

## MIKE LEIGH

*Sean O'Sullivan. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011, 192 pp.*

*Book Review, Journal of Film and Video 66.2/ Summer 2014*

“We need to separate the romance from the result,” Sean O’Sullivan says in his careful, convincing new book about the English director Mike Leigh. “It is time that we stopped thinking of Mike Leigh as a shaman and started thinking of him as a filmmaker” (2). Mike Leigh is widely considered a director of realistic films, one who enters the lives of ordinary British folks and, as if by magic, unearths unexpected complexity and richness there. Small, evocative slices of life, his films are often either revered for their insight and authenticity or criticized for their refusal to break from the confines of London living rooms and pubs. O’Sullivan notes that in a review of Leigh’s film *Vera Drake* (2004), the *New Yorker* critic David Denby said, “In its limited way, perfect”—a common reaction to Leigh’s work.

In *Mike Leigh* (included in the University of Illinois Press’s Contemporary Film Directors series), O’Sullivan announces his intention to reclaim Leigh “as a practicing theorist—a filmmaker deeply invested in cinema’s formal, conceptual, and narrative dimensions” (1). More than “an unassuming crafter of little movies” (1), Leigh is, O’Sullivan argues, an artist who puts an extraordinary amount of thought into every aspect of the filmmaking process, creating works of great depth that depart radically from reality.

The first and largest section of O’Sullivan’s book, “The Nature of Contrivance,” borrows its title from Leigh’s film *Topsy-Turvy* (1999). In the film, the composer Arthur

Sullivan (Allan Corduner) has told his collaborator, the playwright W. S. Gilbert (Jim Broadbent), that he would like to take a break from their work together to write a grand opera, as opposed to the “trivial soufflés” Gilbert tends to write, stories that Sullivan says often rely on such “contrived devices” as magical potions. Gilbert replies, “Every theatrical performance is a contrivance, by its very nature.”

Certainly, contrivance is an element of all film, but this fact is often overlooked—or un- duly criticized—in Leigh’s work. The director famously spends months improvising with his cast to develop the characters they will play and the narrative that will unfold them. Perhaps it is the organic nature of this collaborative process that gives some people the impression that his films are sprung full-blown from the earth—or at least the minds and bodies of the director and his cast—rather than crafted. But Leigh’s films are made like any other. Every dreary kitchen in which a woman sits frowning into her cup of tea has a barrage of lights rigged to its ceiling, a camera rolling, a boom overhead, a video monitor in the corner, and a director of photography, gaffer, sound guy, makeup artist, and dolly grip, plus an army of electricians and production assistants ready to make noise as soon as the director calls, “Cut!”

Likewise, like any director, Leigh manipulates narrative elements to suit the story, heightening tension and building suspense and emotional punch for the audience’s satisfaction—for example, in having the police knock at Vera Drake’s door to question her about a near-fatal abortion she performed at the precise moment that she’s hosting a party to celebrate her daughter’s engagement. Although we forgive this type of dramatic

license in movies all the time, critics pounce when it occurs in a Mike Leigh film perhaps because his films are supposed to be just like life. This, O'Sullivan argues, is not fair. "We need to recover words like 'contrivance,' 'artifice,' and 'design' in order to see and hear what Leigh offers to be seen and heard," O'Sullivan says. "We need to realign Leigh with Gilbert, the artificer, the careful shaper of language, actions, and images" (10–11).

In a section titled "How to Watch a Mike Leigh Movie," O'Sullivan outlines the narrative and stylistic elements that mark Leigh's work. To formally understand Leigh the theorist and visual stylist, O'Sullivan instructs us to look for three cinematic tools that signal Leigh's signature as surely as the faces of the actors he casts and the themes he explores.

The first such tool is the "unbroken shot," a long shot that allows the action to unfold without the clarification that continuity editing provides. The second tool, the "side-by-side," is a shot of two people in conversation, framed head-on, facing the camera instead of each other. A famous example of this is the scene in which Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn) are seated at a café during their first meeting in *Secrets & Lies* (1996). The third element, the "centaur," occurs when a part of one character's body and another part of another character's body appear in a single frame. O'Sullivan points out that visual centaurs are less frequent than unbroken or side-by-side shots in Leigh's work, but there are also figurative examples, where two characters are linked metaphorically or in their imaginations, as when Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge) says to Annie (Lynda Steadman) in *Career Girls* (1997), "Well, you see, if

we could be a combination, we'd be the perfect woman, wouldn't we?"

O'Sullivan goes on to discuss the director's eight most recent films, beginning with his 1993 breakthrough, *Naked*. Each chapter pairs two films as if in conversation with each other, in order to draw our attention to recurring narrative, thematic, and structural concerns.

Although O'Sullivan addresses filmic elements from cinematography to symbolism to sound in an attempt to establish Leigh's role as a cinematic virtuoso, his main thrust remains the ways in which Leigh challenges the conventions of realism.

Take, for example, that famous shot from *Secrets & Lies* (which, O'Sullivan points out, is a side-by-side unbroken shot that lasts for eight minutes). There is nothing realistic about this shot—or most side-by-side shots, for that matter. A black woman dressed in black sits with a white woman dressed in white, the birth mother she's meeting for the first time. Not only is the café in which they are sitting completely empty, even though it is a Saturday in Covent Garden, but also no two people meeting for the first time would sit on the same side of the table instead of across from each other.

But Leigh wants to show us both of their faces simultaneously, rather than shooting over their shoulders and cutting back and forth between them, in classic Hollywood style.

O'Sullivan quotes Leigh on the subject of the scene:

They are not naturalistic literal quasi-documentary films—they are very heightened. That café scene has as much to do with Beckett and Hopper, has more to do

with Beckett and Hopper, than it has to do with a literal investigation into two women around Covent Garden on a Saturday night in the summer of 1995. (3)

*Mike Leigh* succeeds in tracing what O'Sullivan calls the "connections and continuities in Leigh's cinema" (138). O'Sullivan's work mining the films for deviation from reality, as well as his discussion of Leigh's attention to style and structure, is extremely thorough; he is a capable tour guide. Still, at times, such as when he strains to find connections—for example, between the "centaurical tensions" of side-by-side shots in *Topsy-Turvy* and *Secrets & Lies*, pointing out that Hortense, an optometrist, and Gilbert, a director, are connected to the world of the eye, whereas Cynthia with her whining and Sullivan with his composing are connected to the world of the ear—we might want to remind him of something Leigh once told him about his films: "They are not decodable . . . They are simply what they are, to be understood in terms of the human experience" (27).

—Andrea Meyer