

The City According to Mike Leigh

Images
vol. XII / no. 21
Poznań 2013
ISSN 1731-450X

The key to the interpretation of the image of London presented in Mike Leigh's films can be found in his own words: "I actually do think London is a hidden city the way New York isn't." and "You can get the hang of New York, but London is a collection of villages. It takes a long time to get under its skin."^[1] The director was born in Manchester, but in 1960 he moved to London to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. It was then when he started to get deeper into the fabric of the city. This was reflected in his films, in which the city is never shown as a mere tourist attraction, but is a place where the characters live and establish often painful relations. Filming on location is extremely important for Leigh. He seldom shoots in the studio; he prefers real houses and streets that he knows well. He describes his filming style as follows:

I have my own aerals. I travel on a bus, come by to a pub for a drink, I read the newspapers. I'm nothing of an artist closed in an ivory tower. I'm firmly anchored in the mundane, real word. Both at the beginning of my career in the theatre and later when I made films for television, I always listened carefully to what was happening in my street. [...] I'm not one of those intellectual filmmakers. My interests now are focused on family matters, work, unemployment, parents, children, sex, health..... in other words: life!^[2]

The map below presents only a few locations in which the director has made his films. It is noteworthy that, although Leigh has often shot in the centre of London, it does not look like a great metropolis, but like typical English suburbs.

The locations on the map^[3] give us some valuable information on some typical aspects of Leigh's work, such as his use of actual natural surroundings and keeping to the rules of film realism. Thanks to realistic backgrounds, it is easier to understand the characters, which is the director's main focus:

In my films I have always tried to find out who we really are. I have always made films about identity, respect and tenderness. I always try to reach as

[1] Quote from <<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/10/07/for-another-year-director-mike-leigh-london-is-home-and-creative-inspiration/>> [accessed: 8 June 2013].

[2] *Tropiciel prawdy* [Truth trailer], an interview with Mike Leigh made by Michel Rebichon for *Studio*

magazine, 1996, no. 114, ed. M. Oleksiewicz, *Kino* 1997, no. 4, p. 51.

[3] The map is loosely based on the article: <<http://www.timeout.com/london/film/mike-leighs-london-1>> [accessed: 8 June 2013].

The Streets of London



The map project
by Bolesław Śliwiński

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| A. <i>Meantime</i> , Trafalgar Square | G. <i>Secrets and Lies</i> , Quilter St, London Borough of Tower Hamlets |
| B. <i>High Hopes</i> , King's Cross Road | H. <i>Career Girls</i> , Agar Grove |
| C. <i>Naked</i> , Caledonian Road | I. <i>Vera Drake</i> , Stepney Green |
| D. <i>Naked</i> , Lina Stores Ltd, Brewer Street | J. <i>Happy-Go-Lucky</i> , Camden Market |
| E. <i>Naked</i> , Charlotte Street | K. <i>Happy-Go-Lucky</i> , Regent's Park |
| F. <i>Naked</i> , Shacklewell Lane | |

much truth and realism as possible, so that one can smell the skin of my characters and they become three-dimensional. My reasoning is very easy: the better the viewers get to know the characters, the better they understand them.[4]

The first and basic rule that seems to apply to the choice of the locations where the characters live is their social status. This is why Vera Drake, who never takes money for performing abortions, lives in the humble 19th-century Cressy House in Stepney Green. As she says, her task is to help others and not to earn money. Also, the characters from *High Hopes* live in a poor tenement house in King Cross. The characters of *Career Girls* experience youthful passions in the run-down area of Agar Grave. In *Secrets and Lies*, the setting symbolizes the social sta-

[4] *Tropiciel prawdy*, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

tus of the characters. In accordance with this rule, Maurice and Monica must live in a better neighbourhood than Cynthia, who lives on Quilter Street.

In spite of being firmly set in the reality of the city, location may also reflect the emotional states of the characters. This is so in *Meantime*, where most of the plot is set in a tenement house in Hackney, but in the key scene at Trafalgar Square it can be seen that this place symbolizes the choice of the main hero, who does not have to live in the grey reality of Thatcher's England anymore. The symbolic difference between the poor tenement house and the representative part of London highlights that both in the main character and in England there is a potential that must not be wasted.

Naked is another intriguing example of how the rhythm of the city stays in tune with the mind of the main character. This can be seen in grim, metaphysical scenes of the apocalyptic visions of the character's trips to Caledonian Road, but also in the philosophical disputes with a janitor from Charlotte Street. Leigh admitted that in order to tell the story of Johnny he was looking for something metaphysical, different from an ordinary London landscape. He was successful when choosing a building on Shacklewell Lane. The character, who ruins the lives of the building's female tenants, does it in the name of apparent freedom. His over-intellectual nonsense will, however, need to find a reflection in real life. As a consequence, in the final scene, Johnny leaves his flat and wanders the streets of London alone.

In *Happy Go Lucky*, colourful and vibrant Camden becomes the setting, but also a good complement to the portrayal of the film's main character. Places such as its colourful stalls, pubs like The Lock Tavern or clubs like Koko, are not only a recognizable part of the district, they also perfectly match the vivacious and eccentric main character. Leigh's choice of these locations complements the information viewer's are given on the characters and the relationships they build.

There are rows of strikingly similar house with micro-gardens, standing on identical streets in districts that look exactly the same. In these house-cages, there is always the same arrangement of micro-rooms and staircases so steep they give you vertigo. In another part of the city, the cages are more spacious, but they are inhabited by more people, for whom grey blocks of flats are reality. In Leigh's films, London is not New York or Tokyo, so one can still see the sky above it, but it is impossible to walk there comfortably during rush hour without being brushed past or bumped into by the crowds of pedestrians. In Londoners' houses, there is an utter lack of privacy, which is violated by constant physical contact with others.

When analyzing Paul Haggis's *Crash*, Thomas Elsaesser, pays attention to the theme of the physical collision of bodies in the film. In the scene of a car accident that he describes, there is a voiceover say-

London and Relationships

ing that the inhabitants of Los Angeles close themselves in their own cars and compensate for the lack of contact with others by causing collisions. One of the main characters says that while in other cities people brush past and bump into each other on the street, in LA nobody touches anybody. Everybody is behind metal and glass.[5] So the drama may be even greater.

It would be tempting to lead these considerations in the direction of a discussion about postmodernism, in which the city becomes a space of alienation – where people are pushed and bumped into, but never establish actual relations with others. However, the context of Mike Leigh's cinema calls for hard facts. The director, patiently watching the lives of the characters, taking care of the details with surgical precision, would wag his finger at a researcher who (probably full of good intentions) presents the view of his cinema as a diagnosis on the lack of communication in the contemporary world. This (indeed valid) theory in relation to Mike Leigh's cinema requires a number of additions and seems to be realized the most fully in the subject of family and relationships of the characters.

Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Community* describes the state of contemporary humanity, which has been deprived of basic points of reference. The navigation that was correct in the old world is today brutally rejected. In the chapter tellingly entitled "Age of Disengagement," Bauman says:

A place may be crowded physically, but it is scary and it is repulsive to its inhabitants because of its moral emptiness. The problem is not the fact that this place emerges from nothingness, from a space that has not been tamed by human memory [...]. The problem is that no place can last in the same condition long enough for anyone to make it home, to become close and cosy, like a safe shelter sought by hungry creatures, yearning for their own home.[6]

The feeling of instability and fluidity that Bauman has written about so many times with such dedication[7], must be, according to him, transferred to marital and family relations:

Inside a family home the stability of entities does not seem to be bigger than in the street. As Yvonne Roberts observed acerbically, "setting off into the 21st century in being married seems to be as wise as going to the sea on a raft made of tissue paper." (*Observer*, February 13, 2000). The odds that a family will live longer than any of its members are smaller every year: compared to the average lifespan of a family, the lifespan of every mortal seems to be eternity. A lot of children have several grandparents and a few "family homes," from which they can choose – each of

[5] T. Elsaesser, M. Hagener, *Film Theory. An introduction through the senses*, Routledge, New York 2010, pp. 108–109.

[6] Z. Bauman, *Wspólnota* [Community], trans. J. Margański, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2008, pp. 64–65.

[7] It is significant that Zygmunt Bauman has spent more than a half of his life in Great Britain and often admits that his reflections on social life are firmly based on the observation of the lives of the English.

them is “for rent for a definite period of time,” like self-catering apartments in holiday resorts.[8]

In Mike Leigh’s films, just like in British homes, (so different from the American mansions in *Crash*), there is no place for privacy. The bodies of the people living under one roof clash in a natural way and remain in constant contact. There is no way to avoid physical interaction with another person, but it is even more painful because there is no genuine relation behind it. Leigh’s characters bump into one another, they stumble over objects touched by others, but there is no romanticism in it (unlike in Wisława Szymborska’s poem “Love at First Sight”[9]), and there is this dramatic diagnosis of the lack of spiritual contact, even though there is permanent, repeated physical contact. It is clearly seen in erotic scenes in other films: *Short and Curlies* (Joy and Clive’s relationship), *High Hopes* (Valerie and Martin), *Life is Sweet* (Nicola and her boyfriend), *Naked* (Sophie and Johnny), *Secrets and Lies* (Roxanne and Paul) or *All or Nothing* (Donna and Jason). The most intimate contacts create even a greater distance from another person and often become a source of painful humiliation. The lack of communication between the bodies of characters who are unable to break free from the trap of physicality is shown even more visibly. Despite the evident physical contact, there is no real closeness, which should become a norm in interpersonal relations.

Each of Leigh’s films shows characters living in small, often cluttered rooms, which are a reflection of what’s inside in the characters’ minds and painfully expose the lack of contact with others. This is most adequately shown in *Secrets and Lies*. Hortense (like Hannah – a bold character from *Career Girls*) lives in a white, sterile flat, metaphorically describing the emotional emptiness of her life. Also, Cynthia’s household in *Secrets and Lies* is cluttered with useless objects, old memories and baggage of experience. Her sister-in-law, Monica will make a home in accordance with the rule that she follows in her personal life, which makes her pretend that everything is fine and keep the appearances of order and harmony. However, the pastel shades that dominate this space will not bring consolation – their dimness will cause nausea. Clear evidence of the lack of the dialogue between Cynthia and Monica is the situation in which Cynthia gives her sister-in-law yellow flowers, not corresponding in any way with the grayness of a perfect housewife’s life.

Only the characters in *Happy-Go-Lucky* and *Another Year* find fulfillment and joy, and thanks to this they find their own place on earth. It seems that Leigh has always dreamed of the final scene of a film in which he would let the characters break free from the stu-

[8] Z. Bauman, op. cit., pp. 65–66.

[9] “Something was dropped then picked up. Who knows, maybe the ball that vanished/ Into childhood’s

thicket? There were doorknobs and doorbells?/
Where one touch had covered another beforehand.”

ffiness and tightness of places and go out to the world. The final scene of *Secrets and Lies* shows the characters sitting in a cluttered micro-garden, known well from London's reality. (A similar scene also appears in *Life is Sweet*). Cynthia from *Secrets and Lies* comments on this situation with one sentence: "It's life, isn't it?"^[10] Maybe this is why the final scene of the best known of Leigh's films was filmed with a God's eye-view shot). It expresses a deeply humanist faith in people and the potential of the uniqueness of relations which they can build with others.^[11]

The completion of a "liberation" are the scenes in a boat in *Happy-Go-Lucky*.^[12] Leaving dark, cramped rooms to go to a sunny park and joyful glide on water will become a definite sign of "liberating" the characters. Finally, Leigh (in a trend seen as early as the 1980s) lets his characters take a deep breath. This leads them out of the grey winding spaces in *Bleak Moments* and *High Hopes*, and sets them free from the trap of sad streets in *Naked*, and from the cages of blocks of flats in *All or Nothing*. This can be most clearly seen in *Another Year*, where life in tune with the rhythm of nature gives the characters satisfaction and fulfillment.

It must be remembered that the diagnoses made by Leigh in his latest full-length films, although with different shades, was present in his cinema earlier, and was connected with traditions inherited by British directors from the Angry Young Men. The rebellion of the latter, contrary to common belief, was not directed at the whole world. Although angry and rebellious, the characters from these 1950s and 1960s films tried to find a haven and their place on earth. For the Angry Young Men, consolation comes with the desire to live a simple, almost primitive life. The hero of *Look Back in Anger* values the style of life of his old nanny, a poor and simple person, working hard to live through another day. Following in her footsteps, he decides, contrary to his background and knowledge, to become a stall seller. Rafał Marszałek writes:

In *Look Back in Anger* for the first time, still in a simplified and sentimental form, there is a note of the fondness of a "simple man's life," to the naturalness of feelings and desires that in different circumstances are doomed to become a routine and die down.^[13]

[10] Quote from *Secrets and Lies*.

[11] Carney and Quart see the ending of this film as optimistic and therefore different from Mike Leigh's earlier films. They admit that in his films there is often a catharsis, but they cannot see the place for a happy ending here. R. Carney, L. Quart, *The films of Mike Leigh. Embracing the world*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 258.

One should bear in mind that Carney and Quart's publication closes a certain phase of Mike Leigh's work. After *Naked* he slowly headed towards seeing

reality in brighter colours. The authors' words should not be treated as conclusive for one more reason:

The whole of Leigh's work balances on the line between tragedy and humour. It is clearly seen in the ending of *Secrets and Lies* when a tragic net of secrets becomes untangled by means of sensitivity and willingness to change for the sake of agreement.

[12] Regent's Park, marked on the map.

[13] R. Marszałek, *Nowy film angielski* [New English Film], Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1968, p. 33.

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London in Mike Leigh films perfectly matches the director's creative thought, exposing social differences and the lack of communication in the family. However, the director releases his characters from the dark corners and hideous streets to let more light and nature into their lives. Thanks to this, as he has said, the city becomes a collection of small villages, which for him is the biggest value of the place where he lives and makes his films.