

Mike Leigh's *Naked* and the Gestic Economy of Cinema

THE collective is a body, too

Walter Benjamin¹

1 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: New Left Books, 1979, p. 239.

2 Andy Medhurst, 'Mike Leigh: Beyond Embarrassment', *Sight and Sound* 3:11, 1993, 10.

3 Jonathan Romney, 'Scumbag Saviour', *New Statesman and Society*, 5 November 1993, p. 34.

4 Julie Burchill, 'Crass Struggle', *Sunday Times*, 7 November 1993.

5 Helen Birch, 'Dear Mike Leigh', *Independent*, 19 November 1993.

Naked was acclaimed by some in 1993 as a powerful representation of the state of the nation—a film registering in apocalyptic terms the impact of more than a decade of Conservative rule in Britain. For Andy Medhurst in *Sight and Sound* it was a troubling road movie of the British underclass,² for Jonathan Romney in the *New Statesman* a black comedy, a cartoon, which for all its caricature dealt with the 'real London of homelessness, violence, sexual exploitation and despair'.³ Both critics shared a certain disquiet, however, one much in evidence in the reviews by women as diverse as Julie Burchill in the *Sunday Times*, who described the film as being 'about as political as a mugging',⁴ Helen Birch, who wrote an open letter to Leigh about her anger at his portrayal of women in the *Independent*⁵—and Suzanne Moore of the *Guardian*, who questioned the kind of realism that would appear to exhibit misogyny without dealing with it critically:

Even if we accept *Naked* as another of Leigh's Life as Shit type of pieces of social realism, how come all the female characters are pathetic drips with silly voices? Women to whom men do things but who appear to do nothing for themselves. What sort of realism is this? To show a misogynist

and surround him with such walking doormats has the effect, intentional or not, of justifying this behaviour.⁶

Naked is a film in which misogyny—specifically, sexual violence against women—is used as one among several forms of social violence that are seen to articulate the *comédie humaine* of the last decade of the twentieth century. As such, it might be seen to provide us with ‘textbook fodder’, as Romney puts it, ‘for the debate that invariably surrounds films that “stage” misogyny rather than simply describe it.’⁷ This remains a debate that it is important for feminists to have, though quite why Leigh’s film opens itself up so readily as ‘fodder’ for attack needs to be explored. In doing so, the particular quality of his cinematic ‘realism’ might lead us to ask questions of the terms of such a debate, suggesting alternative routes for critique and raising broader questions of the gendering of cinematic representation. And to discover, at the heart of such representation, a particular form of violence acted out through the body itself.

A Mike Leigh film generally mines that space between class fractions where white, upper-working-class Englishness meets the aspiring middle class—a space shaped by the patterns and conventions, desires and inhibitions, of this particular territory of English life. It is a form of realism that flirts with banality but lifts away from it through a kind of wry pathos, ironic familiarity. Characters always risk becoming stereotypes—such as his much ridiculed figure of the 1980s, the yuppie—but the social typology they offer is of a more mobile kind than such a term would imply. In Leigh’s view,

they are all rooted in real characters and a real world out there, but they are pretty heightened. My films are realism, but I don’t think they are naturalism. I’ve been accused of making loaded caricatures, but we have to deal with the way people are behaviourally. And sometimes extraordinary behaviour translates into caricature.⁸

Caricature is often a difficult mode to read, depending on often localized forms of recognition and identification—it invites charges of reduction or even more loaded accusations of disavowal. Yet Leigh’s strategy here reminds me of the epic theatre described by Brecht in which ‘the *gestic* principle takes over, as it were, from the principle of imitation’ (my italics).⁹ The point might be to suspend the impulse to say, for example, ‘women are not like this’, and rather to see in the lineaments of a character’s attitudes and gestures a certain bodily logic in which the theatricalization of social meaning takes place.

The syntax of this world in Leigh’s work is put together by means of an acute ear for language and dialogue—particularly for the way that cliché functions to empty out meaning even as it is a form of phatic bonding. Voices register almost musically as a character signature: intonation rising and falling, varying in pitch, whining, staccato, whinnying, lispings. If sound is body, here,

6 Suzanne Moore, ‘Reel men don’t eat quiche’, *Guardian*, 4 November 1993.

7 Romney, p. 35.

8 Quoted by Richard Combs, *Guardian*, 6 January 1994, p. 6.

9 Bertolt Brecht, ‘On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre’, in John Willett (ed. and trans.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1974, p. 86.

so too are faces 'inscribed by the gest of the body', in Brecht's words:¹⁰ the scowl of bulimic Nicola in *Life is Sweet*, the self-satisfaction of Beverly in *Abigail's Party*, as she forms the words 'Demis Roussos' and sets her shoulders to dance. These are films that draw on a tradition of social comedy in England which, whether we remember the films of George Formby, the slapstick of Norman Wisdom or Ealing comedies, use the body to produce a profile of social life. In Leigh's films, which famously build in theatrical form on improvisational work by the actors, the body exhibits Englishness as a kind of pathological condition, a drawn-out comedy of manners, in which people are caught up in a frame of habits and constrictions which both signal the way the world has restricted them and measure how they nevertheless cope and come together.

Brecht's notoriously ambiguous concept of *gest* is useful in this context because it can identify a process or moment of bodily translation in which posture and attitude yield social meaning: 'by social gest is meant the mimetic and gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people of a given period'.¹¹ In this way forms of habitual behaviour and movement, often unconscious and idiosyncratic, open up to the eye an anatomy of social relations. If cinema reveals to us 'the unthought, that is life', Gilles Deleuze argues, 'the categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body, its postures. "We do not even know what a body can do": in its sleep, in its drunkenness, in its efforts and resistances.' For Deleuze, in a deterritorializing move that nonetheless echoes the terms of Brecht's epic theatre, the spectacle of 'the everyday body' is *gest* itself, 'irreducible to the plot or the "subject"':

what we call *gest* in general is the link or knot of attitudes between themselves, their co-ordination with each other, in so far as they do not depend on a previous story, a pre-existing plot or an action-image. On the contrary the *gest* is the development of the attitudes themselves, and, as such, carries out a direct theatricalization of bodies, often discreet, because it takes place independently of any role.¹²

In the economy of Brecht's epic theatre the function of the actor was to call attention to such bodily 'knots' of attitude, through which the spectator might become aware of the social laws shaping his or her behaviour, and the possibility of change. In the 'cinema of bodies' described by Deleuze, the notion of *gest* becomes a principle of composition, in which the body is 'at once both obstacle and means'—a space, light, colour, relation, a speed and movement, a way of putting time into the image, a violence and collision. Such a spectacle, he writes, 'can pass through a script; the point of this is less to tell a story than to develop and transform bodily attitudes'.¹³ On the one hand, a space of transformation within the everyday, on the other, a corporeal revelation of the 'scripts' which regulate and shape bodily relations. We might, then, begin to explore Leigh's *Naked* in gestic terms.

10 Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', in Willett (ed.), p. 92.

11 Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting', in Willett (ed.), p. 139.

12 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 189, 192.

13 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 195.

NAKED is more cinematic than the rest of Leigh's oeuvre, and moves into much darker terrain. Yet it shares the strategy of gestic caricature, the body passing through a grimly deterministic script from which the only way out appears to be apocalypse. Leigh has talked of his film as 'lamentation' in the Old Testament sense, about 'the great sense of waste—of talent and imagination' in the Britain of the late twentieth century.¹⁴ And if the film literally lays bare such a condition in the 'guts' of London streets, it does so by stripping down humanity to its skin, 'naked' and exhausted at the end of the evolutionary line: 'monkey see, monkey do'. 'Have you ever seen a dead body?', asks the central protagonist, Johnny, of Maggie, a girl who has been sleeping rough. 'Only my own', she replies. And the energy which draws bodies together only for them violently to repulse also seems to come from the gut, from bodily drives of need and sexual desire which reproduce a panicky dynamic of mean hurting women, and women taking, even desiring the hurt: as if caught in a much more desperate than Schnitzlerian *fin-de-siècle* *La Ronde*. The comic if abusive *pas de deux* between Archie and Maggie, separated on the streets at night in their search for food, captures this cycle in miniature: both screaming for the other, Archie's body wracked with a tirade of verbal tics and swearing—if you see her 'tie her up' and 'knock her out'—and Maggie searching anxiously for her other half, only to scream and hit out at him when she finds him. 'What's it like being you?', Johnny asks. 'Bit hectic?'

The sense of dark slapstick to this exchange is largely missing, however, from the often disturbing bodily encounters which take place elsewhere, when the bitter misogyny of the film comes into force. The title *Naked* refers, as the prophet and anti-hero of the film, Johnny, reminds us, to the Old Testament book of Hosea—where it is the figure of the mother and her adulterous 'whoredom' who is responsible for the crisis: 'Lest I strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst: yea upon her children will I have no mercy; for they be children of whoredom.' Johnny is seen to be one such child, God, that 'monkey with a beard', a 'nasty bastard'. The film begins with Johnny's raping of a woman in a Manchester alleyway—seemingly consensual sex turned nasty—and his subsequent flight by interminable motorway to Dalston in East London, in search of an ex-girlfriend, Louise. First Johnny meets Louise's gothic and gloomy flatmate Sophie, returning after signing on the dole. When he kisses her he bites her mouth hard and grabs her hair. She is in love by the time Louise arrives home after work in the office. The more needy Sophie becomes, the more violent his physical reactions to her. Like rats in a cage, the two of them bounce off the walls of the flat in some desperate pursuit. When Louise resists a similar game, he leaves to sleep on the streets. Beaten up and hysterical, he will return seemingly to accept her caring

14 Quoted in Combs.

overtures, only to leave when the prospect of going home is imminent. Like a Chekhovian drama, Manchester, always held out as both home and community, a place 'where people talk to you', will remain out of reach.

The compulsive repetition of attraction/repulsion and dependency/rejection marks out the gestic terrain of *Naked*, which is on one level about the need for and yet fear of intimacy. But such a patterning or 'knotting' of attitudes, to recall both Brecht and Deleuze, is rigorously ordered and scripted in sexual terms, and underwritten by the most uncompromising of narratives: Darwinism and the Bible ironically hand in hand. Gender is wholly subsumed by sex, by an absolute divide in which, as one critic put it, 'those who are not men—the bio-deterministic thesis would have it—are women'.¹⁵ It is here that questions about the film's staging of misogyny can most usefully be posed. At first sight it might appear that *Naked* colludes with a vision of male dominance and women's sexual subordination in its unrelenting portrayal of men as voyeurs, sexual predators, as agents, and women as their passive yet receptive victims. In this view, it is the bodies of women—'not-men'—which bear the brunt of male power, as if a pornographic principle has become wholly defining of human relations. The film thus confirms the radical feminist thesis of a dualistic and sexualized antagonism from which there appears to be no way out, and in which, as in Catharine MacKinnon's view, women are seen to 'desire dispossession and cruelty. Men, permitted to put words (and other things) in women's mouths, create scenes in which women desperately want to be beyond, battered, tortured, humiliated, and killed.'¹⁶ In her angry response to the film, Helen Birch evidently felt Leigh had gone too far, repeating the polarizing gesture herself by advising him: 'next time you decide to stray so far into male fantasy why not take a tip from [Michael] Winner and give a woman a gun?'¹⁷

DOES *Naked* collude with or stage such misogyny? It is true that one of the central difficulties here is how far the film indulges the charismatic figure of Johnny, and his ranting stream of terse and clever wordplay, his self-mockery and autodidacticism. The Deleuzian account of gest might take us beyond the individual role in its tracing of flows and knots of attitude, but Leigh's film undoubtedly pushes against this in its almost solipsistic portrayal of an anti-hero, in which the women characters are offered up as handmaidens to his possible redemption. Yet the fact that the film is 'fodder' for a radical feminist account deserves more scrutiny. If in this world 'some fuck and others get fucked', in MacKinnon's terms,¹⁸ this is also the struggle which takes place in *Naked*, where the survival of the fittest involves avoiding the weakest—feminized—position, that is, getting fucked. The film articulates its pessimism in

15 Nigel Andrews, 'Misogynist on the Rampage', *Financial Times*, 4 November 1993, p. 17.

16 Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 148.

17 Birch.

18 Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 4.

terms of an overridingly sexualized view of power and, in so doing, it might be seen to *share* a radical feminist perspective on social relations. I am thinking here of Wendy Brown's incisive account of the political despair at work in MacKinnon's theory which, she argues, 'speaks directly to the anxieties of an age in the throes of a theoretical and political crisis about the end of history, an era defined by lost faith in progressivist or teleological movement in history'. The only future offered by MacKinnon is one of unrelenting masculinist domination from which there is no escape. Brown notes the 'posthistorical' character of MacKinnon's thought and yet its modernist nostalgia:

Prospects for radical social change evaporate when the oppressed class is only derivative of the dominant class, when it has no cultural meaning or existence other than this derivation, and when the oppressed have no inner resources for the development of consciousness or agency, precisely because they have been produced subjectively, and not only positioned, by dominant power.¹⁹

Naked might be seen to replicate the iron cage of such a sexual politics, in its caricature of misogynistic men and women as 'walking doormats', in Suzanne Moore's words. It undoubtedly confronts its own apocalyptic vision of the end of history—'the end of the world is nigh, Bri . . . The game is up'—through such a politics. Just as Brown argues that MacKinnon's work remains in thrall to the very categories she attempts to analyse—a 'mirror of pornography'²⁰—so Leigh's 'staging' of misogyny could be seen to fall back into collusion with it. But the gestic economy of the film suggests more complexity than this, and moves the space for critique beyond the confines of a radical feminist account that would remain within the polarities it describes. The account of gest taken from Brecht and Deleuze is not reducible to singular roles, 'to the plot or the "subject"', but importantly deterritorializes the body into 'knots' of attitudes.²¹ On this level we leave behind analysis which stays at the level of individual character, however much the focus, and within the boundaries of individual bodies, men v. women, oppressors and oppressed.

The violence of the film is a case in point. It does not rest solely within a dynamic in which men are the active agents and women the recipients. Rather it manifests itself at every level as a mark of the cost of bodily subjection to those 'scripts' or forms of regulation. One such script, we might argue, is that of a heterosexuality which involves, in the words of Judith Butler, 'the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment'.²² Masculine heterosexual identity, in particular, appears driven, held in place by assertion and violence: indeed it is masculine bodies which are the most hystericized, whether twitching and neighing like the vicious yuppie, or battered and colliding out of control with the walls of a stairwell, or, as Georgia Brown put it in the *Village Voice*, a 'nonstop yammering into and at the void . . . transmuting into

19 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 94, 93. Brown's excellent reading of 'the pornographic cadences' of MacKinnon's work and its imbrication with Marxist social theory deserves more space for its elaboration than I have here.

20 Wendy Brown, p. 87.

21 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 192.

22 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, p. 232.

music'.²³ The gestic strategy of the film thus opens out a space where it is possible to see a spectacle of the body in the performative process of passing through a script. And it is masculine anxiety, specifically, that shapes such a spectacle.

If the gestic economy of *Naked*, then, brings the passage of regulation into focus, it does so nevertheless with specific social content. The violence that sparks throughout the film has a number of different theatres: the frenetic action of the yuppie, screaming his business deals down the phone and using his power as a landlord and money-maker as a form a sexual violation; the motiveless violence of the streets (isn't the answer more law and order?); a pornographic violence against women; the violence that means that property must be protected; the state violence that forces people to sleep rough, that deprives people of work—a price worth paying, according to the government of the time—that scapegoats (single mothers as the enemy within). Such a theatricalization of spaces of violence is the stuff of politics over the last seventeen years, and what the 'everyday body' exhibits in the film in its very movements.

'The body is never in the present, it contains the before and after, tiredness and waiting. Tiredness and waiting, even despair are the attitudes of the body', writes Deleuze of the cinema.²⁴ If there is despair in *Naked* rather than lamentation, it resides here, in a tiredness and a waiting (for change, to go to Manchester, to go to Ireland, for love, for the return of youth, for a future). Walter Benjamin saw in the staccato movements of the body of Charlie Chaplin a mimesis of the shock of modern existence and the disciplinary life of the factory, the time of production and the machine. The movements of the body in *Naked* testify to a different regime, offered as a millennial truth. Sheltering overnight in empty office space, Johnny explores the 'mysteries' of the trade of the security guard, 'guarding space', 'the most tedious job in England'. At regular intervals Brian the night security guard has to move around the building, logging his presence with a electronic gismo which is 'representative' of his employer. 'My existence is tracked and recorded.' In this corporate space, which resembles a 'postmodernist gas chamber', in Johnny's words, an apocalyptic sense of the end of history comes together with a vision of the society of control. 'The future is now' and it is that 'nobody has a future', that 'mankind must cease to exist'. And the mysteries of biblical and Nostradamian prophecy come together in the bar-code of a cashless society, which will, Johnny predicts, eventually be tattooed on the body, replacing plastic with flesh.

As Deleuze describes in his 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', the regulatory power of the society of control depends upon 'codes that mark access to information', and will be able to give 'the position within an open environment at any given instant (whether animal in a reserve, or human in a corporation, as with an electronic collar)'. Here we see 'the progressive and

23 Georgia Brown, 'Life Is Sweat', *Village Voice*, 21 December 1993, 70.

24 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 189.

dispersed installation of a new system of domination', one which has taken over from the old disciplinary forms of enclosure: the prison, hospital, family, factory and school. It is an apocalyptic vision of such a society of control that *Naked* appears to see ushered in by a decade of Thatcherism, in which the old institutions find themselves in crisis and the new corporate system with its floating rates of exchange and flexible accumulation brings about a transformation of bodily relations: 'the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network'. And the body will experience control as a constant 'modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other'.²⁵

If bodies act out, then, a 'tiredness and waiting' in *Naked*, they do so as a diagnosis of a point of crisis, in which older forms of relating such as class, family, work and community appear to have broken down. It may be that it is the women here who will prove to be the most resilient—I agree here with Georgia Brown who suggests that 'in the end, women show a greater ... tensile strength than the men, who, for all their brutality, are more pitiful; they're unable to connect'.²⁶ The millennial post-Thatcherite future offers a prospect of open spaces, a freedom from old forms of regulation, which paradoxically involves an equally totalizing form of subjection: there is nowhere to go. Johnny's tale of evolution ends with a vision of 'something that transcends matter', as if the body, that is 'both obstacle and means',²⁷ in gestic terms, has become its own dead end. Manchester, held out at the end of the film as a place of homecoming, offers a nostalgic return to the industrial North and the enclosed community of an earlier time, but it can't be indulged. The final shots of a body forcing itself to limp away, limbs flailing, into the empty London streets now synonymous with the 'open environment' of the society of control, is hardly an image of hope. But it is an awkward and bloody-minded gesture of resistance, insisting, in this blue-black bruise of a film, on a way out, on taking the main chance. On just passing through.

25 Gilles Deleuze, 'Post-script on the Societies of Control', *October* 59, 1992, 5, 7, 6, 4.

26 Georgia Brown.

27 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 193.