

The Films of Mike Leigh

Embracing the World

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with contributions by

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I

Stylistic Introduction: Living beyond Consciousness

On the whole, life for most people is – get born and survive as best you can for as long as you can, till it’s all up. The norm for most people in the world is that life is hard work; it’s tough. It’s not about being winners or losers. It’s about coping. The minute anything extraordinary or exotic happens [in a film], I get bored. Most movies are about extraordinary or charmed lifestyles. For me what’s exciting is finding heightened drama, the extraordinary in the ordinary – what happens to ordinary people . . . the entirely disorganized and irrational business of living.

– Mike Leigh

The best way to define the distinctive qualities of Leigh’s work (and the implicit challenge it presents for viewers) is to notice its difference from mainstream American film. Hollywood movies are basically devoted to achievement. Characters are defined in terms of their ability to do things (anything from freeing the hostages to getting the girl) – frequently by being pitted against each other in tests of wit or prowess. Hollywood understands life as essentially a matter of competition, achievement, and reward.

A narrative organized around a series of problems for characters to solve or goals to achieve appeals to American viewers for at least two reasons. First, it makes the story easy to follow. Characters’ progress (or failure to progress) can be measured in an almost step-by-step way. Second, it ties in with one of the basic myths of American culture: the faith in the virtues of doing. For someone who subscribes to the ideology of capitalism, this narrative form is fundamentally encouraging. It’s a “can-do” vision. Willpower, diligence, pluck, and resourcefulness can solve any problem.

Mike Leigh’s films are organized along different lines. In the first place, he rejects struggle and competition as sources of value. He is more

interested in his characters' ability to interact sensitively than in pitting them against each other. When *Abigail's Party* and *Who's Who* depict characters competing for attention or jockeying for power, they are clearly offering nightmare visions of life.

The problems Leigh dramatizes are not the kind that have solutions – particularly practical ones. *Bleak Moments* explores the situation of flawed characters interacting in imperfect ways but never in the least suggests that there is a way out of their situation. *Hard Labour* presents another group of figures who are trapped in various ways but doesn't suggest that there is anything in particular they can do to break free. Leigh's work suggests that there are situations that can never be escaped from, and aspects of our personalities that can never be repaired.

Leigh's movies are not about performing a task or achieving a goal. The drama is generated out of states of being more than acts of doing. The interest of *Nuts in May* is not anything Keith does at one moment, but what he is throughout. In *Life Is Sweet*, what Aubrey and Nicola do in a given scene is far less important than what they are in every scene.

Since what you are is not something that can be altered by an action, the films are not really about events. Rather than competing in the realm of action, Leigh's figures are placed in situations in which their ways of feeling and thinking are compared. It's not how your words and deeds conflict with mine, but how your way of knowing differs from (or overlaps with) mine. You see, feel, and understand life in one way; I see, feel, and understand it in another.

The most obvious illustration of how this comparison and contrast of points of view creates drama is the films in which characters with more or less opposite points of view are thrown together. Many of Leigh's films pair figures who are, in effect, each other's antitypes. In *Meantime*, a middle-class do-gooder is paired with a lower-class layabout who resists being "helped." In *Grown-Ups*, a lost-in-space teacher is forced to deal with his most uncontrollable former students when they move in next door as adults. In *Nuts in May*, a yuppie camper who has reduced all of life to a routine is plunked down next to lower-class campers whose rowdiness resists his systems of organization and understanding.

More often, the contrasts are not so blatant. Many of Leigh's groupings involve characters whose perspectives and attitudes differ quite subtly. The drama of *The Kiss of Death*, for example, is generated by differences in the sexual attitudes of figures whose points of view are similar in some respects and different in others: the sexual cluelessness of two boys is compared with the sexual knowingness of two girls; the

chaste, marriage-mindedness of one of the girls is compared with the moral “looseness” of the other girl; the romantic earnestness of one of the boys is compared with the erotic sniggering of the other. Even minor characters briefly factor into the comparison and contrast process: in the same film, for example, the “dirty-minded” attitudes toward sexual relations of one boy’s boss, and the painfully unromantic relationship of a man and woman the boy visits in the course of his job contrast with the young people’s attitudes.

The “plot” is less a matter of external events than the interplay of alternative points of view.¹ This can confuse audiences. Differences in feelings and points of view are harder to follow than events. That is why many American viewers are left scratching their heads at what is “going on” in a Leigh scene or what they are supposed to be “getting” from it.² As Cassavetes once said about his own work: “The lights go down and the audience says ‘Let’s get going,’ but the film is *already* going – someplace they don’t realize.” The drama doesn’t depend on external conflicts and struggles. The opening scenes of *Nuts in May* show a married couple on vacation in the country, checking into a campground. The drama begins long before they have any actual disagreements. It is already unfolding in how they sing together as they drive, how they interact with each other and the camp manager as they check in and set up camp. In *High Hopes*, when one of the married couples has a conversation prior to going to sleep, the drama is taking place at the speed of light, even with the characters flat on their backs.

As the repeated bedtime conversations in *High Hopes* suggest, Leigh’s fundamental organizational device is the paralleled scene. The films are virtual echo chambers of compared imaginative positions. The viewer becomes a connoisseur of the contrasts, even when the characters are completely oblivious to them. In *The Kiss of Death*, for example, it isn’t that the various young people notice the differences between each other’s ways of feeling and thinking, but that a perceptive member of the audience does. In fact, it is an essential aspect of Leigh’s vision of life that most of his characters are so locked inside themselves that they don’t even realize there is a difference between their point of view and that of another character.³

As the preceding suggests, contrary to the situation prevailing in most mainstream films, in Leigh’s work the consciousness of the main character or characters is not the organizing center. That is to say, the drama is played out, not in the character’s mind, but the viewer’s. This decentering of the drama away from the main characters’ consciousnesses is,

in fact, one of the defining aspects of Leigh's work (which resembles some of Alan Clarke's in this respect) and is something about which I shall have much more to say in the pages that follow.

Because Leigh's films are narratives, there are some "doings" in them, "events" that superficially resemble those in a Hollywood movie – arguments, power struggles, schemes in which one figure attempts to get the better of another – but these "actions" function, not in the conventional Hollywood way to generate counteractions that eventually allow a winner or loser to be determined, but as dramatic externalizations of characters' points of view. Leigh's "plots," such as they are, are less something that happens *to* the characters than expressions of what the characters are. Gloria disrupts the Butchers' household in *Grown-Ups*, Keith clashes with Honkey and Finger in *Nuts in May*, Barbara tries to give Colin a job in *Meantime*, and Andy purchases the caravan in *Life Is Sweet*, not to create actions or counterevents, but to open windows into the souls of the figures involved. Events reveal the characters' strengths or shortcomings – as when Alison Steadman's character responds to a medical emergency in one way in *Abigail's Party* and in an entirely different way in *Life Is Sweet*. Behavior is event and character is narrative. What someone is, is what happens to him.

When the problem is not outside but within a character, there is no need to give him or her an external problem. What the character is, is more than enough for him or her to deal with. The "plot" of most of Leigh's works is not something inflicted on you by someone or something else, but what it is to be a certain kind of person, to have a particular way of thinking and feeling. What you are is what you have to deal with.

That is a further reason why there are almost never any particular actions Leigh's characters are asked to take in the course of his films. Action can never be a solution to an internal problem. There is nothing to do when the problem is how you feel and think. You can adjust your actions in response to someone else, but how can you adjust your identity? How can you change what you *are*? As in classic drama, the only possible "solution" is an act of insight. Leigh's subject is the possibility of personal transformation. In this respect, his work is essentially as spiritual as that of Dreyer or Tarkovsky.

The Hollywood film's emphasis on a character's ability to do things is related to its definition of identity in terms of volition. The characters played by Michael Douglas, Jody Foster, Meryl Streep, and Harrison Ford *are* the choices they make. They are their intentions, plans, and acts of will. If they decide to do something daring, they are daring; if

they decide to be careful, they are careful; if they decide to do something mean, they are mean; if they decide to be loving, they are loving. The drama in Hollywood films is generated almost entirely by characters' moment-by-moment thoughts, feelings, wishes, and plans – and the conflicts between them. What Michael Douglas wants and intends (and how it conflicts with what Glenn Close or Demi Moore wants and intends) is the motor that drives *Fatal Attraction* or *Disclosure*. Characters are their surging, shifting states of consciousness. Identity is awareness.

On the face of it, this may seem a natural or even inevitable definition of selfhood, but Leigh shows how much it leaves out. His work demonstrates that reducing selfhood to consciousness represents a stunningly superficial definition of who we are. The realm of choice, volition, and will only skims the surface of what his characters are. Identity does not emanate from consciousness but from structures of character that antedate and underpin our superficial, momentary thoughts, feelings, and volitions. Sylvia, Peter, Keith, Beverly, Aubrey, and Nicola will still be who they are, no matter what they think or intend or attempt to do at any particular moment. When what one is is constituted by an entire body of lived experience, the relative importance of passing states of consciousness pales.⁴

Leigh lowers the center of gravity of identity. He moves what we are from our heads and hearts to a deeper place. Identity is not the reflection of thoughts and desires, but something beneath them that might be said to be the source of them. The drama in Leigh's work is not created by what a figure *decides* to do, but what he *is* independent of his decisions. Sylvia's failure to connect with Peter in *Bleak Moments*, Keith's conflict with his neighbors in *Nuts in May*, Gloria's clashes with Dick and Mandy in *Grown-Ups*, and Beverly's painful interactions with Susan in *Abigail's Party* are not traceable to these figures' intentions and desires.⁵

Thus the drama in Leigh's work is not the result of choices and decisions. He sees life in other terms: You have your personality and I have mine. How do our ways of knowing interact? Our relationship is based, not on our wishes or wills (a superficial and evanescent connection), but on deep, abiding structures of feeling. Whereas American film understands life ethically, Leigh is preethical. A better way to put it would be to say that Leigh defines ethics not as a series of choices but as a pattern of behavior. Morality is not located at the level of the will. It is not traceable to our intentions, feelings, or decisions. It is what we are, even when we aren't aware of it, even when we don't intend it.

The result is not moral nihilism: Leigh wants us to judge, and to judge

firmly, but to judge on the basis of a person's whole character and the details of his or her actual expressive performance, not on the basis of an intention, idea, or desire. We are not saved or damned on the basis of what we want and believe (a very simple thing) but on the basis of what we are (a far more complex and more interesting matter).

In mainstream film, a character's understanding of himself is unassailable. You can know what you are; you are what you feel you are. In *Fatal Attraction* or *Disclosure*, when Michael Douglas acts in a certain way (nasty, cunning, clever, trusting, innocent), he knows it. He understands his own goals and intentions as well as a viewer does. First-person truth is trusted in the way many people innocently trust first-person truth in their own lives. (I *want* to be so-and-so; I *intend* to be so-and-so; I *believe* myself to be so-and-so; therefore I *am* so-and-so.) The intentional self and the actual self are the same. There is only one self and we can know it.

Leigh pulls the realms of thinking and being apart. Good intentions are not good enough. Your behavior can reveal you to be something entirely different from what you think you are or intend to be. Wishing, wanting, and trying only skim the surface of being. Character is deeper than consciousness (indeed, is usually opposed to it). What we are goes beyond our capacity to know it. The structures of personality that Leigh is exploring are almost never knowable by the person defined by them. Whereas American films are implicit celebrations of knowing, Leigh's films are depictions of the life that flows beneath awareness.

In fact, one of the main sources of drama in Leigh's work is the fallacy of self-knowledge. Peter sincerely *believes* he is taking an interest in Hilda in *Bleak Moments*, even as he patronizes her. Beverly honestly *thinks* she is the soul of kindness and consideration in *Abigail's Party*, even as she bullies and harasses her cocktail party guests. Melody sincerely *feels* she is "bonding" with Stan in *Home Sweet Home*, even as she repeatedly insults him and misunderstands virtually everything he says. Aubrey truly *imagines* himself to be sexy, cool, and hip, and Nicola is genuinely *convinced* that she is the only member of the family who cares about others, even as scene after scene of *Life Is Sweet* demonstrates that they are very nearly the opposite of their ideas of themselves.

These characters are not hypocritical. They are not trying to deceive anyone. (If that were the case, we would be back in the mainstream view of personality where a character knows what he or she is doing.) They are sincere. The problem is that feeling is not being, and to feel, think, or believe something, however sincerely, is not enough. Feelings of love

may be expressed in hurtful ways. Attempts to help someone may be misguided; we can drop the lifeboat on the heads of the people we sincerely intend to rescue.

It's not like that in mainstream films. One might say that Hollywood movies let us indulge in the luxury of seeing everyone *the way we see ourselves* – as insides viewed from the inside – while Leigh's films force us to see characters *the way others see us* (and the way we see others) – as outsides viewed from the outside. It is the difference between judging from intentions (the way we normally see ourselves) and judging from actions (the way we customarily see others). For ourselves, our ideals, motives, and emotions *are* us; for others, what we are can be completely unrelated to or in contradiction to our own understanding of ourselves. Our behavior and expressions can admit of interpretations other than our own. (The real threat of Leigh's work, if we can accept it, is always against our own complacent belief in the infallibility of our knowledge of ourselves.)

Is it any surprise that most viewers prefer the Hollywood vision? Its equation of identity with consciousness not only simplifies life and art but reinforces our fantasy of self-knowledge. Hollywood characters *are* their own views of themselves. There really is only the character's own view of himself; no other view is reasonable.⁶ The self is one thing through and through. In contrast, Leigh's characters always have at least two selves – what they are to themselves and what they are to others, and the two almost never coincide.

The more general way to understand this situation is to see that while most American film idealizes experience, in both the vernacular and philosophical senses of the term, Leigh deidealizes it. American film understands experience as mental events (depicted in the characters and evoked in the viewers); Leigh understands it as expressive events (which require complex acts of interpretation on the part of both characters and viewers). The ideal view dives beneath phenomenal reality to anchor understanding in intentional depths; the other navigates turbulent expressive surfaces. Inner states count for so much in American movies (and are so reliable and trustworthy as sources of information) because they are, in effect, all there is. Leigh's films imagine a wholly other world, external to our desires, beyond our hearts and minds, and not necessarily accessible to them.

From classic Hollywood melodramas like *Citizen Kane*, *Now, Voyager*, *Casablanca*, and *Psycho*, to more recent works like *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Forrest Gump*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Face/Off*, *Titanic*, and

The Truman Show, mainstream American film is fundamentally a depiction of *inner* worlds. It focuses on states of vision, feeling, and thought. The importance of social interactions is played down and that of imaginative reactions played up – which is why moments of looking, being looked at, thinking, and feeling are the most important events in these works. For both their viewers and their characters, these films are about *seeing and feeling things* – participating in states of insight and emotion – not about socially, verbally, or physically interacting in a practical way with someone else.

The whole stylistic enterprise of these films is devoted to providing windows into characters' souls. Musical orchestrations and expressionistic lighting cue us into characters' emotions; close-ups let us look deep into their eyes and savor the expressions on their faces; blocking and framing techniques and editing rhythms and juxtapositions let viewers vicariously participate in characters' emotional and intellectual states; most of the dialogue involves expressing opinions, beliefs, fears, doubts, hopes, plans. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that every effect is directed toward the end of making consciousness visible and audible – to keeping both the viewer and other characters focused on internal states. When characters meet, mind meets mind. Your emotions meet mine; your intentions are pitted against mine: your ideas, goals, and plans are compared with mine.

These films implicitly suggest that life is less a matter of behavior than of feeling; less about expressions than intentions. The presentation of inner states is not only more important than, but usually takes the place of practical interaction. If a character tells us how he is feeling or thinking (by saying it in a line of dialogue), or if the style of the film shows it (with a close-up, lighting effect, or musical orchestration), the character usually need not do anything at all to express it in the world. "Interaction" is almost entirely imaginative. In all of the important or memorable scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's work (the most extreme example of this idealizing tendency in mainstream film), the characters might as well be brains in vats communicating through mental telepathy. But Hitchcock is only the most obvious example. In shot after shot in virtually every mainstream movie, what is presented are states of feeling and thinking. Identity is mental. We are our internal states. Experience is equivalent to states of subjectivity. The most intense, important, and meaningful moments in life consist of thoughts and feelings (which need not be spoken or otherwise expressed). Life is visionary – in both the optical and the imaginative senses of the term.⁷

The subjectivization of experience in mainstream films is one of the reasons why viewers are so easily able to identify with the characters in these films, becoming the victims in *Schindler's List*, the unsung heroes in *Saving Private Ryan*, the romantic lovers in *Titanic*, the nebbish with a heart of gold in *Manhattan*, the tough guy in *Terminator*, or the hipper-than-hip swingers in *Boogie Nights*. The outer lives of the characters in these films do not remotely resemble those of the viewers, but the inner states are the same. As long as what we are is equivalent to our basic thoughts and feelings, there *is* no difference between us and the characters played by Kate Winslett or Arnold Schwarzenegger. The viewer can frictionlessly slip inside the character's skin. The character is always comprehensible in terms of the viewer's *own* ways of thinking and feeling. Their motives are *our* motives. Their ideas are *our* ideas. Their generic thoughts and emotions give us versions of our own understandings of ourselves. Leigh, on the other hand, asks us to go out of ourselves, to leave our own ways of understanding behind and inhabit genuine otherness – in a far deeper sense than is dreamt of by the multiculturalists.

The imaginative transformation simplifies experience (not to mention making it intelligible in foreign markets – you don't need subtitles or familiarity with cultural customs to understand emotions). While practical performance involves complexities of timing, tone, timbre, and the mastery of local expressive conventions, emotional states are more or less universal. We all have the same glands. The nonspecificity of idealist presentation contributes to the genericness of its effects. When an experience is made equivalent to its imaginative and emotional value, its uniqueness is diminished, its outlines simplified, its complexity attenuated. In being taken up into the mind, reality is softened. Differences between figures that would be gray and fuzzy in expression become black-and-white when translated into ideas and feelings. Even the most imperceptive viewer notices how in Hollywood movies characters are simpler and their conflicts more clear-cut than outside the movies.

Most American viewers are so accustomed to this idealization of experience that they fail to see how it skews their understanding of life. If something is everywhere, it is invisible.⁸ Leigh shows what it looks like for a film to proceed differently. His work rejects ideal relations to experience – for both characters and viewers. It deidealizes experience and expression. Insides are replaced by outsides. Leigh's characters' consciousnesses must always be translated into practical forms of social interaction. Their insides are never directly visible – neither through their

words and actions, nor through the visual and acoustic styles of the works they are in. The viewer is held in the realm of expression and behavior, not empathizing with feelings and thoughts deep within a character, not identifying with the character, dropping into the character and “becoming” him or her, but – as in documentary film – standing outside of it, off to one side of it, scrutinizing opaque, impenetrable surfaces. Leigh holds us on the surface and, more than that, implicitly says that surfaces are all that matter.

Contrary to everything our culture tells us (and everything we may want to believe), Leigh argues that experience is not reducible to subjectivity. Consciousness never stands free of its warped, partial, imperfect, shifting expressions. Leigh’s characters cannot simply “think” or “feel” their goals, purposes, and relationships, but must express them in a thousand practical details. Feelings must be converted into actions. Emotion must be exteriorized by being shared. Leigh’s characters are not their thoughts and feelings, but their social interactions, movements, gestures, tones of voice, and facial expressions. They must *perform* their thoughts and feelings in front of, in concert with, and in response to other characters. They must *enact* their impulses in the world. (In Leigh’s favorite phrase, they must move from abstractly thinking about something to “getting on with it.”) That is why to think back on most of the great scenes in Leigh’s work is to remember particular vocal tones and facial expressions, bodily shapes and movements, and practical verbal and social interactions: Sylvia’s joking, playful, embarrassing, clumsy conversations with Norman and Peter; Mark’s razzing of Colin and verbal sparring with Barbara; the dramatic skits Cyril and Shirley improvise together; Wendy’s subtly different tones and styles of conversational interaction with everyone she meets. Characters have voices and bodies. They are not merely (or chiefly) their thoughts and feelings.

For a shorthand formulation of the difference between the two understandings of identity, compare Tom Hanks’ Forrest Gump with David Threlfall’s Trevor in *The Kiss of Death*. Both figures are well-meaning, physically clumsy, and fairly inarticulate. Yet in the case of Forrest Gump, we are never allowed to forget that beautiful intentions underpin his homely expressions. Fine sentiments and pure ideals lurk beneath the homespun surface, instructing us to disregard the surface. As far as the audience’s view of Gump goes, he might as well be made of glass. He is transparent. We look past his humble exterior and admire his tender soul (a move into the interior assisted by the film’s voice-over narration). He is all inside. Leigh’s Trevor, in contrast, might be said to be all

outside. He *is* his expression of himself – however halting and imperfect. He is opaque. His inside is inaccessible. What you see is what you get. There is no release from the visible.

The difference between the two expressive traditions is reflected in the different kinds of acting in the two bodies of work. Most American acting plays down surface expressions and plays up indications of “deep” thoughts and feelings. In the most extreme illustrations of this kind of acting – seen in Hitchcock’s work with Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant or Capra’s with Gary Cooper – surface expression is diminished almost to the vanishing point while cinematic style picks up the expressive burden. Acting becomes a kind of pantomime: The actor stands still with a neutral expression on his face while musical orchestrations, lighting effects, plot events, scripted remarks, or intercut close-ups of looks, glances, and stares suggest thoughts or feelings surging just beneath the surface. Even much more complex and nuanced forms of American acting, like the performances of Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift, are significantly still built up from the inside out. All Method acting is based on the belief that what is in the depths is more important than what is on the surface. Feeling is primary; expression secondary. American acting is almost always based on depths rather than surface expressions precisely because it has internalized the set of understandings I have described: namely, that there is a realm of subjectivity that anchors and is ultimately more important than the relatively “superficial” details of social or verbal expression.

The acting in Leigh’s work reverses these priorities. It puts a premium on surfaces (nuances of voice tones, facial expressions, gestures, body language), more or less letting the depths take care of themselves. It is more about outsides than insides, less about states of thought and feeling than about the enactment of those states. Selfhood is not (as in the Method) something hidden deep within us, anchored in secret dreams and unspoken desires, but is a concept that summarizes the overall effect of the intricate network of expressions we employ. Leigh would undoubtedly agree with Oscar Wilde’s witticism that it is only superficial people who do not judge by surfaces. That is also why Leigh is not interested in discussing a character’s internal states – his motivation, thoughts, emotions – with the actor during rehearsal. The issue is not what the character would think or feel in a certain situation, but what he would say or do. Manners are morals. Even the casual viewer picks up on the difference when he notices the importance of generalized stylistic

effects in American film (lighting, editing, and sound effects that suggest subjective states) and their relative unimportance in Leigh's work.

The difference between an idealized and unidealized presentation of experience is what an American viewer registers as the "rawness" of Leigh's characters or the "roughness" of their interactions.⁹ Leigh's characters feel lumpy, their expressions muddy, and their interactions bumpy in comparison with those in Hollywood films because it is almost impossible for practical social expressions and interactions to achieve the purity and clarity of abstract statements of subjectivity and stylistic indications of consciousness. Characters in idealist films can "speak" their thoughts and feelings (in both the verbal and stylistic senses of the term) more clearly and powerfully than Leigh's can, because their "speech" is freed from the compromises, fallibility, and imperfection of speech as it is encountered outside of the movies. In *Psycho* Hitchcock can lay in a little spooky-dooky music on the sound track, throw a spot on an actor's face, or use expressionistic camera angles to create states of feeling that have an unworldly purity, clarity, and intensity. In *Citizen Kane* Welles can use short lenses, oversized sets, and shadows to express the title character's megalomania and loneliness with a directness and purity that the compromised, mediated personal expressions in Leigh's work never attain. The smoothness and completeness of idealist presentation is replaced in Leigh's work by the halting, rough particularity and imperfection of actual physical and verbal expression.

Just as the characters in a mainstream film commune visionarily with each other and their surroundings (effortlessly taking in meanings simply by glancing at someone or something), so do the viewers of mainstream films take in the characters and their situations in a visionary way. That is to say, idealist film not only allows characters to read each other's minds, it makes the viewer a mind reader. The conflation of visionary forms of interaction is, in fact, the central narrative project of Hollywood film, which not only allows characters to relate to each other in terms of states of thought and feeling but encourages the viewer to relate to the characters in the same way. The viewer encounters the on-screen experience in the same idealized, visionary way the characters do, expanding imaginatively within the character and situation – "identifying" with the character, "becoming" him or her, feeling what the character feels. The viewer leaves his real identity behind and sympathetically lives through a group of figures for a period of time. He effortlessly shares those figures' states of thought and feeling – seeing what they see, know-

ing what they know. He frictionlessly inhabits other consciousnesses. (The conflation is facilitated by the use of subjectivity editing conventions and mood-music orchestrations.) In the final scene of *Casablanca*, Bergman and Bogart read each other's minds, imaginatively expanding and visionarily merging, and the viewer switches into the same resonantly empathetic, imaginatively expansive appreciation of them.

Leigh's work requires an entirely different and more demanding mode of viewing. Viewers cannot commune visionarily with his visuals. They cannot expand imaginatively within his scenes. They cannot live vicariously through ("become") his characters. His figures repel identification. His camera placements don't encourage the viewer to see things through their eyes. His music and visuals don't allow the viewer to participate in unmediated states of feeling and thought.

The viewer has to work much harder to come to grips with Leigh's work also because things are much less clear than in the other kind of movie. Visionary stylistic effects, the staple of American film, are fairly simple and static in their significance. The import of a spooky orchestration on the sound track, a beautiful female face, a key-lighted shot can be taken in almost effortlessly. Meanings mapped on the body are invariably cryptic, multivalent, and changeable. In *Bleak Moments*, is Peter's ungainliness charming or dismaying? Are Sylvia's jokes a way of reaching out to others or holding them at a distance? Are Norman's stammerings and hesitations soulful or shallow? Even once we do bring their significance into focus, the problem is that performed meanings won't stand still. Created in time and extended in space, they continuously melt and transmute, shimmering with changing resonances.

Based as they are on a screenwriter's moral and thematic abstractions, and interacting with other characters in terms of their own abstract intellectual states and emotions, American characters have the experiential thinness of figures in an allegory or a dream. They and the interactions between them are as smooth and featureless as the ideas in which they originated. There is, as John Cassavetes once put it, no behavior. Everything is somewhat generalized. They represent ideas about ourselves, rather than the complex perceptual events we really are. They are generic and abstract. They lack details (which is why you can almost always take them in at a glance). Nothing could be less like Leigh's presentations. Details are everything in his work. There is nothing but specific, local expressions. There is no avoiding particulars – for the viewer or the characters.¹⁰

Given his nonvolitional understanding of experience, it is not surpris-

ing that Leigh once told an interviewer that in order to understand someone it would not be sufficient to hear the person talk about his or her ideas and feelings. He said that he would need to know what the person did for a living, where he or she was born, and what his or her family was like. It would be a mistake to attribute Leigh's comments simply to British class awareness. Leigh was making a statement about the nature of identity. He was telling the interviewer that our dreams and desires are not the most important things about us. Identity is not mental. It is not disembodied. It is not optative.

The famous colloquy between Madame Merle and Isabel Archer in Chapter 19 of Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* can provide one final additional perspective on the difference between the two understandings of selfhood.¹¹ In the quotation that follows, Merle's conception of selfhood comes first, as a response to Isabel's declaration that it won't matter how her lover dresses or what kind of house he lives in:

“When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each made up of some cluster of appurtenances. What shall we call our self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've got a great respect for things! One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive.”

This was very metaphysical; not more so, however than several observations Madame Merle had already made. Isabel was fond of metaphysics, but was unable to accompany her friend into this bold analysis of human personality. “I don't agree with you. I think it is just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!”

For the purposes of the present argument, I would suggest that the Hollywood understanding of identity is close to Isabel's, while Leigh's is closer to that of Madame Merle. Translated into the terms of the preceding discussion, Isabel defines selfhood in terms of consciousness, while

Madame Merle defines it in terms of expression. Isabel's identity (or at least the identity she aspires to have), like the identities of characters in Hollywood movies, is a more or less direct reflection of her wishes, dreams, and desires. (In fact, there is really very little else to her.) Madame Merle, in contrast, like Leigh, says that subjectivity only matters insofar as it is externalized in forms of practical performance.

The point of invoking Isabel Archer is to suggest the seductiveness of the idealist position. The equation of the self with its volitions, intentions, thoughts, and desires is a vision of virtually unlimited possibility. It imagines the individual to be fundamentally unbounded and undefined. The self is open-ended and free. The motto of these films is no different from the get-rich-quick maxim: Anything you can see you can be: anything you can conceive and believe, you can achieve.¹² Where identity is so thoroughly mental, there are virtually no constraints on it. Characters in American film are capable of being or doing almost anything. They truly are American Adams, freed from the limits of history, memory, and social contingency. Hollywood and Isabel imagine our identities to be responsive to our consciousnesses, and consciousness itself to be fundamentally open-ended, unbounded, and free.

Unlimited possibility doesn't come without a price, however. Insofar as a character can be anyone, he or she must to some extent forfeit being someone. The idealist position manifests itself as a characteristic blankness or vacancy in the acting and the verbal and physical expressions of the characters in Hollywood films. Leigh himself has commented that the figures in American film strike him as "ciphers."¹³ George Bailey, Mary Hatch, Jefferson Smith, Rick, Ilsa Lunt, Charles Foster Kane, Marion Crane, "Top Gun," Forrest Gump, "The Terminator," and Truman Burbank are as unindividualized as comic-strip figures. They are Everyman (or Everywoman), not someone but anyone: generic placeholders performing generic functions in generic narratives – the archetypal father, mother, crusader, cynic, romantic, megalomaniac, and so on. The psychological indefiniteness and sociological vagueness of these characters and their situations is dictated by the refusal to place fundamental limits on personal expression and achievement (and is what makes it so easy for a viewer to become them).

Leigh has a different vision of what we are. His characters are not general but particular, not anyone but someone, not Rorschach inkblots for viewers imaginatively to fill in, but particular individuals with specific traits and attributes who resist imaginative appropriation – by other characters and by the viewer. Characters' acts of resistance to other

characters' imaginative appropriations of them constitute the plots of most of the films. And their resistance to viewers' imaginative appropriations is the reason Leigh's work challenges audiences.

Leigh devotes weeks of his rehearsal process to working with his actors to arrive at definite forms of movement, speech, and expression precisely because he believes so strongly in each figure's specificity. He understands that although people's intentions are more or less the same – who doesn't want to be successful, happy, or good? – their ways of expressing them are different. In *Life Is Sweet*, Andy and Aubrey are more or less identical in terms of their desires (they both aspire to work for themselves). But their expressions of their desires are as different as night and day.

In Leigh's world, precisely because we cannot escape our personalities, we are not open-ended, free, and able to live our dreams. We cannot be or do anything we imagine. We are not infinite in possibility, but fundamentally limited and constrained. Leigh's characters have particular identities that stand between them and their visions of themselves. They are tangled up in their pasts (social background, upbringing, personality, and memories), their futures (obligations and responsibilities), and everything around them (jobs, families, and personal forms of expression). The specificity of the characterizations and performances is critical to the meaning of Leigh's work. His characters are particular individuals, grounded in specific sets of circumstances, mannerisms, ways of talking (including the specific local accents that drive many American viewers up the wall in *Four Days in July*, for example), and ways of knowing that they can never escape. Each has distinctive paces, rhythms, memories, and physical attributes. There is no realm of thoughts, feelings, and intentions free of these contingencies – no realm of ideas, feelings, or intentions not inflected by what we are. Contrary to Isabel Archer's dream, there is no realm of consciousness that is free of social contingency and psychological particularity. We and all of our expressions are fundamentally mediated and compromised. That acknowledgment of our limitations is what American viewers often find depressing about Leigh's work. His characters' expressive possibilities are radically constrained. They can never be anything other than what they are.

Leigh, like Madame Merle, tells us that although we may dream in the subjunctive we must live in the indicative. Ideals can be expressed only in compromised, imperfect, unideal forms. But that is not a situation to be regretted, according to either of them. It is a stimulation to creative performance *within* the limits that contain us. Trevor can never

be other than Trevor in all of his goofy, clumsy imperfection, but he can be the most sensitive, responsible, interesting Trevor possible. Colin will never be able to leap outside his own imaginative limitations (or even to imagine the possibility, as Isabel does), but he can work within them. Shirley and Wendy cannot escape the families of relationships that hedge them round. They must work with what they have – just as Leigh does as a director – working *within* the limits of the personalities and expressive possibilities of the particular actors available to him.

These characters cannot be anything because they are so clearly something. Character sets an absolute limit on what each can be and do. Sylvia, Peter, Gloria, Keith, Beverly, Shirley, and Wendy can never be fundamentally different from what they are, even if they wanted to be (which they don't).¹⁴ Leigh's characters have "character" in the root sense of the word. Their figures are more or less permanently etched in a hard surface. Characters in American movies might, in contrast, be said to have "personality," in the sense of the word that is applied to the host of a television game show: a superficial, ephemeral congeries of attributes. In the latter case, identity is malleable; in the former, it is virtually unchangeable. Leigh's figures are locked in emotional and intellectual boxes from which they can never escape. They must be themselves – which would be a terrible limitation if they did not have extremely complex and creative selves to be.

Leigh's work dramatizes the individual's capacities for creative performance within inescapable limitations. His characters can never melt and swoon into a cloud of possibility the way Isabel Archer can; they cannot transcend the social forms of expression that define them. There is no unconditioned realm of consciousness into which they can withdraw. Like ballerinas, they cannot leap outside the music that both energizes and constrains their performances. They must find a way to express themselves, uniquely and creatively, within social and psychological forms and structures that inexorably limit who they are and what they can say and do.