

Mike Leigh's female protagonists: exploring agency and performance in the actor/director relationship

This paper intends to look at the performative style of several key female protagonists (Lesley Manville, Ruth Sheen, Imelda Staunton and Sally Hawkins) in the films of Mike Leigh. According to Leigh all actors are cast because of their performance abilities and subsequent individual meetings create, develop and hone the character (McDonald, p.138).

The discussion looks at whether the finished performances are the product of directorial control nuanced by Leigh's methods, or the instinctive creativity determined by the actors themselves. This paper will analyse the distinct relationships cultivated between Leigh and these actors and the ways in which his visions of female identity are explored through their performances.

I want to raise the issue of female agency and performance within the context of realism, a mode which has habitually been construed as offering less interpretative space than the more expressive genre of melodrama.

Much that is written about Mike Leigh and realism dwells on his radical improvisational methods from *his* perspective. What interests me is the nature of the creativity brought to the performances by the female actors who work with him. In order to explore this question I have selected three actresses who have worked with Leigh over a considerable number of years: Sally Hawkins, (2002-8) and Lesley Manville and Ruth Sheen (1988-2010).

The four areas I intend to address are; Leigh and Realism, his production methods, the actors' performance style through the use of explanatory models.

Leigh's: form of Realism

Realism, is commonly understood to have specific aesthetic traits and unscripted dialogue, with a focus on the working class. Classic realism displays a discursive consonance: that is a match between the different discourses within the text. In all of Mike Leigh's films there is a devotion to complex portrayals of everyday life across the classes with characters grounded in the quotidian. All class characters are strikingly individualistic in their jobs, relationships, problems and disappointments. Leigh has been criticised for creating caricatures. He refutes this, suggesting that he deploys humorous portrayals, which engage 'in these heightened

juxtapositions, and these tend to confuse people... The convention is realism, but it's not propaganda. They are tragic-comedies'. (Xan Brooks) The acting style he advocates is not melodramatic. Rather Leigh calls attention to the awkwardness which is produced when characters are set in uncomfortable relations to their context. Thus he is pushing against the easy consonance which is expected in realism.

Leigh's definition of realism is not like that of Loach. Loach's realism has a campaigning and progressive tone, and he has a political conviction embedded in his films. By contrast, Leigh's objective is to make characters in British class society 'real'. He is an *observer* who tries to get to the core of social experience. Leigh's work implicitly agrees with the apology for realism offered by Jean Renoir's in *The Rules of the Game* (1939): 'The tragedy is that everyone has their reasons'. This is something that Leigh excels in; giving narrative space to the least considered members of each class. To achieve this he develops a particular way of working with his actors.

Leigh & his production methods.

Psychologists like Phillippe Rochat who work to understand the emotional responses of the mind will tell you that actors come in two basic types: the Oliviers, who learn their lines and aim to find a way to simulate appropriate emotions, and the "method" actors, who draw on some emotional experience within and then recreate this real emotion in the performance (Rochat, 2009, p. 194). With Leigh, the finished performances evolve from months spent working to find a new acting identity from within the actor. Leigh's process goes beyond that of Stanislavsky and Lee Strasberg. Both these, in their 'Method' acting schools, encouraged actors to draw on their own emotions in order to find the inner characteristics of their performed characters. Crucially, they worked from a completed script. Leigh however, encourages his actors to work from within but there is no fully formed character or dialogue upon which they can exercise their skills.

He does not make actors learn lines or find a way to simulate emotions. Initially his actors get neither script nor role; rather they are required to invent characters from whom the lines will emanate organically during the rehearsal period. Manville noted in interview that everything her protagonist says in *Another Year* comes from her (27 Oct 2010). This is crucial in considering Leigh's character formulation.

All Leigh's female actors (from Alison Steadman to Sheen, Manville, Imelda Staunton and Sally Hawkins) say the same thing about Leigh's rehearsal methods. He makes them select a person or persons from their acquaintance to be the springboard for their character. Then several months of challenging improvisation ensue. Additionally, the actors never know what the other characters are doing and arguably this frees up the women from subordinate positions. At this stage Leigh himself produces a very brief outline of each scene and the dialogue remains that of the actors' improvisation.

Gender difference

The consequence of this practice is that female actors are granted unprecedented space and expressivity. By contrast male characters in his films are frequently subordinate, kindly, and 'nice' but ineffective people Timothy Spall in *Secret & Lies* (1992), and *All or Nothing* (2002/1), Broadbent in *Another Year* (2010), Phil Davies *High Hopes* (1982) for example. They are the 'foil' and support to their female counterparts. In *Secret & Lies* it's Brenda Blethyn, in *All or Nothing*, *High Hopes* and *Another Year* Manville and Sheen hold centre stage and in *Happy Go Lucky* (2008) Hawkins carries the film. I am not arguing that Leigh is a feminist but that his production methods free up the women more dramatically than the men, who after all, are habitually used to taking centre stage. Whilst actors may tell of their collaboration in the making of the narrative and script, their reactions to Leigh's controlling directorial model of keeping plot and character involvement secret affects the genders differently.

Interviews with male actors such as Jim Broadbent, and Timothy Spall for example, 'flag up' the different way those men respond to the challenges of performance with Leigh's directorial methods. They both express terror of being plunged headlong into the unknown. Broadbent notes the risk and the 'not knowing'. Similarly, Spall recalls how you start from zero which is both 'frightening and inspiring. You do not know what other actors are doing when they are not there'. Later in the interview Spall records that it is 'white knuckles all the way, don't know where it is going. Might work for 10 months and be the bloke that picks up a bottle of milk and says one line and that's it...it's a big leap of faith (*All or Nothing*, interview)

These and similar remarks suggest that the male actor is particularly challenged by the lack of control and Leigh's insistence on expressivity and inwardness. Women on the other hand seem to thrive on it.

However if we now turn to the three female actors who are the main thrust of this discussion and examine their interview remarks a pattern emerges. Ruth Sheen's off screen persona is one of calm and appears to be undisturbed by last minute changes. Rather than needing to know her exact role she takes any unexpected changes in her stride. Having known Leigh and worked with him since 1988 in five films, she has an unquestioning acquiescence to his directorial input. She notes, 'I think Mike has mellowed ... he was much more strident but he still has the capacity to surprise me. I *still* go "Oh, OK!"' (*Another Year*, interview). She shows acceptance of his artistic temperament.

Her portrayal of Shirley in *High Hopes* won her the European Film Award for best Actress. A particularly memorable scene that typifies Sheen's performance occurs when she and Cyril return from a night out. Both slightly drunk, Sheen's character moves from girlish laughter and silly fun to stillness, to sulky silence, little girl fed up, apprehension, attack, defensiveness, attack and back to smile and laughter, all in the space of 4 minutes. This is achieved through changes from movement to facial stillness, eye movement, (eyes cast down, sideways or upwardly peering or straightforward twinkling). The emotions are held almost exclusively in her eyes. The only bodily transmitted movement comes from the sulky swinging of her legs on to the bed which verges on a histrionic gesture; much as a teenager would enact. The emphasis is on transparency and natural behaviour; small gestures and extremely subtle changes in expression which run the range from innocence, experience and wry sophistication to a gift for physical comedy. All is witnessed in this scene.

Leslie Manville similarly has worked with Leigh since 1988 and the same five films as Sheen. Manville is more overtly effusive on her compatibility with Leigh's methods. In the majority of interviews she repeatedly remarks on the collaborative element. She notes,

'He is truly wanting your input on a major scale. We are acting in a very particular way with Mike and you buy into it and stick to the rules and you do it in the way it has to be done. You can't break the rules with him otherwise it goes pear-shaped (*All or Nothing*, interview).

Much the same as Sheen she is prepared to go with Leigh's artistic insights unquestioningly and privileges his 'rule making'. In contrast to Sheen, Manville undertook an exaggerated performance, which elicited much controversy, in the portrayal of upper-class Letitia. Manville's acting in *High hopes* and *Another Year* verge on stereotypical caricatures. In

High Hopes Manville's comedic portrayal of Letitia relies on her slightly stilted and strangulated voice, staccato jerky delivery with a raised end inflection, a tilt of the head upwards; literal stiff upper lip and tension in the neck causing the tendons to be visible. In *Another Year* she hunches her shoulders, again fast-speaking, jerky sentences, quick actions.

Her comedy unlike Sheen's deploys parodic and gestural signs. Sheen's work is minimalist in its expressivity whereas Manville is full of vitality and redundancy. But both have clearly profited by being given a degree of performative autonomy.

Sally Hawkins is a less experienced actress, and thus more likely to be overwhelmed by Leigh's presence:

We talked for a while then Mike went out saying that he'd come back to observe me in character. For the first five minutes after he left the room I ran about thinking, "Oh, God, what do I do? What would Timothy Spall do?" Then I settled down and it went fine' (*Happy Go Lucky*, Telegraph Interview (22 April 2010))

Hawkins shows a ditzy sparkle that she finds hard to mask even in one of Leigh's most bleak films, (*All Or Nothing*). Leaning over the guardrail of the balcony on her high-rise council flat, Hawkins surveys the grass and wreckage below. Hungry and cross with her dysfunctional alcoholic mother a glance from her carries an irrepressible light that is given full reign in the character of Poppy in *Happy Go Lucky*. Hugely irritating to some, a ball of irrepressible fun to others, Hawkins performance is one of perpetual high-energy movement. The sparkling, darting eyes, continual head motion and almost each sentence delivered with a giggle, mirror the image of her meeting with Leigh. Even she, inexperienced as she is, has been able to work on characteristic performance tropes.

From the above, I want to suggest that men and women's different position in the patriarchal structure profoundly affects the way they are able to deal with a method that looks authoritarian but which encourages a degree of expressivity and risk. When actors such as Manville, Sheen and Hawkins work with Leigh, they are required to create an 'I'; an entity that is dynamic and changing. The character needs to be an ongoing, social construction that has a central aspect of self-consciousness. Manville, Sheen and Hawkins, partly due to directorial power here, and partly due to the female proclivity for self-awareness are able to create this.

Professor of psychology Phillippe Rochat argues:

We have the ability to switch hats and transform ourselves according to circumstances. [...] all of us as persons, there is always an opposite, something in many ways radically different, always ready to manifest itself depending on life's circumstances (p. 195).

It is this notion that we are multifaceted and have the ability to undertake many roles that is of importance here along with the idea that we have within us characteristics that are the opposite of our 'everyday' selves. It is these other selves that Leigh encourages his actors to draw upon.

This actor/Leigh relationship may be better explained as not being Method acting, but as developing a form of authentic psychodrama, as the actor and their character merge. Leigh appears to be encouraging actors to dig into themselves and find a character to act out in his films. Rather than be considered a writer/director Leigh has a role as psycho dramatist and filmmaker that produces some extraordinary vignettes of character.

Operating as some kind of psychological guru/director, Mike Leigh's treatment of his actresses elicits a special intensity in their performances. As part of a psycho dramatic approach, Sheen, Manville and Hawkins have been encouraged by Leigh to develop parts of their personality hitherto unknown to them. As Rochat suggests, 'regarding human nature: [...] a person by definition is not singular, but rather multiple and changing...' (p.196). We all exist in compartmentalised contexts, having different micro narratives in life. He further observes that it is a very human ability to role play: 'Deception, impersonation, self-representation, seduction and constant social monitoring are our trade' (p.208). This appears to suggest that Leigh could not elicit a performance from an actor if it was not within them as part of an unconscious buried identity. This leads us to Barry King's suggestions that personification relies upon performances corresponding with the actor's personality (p.293). The performances are therefore instinctive rather than nuanced by Leigh's directorial control.

Finally, we need to look at agency and the actor/director relationship. At a primary level, framing, editing and camera movement all partially determine the performance. At a secondary level, there is the performance of the actor, whereby the actions of the voice and body create character and so contribute to the meaning. Leigh in prolonged rehearsal periods sees how the actors' body naturally moves in the performance of their role. Tapping into this ensures integrity and naturalistic performance style, thus achieving Leigh's particular form of

realism. For the actors themselves, his psycho-dramatic approach allows each to develop their insights and techniques; Sheen as minimalist, Manville as excess and Hawkins high energy; although, these could, to use James Naremore's expression, form an 'expressive coherence' (p.68). In some places Leigh's work goes towards an 'expressive anarchy', where he is pushing the boundaries of what may be considered realism.

In answer to question of whether Leigh's directorial methods are determined by actors themselves; I would suggest that Leigh in a sense gives them 'permission' to release facets that are buried in their unconsciousness; an area for subsequent work.

To conclude, I have argued that performers' gender position affects them acutely in the styles they are able to purvey. Some productions methods that look authoritarian may paradoxically release female actors from habitual and deferential patterns of performance. Such a view calls profoundly into question traditional notions of film authorship.

All this attests to recent work by theoreticians and how a range of performance analysis is necessary when looking at autonomy and gestural habits

Bibliography

Brooks, X. (2010, October 28). 'Mike Leigh: Buddha of suburbia'. *The Guardian*.

Kermode & Mayo, 'Mike Leigh's method'. Interview with Leslie Manville 27th Oct. 2010.

King, B. "Articulating Stardom". *Screen* 26, no. 5 (1985): 30.

McDonald, P. 'Secrets and Lies: Acting for Mike Leigh'. (1999). In Lovell, A. & Krämer, P. (Eds.). *Screen acting*. London & New York: Routledge. pp.138-151.

Naremore, J. (1990). *Acting in Cinema*. London: University of California Press Ltd.

Preston, J. (2010, April 22). Sally Hawkins Interview. *The Telegraph*.

Rochat, P. (2009). *Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sheen, Ruth, DVD extra *Another Year* (2010).

Spall, Timothy, DVD extras *All Or Nothing* (2002/1).