuse, drug addiction, homelessness, and murder.

Many of the films get right to the heart of English class power, envy, resentment, and entrapment. Leigh is clearly political, a man of the left and a Thatcher hater who views the "reactionary" Tory governments as helping to destroy the fabric of English society. His films of the eighties, in particular, were shaped by the same political and social environment that spawned other contemporaneous British films critical of Thatcherism: Richard Eyre's skewering of the triumph of the ersatz and the inauthentic in public and private life in *The Ploughman's Lunch*; Chris Bernard's romantic fable about the Liverpoolian working class's attempt to escape their entrapment in *Letter to Brezhnev*; and Frears and Kureishi's condemnation of greed and affirmation of the spontaneous and the anarchic in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*.

The period between *Home Sweet Home* and *High Hopes* saw Thatcher securely established, and the British political left and center too fragmented and impotent to challenge her. Even if a schism had not occurred between the Labor Party's social democratic, center, and hard-left wings, Thatcher had already successfully poached on the loyalty of the party's prime constituencies: the skilled working class and manual laborers. She garnered their support by leading the nation to a flag-waving, putative victory against Argentina in the Falklands war, and by promoting the expansion of share ownership and the sale of council flats to tenants (turning one million families into homeowners). In novelist Julian Barnes' sardonic analysis:

Mrs. Thatcher's achievements were, in political terms, remarkable. . . .  
You could survive while allowing unemployment to rise to levels pre-

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viously thought politically untenable. You could politicize hitherto unpolitical public bodies and force the principles of the market into areas of society presumed sacrosanct. You could sharply diminish union power and increase employer power. You could weaken the independence of local government by limiting its ability to raise money. . . . You could make the rich richer and the poor poorer until you had restored the gap that existed at the end of the last century. You could do all this and in the process traumatize the Opposition.<sup>11</sup>

The result was a Thatcher ethos shaped out of her sense of political certitude and moral rectitude, and characterized, in the main, by a hunger for status, gross materialism, unembarrassed consumption, and contempt for the poor. The pursuit of self-interest became the dominant force in British culture.

Britain, dominated by Thatcher and New Right thought, which emphasized increased income and consumer choice over governmental social protection and regulation, had become a country where acquisitive individualism and aggressive self-interest thrived. The South of England and London had become richer and more yuppified, while the industrial North's steel towns and mining villages had begun to wither away. Despite the high tech and financial industries flourishing in the South, and the proliferating boutiques, bistros, building cranes, and glass office buildings, the number of homeless rose nationwide to a million and 20 percent of the people lived under the poverty line. Also, burglary, car thievery, and vandalism greatly increased, and Britain held the dubious distinction of having the highest per capita prison population in the European community.

Thatcher reversed a forty-year line of economic development where incomes had gradually grown more equal in Britain. By 1988 she had succeeded in turning around the whole process. The best-off tenth of the population now enjoyed nearly nine times more income than the worst-off tenth. In London, well-heeled computer executives, stockbrokers, and tourists hurried past adolescent runaways begging dolefully outside Central London tube stations and warily perched on the steps leading down from the National Theater.

Film turned into a political weapon against the Thatcherite tide. Of course, it is not as if the political and social criticism in Leigh's and Frears-Kureishi's work made a significant dent in the Thatcher ethos. Their films, however, did offer an alternative to the image of a prosperous, entrepreneurial, and triumphant Britain that Thatcher's favorite ad agency, Saatchi and Saatchi, and much of the daily press promoted.

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Heritage films like *Chariots of Fire*, *A Passage to India*, and *A Room with a View* also advanced, in a more complicated and ambivalent manner, the portrait of a sanguine, victorious Britain. The heritage films, despite criticizing some aspects of the culture and society of the past, and implicitly contemporary life, still turned their gaze away from the turbulent present. They did this by invoking in a pictorial, decorative style enveloped in nostalgia, a more serene, pastoral Britain. The Britain depicted in these films offered a portrait of a relatively balanced, hieratic world that, despite its inequities and imperfections, soothed rather than disturbed educated, middle-class audiences.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, a number of the films dealing with 1980s Britain portrayed it as an urban society – heterogeneous, socially divided and fractured, and permeated with large pockets of unemployment and poverty. These films, however, made no claim to provide answers to Thatcherism, eschewing promoting or even intellectually exploring an alternative political perspective. Thatcher's Britain had produced an ever-changing social landscape where the power of social institutions that had once carried moral and political weight, like unions, left-wing political groups, and even the class system, had eroded. In the words of director Michael Radford (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*), eighties Britain had become too complex a phenomenon for any single ideology to explain, and “all things we were taught to believe had crumbled away.”<sup>13</sup>

The one political certitude that many of the directors, including Radford, and the films shared (without ever turning to poster art or agitprop) was that an arrogant, vindictive Margaret Thatcher was the one unambiguous political villain in Britain. It was as if directors of American politically oriented works like *Country* and *Do the Right Thing* had begun to punctuate their films with barbed and contemptuous remarks aimed explicitly at Ronald Reagan and had turned him into the prime source of all that had gone socially and politically wrong during the 1980s. If most of the British directors of the Thatcher years (excepting Ken Loach, whose explicitly socialist appeals to an increasingly beleaguered working class remained unchanged) did not have an antidote to Thatcherism, they at least shared a belief that Margaret Thatcher was at the heart of what they felt was going wrong in Britain.

Leigh's work was shaped by this political perspective; yet despite his antipathy his films carry no political agendas, nor do they offer political alternatives or solutions in the Ken Loach mode. Leigh does not share Loach's Marxist vision that the world is divided roughly between those who hold power and those who are its victims, and that the possibility

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for radical social change still lies with the working class. Undiscerning critics often lump Leigh and Loach together, because they are independent, noncommercial directors who spent much of their careers working on television and share a penchant for making realistic films about working-class characters. Their ways of dealing with politics and their formal strategies, however, differ radically. According to Leigh, Loach would regard him politically “as, at best, a lily-livered liberal.”<sup>14</sup> Leigh’s films rarely provide answers – his world is too ambiguous, too bound by contradiction, to be given a schematic reading – while Loach permeates his work with a class-conscious, radical social agenda.

In most of his films Leigh successfully captures the emotional drives and inwardness as well as the speech patterns and tastes of his characters, usually satirizing them a bit while simultaneously respecting their feelings and selfhood. It is a delicate line that Leigh draws and more often than not balances with great agility. But not always. Sometimes the films get so bogged down in caricature and over-the-top behavior<sup>15</sup> (Leigh was a skilled enough cartoonist to make a living at it) that he reduces his characters to their class stereotypes. Their class and culture become the prime definitions of their identity, and they begin to lose their individuality and layering as characters. They become outsized figures, sometimes interesting but operating like characters who belong in some other, less nuanced, comic-routine based film. It’s something Leigh tries hard to avoid – being antipathetic to constructing character in a facile and reductive manner, and always trying hard to achieve an ensemble effect – though he succumbs to it at points.

The depictions of Rupert and Laetitia Booth-Braines and Aubrey in *High Hopes* and *Life Is Sweet*, respectively, illustrate the problem. Leigh’s parody of the Booth-Braineses is a bit broad. It is plausible that couples like Laetitia and Rupert engage in coy baby talk before sex, use cucumber slices as eye patches to shut out the light before going to bed, and generally sound, in their empty chatter, like extras from *Brideshead Revisited*. Still, their almost unrelieved offensiveness seems excessive even for the smug upholders of the success-obsessed Thatcherite culture: narcissistic Laetitia thanking God that she’s been blessed with such beautiful skin; stuffy Rupert harshly telling Cyril and Shirley to take Mrs. Bender away, as if she were a dog. Leigh etches his targets sharply, but a touch less anger toward them on his part would have given these characters more emotional resonance, and the social satire would have greater effect and depth.

In some of Aubrey’s scenes in *Life Is Sweet*, Leigh’s penchant for

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cartooning goes over the top. The restaurant scenes are too excessive to connect in tone with the central family sequences, and Aubrey's character doesn't quite achieve the mixture of poignancy and drollery that was Leigh's aim. When the restaurant's opening night proves to be a predictable fiasco, Aubrey's drunken, rolling-around-the-floor rage, self-loathing, and lust for a concerned Wendy (who is doing him a favor by working as a waitress for the night), make him tediously ridiculous rather than granting him genuine pathos.

When Leigh's characters are convincing, it is because he knows just when to prevent their idiosyncrasies and tics from becoming as excessive as Aubrey's are in his big scene. At such times, in his construction of character and narrative Leigh eschews the formulaic and conventional for the ambiguous and open-ended.

Starting with *Bleak Moments*, Leigh's films have been in the general tradition of English realism, which has been one of the dominant strains in British cinema. Realism's beginnings in British film can be found in the social documentary cinema of the thirties, whose founder, publicist, distributor, and leading figure was John Grierson (the only movie he directed was the Eisenstein-influenced *Drifters*), and in the work of the more formally adventurous and poetic Humphrey Jennings (*Fires Were Started*), who found in Britain's feelings of national unity and community during World War II the perfect moment to convey his sense of the grandeur and tragedy of men at war.

The social documentary movement sought to create a public sphere of responsible and engaged film that would be distinct from a class-bound, escapist commercial cinema. The films produced under the Grierson rubric (*Night Mail*, *Housing Problems*, *Coal-Face*) were committed to telling stories that would explain and improve reality for the mass of people, the moral taking primacy over the aesthetic. Still, a film like *Night Mail*, which depicted workers processing mail on the postal express train as it moved overnight from London to Glasgow, carried a strong aesthetic consciousness. *Night Mail* evoked the rhythm and beat of the train, and a strikingly composed look of the landscape it traversed, by integrating image, Benjamin Britten's musical score, and a verse narration by W. H. Auden to capture the poetry of men at work. Grierson's prime concern, however, was to create a socially useful cinema – not an aesthetic one – that depicted the workings of the society at large rather than the lives and feelings of individuals. The Grierson documentaries contained no specific political line or social critique, just a generalized



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commitment to a rational society, a democratic culture, and the dignity of work.

The heirs to the Grierson tradition in English cinema were the liberal humanist Free Cinema films of the 1950s (Lindsay Anderson's *Every Day except Christmas*), and the New Wave features (ranging from Jack Clayton's conventionally directed *Room at the Top*, which appeared in 1959, to Anderson's passionate and emotionally primal *This Sporting Life* in 1963). The key figures in the Free Cinema movement, Anderson, Karel Reisz, and Tony Richardson, moved from documentaries that were personal expressions which aimed to evoke the poetry of the everyday world to narratives that attempted to focus without condescension on working-class characters, locales, and concerns (though all the directors were upper-middle-class and Oxbridge-educated, making films about lives they saw from the outside that had little or nothing to do with their own). They used a new group of non-West End actors with strong regional accents (e.g., Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay) who were able to convey working-class authenticity through vernacular speech and raw, volatile behavior in a manner that less full-blooded British movie stars of the time, like Dirk Bogarde or John Mills, were incapable of projecting.

The films were not in the Grierson mode but, like Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, committed themselves more to psychological than documentary realism. They explored the desires and hopes of their working-class protagonists and their heroes' ambivalent relationship to working-class culture rather than getting to the heart of the structure and texture of the communities in which they lived and worked. The New Wave films tended to use their locations – the streets, canals, factories, row houses of provincial industrial cities – to sometimes striking, sometimes clichéd pictorial effect. In a number of the films, many of the locations did not serve as an integral part of the narrative or organically relate to the characters. For example, the shots of back-to-back houses and industrial sites rarely worked as a window into the structure and ethos of working-class life. Still, the New Wave films captured the way working-class homes, streets, pubs, dance halls, beach resorts, and factories looked – the appearance if not the essence of working-class life. They also projected a social vision – more a moral and cultural critique than an overtly political one. The films centered on protagonists who, in varied ways, affirmed the autonomy and integrity of the individual. These were men and women who felt their soul and

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spirit threatened by a set of social and cultural forces. Their credo was best summed up in *Saturday Night*'s Arthur Seaton's terse line, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." There was no alternative political or social vision inherent in Seaton's response, just one man asserting his own sense of individuality amid all the conformist pressures he felt were destroying it.

Leigh's films look very different from the films of the British New Wave. No single film of his, except for *Naked*, is dominated by a single figure – a heroic/antiheroic protagonist. (Even in *Naked*, despite Johnny's charismatic presence, all the other characters are much more than mere plot devices.) He builds all the films on an ensemble of actors, with five or six characters often playing central roles. His characters are so individuated and true that, like people in the real world, their emotions aren't predictable or fixed. If the trajectory of the lives depicted will never change, he doesn't neatly prescribe or homogenize his characters' behavior. In each film some fresh and unique detail, bit of business, personal quirk, emotion, or idiosyncrasy is conjured up. Leigh captures the variety of human behavior, connecting equally to both the emotionally lost and destructive and the relatively balanced and life-affirming of his characters.

The emphasis in Leigh's films is rarely on the landscape or cityscape bounding his characters' lives. He has no interest in providing a documentary realist vision of the way the world looks in his films. It's not his wont to emulate the New Wave pattern of shooting scenes depicting characters walking along canals, visiting fairs and beach resorts, and interacting in pubs. When Leigh uses the public world, he doesn't make it aesthetically or sociologically vivid enough to provide release or escape for his characters or the film audience. He almost never has his characters interact with the public settings that surround them. It's the people who are central, not the buildings, streets, and neighborhoods they inhabit or pass through or the cafés and pubs they eat and drink in.

Leigh mainly stays with interiors, the behavior of his characters, and the small-scale incidents that are his films' dramatic spine. There is no Chayevsky-style emotional underlining or editorializing. In Leigh's work his characters can be pathetic but never bathetic. He is usually too satiric, clear-eyed, and tough-minded an observer to allow a sense of pity or mawkishness to creep into his films.

The New Wave films' depiction of urban and working class life depicted worlds closer to Mike Leigh's own experience than David Lean or Carol Reed ever cared to treat. His notion of realistic cinema, how-