

Pricked by Thatcher's thorns



Philip Davis as Cyril with director Mike Leigh on the set of *High Hopes*.

High Hopes
Directed by Mike Leigh

By Pat Aufderheide

THINGS FALL APART. THE CENTER cannot hold, either. And still, in its irritating way, life goes on. Not life as you knew it, perhaps, but culture goes right on permutating.

Thus, we get *High Hopes* amid the shards of Thatcherism. Or perhaps I should say spikes, since cacti are the central metaphor in English film

director Mike Leigh's prickly entry into the bitter-wit-of-the-late-20th century sweepstakes.

High Hopes has an energy and interest that would baffle every teacher of Scriptwriting 101 and every agent pitching a package. And it must have driven to distraction its own promotion people, who are marketing a product (whether or not it wants to be one) on the entertainment machine's assembly line. The movie has a story of sorts, but that's not really the point. Its journey through the windows and into the

homes of the Thatcher era's winners and losers is a probe of a society's soul.

That puts it squarely in a biting, lively collection of recent British films about the quality of life and

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hope under late capitalism. Filmmakers, it seems, have taken on the social role of the canary in the coal mine. But unlike, say, Stephen Frears' *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, the director's anger and curiosity are

creative work and research. We go year by year, inventing the history, not the film. Part of the joy in the thing is that they become real people. You went to work every day and wanted to find out what happened to them.

What I did, wearing a writer's and a director's hat simultaneously, is to push and pull and cajole in a direction to that final microcosm from which I can construct the final film. Because I'm obliged to care about every character at the center of his or her universe, and take on every sort of detail about everybody, when I finally stand back it comes ready-made, as it were, with layers and layers.

But listening to this, I would never have imagined the wild clash of performance styles in the film. Yes, but all that is drawn from real experience. For instance, the couple next door—they are people whose parents have country estates, and who went to English public schools—that couple's style is based on their characters. And the sister: if you tell me you don't know anyone as neurotic as that, I simply don't believe you. Of course, it's possible to achieve a more naturalistic style or mode in the way I work. I am not

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is to make characters mere ciphers of one notion or another.

Your question is also about the particular preoccupations of the central characters, with which I would sympathize and which are an expression of my concerns. The film

works on a number of different levels concurrently. The film is about holding on to their values and sense of humor, with some courage, I think.

The film is inconclusive. There are no easy answers. You have a distinctive working style, improvising with the actors to develop character and only then writing the script.

My improvisational approach goes back to creating that microcosm. Although there is an idea, a conception, I start with an open brief. I won't do a project anyone puts pressure on me to describe. I work individually with each actor to bring a character into existence, through

controlled in *High Hopes*. They are expressed through the development of characters that range from the naturalistic to the burlesque.

Clashing styles: Leigh, a veteran stage and TV director (see accompanying interview) showcases radi-

Former television and stage director Mike Leigh's movie *High Hopes* fits squarely into a biting, lively collection of recent British films about the quality of life and hope under late capitalism.

cally different performance styles, associating them with different values and classes living cheek by jowl in Thatcher's England. Each performance is boosted just slightly past plausibility, so that you never forget you're watching performances. Yet the performances are so well-grounded in subcultural detail and so well-supported by production design that you don't doubt their relation to reality.

Shirl (Ruth Sheen) and Cyril (Philip Davis) are at the center of the film. Cyril is a downwardly mobile veteran of more optimistic days. At 35, he's a motorcycle messenger, delivering communications to a world he refuses to join. Neither he nor the winsome, toothy Shirl has high hopes—except the highest one of all, to find some meaning in life. Shirl thinks they could have a baby, but Cyril can't bear initiating new life when he can't figure out the point of it himself. He explains it to her as they stare at Karl Marx's gravestone, engraved with Marx's maxim that the goal is not to understand the world but to change it. "It's a different world now," Cyril says. "Soon there'll be 26 TV stations blaring out 24 hours a day... It's pissing in the wind."

The global situation isn't what brings Cyril to that conclusion, though, but evidence much closer to home. As he tells Shirl in one of their baby discussions, "Families fuck you up." And there's his family to prove it. His sister Valerie (Heather Tobias), for instance, is a permanently cranked-up hysteric, whose husband, a used-car salesman, is really married to the entrepreneurial ethic. With her gaudy reflective wallpaper, an Exercycle and red sports car, she's a sauntering embodiment of discontent disguised as consumer extravagance. She's the case against kitsch. When Valerie throws a birthday party for her senile mother (Edna Dore), the scene becomes something like a John Waters film as dreamed by Sam Shepard.

The neighbors provide no better example. A young elite couple have moved in next to the mother's council flat, in what could be a demonstration project for Thatcher's privatization schemes. When the old lady locks herself out, we watch the cultures clash. Laetitia (Leslie Manville) is too impatient even to wait for the woman to drag her body up the steps: "Chop, chop!" she cries. She's got an opera to attend, a charity to donate champagne to and no time to waste.

Cool and arch: In this madhouse of decaying lives and hardened hearts, Cyril has the decency to be depressed about what is patently depressing, while Shirl is the movie's earth mother, patient and kind because someone has to be. (Shirl is the one who cultivates the cacti—one named Thatcher—that punctuate her apartment, otherwise a friendly den.) These characters are played by hypernaturalism, understated and cool. The perspective of the film, even when the shots are not taken from their point of view, is theirs.

The worlds they intersect, by contrast, are all archly poised. Edna Dore plays the mother with minimalist frozen despair, and when mother and daughter face off in a birthday battle over eating cake, it's like watching a Beckett play collide with a soap opera. The elite couple's characters are rendered so crisply they crack at the edge of their upper-class accents.

A clash of styles this bold is made possible in part by the high cultural definition of Britain's class system, but it's still a risky ploy. What makes it work is in part the intensity of each performance. What also makes it work is its match with the bizarre fragmentation of English daily life today. Cyril's dismay and Shirl's yearning, their rejection as well as their acceptance, gain plausibility by the revue-sketch quality of the lives around them.

High Hopes, which develops such a somber theme, is full of hilarious moments in the tone of a film by Pedro Almodovar. Many of the moments were spiked with outrage, and some of them are elegant metonyms for absurdity masked as ordinary reality. The film offers an odd but invigorating hope, in Cyril's remark near the film's end: "I'm scared of getting bitter." Maybe that's why Shirl's still with him—because he hasn't yet given in.

In this highly ambitious little film, Mike Leigh has focused on the problem of going on when life seems to have lost its center, when baseness is rewarded but even the rewards don't bring satisfaction, when the experience of daily life is at vast odds with the image factory. He's too smart to deliver answers. Instead his characters deliver the reality that we still have choices to make, and must make them. ■

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Mike Leigh talks of his *High Hopes*

By Pat Aufderheide

MIKE LEIGH, AFTER TRAINING and experience in the theater, made his first film, *Bleak Moments*, in 1971. Since then he has become well known for his television productions, developed through the unorthodox method of creating characters with actors through improvisation and then writing a script, evolving a fiction style he describes as "a form of social documentary." He spoke with *In These Times* in Washington, D.C.

How have you managed to take a subject and situation that most people would find depressing, and make a film that, without denying a grim reality, is far from depressing?

I don't approach it from the viewpoint of having a problem to illustrate. What I try to do is to create a microcosm. I try to make it as three-dimensional and solid as I can. What I don't do and don't much care for

By Richard Ryan

Wrestling with ideas becomes a philosophical grudge match

IN THE LAST WEEK OF DECEMBER A significant episode in American intellectual history quietly unfolded in the halls and conference rooms of the Sheraton Hotel in the nation's capital. Still, despite the reports of a "new intellectualism" abroad in the land, we can safely presume that the average Washingtonian paid scant attention to the annual meeting of the eastern division of the American Philosophical Association (APA).

Not that it's surprising: for the last 20 years the "analytic Anglo-American" school, the dominant force in U.S. philosophy departments, has narrowed the field to a constricted set of linguistic, logical and scientific questions that seemed to bypass both the grand humanistic tradition of Western philosophy and the ad hoc political crises. While many distinguished analytic philosophers (Hilary Putnam, Noam Chomsky) were personally progressive, the analytic movement itself was disengaged, apolitical and aloof. If you weren't an academic philosopher the field offered you no "tools for living."

Pragmatist perestroika: But in the '80s a transformation has come over the sundry historians, logicians, linguists, et al. who call themselves philosophers. The theorists now entering the field have balked at the discipline's self-imposed limitations. And many prominent veterans of the analytic school have turned their backs on former doctrines, denounced theories they themselves formulated and leaped into the fracas as American philosophy re-invents and re-discovers itself. Re-invents itself by submitting to the powerful mutating radiation of literary and social theory: post-structuralism, deconstruction, neo-Marxism, feminist and minority criticism. Re-discovers itself by acknowledging (as used to be widely known) that some of the most radical and original Western thinkers since the death of Kant came out of the American pragmatist school: Peirce, Dewey and James foremost among them.

The effects of this intellectual upheaval were visible throughout the December meeting of the APA, and most apparent in diversity of tendencies on parade. There were plenty of traditional workshops to attend ("Aristotle's Treatment of Megalopsychia"; "Foundationalism and Regress Arguments") but connoisseurs could also sample the more *nouvelle* dishes: "The Taoist Legacy to the New World Religious Consciousness" "Lacan's Hamlet: Mourning, Woman and the Phallus"; "The Role of Seeing in Lynch's *Blue Velvet*."

Affinity groups included such as the International Philosophers for the Prevention of Nuclear Omnicide, the King-Gandhi Society and the Sartre Circle. Animal rights were de-

bated; *perestroika* was cross-examined; Husserl, Heidegger and Foucault showed up at dozens of trendy seances. One indication of the field's new secular spirit: *In These Times* and other progressive news outlets were alternately praised and attacked at a workshop on "Philosophy and the Media."

Rigor, or rigor mortis? This explosion of philosophic pluralism, as the movement is being called, comes only after years in which metaphysical, social and aesthetic concerns were suppressed in the name of analytic "rigor." As described by Haverford College's Richard Bernstein (the APA's Eastern president for 1988), the eclipse of so-called continental philosophy began just after World War II, "when what was going on in European philosophy [phenomenology; existentialism; hermeneutics] was taken to be pretentious, obscure, woolly and muddled." Anglo-American philosophers, citing the twin disasters of fascism and

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communism—which were often seen as outgrowths of romantic German philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche—fought for a program that would purify philosophy of mystical or irrational elements.

There was something overhasty in all this, since many of the progenitors of the analytic movement—Frege, Wittgenstein and Gödel, for instance—were German-speaking

philosophers heavily indebted to their romantic forerunners. But with the advent of computers and the seeming triumph of techno-capitalism, the hold of logic and scientific method on philosophy seemed secure. Pockets of resistance survived among theologians, Marxists and existential psychologists but, by and large, analytics reigned.

As Bernstein noted in the convention's presidential address, the reign was not entirely peaceful. Paradoxes and inconsistencies constantly undermined analytic systems, and as time passed scientific approaches appeared unequal to resolving traditional philosophical concerns. But not until the importation of avant-garde French criticism 10 years ago did philosophy begin to reach out to disciplines beyond the sciences—and especially to literary criticism—for support.

Contours of a renaissance: At the same time, many disenchanted analytic philosophers were re-reading the American pragmatists and discovering connections between the skeptical, evolutionary theories of Peirce and Dewey and the radical critics of the French school. The analytic foundations trembled, and suddenly everyone was "under erasure." Richard Rorty, a philosopher of language, became the high priest of neo-liberalism. Hilary Putnam, a distinguished philosopher of mathematics, started talking mystical metaphysics. Arthur Danto, an analytic historian of ideas, became the

art critic for *The Nation*. The presence of these famous converts at December's APA convention underlined the gathering's acknowledged leitmotifs of renaissance and renewal.

The contours of this history were traced in Bernstein's talk, "Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds." Bernstein reminded his listeners of the golden age of Amer-

The conference revived a vision of the humanities as a relevant spectator sport.

ican philosophers, when the pragmatists were less interested in scientific certainty than in forming a critical community where ideas could be tested by consensus and democratic investigation. Saying that there was no reason for thinkers to give up their differences, Bernstein still urged them to "displace ideological labeling with reasonable philosophical engagement."

In the face of academics' mutual distrust, this call for intellectual tolerance was not entirely well-received. The associate editor of the *Journal of American Philosophy* and a supporter of the continental position remarked: "I doubt there will be any 'healing of wounds.' The divisions are much too deep to be overcome." Naturally, the hundreds of philosophers trained as analytics are going to be reluctant to give up their turf.

Regardless of whether the continental, pragmatic and pluralist doctrines thrive, the old school will have sheer numbers on its side. The fact is that many major philosophy departments remain firmly in analytic control, ignoring the renaissance of classical American philosophy, let alone the strange offerings of continental theory.

And even if the new wave succeeds there is a second and inevitable obstacle to Bernstein's goal of intellectual unity: the very real possibility that as the analytic continental split is overcome, the surviving "pluralist" school will rupture into a contest as belligerent as the current dispute.

Jacques around the clock: This possibility was foretold on the final day of the conference, an occasion of high intellectual drama, as the great French critic Jacques Derrida, the founder of the fearsome theory of "deconstruction," faced off against Thomas McCarthy, an ascen-

dant scholar from Northwestern who is one of this country's leading exponents of "critical theory," the program of leftist neo-rationalism associated with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

Derrida, once a *bête noir* in American philosophical circles, is now, it seems, a distinguished presence, invited to address the APA convention by the organization's president. As though sensing the opportunity to win fresh intellectual converts, Derrida performed brilliantly even by his high standards: his talk, a long discourse on the nature of friendship and democracy, featured all the signature jokes, diversions and intellectual hand grenades that have made deconstruction so notable.

Derrida argued that our Western view of friendship is grounded in a tradition of "virile homosexuality" that precluded the possibility of friendship between men and women, women and women, natives and foreigners, or even a kind of "pre-Greco-Greco," "pre-Judaeo-Christian" friendship between humanity and nature. He then called for a new form of friendship that would launch a previously unknown form of democracy, "a democracy that is yet to come."

McCarthy's sharp and straightforward commentary nicely set off Derrida's baroque musing. McCarthy, in a series of common sense objections, noted that Derrida's prescribed "total transformation" of traditional democracy "seems to float the politics of deconstruction into uncharted waters without any compass." McCarthy said he felt it was fair to ask Derrida to be more specific: "What sorts of social, political, legal and economic institutions does he see superceding those we have experienced?"

City Paper, D.C.'s hip local weekly, ran a blunter review of the Derrida concert: "Deconstruction is really a post-modern version of irony. And when you've got that rhythm, you can't dance politically." And a few days earlier, neo-liberal celebrity Richard Rorty, in a workshop on pragmatism and education, dismissed deconstruction as a fairly predictable form of romantic skepticism with no significant political applications.

Such complaints suggest that a possible liberal/leftist assault on deconstruction is brewing, to the benefit of the analytic status quo. That would be a pity, after the communal success of the December APA convention, which many participants agreed was the most diverse and energetic meeting the association has held in years. At very least it revived a vision of the humanities as relevant and unpredictable, a spectator sport. Especially when literary critics show up at philosophy conferences and get attacked for not being political enough. ■

Richard Ryan writes frequently for *In These Times*.



Jacques Derrida: frolicking amid the rubble of the deconstruction zone.