

Authenticity and Englishness in the Films of Mike Leigh

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What you see in my films you mostly don't see in movies. As a kid in the '40s and '50s, I would sit in movies endlessly...and think wouldn't it be great if you could see people in films like people actually are?

Mike Leigh, *The Salon Interview* ¹

I don't make films that are exclusively or idiosyncratically English; the subject matter of my films is not English, but universal.

Mike Leigh, quoted in *Movshovitz* ²

Introduction

In a 2008 interview for BAFTA (The British Academy of Film and Television Arts), the English movie director, Mike Leigh, recalled a moment of truth that he experienced during a life painting class at the Camberwell Art School in London in the mid 1960s.³ He had moved to London from Manchester in 1960, intending to train as an actor. At first, he attended RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), but he found the experience very unsatisfactory. In Leigh's opinion, RADA's teaching was based on old-fashioned and unsuitable methods. In particular, he felt that there was no room for actors to bring their own interpretation of characters or experience of life into the process of creating a film or play. They were instead presented with examples of 'great acting' and they were expected to imitate these as closely as they could, rather than to create roles for themselves, using their own personalities and inventiveness. Leigh found that this "method" restricted and detracted from the potential of the actors, and turned them into robot-like automatons, whose creativity was denied and whose function as true artists was minimal.

Partly in reaction to this situation, Leigh began taking classes in painting and drawing at the Camberwell Art School. Here, he found that things were very different. The students were encouraged to express themselves and their creativity was valued and encouraged. He says in the 2008 interview that he remembers one class in particular. The class was working to produce sketches of a nude model and Leigh could feel that this was "a real investigation of real life", in which each student's interpretation of the subject was encouraged and valued. The

teaching was not “received and dead”, like in his classes at RADA. This experience made him radically rethink his attitude to his creative work and he began to develop an acting method and, subsequently, a way of making films and plays, that encouraged input by the actors and others concerned in the creative process, and which also promoted the presentation of an understandable and recognizable reality on stage or an screen. Leigh’s creative method is outlined in this paper.

Leigh went on to become a director, initially of television plays and later of movies. He also works in theatre and at the time this paper was written in the summer of 2011, he has a new play “Grief” that has just opened at the Cottesloe Theatre in London.

The comment by Leigh that is quoted by Movshovitz and reproduced at the head of this paper indicates clearly that Leigh rejects the idea that he is intentionally focusing on or attempting to represent “Englishness” in his films. However, despite this claim and although it is clear that he does not concentrate solely on the representation of contemporary England and contemporary Englishness in his work, this paper suggests that, in fact, Leigh’s work includes some important evocations of Englishness, particularly working-class Englishness. Perhaps Leigh’s greatest strength is that he manages to communicate a strong, believable sense of reality and truth in his films. His characters and situations can be and are accepted as representations of a reality that his audiences, both English and non-English, can relate to. The situations themselves, however, are undeniably English in character and reflect a working class version of English society and political sympathies that are aligned with the British left.

After initially describing some of Leigh’s work and tracing his creative process, this paper goes on to investigate how Englishness has been defined in various quarters in the past. Subsequently, there is a brief analysis of four of Leigh’s films (*Meantime* (1983), *High Hopes* (1988), *Secrets and Lies* (1994) and *All or Nothing* (2010)) and I consider the degree to which Englishness is important in his work.

Background, early work and working methods

As noted above, Leigh is originally from Manchester, although his working life has been spent almost entirely in London. He was born in 1943. After he came to London in 1960, he studied not only at RADA and at Camberwell Art School, but also at The Central School of Art and Design and The London International Film School. During the 1960s, as a result of his increasingly negative feelings about traditional methods of stage direction and acting and the current state of mainstream theatre in the UK in general, he began to work more with theatre workshops such as the famous East 15 company. The work of East 15 and other progressive groups around this time was influenced to a large extent by the introduction of improvisational

techniques that had previously been mostly absent from theatrical production. The work of the Russian actor and director, Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), was particularly influential.

Stanislavski's ideas are based on the contention that actors should bring their own experience, imagination and feeling to a role. He taught that in creating a role, an actor should create a balance between using his or her personal experience and attempting to imagine being in the character's situation. Actors should not simply rely on observation and imitation. Instead, "they had to emotionally feel the role of their characters and recognise themselves in it, not just think of the part but also live it."⁴

Leigh came to realize that his own ideas and those of Stanislavski were very similar, and partly as a result of this he began to develop his own method of both writing and directing that was based on these ideas. Leigh has basically continued to use the same method throughout his career. I will describe this method in more detail later in this paper.

In 1970, Leigh directed a play called *Bleak Moments* at the Open Space theatre. In 1971, he was given the chance to make the play into a film using the same cast. The central characters are Sylvia, who is a lonely, unfulfilled woman living in the London suburbs and her sister Hilda, who has learning disabilities and needs to be looked after. The people surrounding these two main characters (Sylvia's colleagues at work for example, and her potential boyfriend) are of little help to Sylvia and the tone of the film is, indeed, bleak. It received very positive critical reviews and Leigh was praised in particular for his ability to create an atmosphere of extreme awkwardness throughout the film. The realism and familiarity of the situations that he and his characters created had not been found in British cinema before. However, with the general public the film had little impact.

Leigh went on to produce several highly praised plays for the BBC in their two influential and innovative series 'Play for Today' and 'Second City Firsts.' In his 2008 BAFTA interview, he talks at length about the importance of the BBC at this time and the relative freedom that was afforded to dramatists by the institution. In answer to a question from an audience member about there currently (in 2008) being no place in BBC scheduling for the single play, Leigh confirms that the situation in the BBC and in British television in general has changed considerably. The freedom that writers and directors had during the 1970s was remarkable, but this period ended with the start of Britain's fourth television channel, Channel 4, in 1982. From this time onwards, attention was directed away from the television play and the newly formed television company started to attract creative talent to the films that it was part of its directive to produce.

The situation now contrasts greatly with what was happening with regard to television drama at the end of the 1970s. Leigh claims that at that time (in the 1970s) there was a "liberal

spirit” and that...

Writers, producers and directors...were allowed to be properly creative with great liberty and freedom. And it is sadly the case that there are not three channels like there were then, there is an endless proliferation of channels as we know and the problem is that management is neurotic, paranoid and terrified and any number of decisions are (now) made on the top floor of management.⁵

In other words, the possibility for writers, producers, directors and actors to work with any degree of artistic freedom has largely disappeared. Decisions about who will make what kind of drama, and what the content and format will be, are made mostly at an institutional level and the creators of the works have relatively little influence. According to Leigh:

An atmosphere in which real creative freedom happens is really rare and the other thing, which is extremely important indeed, is that it is extremely tough for young writers, directors and others to be given the freedom to explore in the way that some of us were back then.⁶

The plays that were produced during this part of Leigh's career include the following:

Bleak Moments (stage play 1970, film 1971)

Hard Labour (BBC, 1973)

Five Minute Films (five short films created for the BBC, 1975)

The Permissive Society (BBC, 1975)

Knock for Knock (BBC, 1976)

Nuts in May (BBC, 1976)

The Kiss of Death (BBC, 1977)

Abigail's Party (BBC, 1977)

The last of these plays, *Abigail's Party*, was a major success and it is still one of Leigh's best-known works. The central character, the monstrous Beverley, is an archetype of snobbery, social climbing and manipulation. Similar characters recur throughout Leigh's work. Typically, they adopt the trappings of what they regard as a sophisticated lifestyle, but do so with an over-confidence and lack of taste that serve to emphasise their empty existence and pretentious nature. The actress who played the role of Beverley was Alison Steadman, Leigh's wife, who collaborated with him on several projects. During the 1980s, Leigh continued to work for television, but he also began to turn again to film work, producing his second film *Meantime* in 1983, *High Hopes* in 1988 and *Life is Sweet* in 1991.

Meantime is principally about the lives of two sisters, Barbara Lane and Mavis Pollock, and their families. Barbara lives with her husband, John, in a middle-class suburb in the western part of London. They have no children. They are fairly comfortable financially. Barbara is 'college educated,' (she took a course in secretarial skills and economics), and she used to work in a bank. It is implied that the life led by the Lanes is sterile, repetitive and frustrating. They do not seem to like each other very much and their social activities bore them and lead to tension between them. Entertaining at home, for example, leads to bickering about what to offer their guests to eat and who to invite. Mavis, on the other hand, has not been so successful as her sister financially. Her husband, Frank, and her two sons, Mark and Colin, are all unemployed and they live on a run-down council estate. They do very little, apart from play bingo (Mavis) or drink at the local pub (the male members of the family). This film presents an insightful and clear view of the two strata of English society that are represented by these two families at a very specific time in English (and British) history, when neo-conservative social and economic policies were starting to bite and the country was experiencing the jingoistic aftermath of the Falklands (Malvinas) war with Argentina in the South Pacific, and the resurgent feelings of patriotism and nationalism that this war encouraged.

High Hopes is also interesting in the commentary that it provides on contemporary British society under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The film concerns three couples and one elderly woman and their interaction. Cyril is a Marxist who longs for an equal society while his girlfriend, Shirley, longs to have a child. Cyril's sister, Valerie, and her husband are in complete contrast to Cyril and Shirley. They are proud representatives of the enterprise culture that was promoted by the Conservative government and are economically quite successful. However, Valerie still yearns for the social status that her working class background denies her and she unsuccessfully and pathetically attempts to emulate the habits, the dress and the lifestyle of the middle class. In this way, she is similar to the character Beverley in *Abigail's Party*. Cyril and Valerie's aging mother lives as a council tenant in public housing, in an area of London (Kings Cross) that was originally poor and working-class but which is rapidly becoming gentrified and upmarket. One day, she locks herself out of her house and is grudgingly looked after by her condescending middle-class neighbours. Valerie comes to let her mother back into her house, but also to snoop into the neighbour's house and way of life. This film helped to confirm Leigh's reputation as a director whose work provided both pithy social commentary and psychological insight and understanding. It was another success for Leigh, and it went on to receive several awards.

Life is Sweet focuses on the members of a lower middle-class family in the London suburbs who are met with a series of crises. Andy, the father, works as a chef in a large kitchen.

He barely makes enough money for the family to survive. However, one day he falls over and breaks a leg and can no longer work. His wife, Wendy (played by Alison Steadman) works part-time as a dance instructor for young children- but her main role seems to be to keep the family together through their various problems. The couple have twin daughters. Natalie works as a plumber and is apparently happy in her life. Nicola, however, is unemployed, nervous, bulimic, chain-smoking and aggressive. This film is frequently comic in tone, although at the same time it also addresses the kinds of problems that ordinary people encounter in everyday life. It also confronts social issues such as eating disorders and binge drinking.

Throughout this early part of his career, Leigh developed a dual reputation, both sides of which remain with him today. On the one hand he is praised for his ability to portray characters in a way that is both recognisable and believable. By allowing his actors considerable input in the creative process, he is said to be able to successfully enter into the private worlds of disparate, sometimes desperate, sometimes eccentric individuals. On the other hand, he is often criticised for adopting a condescending and patronizing attitude to his characters and of “encouraging the audience to look down on and snigger at their antics”.⁷ However, it must be accepted that most of his characters are ordinary people, despite their oddities, and they are mostly just trying to confront the problems in their lives in the best way they can. The way that these characters are created, the way they exist and the way they end all seem to communicate successfully with cinema audiences and these aspects of Leigh’s work deserve some closer attention.

Ideas about film-making

In his interview with salon.com in the early nineteen-nineties, Leigh spoke at some length about his ideas on making films. It is worth quoting part of what he had to say in full:

My films are full of ideas, lots of different ones...things working on all kinds of different levels. For me, making a film is an exploration of what we feel. I’m not concerned with making films that are conclusive or prescriptive, and certainly not propaganda. I make films where either rationally or emotionally I tend to ask more questions than give answers. I feel that the audience should have something to work with when the film is over, something to discuss and argue about.⁸

Thus, Leigh claims that he wants his films to ask questions rather than prescribe answers. In addition, of course, he is also implying that the questions he is talking about must be asked about a believable, recognisable situation or character or event. One question that

needs to be addressed is how does Leigh as a film maker go about creating this acceptable and understandable version of reality in a fictional narrative?

As was explained briefly above, Leigh requires his actors to participate fully in the process of characterization. A lot has been written about what Leigh actually does with his actors and what is entailed in the process he employs to create a character and, ultimately, a film. The process has often been misunderstood and misrepresented. However, one of the most succinct and economical explanations of the procedure is in the book *Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh*, a series of interviews conducted and edited by Amy Raphael.⁹ There are several sections of the book that throw light on Leigh's production methods.

In the initial part of the procedure characters are developed through a series of discussions between Leigh and each individual actor. Characters may be based on a person the actor knows personally, or a combination of a person the actor knows and the actor's own experience, or a combination of different people the actor knows. The next stage is for the actor to improvise the role of the character, without anything interesting happening or anything to advance the plot. At this stage, the actor is simply getting used to being in character. After this has been going on for some time, the actor can begin to interact with other actors in character. This is improvised, and the improvised situations will not form any part of the final production. The characters are simply getting used to each other and learning about each other's backgrounds, personalities and life stories. They are also learning about the way they interact and developing their relationships with each other. These improvisations help the actors to further flesh out their already substantially developed characters as the improvisations become more complex and revealing. However, the final product is not known until the final stages of production, when the camera is taken out on location and the script is finalized. It is not true to say that Leigh's films are improvised, as is sometimes claimed. However, the initial stages of production, which may take six months or more, *are* largely improvised and the content may or may not eventually find its way into the finished version of the movie concerned. In one of his many conversations with Amy Raphael, Leigh makes this observation:

The generally received convention of what a director does with actors is that you start to manufacture the end product as soon as you commence rehearsals. What I had to learn – and it's the hardest thing to explain to people – is that a very large proportion of what I do is merely preparing the conditions in which the end product will eventually be created.¹⁰

Later in the same conversation, he again recalls the importance of Camberwell Art School, although in a slightly different context to the one mentioned above:

I do not think that I would have been able to do what I do at all had I not spent time, brief as it was, at art school. I have the ability to draw character and the details of a character's face with a very fine pencil. When I went to Camberwell Art School, we'd sit around in the life class. There I'd be with a finely sharpened pencil, drawing the lines round the eye of the model. This wonderful teacher called Chris Chamberlain came up once and said: 'Give me your pencil!' He snapped it in half and told me to draw with the blunt end. 'Understand the structure of what you're doing', he told me. 'Don't worry about the detail till you've got the bigger picture.' It was a major, major educational moment. Whether I'd have learned that if I'd done an English degree at Oxford or Cambridge...probably not.¹¹

Finally, towards the end of the interview, Leigh talks about why he is generally unwilling to talk at length about how he makes his films. He claims that, overall it is because it is impossible to describe the process clearly or to do it justice "any more than Van Gogh could explain the sunflowers other than by describing how he applied the paint."¹²

To close this section on Leigh's ideas about film making and how these differ from the ideas of most other modern film makers, it is worth considering his reaction to a question from the audience at a film workshop for students in London. His reply to the question tells us a lot about Leigh's dedication to and belief in the film making method that has become both his signature and his strength:

Question: Was it hard to get known because of your different way of thinking?

Leigh: Yes, and it still is, funnily enough, because it's always been tough (and) because apart from anything else, when you go to a group of people and say 'I want to make a film and I don't have a script and I can't tell you what it's about and I don't want to discuss with you who's in it...you don't always get a warm reception.'¹³

Leigh's work from 1993

The critical reaction to Leigh's films has always been relatively positive, but his work became more commercially successful and known to a wider audience from 1993, when *Naked* won prizes at the Cannes International Film Festival for both best actor (David Thewlis) and best director. However, the film was also criticized for its depictions of seemingly uncriticised violence against women. The main character, Johnny, steals a car and leaves Manchester after possibly raping or at least violently attacking a woman. He heads for London in order to find his former partner, Louise. The main part of the film concerns the few days that Johnny spends in London and the slow, painful development of his relationship with

Louise. However, at the same time it provides a long, unsentimental look at life among London's underclass. The film is extremely dark, both in the atmosphere that it creates and in the range of colours that Leigh uses to film it. At first, Leigh considered making the film in black and white, but eventually decided that he could best achieve the effect that he wanted by using a 'bleach-bypass' process, which means that the bleaching process is omitted at the production stage of the film. This achieves a remarkable, rather eerie, effect, which complements the atmosphere that Leigh wanted to create. The character Johnny (Thewlis) is compelling, repellent – yet for some reason likeable. He is very intelligent and witty. Despite its dark tones, the film is also often extremely funny. However, as Bette Gordon pointed out in a 1994 interview with Leigh, there is “a sense of overwhelming despair” in this film in comparison to the earlier films and plays.¹⁴ Leigh's response to this comment was that, although he did not set out to portray “the idea of despair” in this film, there is a “feeling of chaos and disorder”, particularly in relation to the way women and the relationships between men and women are portrayed. “I felt it was important to investigate perspectives about men and women in this apparently post-feminist era in which women are still put upon.” Many people were upset and angered by the film and it is often pointed out that the women are shown as weak and unable to fight back against violence and domination. Leigh's response to this is that it is depressing and immature to suggest that there should be a “defensive or ivory tower, romantic view of feminism” in the film. As usual, his aim is to deal in representations of reality, no matter how unpalatable these might be.

As was noted above, Leigh is also regularly criticized for what is perceived to be a patronizing attitude to his working-class characters. In his own defence, Leigh has said, “what I actually do is put on screen very accurate depictions of working-class people. And that is what you do not normally get on the screen.” He claims that characters such as Johnny and his girlfriend Louise in *Naked* are clearly from working-class backgrounds, but what interests him in them is their ‘extraordinary qualities’, rather than the fact that they are working class.

After the major success of *Naked*, Leigh went on to make the even more successful *Secrets and Lies*, which received five Oscar nominations, along with awards at the Cannes Film Festival and from BAFTA. Again, the film deals with a group of extraordinary, ordinary working-class characters. However, this time the focus is once again on family life and the fact that families are often dysfunctional because their members are not honest with each other. The strain that is put on family relationships as a result of this lack of honesty and also the pressures that are often common in working-class family life for economic reasons are centres of attention. In addition, the film deals with some of the social issues that are related to adoption, for example, the right of adopted children to seek out and contact their birth

parents.

The film opens with Hortense, an apparently black woman, who appears to be around thirty years old, attending the funeral of her mother. Hortense is educated and successful. She works as an optometrist. We subsequently learn that she was adopted as a baby when she decides to try and find her birth mother (this became the right of adopted children in the U.K. in 1975, although the mother is not obliged to meet the child she gave up for adoption if she does not want to). Hortense discovers that her birth mother, Cynthia, is white and one of the main themes of the film concerns the development of her relationship with her newly-discovered mother and her half-sister, Roxanne. Cynthia is poor and working class. She works in a factory making cardboard boxes, while Roxanne is a street sweeper. The other main strand of the story concerns Cynthia's brother, Maurice, and his wife, Monica. Maurice is a successful photographer. He and Monica live in a large house in the London suburbs. They are childless, although they have been trying to have children for a long time. However, they keep the problems they have in conceiving secret from other family members. Thus, many of the elements in a typical Mike Leigh family drama are in place in this film. Most notably, there are the siblings who are living socially disparate lives. There is also the tension that arises not only because of the differences in their economic and social standing, but also because of events that happened in the past that are coming back to haunt them, and because of the fact that they are less than honest with each other. However, in this film, as will be shown later, there is greater acceptance of the wealthier, more middle-class sibling, Maurice, who is portrayed in a very positive light.

Another film by Leigh that I want to consider briefly before turning to the degree that Englishness is depicted in his work is *All or Nothing* from 2002. This film again depicts working-class characters at a critical juncture in their lives. It revolves around a family living on a run-down council estate (public housing) in South London. The father, Phil, is a taxi driver whose family relationships and work depress him and make him feel alienated from life and from those around him. His wife, Penny, struggles to patch up their relationship but is unable to do so. His son, Rory, is unemployed and aggressive to everybody both inside the family and out. His daughter, meanwhile, works in a home for old people and is the only one in the family who seems able to diagnose the problems the family is going through. The critical point in the film's plot occurs when Rory has a heart attack, probably brought on by his unhealthy lifestyle. This crisis forces the family to start working together to deal with their problems. The viewer is left with a sense of hope that they will be able to do something to find their way out of this difficult situation. Their feelings for each other seem to be reawakening.

In addition to the films and plays described above, Leigh has also directed several other

successful works. Notable among these are *Vera Drake* (2004), which is probably his most successful film so far. This tells the true story of a woman who provided abortions for other women in 1950s London, when abortion was both illegal and morally censured by the majority of the population. *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) on the other hand, has been seen by some as a return to the kind of lighter material produced by Leigh in his earlier work such as *Life is Sweet* (1991). The film tells the story of an insuppressibly optimistic primary school teacher and her attempts to learn to drive. It was received well critically but it did not achieve the commercial success of its predecessors. Leigh's most recent film is *Another Year* (2010).

Versions of England and visions of England

It is necessary now to turn away from direct reference to the work of Mike Leigh in order to introduce another main theme of this essay – that of Englishness. For much of the material in this section I am indebted to the ideas of Andy Medhurst, in particular chapter four of his 2007 book *A National Joke*, about popular comedy in England and English cultural identity.¹⁵ Medhurst begins his chapter by noting that Englishness, and indeed national identity of any kind, is never immutable or unitary. Englishness has meant different things to different people at different times. However, it is interesting to note the ways in which people have agreed about the notion of what Englishness is over the years – or at least about the way it should be described. Recently, of course, the topic has come to be discussed widely both in academic circles and among a wider audience through the press and other media. In various disciplines, there has been a lot of work published on how Englishness - or sometimes Britishness- should be defined. There have also been several popular works published on this topic.¹⁶ The topic itself is not new, however, and Medhurst notes that many of those who have chosen to write about it over the years have been drawn to compiling lists of the things that for them are irrevocably and quintessentially English.

One of the most famous of these 'lists of Englishness' is the one proposed by the Conservative politician and future Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, in 1924. For Baldwin, England was essentially a rural idyll:

England comes to me through my various senses... The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been in England since England was a land... These things strike down into the very depths of our nature and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race... These are the things that make England.¹⁷

Using a similar rhetorical device, that of listing “impressionistic imagery”,¹⁸ but at the same time introducing relatively modern themes such as industry, unemployment and urban life, that were absent from the list by Stanley Baldwin, the author and essayist George Orwell produced this in 1941:

The clatter of clogs on the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning – all these are not only fragments, but *characteristic* fragments, of the English scene ... Yes, there is something distinctive and recognizable in English civilization ... It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists.¹⁹

Much later, in 1993, as part of his ‘back to basics’ drive, which aimed to encourage the British people to re-embrace and connect again with the values that, he believed, once made Britain great, the Conservative Prime Minister John Major evoked his own enumeration of English essentials:

Fifty years from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on country grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said- ‘old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist’.²⁰

Medhurst points out that these lists (and he gives examples of many others) are usually characterized by what he calls a “selectively panoramic lyricism, and...commitment to continuity and tradition.”²¹ The final list that he turns to in order to illustrate his point comes from Bernard Crick, who in 1991 itemised what he saw as the dominant characteristics of the English personality. These included, somewhat hilariously, the “conservatively English traits of understatement, taking things for granted, distrust of theory and explicitness...a calm contentment that needs no words.”²² This reticence, preference for silence over words and contented calm seem to suggest that the Englishman – at least the white, conservative, middle-class Englishman who traditionally seems to produce these kinds of lists, is indeed sure of the constancy and immutability and, it is implied, the inherent superiority of the English and ‘their’ way of life and of doing things. All of the lists are, to some extent, retrospective in that

they hark back to and conjure images of an England that exists largely in the memory and that is yearned for by the list-makers. It is remarkable that Crick's list of "conservatively English traits" was made as recently as 1991 and yet, as Medhurst points out, it seems dated when we read it now. Maybe this is because Englishness has come to be questioned more and more in the last twenty or thirty years, and England, or at least its conservative leaders, commentators and decision makers, can no longer rely with contented calm on the version and vision of England that they were once so sure of. Medhurst's comment on the changes that are occurring in modern England and that have shaken the worldview of the traditionalist to the core runs as follows:

The serene myths of Baldwin's Englishness, and the untroubled arrogance that they cloaked, have been rendered absurd by a combination of social and cultural changes ...(such as) Scottish and Welsh devolution, the particularly tense complexities of Northern Ireland, snowballing European integration, increasing ethnic diversity (and at times ethnic conflict) within England and Britain, and the onslaught against any sense of national culture from the 'borderless' new communication technologies. Consequently, conventional Englishness can no longer pretend to occupy any guaranteed position of cultural centrality, which means that it can no longer take itself, its place or its power for granted.²³

Thus, traditional Englishness, or traditional conceptions of Englishness, are under attack as a result of the increasing diversity and innovation and infiltration that characterize modern England and modern Britain. Where, then, does that leave Englishness in the twenty-first century and to what extent does the work of Mike Leigh reflect changing versions of Englishness?

Ewa Mazierska (2004) has written about three of Mike Leigh's films and about the way that these reflect the fact that Englishness and English identity became fragmented and relocated in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁴ She chose to write about *Meantime* (1983), *High Hopes* (1988) and *Secrets and Lies* (1995). In addition to summarising Mazierska's analysis of these three films, I would also like here to consider the 2002 production, *All or Nothing*, and whether this continues to reflect aspects of Englishness in the twenty-first century.

Mazierska contends that discussions of Englishness must necessarily be predicated on discussions of class. In some ways, this echoes Medhurst's idea that traditional representations of Englishness have all, until recently, had similar provenance – the ideas and opinions of white, mostly male, middle-class representatives of the ruling class. As was noted above,

according to Medhurst, the conceptualised images of England that are normally produced have been overwhelmingly retrospective, self-satisfied, superior in tone and frequently focused on the rural. However, Mazierska also introduces a new slant to the argument. She discusses the idea that there is another reading of 'Englishness,' which may be equally valid but which has at its base a *working-class* formulation of what it is to be English, and analyses whether such a formulation of Englishness can be applied to *Meantime*, *High Hopes* and *Secrets and Lies* and the England (or Englands) that these films create.

The three films were made during the 1980s and 1990s, which were turbulent and troubled decades in the U.K. The 1980s are still popularly referred to as the 'me decade' in Britain, although this expression was first used in the United States to describe the 1970s.²⁵ However, the focus in the 1980s on the individual and on the development of individual worth, be it economic, spiritual or otherwise, and the incumbent Conservative government's promotion of personal 'freedoms' and 'rights' and the resulting diminution of social responsibility meant that, for most British people, the 1980s came to be seen as the decade of the individual. For some, this is the same as saying that it was a decade of rampant greed.

Mazierska notes the political changes and attitudes that led to the erosion of traditional values and the creation of new ones:

It appears that in the 1980s the importance of class decreased in official, political discourse, while that of family increased. The ideologists and politicians representing the New Right, which in the 1980s dominated political thought both in the UK and in the United States, including Margaret Thatcher herself, often talked about policies which should serve 'individuals and their families', as opposed to particular classes. Similarly, New Labour distanced itself from the problems of class, suggesting that the old class divisions do not matter any more and claiming to construct political programmes which serve all sections of society equally.²⁶

The films that are discussed by Mazierska have already been described briefly above. It is her contention, however, and I agree with her, that it is impossible to suggest that the films simply show a range of real English working-class (and some middle-class) individuals or that they simply present a series of believable lives. This is only part of what the films do and there is, to some extent, a degree of manipulation, which conveys "a distinctive ideology drawn from the British Left, particularly that part of the Left which is represented by and identified with the Labour Party."²⁷

In *Meantime*, for example, it seems that Leigh is commenting to at least some extent on the degree to which the lives of sisters such as Barbara and Mavis and their families have had their lives polarized and their relationships damaged as a result of Conservative policies. Barbara and her husband may be doing quite well financially, but this is at the expense of their relationship with the Pollocks, who in some ways see Barbara, at least, as a class traitor and snob. The Pollocks, meanwhile, suffer directly in the grips of the enterprise culture that forces them into a meaningless existence and which cannot provide work, adequate remuneration or a meaningful life.

Mazierska points out a significant difference between *Meantime* and *High Hopes*:

Class and financial matters in *Meantime* create psychological and ideological barriers between family members. Guilt on the part of well-off, gentrified and successful Barbara and shame and envy in the Pollocks, make communication between them increasingly difficult, in spite of continuous attempts to build bridges. In *High Hopes*, ideological and psychological differences between members of the family lead to class/financial divisions between them, rather than the other way round.²⁸

In addition to this, however, there is also a marked difference in the way Leigh presents this England of 1988 in *High Hopes* compared to the England of 1983 in *Meantime*. By 1988, of course, the government's monetarist and divisive policies had had an even more significant effect on communities and on individuals. British society had become more polarized than at any time since the Second World War. Private companies were supported and aided by the government, while members of the working class, if they were lucky enough to be in work, suffered. At the same time, excessive consumption was encouraged.

Mazierska points out that one significant symbol of the isolation and marginalization of the working-class at this time is in the fact that Cyril's mother lives alone in her solitary council house, while all of the neighbouring houses have been sold as part of the government's housing policies and overall the whole area has become wealthy and middle-class. Cyril's mother, Mrs. Bender, is left isolated and, it seems, scorned by her neighbours.

Cyril is an old-school Marxist whose aim is to live in a world where everybody has enough to eat, adequate accommodation and a job to do. His attitudes often seem to hark back to the ideals of British socialism in the years immediately following the Second World War. However, Cyril's brand of socialism is not compatible with the activities of the 'politically aware' working-class of the late 1980s, who rebelled against the closure of coalmines and other industries and who fought the unfairness of the hated Poll Tax. Cyril is far too individualistic

for such activity and admits himself that he does nothing actively to further the socialist cause. He is not even a member of a trade union, let alone a political party. According to Mazierska, "Leigh's portrayal of the fragmentation and impotence of the working-class encapsulates the state of the British Left in the second half of the 1980's" ²⁹

Both Cyril and Shirley, on the other hand, are portrayed in an admiring way. They are happy and they like each other and they are both in jobs that suit them, even though these are not well paid or socially admired occupations. (Cyril is a motorcycle courier, while Shirley is a gardener.) Their socialist principles show most clearly in their willingness to take in a stranger off the streets and have him stay with them overnight.

Cyril's sister, Valerie, and her husband, Martin, however, represent the worst excesses of enterprise culture and lead the empty, cheerless lives of the nouveaux-riches. The third couple portrayed in the film are the Booth-Brains, who are virtual caricatures of the Thatcherite middle class. They are cold, cruel, thoughtless and superior in their attitudes.

Thus, in *Meantime*, family life is disrupted as a result of class differences that lead to psychological barriers. Barbara's guilt at her own economic success and the Pollocks' shame at what they interpret as their social failure mean that successful communication and a healthy relationship are impossible between the two sisters and the two families. In *High Hopes*, on the other hand, political and ideological differences between the two sides of the family lead to division and disruption. In both films, however, the divisions that have been created in British society as a result of government policy are the catalyst without which family breakdown would probably never have occurred. The situation is rather different in *Secrets and Lies*. In this film, as Mazierska points out,³⁰ the class structure of the families concerned is similar to that found in the earlier two movies. Cynthia and Roxanne are poor and working-class, while Cynthia's brother Maurice is well-off and runs his own photography business. However, in contrast to the Lanes in *Meantime* and Valerie and her husband in *High Hopes*, the wealthy Maurice and Monica in *Secrets and Lies* are clearly approved of by Leigh. Maurice is sensitive, helpful and caring. He does as much as he can to be a good brother to Cynthia, helping her financially and also in practical ways (he helps her to repair the damp in her house, for example.) Also, he is socially responsible as a businessman, aiming to provide a good service for his customers and treating his assistant, Jane, almost like a member of his family.

In addition, in contrast to *Meantime* and *High Hopes*, *Secrets and Lies* ends with a reunion rather than with an unresolved family crisis. The divisions in the family in *Secrets and Lies*, although they are considerable, are caused by the lack of honesty of individual family members, rather than by social, ideological or financial divisions. Mazierska draws attention to the fact that in *Secrets and Lies*, there is none of the implied criticism of entrepreneurship and

affluence that is found in the earlier two films, while poverty is a trigger for frustration, promiscuity and resentment, and leads to laziness and irresponsibility, as evidenced by the behaviour of Cynthia and Roxanne.

Mazierska also suggests that the film may indicate Leigh's tacit acceptance and endorsement of personal wealth and enterprise culture, as promoted by New Labour at the time the film was made. (New Labour were to win the general election in 1997, the year after *Secrets and Lies* was produced.) In this film it is not social class issues, or problems related to financial or political differences, but a lack of honesty and limpidity, that leads to family problems.

The last film I want to consider is *All or Nothing* from 2002. This premiered during the fifth year of Tony Blair's New Labour government and it returns to a particularly working class, contemporary version of Englishness, by giving us a clear picture of the lives that are being lived by the working poor in London and other British cities. At the same time, it allows the viewer to gain an insight into the lives of realistic and well-defined individual characters. There are no middle-class characters in central roles.

One online review of the film begins like this:

Thatcherism is dead. Long Live New Labour. We are in London in 2002 and not much has changed for the socially deprived. They're still living on decrepit council housing estates, neutered by lack of opportunity and lack of ambition, living on a diet of fried food, alcohol and cigarettes. Leigh introduces us to a rare nuclear family. Timothy Spall plays Phil - an optimistic but lazy taxi driver... He's married to Penny: Lesley Manville in a role usually described as "long-suffering". They have two obese children - a loving daughter Rachel (Alison Garland) and a brutish, selfish son called Rory (James Cordon.) Their journey is of self-realisation...The secondary characters are a rogues gallery of teenage pregnancy, abusive boyfriends, slappers and stalkers... Together they give a rich sense of the untapped potential, frustrated hopes and yes - the community spirit that just about still exists on the estates.³¹

In other words, in the opinion of this reviewer, the film represents not only the vicissitudes of life for one family with problems, but also the social and cultural life of an English working-class community at a particular point in its history. From this point of view it addresses the trope of 'Englishness' clearly and resonantly.

In his introduction to a book about British cinema and Thatcherism, Lester D. Friedman claims that Mike Leigh expresses in his films an "urgent disgust with the current state of British life" and horror about the "inexorably downward spiral" of his country.³² In the same

volume, an article by David Sperrit³³ states that the Mike Leigh of the Thatcher years was an example of a type of contemporary artist who appeared to understand that his work need not overtly rage against the political excess that was being suffered by the working (and non-working) poor. Instead, he could achieve the effect that he wanted simply by chronicling the kinds of lives that he saw around him in detail. Moreover, Sperrit claims that Leigh is able to “see far beyond the passing concerns of partisan politics,” and it is this point that I would like to address to conclude this paper, by considering whether *All or Nothing* can be said to paint an accurate picture of working class lives in London under New Labour.

In an interview about the film with the BBC, Mike Leigh made this familiar claim about his latest work:

Question: Does the film have a political message?

Leigh: I defy anyone to walk away from any of my films and say exactly what the message is. I never have been concerned with making black and white, simplistic message films that leave you in no doubt as to what I want you to think. I'm far more concerned that you come away from a film such as this reflecting on the way we live from various points of view.³⁴

It should also be noted, however, that Leigh also said this in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper:

I have to say that I don't really personally see it as a film about London, England, Britain or English things. Obviously the milieu, the territory and the landscape is that but I am more concerned with the emotional landscape, as I always have been when the chips are down. Although it may sound pretentious to say so, I guess I think it's about something more universal than just here. So, I don't really see it like that.³⁵

Thus, Leigh's claim is still, with this film, that his work does not try to represent Englishness in any real sense. For him, his work is an attempt to address themes that are more concerned with the emotional lives of his characters and the relationships between them, and these are universal, as opposed to particularly English or regionally-based or even class-based themes. On the other hand, it is clear that his work does represent a particular kind of Englishness that is focused on working-class life experiences and which reflects politically left-wing views. This view of England has been portrayed consistently in Leigh's work since the social upheavals in U.K. society of the 1970s and 1980s.

- 1 This quotation is from an interview for the salon.com website. It is available here:
www.salon.com/weekly/interview2690916.html
- 2 Taken from Howie Movshovitz (ed.). *Mike Leigh Interviews*. University of Mississippi Press. Jackson. 2000. pp. 33-34 and re-quoted by Andy Medhurst. *A National Joke*. Routledge. Abingdon, 2007. pp. 167-168.
- 3 The BAFTA interview "A Life in Pictures: Mike Leigh" took place on stage at the Brighton Festival on May 20th, 2008. It can be viewed here:
<http://www.bafta.org/access-all-areas/videos/a-life-in-pictures-mike-leigh,433,BA.html>
- 4 This quotation is from a synopsis of Stanislavski's work on a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) website. It can be seen here:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A5133151>
- 5 "A life in Pictures: Mike Leigh". *Op. cit.*
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 This observation has been made by, among others, the British Film Institute in their 'screenonline' synopsis of Leigh's work:
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/461294/index.html>
- 8 Quotation from salon.com interview. *Op.cit.*
- 9 Amy Raphael (ed.). *Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh*. Faber and Faber. London. 2008 p.22.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 "A Close Encounter with Mike Leigh." (3:45-4:15)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zcrt2EI_oE&feature=player_embedded#
- 14 Bette Gordon. *Mike Leigh*. BOMB 46/ Winter 1994
<http://bombsite.com/issues/46/articles/1732>
- 15 Andy Medhurst. *A National Joke*. Routledge. Abingdon, 2007.
- 16 For more 'academic' approaches to the topic, see Robert Colls. *Identity of England*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2004. or Richard Weight. *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000*. Macmillan. London, 2002. For a more 'popular' treatment of the same issues, see Jeremy Paxman. *The English: A Portrait of a People*. Michael Joseph. London, 1998.
- 17 Judy Giles and Tim Middleton. *Writing Englishness 1900-1950*. Routledge. London, 1995. pp. 101-2. Quoted in Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op.cit.* p. 40.
- 18 Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op. cit.* p.41.
- 19 George Orwell. "The Lion and the Unicorn" in *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters Volume 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943*. Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1970. p. 75-76. Quoted in Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op.cit.* pp. 40-41.
- 20 Quoted in Jeremy Paxman 1998. *Op.cit.* p.142 and in Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op. cit.* p.41.
- 21 Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op.cit.* p. 41.
- 22 Bernard Crick. "The English and the British" in Bernard Crick (ed.). *National Identities: The Constitution of the United Kingdom*. Blackwell. Oxford.1991. p. 92. Quoted in Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op.cit.* p.44.
- 23 Andy Medhurst. 2007. *Op.cit.* p.45.
- 24 Ewa Mazierska. "Family, Social Class and Politics in the Films of Mike Leigh" in Stephen Caunce et al. (eds.). *Relocating Britishness*. Manchester University Press. Manchester, 2004. pp.71-87.

- 25 Novelist Tom Wolfe first used the term in August 1976 in New York magazine, in the article “*The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening*,” which described the contemporary American preoccupation with self-awareness and the collective retreat from history, community, and human reciprocity.
- 26 Ewa Mazierska. *Op.cit.* p. 81.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Ewa Mazierska. *Op.cit.* p. 84.
- 31 This independent online review of *All or Nothing* can be found here:
<http://bina007.blogspot.com/2008/05/mike-leigh-retrospective-all-or-nothing.html>
- 32 Lester D. Friedman. Introduction to *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*. Wallflower Press. 2006.
- 33 David Sperrit. “Low Hopes: Mike Leigh Meets Margaret Thatcher”. Chapter 19 in Lester D. Friedman. *Op.cit.* pp. 315-339.
- 34 This quotation is from a BBC Films interview with Mike Leigh. The full text can be found here:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2002/10/03/mike_leigh_all_or_nothing_interview.shtml
- 35 From the *Guardian* interview with Mike Leigh, conducted by Derek Malcolm. The full text is here:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2002/oct/07/features.mikeleigh?INTCMP=SRCH>

Authenticity and Englishness in the Films of Mike Leigh

Anthony Mills

Mike Leigh is best known for his work as a film director. However, his working life began with the production of several television plays for the BBC in the 1970s. The plays were praised for their realistic and sometimes uncomfortable sketches of working-class and lower middle-class life in England, especially in London. Perhaps the most successful of the plays is *Abigail's Party* from 1977. Leigh went on to direct films such as *Meantime* (1983), *High Hopes* (1988), *Naked* (1994), *Secrets and Lies* (1994) and *All or Nothing* (2002). He is famous because of the stark realism of his work and for his working method, which gives great freedom to the actors and which relies on a painstaking process of character development through improvisation.

It has been claimed that Leigh's work expresses a particular version of Englishness that goes beyond what has been found in British cinema before, and which reflects a particular, nuanced understanding of *working-class* England. However, Leigh himself claims that he is not concerned with making films about Englishness *per se* and that he is more interested in creating realistic individuals and exploring the way they interact with each other. He implies that, although the characters happen to be English and the setting is England, this is of relatively minor importance.

This paper examines Mike Leigh's career to date and describes his working methods in detail. It goes on to examine four of his films and the degree to which they can be said to reflect a changing version of Englishness in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.