the contributors trace Hollywood's ness to try to capitalize on the links a given production and nearly any zable grouping of films, they demon- he value of expanding the bounds of nal generic criticism beyond identifi- nd replicable narrative forms and res. For Dixon and his contributors, thus continues to serve as the —or, again, the terms of a contract— ch audiences relate to Hollywood cin- nd filmmakers fashion familiar prod-

llywood may persist in being the cinema *par excellence* but it is hardly ly one. One of the telling absences in hree volumes is the need for criticism neorizing about other national or, singly, transnational cinemas; as well icles about musicals, romances, and films. In addition, while critical work d on cinema remains valuable, discus- of contemporary genre films especially tention to connections between cine- nd other popular media that remain picuously underexamined. In the time, each of the new volumes, as well oviding provocative examples of con- orary generic cinema, reiterate the that the concept of genre is a basic ele- of the cultural, critical, and commer- tructure of popular cinema.—**J. David m**

The Films of Mike Leigh:

Embracing the World

by Ray Carney with contributions by Leonard Quart. Cambridge, MA and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 304 pp., illus. Hardcover: $49.95 and Paperback: $17.95.

The theater, television, and film director Mike Leigh is one of Britain's most distinctive creative voices, responsible for a series of idiosyncratic tragicomedies—from *Bleak Moments* (1972) to *Secrets & Lies* (1996)—that explore the psychosocial dynamics of extended family relationships. Yet, it is a body of work that has only recently begun to attract serious critical attention and, as recently as 1997, Leigh himself felt sufficiently aggrieved to chastise BAFTA (The British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for their lack of recognition of his work.

This history of critical neglect probably explains why those critics who are drawn to his work tend to be so unflinching in their support of him. Michael Coveney's book, *The World According to Mike Leigh*, published in 1996, provided an informative account of the director's career but was marred by the author's refusal to countenance even the mildest criticism of Leigh's work. Ray Carney is equally unyielding in his approach and, having recruited Leonard Quart to contribute an opening chapter and discussion of *Naked*, he then proceeds to rebuke him—in a footnote—for making the (seemingly unexceptional) suggestion that Leigh's use of caricature may on occasion teeter on the edge of class stereotyping.

However, while they are united in their admiration for the director, Coveney's and Carney's books do, nevertheless, differ in emphasis. Coveney's book is basically a biography which largely avoids textual analysis. Carney's book, on the other hand, ignores virtually everything except the actual films and television plays. Quart's 'Biographical and Cultural Introduction' appears to have been included in order to rectify this absence but it is then largely ignored by Carney in his subsequent analyses (which constitute the core of the book's contents).

This is not, perhaps, surprising given the 'methodology' which Carney adopts. The book contains a running attack on all critical approaches to film—from sociology and Marxism to cultural studies, psychoanalysis and neoformalism—that would place texts in some kind of artistic or social context. As result, his readings of the films depend for their validity almost entirely on Carney's powers of persuasion (and even Leigh's own accounts of the films are largely ignored).

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Carney, in this respect, proves himself a determinedly old-fashioned and self-confident style of film critic. He happily employs terms such as "art" and "truth" without any sense of self-doubt and attacks other critics for their "misreadings," "misunderstandings," and "mistaken notions" of film art in general and Leigh's work in particular. Leigh, by this account, is properly understood not as a 'satirist or social commentator' but rather as a great artist whose films embody universal truths. As such, Leigh is revealed as some kind of existential philosopher *manqué* whose works are seen to dramatize the contingencies of existence, the fluidities of personal identity, and the absence of human essence.

While this approach is capable of yielding some degree of insight into the twists and ruptures characteristic of Leigh's work, there is also a sense in which Carney's accounts of the films appear to lack critical proportion and to jar with the actual experiences of watching them. *Nuts in May* (1976), for example, is a slightly silly comedy of manners set in the country which comes complete with jokes about farting in tents and crapping in the bushes. In Carney's hands, however, the film's comic character is barely registered and the film is revealed, instead, as a drama about "selfhood and identity," which precipitates the viewer into "an emotional and intellectual state of crisis." (A re-viewing of this drama only confirmed my skepticism towards this account.)

The problem with this style of criticism, then, is that it inflates Leigh's achievement while doing little to illuminate its more obvious features. Carney's desire to bring out the "universal," for example means that he has little time for the tics and nuances of English social life that make Leigh's work so redolent for local audiences. It also makes him peculiarly insensitive, as the analysis of *Nuts in May* suggests, to the comedy of Leigh's work and the way that so many of its effects are achieved through a play with social mores. In this respect, Carney's determination to identify Leigh as so much more than a social observer results in his discussion often missing the crucial role that social observation plays in Leigh's work (and its interpretation by audiences). Even more seriously, Carney's emphasis upon the thematic complexities of Leigh's work leads him to say little about Leigh's actual achievements as a filmmaker. Carney rightly notes that Leigh avoids stylistic showiness but then virtually ignores his use of film techniques. Thus, while he is prepared to link Leigh's work with that of both Renoir and Ozu, there is little, at the level of formal analysis, to sustain the comparisons.

In this respect, Carney's rejection of all forms of contextualizing criticism results in a series of peculiarly disembodied interpretations of Leigh's work. While Carney, a professor at Boston University, has obvious-

Continued on page 47

and synthesis of art/historical influences. Pollock wanted, in his own words, "to literally be in the painting." In one overhead shot, the film observes Pollock moving gracefully like a dancer around an immense blank canvas on his studio floor. In other scenes, the camera follows Pollock in medium close-up around his studio, as he skillfully drops swirls of paint and then consciously shapes it, in all its labyrinthian complexity, into a unity based on the flow of energy. (Harris practiced painting like Pollock, and mimicked Pollock's physical movements and gestures—the ones he used in the Hans Namuth documentary that helped create the Pollock myth.) The only time in the film that the inarticulate, anguished Pollock is at ease is when he is painting—making order on canvas of the raw feeling and fury that he often couldn't control in his daily life. Pollock's most emotionally stable periods seem to have occurred when he was most creative: he produced a number of his great "drip" paintings from 1948-50 when he had stopped drinking and was relatively happy living with Krasner in East Hampton.

Without offering any psychological explanations, Harris gets to the heart of Pollock's personality. Harris's Pollock is taciturn, depressive, socially awkward, profoundly insecure, and filled with coiled rage. As a result, he goes on drunken jags, sleeping in the street or emotionally exploding by screaming and throwing over tables filled with food. Pollock is also filled with self-doubt and has a desperate need for approval, craving praise, overreacting to criticism, seeking fame, and needing to see himself as a great genius—a painter better than Picasso. He's even wary of his celebrity, not sure that he isn't just a phony. Towards the end of the film, a tight close-up of Pollock, at the height of his celebrity, captures his utter desolation.

Still, despite his deep-set neuroses, Pollock was a risk-taking artist, who had sufficient self-confidence to pursue his own vision of art. And Harris has always been an actor who conveys unself-conscious manliness, self-assuredness, and physicality without turning it into posturing machismo. Wearing paint-splattered jeans, a worn black jacket, and work shoes, he feels utterly right as Pollock. He embodies the taut, monosyllabic painter who doesn't speak the language of art crit and who vigorously struggles to move from paintings built on mythic, biomorphic forms and idiographic signs to a gestural and 'drip' painting that was stylistically revolutionary.

Where the film is problematic is in its too elliptic depiction of Pollock's large family and mother. The film clearly suggests that something has gone wrong in his relationship with them—a family visit elicits anger from his relatives at Pollock's self-absorption. His mother (Sada Thompson), whom he seems to love and wishes to please, feels utterly remote from him, and he is self-conscious and uncomfortable around her. It's all dramatically opaque, however, with family members appearing and disappearing and almost all of the psychic undercurrents left undefined.

The film also fails in its evocation of the social and intellectual worlds of the abstract expressionists. A brief, stagy scene set in a smoky Cedar Tavern of Pollock sitting and drinking with his fellow artists, De Kooning, Tony Smith, and William Baziotes reveals nothing either about who they were as people, or about the nature of their artistic vision. We do get some smart art talk from Krasner and Clement Greenberg, but even they provide no real sense of the artistic breakthrough made by the abstract expressionists. (A fictional film cannot provide us with a long disquisition about the esthetic significance of the New York school, but a touch more of the historical context wouldn't have hurt.) In addition, besides the perfunctory depiction of a couple of art openings, the film captures little of the Forties Village scene.

Still, Amy Madigan makes an animated, idiosyncratic appearance as imperious art patronness Peggy Guggenheim, who was the main financial support of Pollock's painting in the mid-Forties. Unfortunately, Jeffrey Tambor as Clement Greenberg, the art critic for *The Nation*, and Pollock's friend and critical champion (he sententiously declared that Pollock was "great"), gives a much too mannered performance. Greenberg tended to be oracular and prescriptive, and Tambor partially succeeds in providing us with an intelligent, dogmatic, somewhat comic figure who sees himself as both pulling the strings and being the ultimate judge of the artists' careers. Watching Tambor, however, one is too conscious of him playing a part, working too hard at conveying the mixture of perceptiveness and arrogance that gave Greenberg his critical cachet.

Pollock's strength as a film lies in its depiction of Pollock as painter, man, and husband to Lee Krasner. There are emotionally riveting and painful scenes where Krasner and Pollock erupt in volcanic arguments. One of them involves Pollock's desire to have children, which elicits from Krasner a furious tirade, asserting that taking care of one disruptive child is enough.

Pollock's last years were ones of decline. He becomes involved with a woman the film portrays as a banal art groupie, who offers him youth, beauty, and uncritical admiration. He drinks heavily, grows fat, and his painting loses its edge. By 1953, he had abandoned his 'drip' technique and moved to anatomical abstractions whose origins were in his early mythic pictures. The arguments between him and Krasner grow more painful and frequent: Pollock, red-faced, breaking chairs, and cursing her out as a "bitch," vents all his frustrations about his waning talent on her; she—the woman who probably kept him alive—ultimately responding by taking off to Europe, leaving Pollock without his main emotional and artistic support. The film's final scene trenchantly captures an emotionally depleted Pollock on his suicidal last car ride, heedlessly killing another young woman who was riding in the car with him.

Harris has made a modest, intelligent film that avoids most of the pitfalls into which artist biopics fall. Yes, *Pollock* is about a suffering artist, but the film unfolds in an understated, unsensational, and utterly real manner. Predictably, Harris's strength as a director is in eliciting impressive, nuanced performances, especially from himself and Marcia Gay Harden, that never reduce Pollock and Krasner to one or two notes. Otherwise, his direction eschews the virtuosic for the solidly functional, though there is one silent, strikingly composed scene of a more sexually active Krasner undressing a passive, lost-looking Pollock when they go to bed together for the first time (both of them framed and silhouetted by a doorway in a full shot).

Pollock may lack the exhilarating camera movements and expressionist camera angles of *Life Lessons* (one of three sections of *New York Stories*), Martin Scorsese's comic/tragic film about an abstract painter who needs to churn himself into an emotional frenzy to paint. But Harris has created an indelible portrait of a painfully uneasy and self-destructive painter, depicted here without a touch of sentimentality or self-aggrandizement. Pollock was an original, a great improvisatory painter who painstakingly gave America a new way of seeing, and Harris has made him come alive without a false move.

—Leonard Quart

Book Reviews (continued)

ly spent a lot of time in the classroom attempting to persuade his students of the value of Leigh's films, it has also led him to take the Hollywood films with which his students are familiar as virtually his only point of comparison. In this way, he spends a lot of time making the fairly obvious point that Leigh's films are unlike those made by Hollywood, while ignoring the artistic traditions—in Britain and Europe more generally—to which they do actually relate.

Thus, Carney fails to register that most of the work he discusses was made for television and not seen in cinemas in the U.K. and, in the case of *Abigail's Party*, that it is not a film at all insofar as it was shot on video. The history of British television drama, on both film and video, provides a crucially important framework for understanding the formal and thematic characteristics of Leigh's work but, a few remarks by Quart aside, is barely acknowledged in the book. Thus, while it's good to see Leigh's work get the kind of sustained attention it deserves, it's a pity that Carney's critical agenda prevented him from providing a more rounded account of Leigh's considerable achievements.—**John Hill**