The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World  

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).
The School of Film/Video ranks among the top five schools in the nation. We foster and nurture an environment of innovative and explorative film, video, animation, and new media making. Every path the moving image has taken in the past or might take in the future is kept open for experimentation and use. The dean will provide the vision and leadership to sustain the current vigorous state of the school and will articulate and elaborate its future perspective. A love of cinema in all its forms of expression is essential, as is a commitment to preserving the language of film culture while continuing to encourage the school’s distinctive, creative atmosphere, open to all varieties of image making.

CalArts is seeking an individual with a distinguished career as a filmmaker or video artist. Experience should be commensurate with a senior level appointment. The candidate should have the administrative skills and background for directing a multifaceted curriculum. CalArts is a privately endowed and fully accredited arts college of approximately 1200 students, unique in offering both BFA and MFA degrees in five disciplines: Art, Dance, Film/Video, Music, and Theater. There is also an MFA Writing Program in Critical Studies as well as an active interdisciplinary program. The Institute is known for its faculty of outstanding artists and scholars and for its innovative students.

The School of Film/Video offers five distinct programs: Character Animation, Film Directing, Experimental Animation, Film and Video (Live Action), and the graduate program in Integrated Media. With a full- and part-time faculty of 77 and an enrollment of over 350, the school enjoys a reputation for producing imaginative experimental work while at the same time training students in traditional filmmaking skills.


To apply: Send résumé, names and telephone numbers of references, samples of work to:
Film/Video Search Committee
Office of the Provost
CalArts, 24700 McBean Parkway, Valencia, CA 91355.

accepting applications for the position of Dean of the School of Film/Video

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 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 redups 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 the 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 fapping 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 "self-hood 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 mannerisms 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-
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, lassily 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 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 virtuoso for the solidly functional, though there is one silent, strikingly composed scene of a compellingly acted 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 cometicragic 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 single, strikingly composed scene of a compellingly acted 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).

Book Reviews (continued)

The film Pollock has attracted a lot of attention in the classroom, attempting to persuade its 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—through which they do actually represent.

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