

## *Poetics of the Happy Ending in Mike Leigh's Films*

The title of this article contains a seeming contradiction. Among a number of adjectives that could be used to describe Mike Leigh's work, a positive ending to the plot – the primary quality of a happy ending – remains at the end of the list. Comedy? Yes. Tragedy? Definitely. But a happy ending is not among the expressions generally used to describe the work of one of the best known British directors. The idea of discussing Leigh's work in the context of the happy endings in his films may be doomed to failure. So, where did this idea come from? From particular scenes: the characters in *Secrets and Lies* sitting in the garden, a reunited family in *All or Nothing*, and a married couple smiling at the end of *Another Year*.

In their book *The Films of Mike Leigh. Embracing the World*, Ray Carney and Leonard Quarto point out that contemporary art (including film-making) is based on scepticism, which fills the void that remains after the loss of faith. According to them, the main aim of art has become formal experimentation and play with form: "Art and life are reduced to 'styles', 'surfaces', 'spin', 'looks'." [1] Leigh's films are complex and challenging, but they are completely different from the modernist canon. They do not focus on form (in the case of Leigh – one might venture the claim that this would simply be boring from the perspective of 21st century audiences which crave special effects and fireworks). [2] The director is much more interested in close-ups and long, static shots, enabling him to watch the characters' faces carefully. It is extraordinary that Leigh manages to prove that not only visual attractions, formal experiments and other "embellishments" determine the value of a film. Quite the contrary – the director focuses on ordinary lives and "normal", "traditional" methods of film-making: "Every scene in Leigh tells us that artistic expression is not somewhere beyond ordinary life but continuous with it." [3] In the context of the above words, it is interesting and inspiring to compare the opening and closing sequences of Leigh's films. In accordance with the rule of *dénouement*, a happy ending (like a disaster) leads to catharsis. In the case of a happy ending, it releases built-up tension and places the character in a situation in which at the end of the story he/she is far better-off than at the beginning. In Mike Leigh's films this procedure

[1] Ray Carney and Leonard Quarto, *The Films of Mike Leigh. Embracing the World*, Cambridge 2000, p. 240.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 241.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 243.

is perfectly visible in the poetics of the first and the last sequences of *Secrets and Lies* and *All or Nothing*.

*Secrets and Lies* starts with a shot from a funeral being held in a Victorian cemetery. The soul songs sung by the mourners and a close-up reveal that most of those attending the funeral are black. The camera captures a person, who becomes the film's main character. In another shoot, a wreath has been placed on the grave with the inscription: "Mum". This gesture seems to indicate to the audience that the character is taking part in her biological mother's funeral, but this is not the case. We thus fall into the trap of the film's first lie, which is revealed a moment later. Another shot shows a lavish mansion where a bride is posing for wedding photos. Again, the viewer faces the unknown. Is the scene there to simply juxtapose life and death (a wedding and a funeral)? Or is it another lie used by the director to make us more alert? It is not the bride who is important in this scene, but the photographer, whom we watch at work. In a moment we will move on to the house belonging to Maurice (played by Timothy Spall), where his wife is working energetically to embellish the interior. The first conversation between Maurice and Monica (Phyllis Logan) leads to an explanation of the key issues: the main sources of the family's conflicts emerge. A secret from the past is mentioned, which is connected with Monica's sister-in-law, whom she does not like. The discord between Maurice's wife and sister remains apparent, based not only on the events from the past, but also on the latter's disapproval of the way Maurice and Monica's daughter Roxanne (Claire Rushbrook) is being brought up. Leigh's genius consists in subtly introducing viewers into the world of the characters so that they become part of the film. There are no redundant elements in Leigh's films. Each shot and each word has its meaning. Therefore, the photo on the mantelpiece in Maurice's house showing a young girl is juxtaposed with a scene in which Roxanne is cleaning the street (Monica will say that Roxanne returned to the street, and Maurice will point out that the girl does not smile anymore). This last issue addresses the work ethos – a common theme in Leigh's cinema, which can be seen from the first scenes of the film. We can see all the characters in action. After the Roxanne scene there is a scene showing Cynthia's (Brenda Blethyn) monotonous job in a carton factory.

The shot closing the initial sequence of the film is that of Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) while working; she is able to offer more patience and care to her little patient than Cynthia's family can offer to each other. Hortense has not interacted with any of the members of Cynthia's family yet, which is why we see her looking through documents in her foster mother's house. But here also a row takes place among her family over the house and the estate. The characters exist in three different spaces, which are both physical and metaphorical. The first of these is Maurice's house and his relation with Monica, the second – Cynthia's house, where sudden arguments explode, and the third – Hortense's lonely life. The initial sequence of the film introduces

us to the world of the characters, who are just about to start existing to one another. They will enter each others' space in order to build a new value for themselves, a new haven, in spite of their pain and grievances.

The opening sequences of *All or Nothing* are very similar. The initial sequence shows the characters at work. The first, static shot shows a nursing home where, as it will soon turn out, the daughter of the main characters works. There is another shot made from a taxi, from which a character played by Timothy Spall is looking at an interesting kaleidoscope of faces and behaviours. Finally, as we soon find out, we are looking at the wife of the main character, who is trying to get through another dull day working as a cashier in a supermarket. In the initial shots, the only person we do not get to know is the son. It turns out to be symptomatic, as he is the only member of the family who does not have a job, and his lifestyle seems parasitic. At the end of the film, the character cannot be said to be punished (as this is not a criterion applied by the director), but he ends up in hospital after a heart attack resulting from his lifestyle. If we tried to summarize all the shots from *All or Nothing*, the shots predicting disaster and family drama would prevail over those expressing hope. In these terms, the ending of the film, showing a family meeting at their ill son's bedside and uniting for the first time, seems totally unfounded or at least improbable. Characteristically, the first shots of the film show each character separately, as in many other moments in the film, and meetings often end in outbursts of aggression and a lack of acceptance. The situation now changes dramatically. The characters are very close and remain in a close contact – both physical and psychological. Family relationships are being built anew.

Leigh builds his characters using single images that are not full and lack important information. Carney and Quart see this as a reference to the renowned tradition of neorealism or the work of the genius Yasujiro Ozu<sup>[4]</sup> (it should be borne in mind that he is one of Leigh's favourite directors). I would rather opt for a way of perceiving the world that does not have to be filtered through his film-studies experience. In my opinion, as in real life, in Mike Leigh's films we are not able to enter someone's world in a way which does not leave doubts; we are unable to fully understand other people. They do not become stranger to us, but they are closer to the real world.

Something valuable is accomplished, which in the last shots of *Secrets and Lies* results in a declaration by Maurice of his love for Monica, and a dialogue between Hortense and Roxanne (the latter conversation brings to mind key conversations that took place between the siblings in *Life is Sweet* and *Meantime*):

*Hortense*: How would you introduce me, as your half-sister?

*Roxanne*: Yeah.

*Hortense*: No, man. Too much explaining to do.

[4] R. Carney, L. Quart, op. cit., p. 276.

Roxanne: That's what I'd say, though.

Hortense: Would ya?

Roxanne: Yeah, yeah.

Hortense: Best to tell the truth, eh?

Roxanne: Right.

Hortense: That way nobody gets hurt.[5]

The last conversation between the sisters shows that Leigh has chosen just one path for his characters (not only in *Secrets and Lies*) – one through secrets and lies, but in the direction of truth. In these last shots emerges a deep, moving faith in man, who can find himself only in contact with others. This clearly shows the exceptional character of Mike Leigh's cinema. He watches the meeting of ordinary people, which always has an element of significance. The unusual symmetry of the initial and final sequences of *Secrets and Lies* and *All or Nothing* [6] additionally highlights the importance of these shots. In both cases, the initial shots show the characters in their microworlds, working and away from their loved ones. In this way (at least in the mental realm), they remain detached from each other until the closing shots of the film. However, in the finale, the characters share common space and have a real meeting with each other, which rebuilds their strained relations.

While the most current cinema is about surprising us with strange formal solutions, whose finale is intended to completely confuse us and outsmart us, Leigh makes films which surprise us with their "typicality", while at the same time (paradoxically) leading to finales we may not expect.

### A happy ending

Cinema has borrowed the notion of a happy ending from the theatre – the Euripidean solution *deus ex machina* made it possible to end a play quickly and positively. In Leigh's work, there are remnants of *deus ex machina* in the characters's monologues, who in a theatrical manner announce the resolution of the plot. In both *Secrets and Lies* and *All or Nothing* the character played by Tymothy Spall explodes at the end in order to "release" his accumulated grudges and grievances. These monologues, called by the British "*here comes the speech*", act as *deus ex machina* in a similar, but less banal way.

A happy ending is generally associated with later forms of art: the *comedia dell' arte* or *buffo*. In British literature, a reference to this tradition can be seen in the positive endings of Victorian novels. However, one person who remains an undisputed genius of the happy ending is William Shakespeare. Leigh is very close to Shakespeare in a sense. It should be borne in mind that Shakespeare's tragedies were to a great extent comedic (*Romeo and Juliet* being a perfect example[7]), and his comedies had a tone of seriousness, bitterness and despair (*Twelfth*

[5] Quote from *Secrets and Lies*.

[6] *Secrets and Lies*, initial sequence: 4 min., final sequence: 4 min. 40 s.; *All or Nothing*, initial sequence: 11 min. 56 s, final sequence: 11 min. 20 s.

[7] A third of the dialogues in the drama *Romeo and Juliet* are comical. The most interesting are the comical characters – Mercutio and Martha. The characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, in violation of the rules

*Night or As You Like It* [8]). Similarly, Leigh's films, although they have dramatic turns, end in a way that is harmonious and uplifting. As Tadeusz Sobolewski comments on Leigh's work: "Mike Leigh's aim is not to expose the characters. In fact we are not dealing with satire, but with something called by English critics tragicomic realism." [9] Leigh in a brilliant way introduces viewers into the reality of his films' characters, thanks to which they become part of the film world. A stroke of luck or coincidence are elements of the film world that are often celebrated by the director. Thanks to them one can fully enjoy a life which is tragic (*All or Nothing*), but often makes us roar with laughter (*Happy-Go-Lucky*). Even if there is pain and suffering, despite tragic events, there is always an element of joy drifting on the surface. In all his films, regardless of the finale of the story or when they were made, Leigh manages to do something which happens only to the greatest film makers. The genius of this director consists in his constructing the world in a way which evokes feelings of both despair and laughter. This laughter through tears not only releases the tensions of the plot, but also lets the viewer relate to the world seen on the screen. According to the rule of projection–identification, we enter a reality which could be ours. The director introduces viewers to the lives of the characters, thanks to which they can see what everyone experiences. The use of a tragicomic tone becomes Leigh's trademark. The director uses the simplest and most interesting means of avoiding passing judgement on his characters' morals. Humour, subtle but accurate, makes it possible to not only release the tension built up by the drama of family life, but it is also the most effective method to avoid passing judgment: "While they dourly judge and categorize, Leigh's humor is a way of suspending judgment. His bemused tone is a form of toleration and enjoyment." [10]

How does Mike Leigh manage to achieve this level of depicting reality, where despite the serious moral dilemmas the characters have to face, any moral judgment is avoided? Undoubtedly, it is to the director's merit that he is able not only to connect tragic and comical elements, but also present a whole spectrum of unusual, sometimes weird characters.

of tragedy, do not have to choose between two equal arguments, a choice that cannot be made, because either way leads to disaster. They choose love, and this is a happy choice and a fulfilled love. There is no tragic fault in the lovers. Their love is happy and fulfilled in spite of death, which is lurking from the first pages of the play. Their love is happy, because, as Andrzej Żurowski says, "real tragedy is not death, but the absence of love. *Romeo and Juliet* is a shiny tragedy. It is a tragedy which is in fact optimistic". He adds: "The world killed Romeo and Juliet. But it did not destroy them. It did not catch them in time. They got away. They managed to fulfill their lives, their essence. They fulfilled themselves in the highest sublimation of loneliness towards the world: in loneliness – togeth-

er." (A. Żurowski, *Czytając Szekspira*, Łódź 1996, pp. 269–271). All quotations from Polish publications are translated by the author of the article.

[8] Both are quite dark and even obscene in their play with the sexes. Jan Kott states that *Twelfth Night*, because of its games with what is masculine and what is feminine, "has a dark and disturbing bottom" (J. Kott, *Szekspir współczesny 2*, Kraków 1999, p. 58), and *As you Like it* "has two different endings: one comical and conventional and another in its cross-dressing and blasphemy" (J. Kott, op. cit., p. 66).

[9] T. Sobolewski, *Amatorzy w teatrze życia*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1997, no. 56, March 7, p. 15.

[10] R. Carney, L. Quarto, op. cit., p. 244.

Thanks to this the director manages to avoid judgment and focus on the sheer joy and contemplation of the bright sides of our world: “The sheer gleefulness of Leigh’s presentation – the playfulness, the zaniness, the calculated outrageousness – simply leave moral categories behind.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Connecting the comical with the tragic does not explain the sense of using happy endings as dramaturgical points for solving the plot. Among those who have conducted research on the phenomenon of happy endings in cinema, negative opinions prevail, pointing out the artificiality and banality of positive endings. Is Mike Leigh’s cinema an exception in this matter?

### The artificiality of happy endings

Among researchers on melodrama, there are clear voices assessing happy endings negatively. It is pointed out that a happy ending often looks as if it was “tacked on”, artificial, and not integral to the rest of the film, ignoring the plot as a whole. Indeed, in a typical romantic comedy or melodrama, the ending often seems ridiculous. In the former, the solution turns out to be absurd and too strongly embedded in the culture of banal optimism. In the latter, there are adversities that are overcome by the characters “too smoothly” and, as it seems, against all odds. In the case of Mike Leigh’s films, the situation looks (ostensibly) similar, for example, in the first shots of *All or Nothing* described above, which introduce us to an atmosphere of nostalgia and drama. Leigh precisely draws the picture of the drama of the everyday life without becoming banally sentimental but also without embellishing reality too much. Each subsequent shot of this film aims at playing out tones of sadness and bitterness. The plots introduced will serve this aim, as well as the nostalgic score by Andrew Dickson, static setting of the camera, and the dialogues filled with dramatic moments. The example is symptomatic, as here one can see clearly the method of the director’s work, who often leads the viewer through the most dramatic lives of the characters, watches the process of ruining areas of family life one after one, to finally make them rise like a phoenix from the ashes. It may be stated that Leigh’s films in some, slightly artificial way take advantage of a happy ending. This artificiality is not about a banal or ridiculous ending, but about one we have not been prepared for by the director. The characters of Leigh’s films do everything to fail (as opposed to romantic comedies); however, the director decides to save them in the finale. Why does this happen? Why does Leigh assume the role of *deus ex machina*, saving his characters? It is worth looking for explanation in his world view, which has not changed since the beginning of his career.

Leszek Kołakowski said that there are certain things in the world we can do halfway (smoke a cigarette, complete a task), and others that are impossible to be accepted if only partially completed. We cannot partially die or only partially accept the world<sup>[12]</sup>. It seems that Mike Leigh has adopted this view and that despite the dramatical stumbles of

[11] Ibidem, p. 245.

[12] L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze. Eseje*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 139–140.

his characters, he lets them stand up in the finale and find fulfillment in their family lives. The acceptance of the world, the harmony of family life, and being professionally active are values which save the characters in the endings of Leigh's films. It is apparent in the tragic and far from happy ending of *Naked*, where the main character, selfish and tangled in his problems, wanders the streets of London.

Undoubtedly, the happy endings of most of Leigh's films seem less artificial when we realize that since the 1980s the director has been leading his characters to optimistic endings more and more willingly.<sup>[13]</sup> This can be seen most clearly in his last productions,<sup>[14]</sup> where the characters of *Happy-Go-Lucky* and *Another Year* experience joy and fulfillment also because they manage to find a place for themselves. Leigh seems always to have dreamt of a finale that would let the characters in his film set themselves free from the stuffiness and tightness of certain places and go out into the world. The last shot from *Secrets and Lies* shows the characters sitting in a miniature, cluttered garden (there is a similar shot in *Life is Sweet*), and Cynthia comments on this situation with: "It's life. Isn't it?"<sup>[15]</sup> Maybe this is why the last shot of the best known of Mike Leigh's films was filmed with a God's-eye shot. There is a deeply humanist faith in man and the potential for building unusual relationships with others.<sup>[16]</sup> A complement to the image of "liberation" are shots of sailing in a boat in *Happy-Go-Lucky*, again filmed with a God's eye shot. Leaving dark, cramped rooms, going to a sunny park, and joyful drifting on the water becomes a sign of the characters' liberation. Leigh lets his characters take a deep breath (this tendency was visible as early as in the 1980s). He leads them out of grey, winding alleys in *Bleak Moments* and *High Hopes*, sets them free from sad streets in *Naked*, and releases from blocks of flats in *All or Nothing*. This is seen most clearly in *Another Year*, where life is in tune with nature and brings the characters satisfaction and self-fulfillment.

There is one more reason why happy endings in Leigh's films are not "artificial". In the finales there is redemption through joy. In this sense, finales are not "tacked on", but are a natural consequence of

[13] In the 1980s, Mike Leigh became the father of two sons. Although I do not see Leigh's stories as autobiographical in character, and I believe in reading films independently from the experiences and declarations of their authors, I cannot ignore the fact that Leigh's films became more family-oriented in the 1980s (*High Hopes*, *Life is Sweet*, *All or Nothing*). Also see: R. Carney, L. Quart, op. cit., p. 274.

[14] The article was written before the premiere of *Mr. Turner*.

[15] Quote from *Secret and Lies*.

[16] Carney and Quart see the finale of this film as optimistic and different from Leigh's earlier films.

They assume that in Leigh's films there is often a final catharsis, but they do not see here any place for a happy ending. R. Carney, L. Quart, op. cit., p. 258.

Carney and Quart's publication closes a certain phase in the director's work, which after *Naked* has been slowly heading towards viewing reality in brighter colours. The authors' words should not be treated as conclusive for another reason. The whole of Leigh's work balances between tragedy and humour. This can be clearly seen in the finale of *Secrets and Lies*, when a tragic web of secrets becomes untangled by tenderness and a willingness to change in the name of understanding.

using a trick characteristic of the construction of whole films. In *The Cinema of Mike Leigh*, Garry Watson writes about American remarriage comedies, in which conversation and laughter are the most important feature.[17] Leigh builds the reality of his films in a similar way. They are based on dramatic conversations, where laughter often breaks through the tears. The director is not afraid of serious conversations, which are filmed in a static, intimate way. He knows, though, that the seriousness of the most important moments may be broken by a joke – something funny said or a funny situation. In fact, this cannot be called a director's trick, rather another stage of getting the world of film closer to reality. Even in the most tragic situations in life, something absurd or even funny often happens to us. Leigh himself, when asked why he became a director, answered that when he was 12, on one winter day in Manchester he was standing in the hall of his house and watching four men carrying a coffin with his grandfather's body. In his memory remained a clear image of the men, who had snot running down their noses. At that moment, in the imagination of the boy an image emerged which could become the basis for a film using both tragic and comical elements.[18]

It is joy in which, despite tragic moments and adversities, the director sees one of the most important values of our lives and believes in it. Through joy he wants to redeem his characters: "Faith, hope, trust and spirit: this is the language of redemption." [19] The finale of *All or Nothing* grows out of a dramatic misunderstanding in the family, which is only able to overcome them in the face of their son's illness. The final shots in the hospital feature an intense and dramatic development of the dialogue, broken by jokes told by the father. At that moment the family is redeemed, the troubles and grudges that kept them apart so far during the film go away, and laughter unites them in the final scenes. Once again, Leigh saves his characters thanks to "redemption by happiness." [20]

It is characteristic of the culture of the 20th and 21st century that it is difficult to show goodness, harmony and the beauty of life in a non-trivial way. In terms of film, it is easy to present a number of examples of "good" (if using this word is allowed) cinema which talks about the most gruesome and atrocious human experiences. Goodness, on the other hand, stops being visually attractive and becomes banal very easily: "Unironical artistic representations of goodness are of course notoriously difficult to achieve, much more difficult than representations of badness." [21] Although he is striving for harmony and positive values in his films, Leigh does not resign from their aesthetic value. There seems to be no banality in them.

[17] G. Watson, *The cinema of Mike Leigh. A sense of the real*, London 2004, p. 86.

[18] H. Movshovitz (ed.), *Mike Leigh: Interviews*, Jackson 2000, pp. 82–83.

[19] G. Watson, op. cit., p. 87.

[20] Ibidem, p. 87.

[21] Ibidem, p. 95.



\*\*\*

In the situations in which Leigh puts his characters, there is definitely an eternal dissonance and questions about the meaning of life. A positive finale, which grew out of dramatic situations practically impossible to be saved, invokes a question that has troubled the greatest philosophers, but probably everyone else, as well: should life be about finding sense and harmony? A rule known since antiquity, works perfectly in the world of Leigh's characters. Leigh does not make his characters pursue the highest virtues which would give sense to life, as the ancient philosophers would see it (perfecting one's mind and morality), but still, in the endings of most of his films, he lets the characters find harmony and sense in the world, even though nothing earlier indicated this was possible.