

Mike Leigh's Modernist Realism

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We should monotonize existence so existence isn't so monotonous. We should turn everyday life into something anodyne so the tiniest thing would be amusing—Fernando Pessoa

As old aesthetic debates grow moldy, it has become increasingly apparent that polemics both promoting and devaluing the spectral category of "realism" are largely unilluminating. To a certain extent, the polarization between advocates of "critical" and "socialist" realism such as Georg Lukács and champions of modernism, most notably Roland Barthes, was engendered by now outmoded cold war tensions. During his long literary career, Lukács gravitated from near slavish obeisance to the Stalinist status quo to a restrained dissidence that led to his imprisonment during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.¹ He never, however, wavered from his belief that the modernism of Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett (all of whom arguably derived sustenance from the work of nineteenth-century "realists" such as Balzac and Dickens) was irredeemably "decadent." Conversely, the nausea Barthes felt when confronted with mimesis's "conservative reproduction of already existing signs"² was an implicitly Left-libertarian response to the aesthetic conservatism of leftists, of whom Lukács remains the most sophisticated representative.

Contemporary theatrical and cinematic realism, which has spawned hybrid styles and genres, presents even thornier quandaries. Among contemporary filmmakers, no one exemplifies the paradoxes of what might be termed "modernist" realism better than the British playwright and screenwriter-director Mike Leigh. Like Charles Dickens, the most blatantly theatrical of nineteenth-century novelists, Leigh uses comic hyperbole to indict the established order. Usually facetiously pigeonholed as examples of British realism, Leigh's films are as indebted to British comic traditions and the theater of the absurd. Seminal Leigh films such as *Life Is Sweet* (1990) and *Naked* (1993) are no more straightforwardly realist than Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) or Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1998). While Leigh's films are as character driven as Dickens's novels, it is useful to recall Theodor Adorno's observation that "Dickens and Balzac . . . are not so realistic after all . . . [and] the whole *Comédie Humaine* proves to be an imaginative construction of an alienated reality."³ Nevertheless, he has been constantly saddled with often unfair accusations of patronizing his (usually) working-class and lower-middle-class protagonists by turning them into grotesque caricatures. Since much of the critical antipathy toward Leigh's work stems from an inability—or an unwillingness—to come to terms with his eclectic theatrical influences, a brief excursus is necessary to clarify the context that engendered Leigh's idiosyncratic meld of Brecht and Beckett.

Brecht's realism—a nonnaturalistic insistence on "laying bare society's casual network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators"—enlivened a broad stratum of British radical and working class theater during the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Consequently, radical dramatists who worked within the commercial and subsidized sphere such as John Arden and Trevor Griffiths, as well as militant collectives like the 7.84 Theatre Company, which spurned mainstream venues like the National Theatre, shared Brecht's desire to "refunction" the bourgeois sphere through theatrical interventions that effaced traditional boundaries between aesthetics and politics. All of the British neo-Brechtians, moreover, followed their mentor's injunction to fuse didactic realism with popular theatrical traditions. In Arden's *Non-Stop Connolly Show*, for example, *Lehrstück* coalesced with vaudeville during a fourteen-hour piece of agitprop chronicling the life of the fiery Irish nationalist, James Connolly.⁵ A more diluted Brechtianism is discernible in Arnold Wesker's work, but, paradoxically enough, his social-democratic morality plays were tethered to a hyper-naturalistic aesthetic. Wesker, however, was sophisticated enough to know

that strict verisimilitude did not entail an illusory transparency. His most celebrated play, *The Kitchen*, required a meticulously authentic re-creation of a huge restaurant kitchen, but John Dexter, the director of the original production, cannily offset this superficially slavish exercise in naturalism with a highly stylized approach that illuminated the hierarchical division of labor within the service industry. If Brecht sneered at middle-class drama as "culinary" theater, Wesker's portrait of one kitchen's class divisions and ethnic conflicts strives to reveal the sweat and rancor that makes culinary pleasure possible.

For Adorno, Beckett's seemingly apolitical drama captured capitalist alienation and deindividuation with more accuracy than Brecht's didactic plays. Harold Pinter, Beckett's leading British disciple, offered the most influential alternative to Wesker and Arden's social realism. Yet, although Pinter eschews the polemical style of Arden and Wesker, unlike Beckett, his work is marked by what one admirer terms "extreme naturalism."⁶ Oddly enough, Pinter's clipped, elliptical dialogue often resembles Noel Coward's repartee, even though the ambiance of his early plays could not be farther removed from the upper-class flippancy of *Private Lives*. *The Homecoming* is a paradigmatic example of Pinter's blend of detailed naturalism, Coward-like badinage and a mordant view of individuals, who, like Beckett's protagonists, are unable to extricate themselves from the constrictions of what Adorno termed their "wretched realities."

Bleak Moments (1971), Leigh's first feature film, despite its almost documentarylike evocation of the London suburbs, is his most Pinteresque evocation of urban desolation. Leigh's biographer, Michael Coveney, observes that this assured blend of humor and pathos is suffused with a "mood of . . . Slavic despair."⁷ The film concerns the plight of Sylvia, a painfully shy young woman whose morbid introspection seems inseparable from her grim neighborhood with its many streets of identical row houses. Like the feuding friends of *Career Girls* (1997), Sylvia owns a copy of *Wuthering Heights*, even though her romantic (or Romantic) urges cannot be expressed with anything approaching the carefree abandon possessed by the later film's heroines. Since everyday life is an onerous burden in *Bleak Moments*, the hapless characters cannot even consider the possibility that it might be even temporarily negated. Oddly enough, it is the mark of Leigh's brilliance that he can render unalloyed depression unnervingly funny. Sylvia's agonizingly awkward date with Peter, a tongue-tied teacher who is nearly as introverted as his paramour, consists of exchanges that are as elliptical as

anything in Pinter as well as long patches of silence. Norman, a folksinger whose spectacularly banal renditions of American ditties such as "Freight Train" charm Sylvia and her retarded sister, encapsulates *Bleak Moments*'s comic enervation.

Characters like Peter, Sylvia, and Norman are rendered with both empathy and astringency, but audiences are occasionally unsure whether Leigh is satirizing or celebrating his dramatis personae. This befuddlement can probably be attributed to the fact that Leigh downplays, but does not completely eschew, the Balzacian tendency to, in the words of Erich Auerbach, "accompany his narrative with a running commentary—emotional or ironic or ethical or historical or economic."⁸ Nothing quite that nakedly didactic ever surfaces in Leigh's films. He implicitly concurs with Flaubert and "modernist realists" that "every event, if one is able to express it purely and completely, interprets itself and the persons involved in it far better and more completely than any opinion or judgment appended to it could do."⁹ The languid exchanges between the characters, often punctuated with generous pauses, are hugely reminiscent of early Pinter plays such as *A Night Out* and *A Slight Ache*—austere but brilliantly paced evocations of marital discord and familial tensions that resemble Beckett-suffused blackout sketches rather than melodrama.

In fact, Pinter's disdain for "the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you no doubt of his worthiness, his usefulness, his altruism" is shared by Leigh and suggests why some of his harshest critics were repulsed by his aesthetic stance.¹⁰ Most of his critics have little trouble with Leigh's indebtedness to certain offshoots of modernist dramaturgy; what perturbs them most is the social realist, explicitly naturalistic veneer of films that (although they are ostensibly sympathetic to the Left) abjure Brechtian revolutionary uplift. On the other hand, many observers also fail to appreciate the fact that, while Leigh's actors borrow their gestures and dialogue (improvised in rehearsal and then incorporated into a final shooting script) from empirical observation, their impersonations often partake of a style reminiscent of Brecht's *gestus* or "quotable gesture." Leigh, paradoxically enough, emphasizes his preoccupation with the "detailed study of actual physical, rhythmic speech patterns—like real people, like you and me,"¹¹ but strenuously maintains that his films promote a clarity through distance that he unhesitatingly labels "alienation."¹²

Paraphrasing Marx, Brecht proclaimed that his *Lehrstücke* were didactic plays, providing a place for "philosophers . . . who not only wish to explain

the world but wish to change it.”¹³ Conversely, Leigh rejects Brecht’s assumption that drama can possess an instrumental “use value.” One of his most accomplished BBC films, *Home Sweet Home* (1982), a painfully funny saga of three bumbling postmen, although not detached enough to refrain from offering “didactic” judgments concerning small-town ennui and bureaucratic ineptitude, demonstrates Leigh’s departure from—as well as his debt to—Brechtian agitprop. Nevertheless, his penchant for extracting performances from actors that are superficially naturalistic but resemble Brecht’s “quotable gestures”—gestures designed to defamiliarize the quirks of “natural” behavior—is also evident.

The central character is Stan, a lugubrious postman who attempts to forget about the wife who abandoned him and his daughter Tina—sadly confined to a foster home—by conducting furtive affairs with his colleagues’ wives. Nevertheless, as is often true in Leigh, the more peripheral characters are more central to the film’s ideological thrust. The two social workers who visit Stan on behalf of Tina drive home the distance between Leigh’s often dyspeptic form of satire and conventional filmic realism and the strange affinities between *Home Sweet Home* and Brecht’s more engaged perspective. The sequences featuring these two hapless social workers recall Brecht’s fusion of pleasure and instruction, despite the fact that the film’s Left-liberal critics were distinctly annoyed by the sardonic treatment of welfare state pieties. Melody, the first case worker (who appears to be two parts hippie and one part yuppie), scolds Stan for neglecting Tina, but her patronizing manner proves as off-putting as it is ineffectual. She smiles incessantly and spouts bromides such as “deviancy is caused by insecurity” while Stan stoically endures the session. Melody’s successor, Dave, a young case worker who shares Melody’s comic incompetence, chides his predecessor for her “quiche Lorraine” utopianism and mumbles Marxist clichés concerning commodity fetishism and “peripheral substructures” under his breath. In all of these sequences, platitudinous monologues by well-meaning individuals concerned with Tina’s plight alternate with close-ups of Stan, whose expression seamlessly combines bewilderment and irritation.

Leigh’s scathing thumbnail sketch of an incongruously militant altruist may seem gratuitously cruel. However, like Brecht’s conception of the *gestus*, which fuses the “stylized and the natural,” Leigh’s seeming “caricatures” are attributable to a similar dynamic. Rather misleadingly, Leigh’s preoccupation with how “real people” behave recalls Stanislavsky’s detailed

advocacy of “physical actions,” not Brecht’s musings on the *gestus*. This celebration of what might be termed “behavioral realism” notwithstanding, *Home Sweet Home*’s acerbic depictions of social workers short-circuits the tendency of audience members to empathize with such innocuous eccentrics and promotes disidentification. Instead of galvanizing spectators with proletarianized “consciousness raising” à la Brecht, Leigh’s mode of distanciation challenges his nominally “liberal” viewers to see a mirror image of their own condescension in these ineffectual members of the “helping professions.” The decision to follow Dave’s maunderings with a parodic version of “The Internationale” on the sound track is not a conservative flourish but an indictment of his bad faith leftist rhetoric, which does nothing to effectively puncture the status quo. As Fredric Jameson observes, the “*gestus* simply identified the nature of the act itself, showing private emotion to be socially and economically functional, and in general revealing the basis of individual psychology in social dynamics.”¹⁴

Playwright David Edgar’s accusation that *Home Sweet Home*, with its deadpan focus on Stan’s limited aspirations, is dripping with contempt for its protagonists echoes other liberal and left-wing critics’ misgivings concerning Leigh’s entire career. But, as Andy Medhurst, one of Leigh’s most articulate champions, observes, the chorus of critics who maintain that Leigh is patronizing “are only really projecting their own guilty anxieties onto the films he makes . . . as if the (working class) were proletarian pandas in need of protection.”¹⁵ In fact, Leigh’s refusal to create unblemished working-class icons is congruent with his analogous demystification of middle-class leftists and could be viewed as his own cranky version of *plumpes Denken*. These nuanced portrayals helped prevent Leigh’s most sardonic anti-Thatcher films—*Life Is Sweet* and *High Hopes*, from degenerating into one-dimensional tracts. Leigh undoubtedly endorsed Nicola’s anti-Thatcherite fury in *Life Is Sweet*, although this neurotic anorectic’s self-loathing (fortunately) prevents her from becoming an exemplary heroine.

Leigh’s fascination with the often “vulgar” particularities of working-class, lower-middle-class, and nouveau riche life, moreover, coincides with the recent theoretical attraction to “spatial politics,” which bears the im-



1. *Life Is Sweet*, Mike Leigh, 1990. (Still courtesy of Cineaste.)

print of Henri Lefebvre's influence. The invention of "social geography," however, has its origins in the nineteenth century, particularly the utopian promise of the Paris Commune of 1871. This seventy-two-day experiment in proletarian self-activity exemplified anarchist geographer Elisée Reclus's conviction that "geography is not an immutable thing—it is made, it is remade every day; at every instant, it is modified by men's actions."¹⁶

Nevertheless, most exponents of spatial politics explore more recent—and dystopian—urban conundrums—flexible accumulation, which resulted in the erosion of the traditional industrial sector; gentrification of working-class neighborhoods; and the rise of the "informational city," with its attendant emphasis on surveillance. While Leigh eventually applied his comic scalpel to these quandaries in films such as *High Hopes* and *Naked*, an early film, *Abigail's Party* (the 1977 film is basically a filmed performance of a Leigh play), examines social geography in a more intimate fashion, revealing the implications of kitsch in all its horrific, and—on occasion—strangely appealing, glory. The play's text begins with detailed stage directions that describe the protagonists' house and party food with pithy humor and on-target sociological accuracy. Leigh calls attention to the couple's "leather three-piece suite, onyx coffee-table, sheepskin rug" and helpfully informs us that the hostess serves "two small platesful of home-made cheese-and-pineapple savories, each consisting of one cube of cheese and one chunk of pineapple on a stick." The focus on cringe-inducing ostentation is not intended to cruelly mock the upwardly mobile but desperately unhappy characters' taste; on the contrary, it entertainingly confirms Lefebvre's belief that "leisure time provides a paradoxical example of alienation within the pursuit of emancipation and the attempt to dis-alienate oneself."¹⁷ Given Leigh's synthesis of the Brechtian and absurdist traditions, he often uses spatial metaphors to reveal the overt injuries of class and the anguish of interpersonal breakdown. In *Home Sweet Home*, the frustration that the working-class Stan experiences as he half-heartedly attempts to establish contact with his daughter are conveyed through ingenious, though unobtrusive, camera placements that circumscribe his milieu's grim topography: "a long shot of Stan and Tina in the scrubland of Stan's back garden, with a full view of the grim, pebbledash back wall, supplies the eloquent vacuum for their halting attempts in communication."¹⁸

Leigh's fascination with claustrophobic interiors—for example, houses, apartments, and offices—stands in sharp contrast to the much-vaunted

realism prized by the British New Wave of the 1960s. Andrew Higson identifies "a tension between the demands of narrative and the demands of realism" in prototypical "kitchen sink" films such as Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961).¹⁹ Higson convincingly argues that British realists of the 1960s often deployed landscape shots—especially an "iconographic cliché" he identifies as "That Long Shot of Our Town"—that function more as the departure points for narrative spectacle than as harbingers of the political and historical critique traditionally associated with documentary (a genre not without its own unwitting appeals to the spectacular). Although Leigh himself once voiced ambivalence concerning the films of the period—praising them for their aspirations and taking them to task for the artificiality of their realism—his own films paradoxically achieve a greater verisimilitude by shunning the British New Wave's overt naturalism and embracing a theatrical stylization.²⁰

A film like *Meantime* captures these opposing tensions with great savvy, since the film's protagonists—unemployed punks and punk wannabes—belong to a subculture that values defiant posturing, which is itself a form of urban theater. Leigh rejects the moralism of Richardson and Reisz, whose oddly picturesque urban settings served as lyrical preludes to the sermonizing endemic to "social problem" films. *Meantime* certainly indicts Thatcher-era unemployment and its ravaged victims, but the focus on the monotony of life on the dole and static and resolutely unmelodramatic lives is achieved through a scrupulous examination of everyday life that avoids the Manicheism of much political cinema. Instead of pitting its morose unemployed protagonists—the terminally angry Mark Pollock, his endearingly dimwitted brother Colin, and their parents Mavis and Frank—against a monolithic "system," the narrative highlights circuitous, nonsequiturish conversations and muted confrontations that always end with a whimper rather than a catalytic bang.

Quite often, a minor but intractable problem aptly reflects Leigh's characters' profound social alienation. One of *Meantime*'s most representative sequences, for example, involves a jammed washing machine door. For several minutes of illuminating banality, the siblings and their mother bicker and are unable to solve this simple mechanical flaw. Leigh never stoops to underlining the jammed door as an explicit metaphor. Similarly, although the film does not shirk from that vulgar Marxists term *class analysis*, the distinctions between the working-class Pollocks and the suburban mores of

Mavis's sister are conveyed entirely through what Lefebvre terms "spatial life." But, while Lefebvre's utopian politics assumes that urban slums can be "severed . . . from the governing spatialisation and returned to the realm of 'communitas,'" ²¹ *Meantime* convinces us that the Pollocks' council flat is an alienated space that fails to reveal any hidden liberatory crevices. "Auntie Barbara's" middle-class flat, however, is even less inviting: an antiseptic environment filled with pricey knickknacks that correspond precisely to her desperate cheerfulness.

Leigh's fondness for the accoutrements of domesticity—artifacts of social hierarchy—provides an ironic gloss to the early years of British punk.²² Ignoring the more militant stirrings of British youth—personified by well-publicized riots in 1981—Leigh prefers to dwell on the external trappings of disaffection, particularly punk fashion. Christopher Prendergast claims that the significance of these trappings is not always entirely transparent: fashion, for example, often "blurs" rather than clarifies the nature of social status. It might be tempting to view Colin's ardent admiration of a snarling skinhead named Coxy—and Coxy's expensive Doc Martens boots—as indicative of misguided working-class rebellion. Yet, in contemporary England, despite a much more deeply entrenched class system than is common in most Western European countries, punk and skinhead costumes appealed to alienated youth from all classes. And Colin's admiration for the skinhead style is probably more a symptom of his desire to strip himself of class-specific traits than an emblem of even nascent class consciousness.

Colin's highly conformist style of rebellion could be viewed as a continuation of what many commentators labeled the British New Wave's tendency to deemphasize overt class conflict.²³ But *Meantime* refuses to embrace its predecessors' enshrinement of upwardly mobile male dynamism and debilitating female passivity. Both men and women are enveloped by defeatism in *Meantime*, but Leigh disdains both essentialist assumptions concerning sexual roles and the naive individualism embodied by films such as Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959). While a shot of a pram juxtaposed with windblown garbage exemplifies *Meantime*'s downbeat tenor, the film's pessimism is clearly the record of one historical moment, not an expression of eternal, immanent gloom.

Foregoing the taut minimalism of *Meantime*, Leigh's iconoclastic deployment of his own comic variant of Brecht's *gestus* was wedded to an incisive exploration of the spatial politics of gentrification in *High Hopes* (1988). De-

spite the superficially gritty delineation of posthippie angst and nouveau riche snobbery during the Thatcher era, the calculated hyperbole of the performances disturbed viewers and critics, who appeared to prefer undiluted—and nonironic—naturalism. In characteristic Leigh fashion, the plight of the protagonists—slightly disillusioned but still idealistic leftists named Cyril and Shirley—was counterbalanced, and on occasion superseded, by the passions of more mercurial minor characters. The cognitive dissonance that ensues when Cyril's doddering mother, Mrs. Bender, is stranded after misplacing her keys in an adjacent row house owned by a preening, absurdly self-satisfied yuppie (and Thatcherite) couple named Boothe-Braine is a case in point. The Boothe-Braines' hypermannered intonations and unselfconscious celebration of conspicuous consumption correspond to what Leigh believes is actual upper-middle-class behavior, while the actors' performance style, however suffused with "authenticity," requires them to revert to a ritualized "third-person" stance that resembles a zany cross-fertilization of Brechtian distanciation and British comic overkill in the tradition of Peter Sellers. The contrast, moreover, between Mrs. Bender's cozy but disheveled flat and the Boothe-Braines's chic, antiseptic brownstone renovation illustrates, in explicitly spatial terms, the chasm in class and status that separates them. Or, to invoke the jargon of radical geography, one commentator observes that gentrification enacts "class constitution through spatial reconstruction."²⁴

To a large extent, *High Hopes* reiterates the near impossibility of resurrecting Brechtian-style consciousness-raising in an age when Popular Front verities are often—quite rightly—questioned. Unlike the intransigent certitude of the Lehrstück, *High Hopes* is suffused with political ambivalence. One of the film's most straightforward and moving scenes features Cyril and Shirley's visit to Marx's grave at Highgate Cemetery in London. The final thesis on Feurbach engraved on Marx's tombstone ("Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways—the point, however, is to change it") inspired Brecht's didactic theater and its unqualified affirmation of an esthetic compatible with historical materialism. Leigh, on the other hand, found a 1990 Polish audience's disgust with this scene "confusing and disorientating."²⁵

Even though *Meantime* and *High Hopes* refuse to offer false hope, their social milieu still recalls the familial nexus prized by working-class playwrights like Wesker, even though the socialist optimism of an early Wesker play such as *Chicken Soup With Barley* is never discernible.²⁶ While *Mean-*

time provided a jaundiced gloss on the Pollocks' failure to (in Lefebvrian terms) "regain control over the social reproduction of space," *Naked* revolves around Johnny, an abrasive loner who consciously rejects the humdrum annoyances of domestic life. Like Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, this Mancunian adrift in London celebrates his "own free and unfettered volition . . . inflamed sometimes to the point of madness." Johnny's nocturnal jaunts reveal him as a flaneur at the end of his tether, although this flaneur has none of Walter Benjamin's dispassionate erudition. Instead, his peripatetic outings evoke Georg Simmel's more mundane conception of the flaneur as a passive "spectator of the never-ending spectacle of crowded urban life."²⁷

Johnny is far from passive, but this voluble, and frequently mean-spirited, hero's meanderings serve as gritty testimonies to how new modes of urbanization have transformed relationships between city dwellers. Edward W. Soja, one of Lefebvre's leading disciples, documents how "old urban cores became increasingly tertiarized, replacing lost industries with an expanding number of corporate headquarters . . . government offices, financial institutions and supportive service and surveillance activities."²⁸ These affinities between the centralization of corporate power and surveillance assume pungently anecdotal form in *Naked*. At a crucial juncture in the film, Johnny finds refuge in a sterile office building where he alternately befriends—and mercilessly harangues—a gentle nightwatchman named Brian. "You've succeeded in convincin' me that you do 'ave the most tedious fuckin' job in England," announces Johnny to Brian. Brian's job in fact consists of endlessly recording his whereabouts with a security device—a task that makes a grim mockery of the notion of "productive labor," which was treated with reverence in the nineteenth century. As Johnny observes, the corporation might as well have trained "a tall chimpanzee" to perform the same task—"or a small chimpanzee with a bigger gizmo." Johnny expresses his belief that "nobody 'as a future" in apocalyptic terms, aligning his own alienation with the prophetic musings of the Book of Revelations. Yet this peculiar meld of misanthropy and metaphysics cannot disguise the fact that the urban detritus that enrages Leigh's antihero is primarily engendered by material factors. The growth of the "global city," in which the mobility of capital and the power of multinational firms become tied to finance capital and the "informational economy," promotes an extreme polarization between rich and poor.²⁹ Johnny, unlike a traditional leftist such as *High Hopes*'s Cyril, is constitutionally incapable of militant defiance.

Naked's dissection of alienated sexuality frequently intersects with its evocation of reified urbanism. Throughout the film, Johnny spews forth monologues of sometimes breathtaking, if crazed, eloquence and engages in a series of trysts with troubled women who find themselves initially attracted to his torrent of words but are eventually repelled by his contemptuous abuse. The sex in *Naked* is the antithesis of Hollywood's soft-focus coupling—what Vladimir Nabokov once derided as the "copulation of clichés." Johnny is undeniably a misogynist and some literal-minded viewers and critics made the mistake of assuming that Leigh shared his antihero's disdain (which occasionally reasserts itself, however schizophrenically, as tenderness) for women. Both victim and victimizer, Johnny's generalized misanthropy pales in comparison to that of Jeremy, a loathsome yuppie woman hater whose pivotal role in *Naked* is one of Leigh's rare aesthetic miscalculations. Jeremy's role as a malevolent *deus ex machina* almost vindicates the antics of the working-class Johnny, who is nevertheless far from a proletarian hero. Linking, however unobtrusively, these sexual predators with the predatory economic policies of post-Thatcher England, Leigh's emphasis on routinized sex echoes Lefebvre's regret that "with 'modern' eroticism we step outside of the everyday, without actually leaving it: it shocks, it seems brutal, and yet this effect is superficial, pure appearance, leading us back towards the secret of the everyday—dissatisfaction."³⁰ *Naked* acknowledges the everyday dissatisfaction of mechanical sexuality with bittersweet humor. Toward the end of the film, Jeremy lunges at a woman named Sophie who has already endured Johnny's venom. "Here we go again" is her weary response.

This near noirish retreat from Leigh's usual interest in family dynamics was a temporary detour. With *Secrets and Lies* (1996), he returned to the family unit with a vengeance, although this crowd-pleasing soap opera was something of an anti-*Meantime*; the earlier film appeared to take pride in its stoic refusal of melodrama. *Secrets and Lies*, however, does not augment its melodramatic contrivances with the operatic pyrotechnics favored by Hollywood's celebrated auteurs. Leigh's patient appreciation of the quotidian succumbs to an ultraschematic narrative structure that reaches its crescendo with an ending that is apparently designed to be heartwarmingly affirmative. Many critics underline historical affinities between real-



2. *Naked*, Mike Leigh, 1993. (Still courtesy of Cineaste.)

ism and melodrama, and it would be naive to view *Secrets and Lies* as Leigh's abandonment of realism (however one defines this admittedly amorphous rubric) or the critique of everyday life. It does seem valid, however, to consider how Leigh's most commercially successful film (not in itself a badge of dishonor) co-opts, either wittingly or unwittingly, his previous achievements.

The film's intricately plotted first half plunges us into recognizable Leigh terrain. The early sequences are preoccupied with Hortense, a middle-class, adopted black optometrist in her twenties who decides to trace her origins; her white, working-class mother, Cynthia; and Cynthia's gentle and more prosperous brother, a portrait photographer named Maurice. Unfortunately, the screen time devoted to Maurice's troubled wife, Monica, exposes the creaky narrative machinery that sometimes threatens to sabotage *Secrets and Lies*. Monica's furtive shame, engendered by her inability to bear children, mechanically rhymes with the film's more significant "secret"—Cynthia's reluctance to confront her long lost child. Leigh's best early films, like the even more downbeat films of the late Alan Clarke, were noteworthy for their minimalist rigor and a concomitant refusal to telegraph prefabricated emotional responses to an audience.

To its credit, *Secrets and Lies* abounds with resonances of earlier Leigh films, and typically scenes that at first seem like irrelevant longueurs are frequently of more interest than the central narrative thread. While the protagonists too often resemble points plotted along an imaginary graph, the minor, eccentric characters often demonstrate how individuals devise stratagems to inject meaning into often superficially meaningless everyday lives. For example, a social worker who resembles a much more sympathetic version of Melody in *Home Sweet Home* subtly conveys an enormous range of emotions; more than just a faceless bureaucrat, she is alternately compassionate, condescending, distracted, nervous, and harried. Partaking of a completely different emotional register, Stuart, the man who sold Maurice his studio, sullenly fulminates against his wife, his mother, Australia, England, and Maurice: he suggests an older, wearier version of Johnny. Nevertheless, despite these privileged moments, *Secrets and Lies* largely abandons the fascination of banality for a diluted, strangely un-English variation of the belief, elaborated in several plays by Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, that confessional zeal functions as balm for the soul. At Cynthia's cataclysmic birthday party (the celebration gone awry is a Leigh motif familiar from previous films such as *High Hopes*, *Grown Ups*

[1980], and *Abigail's Party*), the film degenerates into a series of confessional monologues that flaunt, with a minimum of irony, more than a few quasi-New Age pieties. Like some nightmarish combination of Bill Clinton and John Bradshaw, Maurice exhorts his family to abandon their "secrets and lies" and "share" their pain. Given this denouement, the film promotes the implicitly patronizing assumption that everyday life cannot be assimilated without sentimental window dressing.

This programmatic conclusion is an aberration within Leigh's work. Most of his films treat daily life with more nuanced grit; *Secrets and Lies*, which shares his best work's character-driven impetus, does manage to evoke "the everyday" through meticulously crafted performances. In this respect, the construction of the Leigh persona recalls André Bazin's characterization of the "Fellinian" protagonist, a figure described as "not a 'character' but a mode of being, a way of living" who the "director can define . . . thoroughly through his behavior: his walk, his dress, his hairstyle, his mustache, his dark glasses."³¹ All of Leigh's scripts are the product of an intimate process of collaboration with unusually talented casts, although it is important to emphasize the fact that his work is no more improvised than Fellini's: after a fairly lengthy rehearsal period, Leigh incorporates the actors' contributions into a final script and remains as much in control as any traditional director. Somewhat disingenuously, or perhaps naively, Leigh insists that his actors don't "simulate something artificially" because their preparation acquaints them with "a history built into the[ir] relationships."³² In any case, it is possible to set aside Leigh's slightly self-aggrandizing pretensions and maintain that his actors "turn everyday life into something anodyne," making the most minute gestures and habits amusing and invigorating. To cite but one example, Katrin Carlidge's artistry lets us look beyond the masochistic stupidity of *Naked's* Sophie and the slightly sadistic invective of *Career Girls's* Hannah. Carlidge's expertly slurred speech and studied lassitude sum up Sophie's erotic frustration with admirable concision. In a much more manic vein, Carlidge's karate-chop gesticulations and staccato verbal delivery pinpoint Hannah's personal contradictions—her mixture of anguish and joie de vivre enlivens everyday life despite her weakness for withering put downs.

Lefebvre's fertile category of "everyday life" offers a salutary antidote to the false dichotomy of an idealist construct known as realism and an equally idealized—and monolithic—modernism. Unlike either Lukács or Barthes, Lefebvre claims that the realm of the "trivial" is often a departure point

for emancipatory possibilities and the supposedly rarefied terrain of the "marvelous" is actually inextricable from everyday banality. For Lefebvre, "the substance of everyday life — 'human raw material' in its simplicity and richness — pierces through all alienation and establishes 'disalienation.'"³³ The 'concreteness,' therefore, of what frequently appears to be humdrum dailiness is not reduced to the platitudes of mainstream sociology but can actually provide a frisson in which critical inquiry and lyrical epiphanies coexist and are in fact inextricable. Employing his usual dialectical brio, Lefebvre ultimately concludes that the Romantic category of the marvelous is not bound up with "exoticism" or the "bizarre" but "operates only on the level of everyday life."³⁴

Leigh's *Career Girls* — while a minor work compared to *Meantime* or *Naked* — demonstrates how his tragicomic sensibility commingles superficial realism with a highly stylized emphasis on the juxtaposition of the marvelous with the quotidian. *Career Girls* is a highly schematic memory film in which two former college roommates — Annie and Hannah — look back with melancholy and wistful humor to their fractious youthful friendship, which was redeemed by sporadically happy moments. Strategically placed flashbacks punctuate Hannah and Annie's frequently strained reunion, and these glimpses of the past concretely suggest that everyday life can be "rehabilitated"; the young women combat boredom with a verve that confirms Lefebvre's assertion that "since Baudelaire, the world turned inside out has been deemed better than the world the right way up."³⁵

Hannah's verbal facility and quirky (and sometimes cruel) sense of humor enables her and the more withdrawn Annie to — at least provisionally — "turn the world inside out." The two women, like depressive versions of Rivette's Celine and Julie, devise private games and rituals that allow them to endure lives spent in a dreary student flat. One of their favorite rituals uses a dogeared copy of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as a magical talisman. By opening the novel at random, "Ms. Brontë" (the anachronistic salutation gently mocks some critics' christening of the writer as a proto-feminist heroine) is able to divine the future and mordantly comment on the present. *Wuthering Heights* was, of course, one of the surrealists' favorite novels: Buñuel's famously over-the-top adaptation is one of his most eccentric films, and Georges Bataille devotes a chapter to the Brontë classic in *Literature and Evil*. The roommates in Leigh's film, however, are mired in the here and now, and their use of Brontë as a tongue-in-cheek *I Ching* highlights the inadequacy of lives that cannot be easily transformed. When

Annie deferentially consults "Ms. Brontë" about her love life, a random flip of the pages reveals the anticipatory words "must come." But when Hannah and Annie's stuttering, overweight friend, Ricky, seeks advice for the love-lorn from the well-thumbed paperback, the book opens, with providential despair, to a blank page. Lefebvre believes that "living is the practice of overcoming alienation"; the comic desperation of Leigh's collegiate outcasts reiterates the fact that this process of overcoming can be rocky and on occasion leads to dead ends.³⁶

Years later, when the two women reunite and look back wistfully at their Brontë worship (a visit to the author's home at Haworth is remembered as a seminal event), their pranks and rituals reflect their status as insecure young professionals. Hannah and Annie arrange bogus appointments with realtors to view lavish condos that they have no intention of buying. Like their whimsical consultation of *Wuthering Heights*, this upmarket jape serves as a pointed antidote to daily boredom. When the women visit a soused yuppie's lavish pad, Hannah looks out the window at the surrounding post-modernist skyline and observes that "on a clear day you can see the class struggle from here." Her remark disrupts the received assumptions of the everyday but acknowledges that it is often almost insurmountably difficult to change assumptions that even become embedded in architecture; as Guy Debord once remarked, "urbanism is alienation made visible."

Career Girls offers a useful inventory of Leigh's major themes as well as a capsule view of his highly artificial realism. *Career Girls* eventually resolves the damaged lives of its heroines with relative optimism, but, like nearly all of his previous films, an ironized, truncated version of the classic nineteenth-century bildungsroman can be easily discerned. The protagonists of seminal Leigh films such as *Bleak Moments*, *Meantime*, *Life Is Sweet*, and *Naked* do not journey from ignorance to edification in the manner of George Eliot's or Balzac's heroes and heroines; they instead usually progress from personal stasis and despondency to even more aggravated states of personal stasis and despondency. Of course, these films are saved from terminal bleakness by the bracing sting of Leigh's barbed humor, which at least partially alleviates the dreariness of the protagonists' everyday lives. However, the gallows humor of Leigh's most artistically successful films has little in common with the exalted altruism of the classical bildungsroman. Franco Moretti, for example, convincingly maintains that Balzac's novels do not critique everyday life but instead accentuate its "alive and interesting"³⁷ qualities. Leigh's films are not precisely inversions

of nineteenth-century novels that pay tribute to a promise of happiness, but the prospect of happiness has been unquestionably put on hold in most of his best work.

A more buoyant ambience is nevertheless evident in Leigh's most recent film, *Topsy-Turvy*, a meticulous evocation of both W. S. Gilbert's and Arthur Sullivan's exuberant theatricality and the late Victorian era that spawned them. At first glance, a celebration of Tory satirists noted for the escapist frivolity of *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Mikado* appears to be far removed from the grittier concerns of *Meantime* and *Naked*. But *Topsy-Turvy* makes it glaringly clear that Leigh, despite being lazily labeled a naturalist by some critics, is primarily concerned with theatrical and cinematic artifice.

Leigh's overweening fascination with the creation of theatrical illusion—and the importance of “quotable gestures”—comes to the fore in an affectionate re-creation of one of *The Mikado*'s most famous set pieces, the “Three Little Maids from School” song. Despite the fact that Brecht's ideal of “the Popular,” (a Left-populist affirmation of “forms of expression intelligible to the broad masses”) couldn't be more diametrically opposed to Gilbert and Sullivan's stolidly middle-class conception of popular art,³⁸ *Topsy-Turvy*'s comic rendering of the rehearsal of this innocuous song demonstrates how Gilbert (who serves as director as well as lyricist) shares Brecht's conviction that, after rehearsals, “what . . . comes before the spectator is the most frequently repeated of what has not been rejected.”³⁹ The conservative Gilbert, like the Marxist Brecht, believed that “every performance is a contrivance by its nature,”³⁹ although, paradoxically, the “Three Little Maids” sequence derives its humor from Gilbert's hilariously misguided attempt to infuse this elaborate production number with authentic “Japaneseness.”⁴⁰ After Gilbert recruits three Japanese women to demonstrate appropriately demure manners to his befuddled dancing master and cast, it becomes obvious that the company's stiff upper lip emulation of this display is destined to be, in Leigh's words, “as Japanese as fish and chips.”⁴¹ This interlude does not merely interrogate Gilbert's own capricious aspirations to realism; it also reiterates Leigh's belief that his work interweaves the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life with a style of dramaturgy and performance that ironizes and theatricalizes the most mundane gestures and incidents.

Topsy-Turvy is a “period” film that also illuminates the spatial politics of modernity and the beginnings of an urban gestalt that has only incrementally changed since the late nineteenth century. The film underlines the importance of the conversion from gas to electric lighting in the 1880s by

foregrounding the resplendent Savoy Theater's electrification as a key event in theatrical, as well as urban, history. And, as the historian Joachim Schlör reminds us, electrification only reinforces the allure of the nocturnal city: “Many come ‘out of the light’ to visit the dark places.”⁴² Leigh illustrates the allure that the subterranean nocturnal city possessed for the Victorian bourgeoisie by highlighting Arthur Sullivan's (the bon viveur composer who could not abide the temperamental Gilbert) visits to Parisian brothels. Sullivan's hedonistic urges can only be fully satisfied in this netherworld, which serves as an antidote to the above-ground propriety that he and his countrymen are forced to maintain.

This dichotomy between private and public realms not only unifies *Topsy-Turvy*'s disparate narrative strands; it is also a key preoccupation in all of Leigh's films. While it is true that the private/public distinction has eroded somewhat in recent decades, Leigh's films prove how his interest in the public realm casts a backward glance to the great nineteenth-century novelists' and playwrights' preoccupation with the external reproduction of reality, while his interest in private life echoes the concerns of what Erich Auerbach termed modernism's fondness for “internal realism.” In addition, if we accept a definition of *realism* that encompasses more than mere naturalism—avoiding, according to Raymond Williams, the literal-minded domain of “static appearance” and embracing a “conscious commitment to understanding and describing the movement of psychological or social . . . forces”—there is no contradiction between Leigh's oscillation between the tradition, on the one hand, of Dickens, Zola, and Ibsen, and the twentieth-century counter tradition of Brecht, Beckett, and Pinter on the other.⁴³ Leigh's modernist realism infuses films featuring detailed portraits of eccentrics, obsessives, curmudgeons, and madmen—characters who sometimes win, but more often lose, a constant battle against monotony. Resolutely iconoclastic, his work straddles Brechtian optimism and Beckett's bleak whimsy. And, like Cyril, the dejected socialist protagonist of *High Hopes*, Leigh remains a man “deeply frustrated by the gulf between how things are and how they ought to be, and how ever-increasingly hard it has become to do anything about it.”⁴⁴

Notes

- 1 For a biographical treatment of Lukács's complex political peregrinations, see Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

- 2 This is Martin Jay's paraphrase of Barthes's position. See his *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 120.
- 3 See Theodor Adorno, "Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács' *Realism in Our Time*," anthologized in Adorno's *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 228. Several studies have recently outlined affinities between the superficially antithetical realms of modernism and realism. See, for example, Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperreal Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); and Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- 4 This is the first part of Brecht's definition of *realism*. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang), 109.
- 5 For a comprehensive analysis of trends in contemporary British left-wing theater, including the work of the 7.84 Company and Arden's plays, see Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980).
- 6 Martin Esslin maintains that Pinter combines "extreme naturalism . . . with a dreamlike, poetic feeling which, as indeed often happens in dreams, is by no means inconsistent with an uncanny clarity of outline." See Esslin's *Pinter, the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1984), 270.
- 7 Michael Coveney, *The World according to Mike Leigh* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 85.
- 8 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 486.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 486.
- 10 Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," in Harold Pinter, *Complete Works: One* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 13.
- 11 Lee Ellickson and Richard Porton, "I Find the Tragicomic Things in Life: An Interview with Mike Leigh," *Cineaste* xx: 3 (April, 1994), 12.
- 12 Leigh's ability to capture behavioral quirks on film constitutes his modest version of realism, but his aesthetic has few affinities with what Ian Watt labels "presentational realism," a more all encompassing stance refined by novelists such as Richardson and Defoe. Watt's recognition that "the tendency of some Realists and Naturalists to forget that the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring literary value" has doubtless helped to discredit the more hubristic claims of realism's proponents. See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 32.
- 13 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 80. A Brechtian analysis of Ken Loach's films could also be assayed, despite the fact that Loach was attacked by supposedly Brechtian antirealists such as Colin MacCabe during the 1970s. In a brief book review, Michael Sprinker initiated this project by claiming that "Brecht's plays, like Zola's novels, were experiments conducted with the aim of interpreting the world correctly so that it might in the end be changed. Loach's commitment to this project has never wavered, the putatively regressive mode of his presentation notwithstanding." See Michael Sprinker, "Brechtian Realism," *Minnesota Review* 50-51 (October 1999): 225.
- 14 Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 104.
- 15 Andy Medhurst, "Mike Leigh: Beyond Embarrassment," *Sight and Sound* 3:11 (November 1993), 8.
- 16 Reclus is quoted in Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 91.
- 17 Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 18 Coveney, *The World according to Mike Leigh*, 163.
- 19 Andrew Higson, "Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the Kitchen Sink Film," in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, edited by Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), 134.
- 20 Leigh remarked that "Having grown up in an urban world, it was exciting to know that there was a cinema attempting to deal with that, although one sometimes had reservations about whether it was quite real or slightly artificial." See Porton and Ellickson, "I Find the Tragicomic Things," 15.
- 21 Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle*, 165.
- 22 Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 95.
- 23 John Hill remarks that for members of the 1960s New Left, "many of the economic changes wrought by 'affluence' were taken for granted. . . . Politically, these tended to lead to a representation of the working class as largely inert and conformist: it is only individual members of the class who are able to rise above or rebel against this general condition." See his *Sex, Class, and Realism: British Cinema, 1956-1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 174.
- 24 See Peter Williams, "Class Constitution through Spatial Reconstruction? A Re-evaluation of Gentrification in Australia, Britain, and the United States," in *Gentrification of the City*, edited by Neil Smith and Peter Williams (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986) 56-77. In reference to gentrification in London, Williams remarks that "the move to establish residence in working-class areas . . . appeared to mark a break from the class-segregated past." He concludes, however, that "far from resulting in a classless society," the process heightened "class consciousness." Williams, 71.
- 25 Coveney, *The World according to Mike Leigh*, 194.
- 26 John Hill believes that the portrayal of families in *High Hopes*, and particularly the portrayal of women, "harks back to the tradition of British working-class realism of the 1960s which not only criticized the 'corruption' of the working class by consumerism but characteristically associated superficiality and an 'excessive' interest in acquisition with women characters." Hill is specifically referring to the slightly caricatured figure of Valerie, Cyril's sister. Hill's pronouncements, however, ignore the fact that Valerie, like many of Leigh's characters, is treated with an equal amount of empathy and scorn. While Hill acknowledges the inescapable evidence that her money-grubbing husband is the object of far more contempt, he asserts (erroneously, from my point of view) that the audience is encouraged to share her brutal spouse's disdain. See John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 194.
- 27 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 186.
- 28 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 179.
- 29 For an in-depth analysis of the new "global city" in three major cities, see Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

- 30 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, translated by John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), 35.
- 31 André Bazin, "The Profound Originality of *I Vitelloni*," anthologized in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, edited by Bert Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 186.
- 32 Graham Fuller, Interview with Mike Leigh, in Mike Leigh, *Naked and Other Screenplays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), xxv.
- 33 Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, 97.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 123.
- 36 This paraphrase of Lefebvre appears in Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love, and Struggle* 43.
- 37 Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, translated by Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 1987), 35.
- 38 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 108.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 204.
- 40 Gilbert is quoted in J. Hoberman, "Your Shows of Shows," *Village Voice*, December 21, 1999, 143.
- 41 Amy Taubin, "Mike Leigh Improvises on History," *Village Voice*, December 21, 1999, 148.
- 42 Joachim Schlör, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London, 1840-1930*, translated by Pierre Gottfried Imhof and Dafydd Rees Roberts (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 65.
- 43 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 261.
- 44 This is from Leigh's preface to the published screenplay of *High Hopes*, included in Leigh, *Naked*, 186.

Why Is This Absurd Picture Here?

Ethnology/Heterology/Buñuel

James F. Lastra

If the heterogeneous nature of the slave is akin to that of the filth in which his material situation condemns him to live, that of the master is formed by an act of excluding all filth: an act pure in direction but sadistic in form. — Georges Bataille

Near the middle of Luis Buñuel's 1933 film *Las Hurdes: Land without Bread* we witness another in the string of atrocities that make up Hurdano daily life.¹ After learning that their diet consists almost entirely of potatoes, which are all eaten by May or June, and then of unripe cherries, which cause deadly dysentery, we spy a pair of wild goats scaling a precipice. As if to underscore the utter absurdity and precariousness of the Hurdanos' existence, the narrator tells us that goat meat is eaten only when an unlucky creature slips on a loose stone and plummets to its death — an unlikely event that nevertheless promptly occurs. Fittingly, this scene has become the film's most notorious, for spectators invariably notice a telltale puff of smoke from the right edge of the frame, indicating that the goat has, in reality, been shot.

A tiny shift in the camera's position would have obscured this fact, but as if to make sure that no one missed that this sacrifice was staged, Buñuel further theatricalizes the scene by giving us a *reverse angle* shot of the goat falling down the hill. Our only possible inference is that Buñuel had the