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**EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS HATED ABOUT
THATCHER'S BRITAIN: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS
OF MIKE LEIGH'S *HIGH HOPES* (1988)¹**

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One of the major trajectories in cultural studies has been to introduce into the academy previously excluded and disenfranchised subjects (Abbas, 1996: 290). In this respect even a late-comer like Spain has benefitted from developments abroad. Indeed, already in the 50s and 60s, cultural studies emerged in Britain as a form of dissent against the ideological bias of ruling-class culture, which took the directions of a critique of ideology, the study of subcultures and working-class cultures, and the study of the mass media. The related critiques of race and gender soon also became part of the same agenda, followed (especially in the United States) by multiculturalism and the politics of identity which allowed ethnic minorities to voice their dissenting views on Western *historical* culture (Robins, 1997:61; Gilroy, 1997: 299-346).

From this very brief rehearsal of well-known trends, the obvious observation is that the enlarged and inclusive notion of culture developed by cultural studies in Britain and the United States (without forgetting Canada or Australia) has won real spaces in the Spanish academy, most universities having by now opened their curricula to marginal voices and positions. And yet, in its travels to Spain, it seems that cultural studies has simultaneously lost or shed one of its most important peculiarities: namely its radical, critical, *political* sparkle.² As I have argued elsewhere (1999:12-13; 2001: 15-18), despite the number of self-declared cultural studies courses, projects and publications crowding the academic marketplace, so far, there have

been few systematic efforts to reflect on what is entailed when one decides to adopt a cultural studies label to define one's work.

It is with this contention in mind that I propose a *cultural* reading of Mike Leigh's 1988 film, *High Hopes*. Precisely because cultural studies is not based on disciplines, but focused on issues regarding gender, class, sexuality, national identity, colonialism, race, ethnicity, etc. (Giroux, 1999), my intention is to put into practice its transdisciplinary approach to understanding the world by relating/connecting it to the adjacent field of cinema, which has tended to define itself outside cultural studies. In this respect, the present analysis can be looked upon as an attempt to supplement film theory's focus on the specificities of the medium, text and genre with a view of the "text" (visual text) as thoroughly contextual. In part, this will require looking at *High Hopes* from the perspective put forward by Norman Fairclough in his fourfold legitimisation of textual analysis (1995: 208-9). As a cultural linguist, Fairclough's *theoretical* reason stems from his conviction that language is widely misinterpreted as transparent. He therefore recommends drawing together contexts and texts as a form of social action, especially if the purpose is to unearth those mechanisms at work in language that "produce, reproduce and transform social structures". His *methodological* reason is that texts constitute a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes. The *historical* reason is that texts are sensitive barometers of social processes, movements and change. Finally, the *political* reason is that it is increasingly through texts (visual texts included) that social control, social domination *and* contestation are exercised.

Fundamental to this line of thinking is the conviction that political and ideological concerns cannot be bracketed out of *any* cultural analysis. As Lawrence Grossberg vehemently put it, cultural studies takes the political, the ideological to be its theoretical "heart" (1997:196; 237; 284). This affirmation is suggestive of my own approach to Mike Leigh's film. What follows will therefore be a radically contextual —ideological *and* political— attempt to unearth relation(s) between *High Hopes* —a (mass) cultural product— and *Culture* itself. Hence, after a little detour into the economic, social and political situation during the eighties in Britain, Leigh's film will be examined from the perspective of genre, in conjunction with a brief discussion of the film's conditions of production and the position of the director. This background information will then enable me to concentrate on the text itself and extrapolate from it the extent to which its comic portrayal of class, family and sexuality is in fact connected to and conditioned by context. More concretely, my aim is to expose how, for all its humorous focus on the actions, interactions and intimacy of three different couples, Leigh's *High Hopes* is —or represents— a direct and corrosive attack on the social inequity, greed and meanness generated by Thatcher and her conservative governments during the eighties.

Cultural studies' political and ideological tenet is grounded in the theory of "articulation" developed by Stuart Hall in the eighties in which he argues that the meaning of cultural texts and practices is invariably the result of: "a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, *under certain historical conditions*, but need not necessarily, be connected" (my emphasis) (1986: 53). In other words, the process called articulation is the practice of mapping connections, establishing correspondences, linking "this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics" (in Daryl Slack, 1997: 115), but with a view of meaning as always expressed in (and determined by) a specific context, a specific historical moment, within specific discourse(s).

With this in mind, let us begin with a little historical detour or bird's-eye-view of the eighties. During Thatcher's eleven years in power, the ruthless unleashing of market forces may have helped a great number of British people to prosper materially but at the same time it turned Britain into a morally callous, crude, and desperate society where a falling quality of life was "covered up" by a rising standard of living (Quart, 1994, 241). In a few words, Thatcher helped create a country where the rich got richer and consumed more conspicuously, while the ethic of social responsibility began to crumble. As the South of England and London became more prosperous and yuppified, the industrial North's steel towns and mining villages withered away. This growing geographical and social division was further accentuated by the Prime-Minister's policies which included cuts in public spending, tax reductions weighed towards the affluent and, where possible, the privatisation of social services.³ Thus, despite the high-tech and financial industries flourishing in the South, the number of homeless rose nationwide to one million and twenty per cent of the people lived below the poverty line.⁴ Also, burglary, violence and vandalism increased so much that Britain achieved the dubious distinction of having the third highest prison population within the European community (after Portugal and Spain) (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002, 542). Seen from this angle, it seems no exaggeration to state that one of Thatcher's prime legacies was a more impoverished life for a sizeable portion of the population. Even so, with much of the traditional political opposition (the Labour Party leadership, the unions, Liberals and Social Democrats) neutralised by the party in power (Woodward, 2000, 96; Ramsay, 2002, 29; 35), a large segment of the working class, who had regularly voted Labour, went over to the other camp, embracing the Tory vision of an enterprise culture. In fact, dissatisfaction with the Labour party and disorientation in the opposition ranks were so great during the decade or so of "Tory" rule that British films of the eighties seemed to be one of the few remaining ideological weapons effective enough to confront the Thatcher tide.

In this respect, the importance of the cycle of films John Hill labels "state of the nation films" (1999: 133-165) is that it offered a clear alternative to the image of

a prosperous, entrepreneurial, and triumphant Britain promoted by Thatcher's favourite advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi (Young, 1993: 508-10), as well as by much of the daily press. Thus, although formally and aesthetically diverse, films like *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), *High Hopes* (1988), *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) and *Riff-Raff* (1991) (among others) shared a similar thematic preoccupation, projecting as they did critical images of contemporary Thatcherite Britain to international audiences.

These "state of the nation" films are in striking contrast to that group of internationally successful British films, produced in the same decade, known as "heritage films", whose salient feature was their apparent recoil from the turbulent present and their preference for invoking, in a pictorial, decorative style enveloped in nostalgia, a more serene, pastoral, hierarchic Britain.⁵ The group of films under consideration depicts Britain as a flagrantly urban society, heterogeneous, socially fractured, and permeated with large pockets of unemployment and poverty. Even so, in foregrounding the damage wrought by de-industrialisation, mass unemployment and poverty typical of the Thatcher years, these films, Carney and Quart remark (2000: 6), made no claim to promote an alternative *political* perspective. The only political certitude that the directors and their films shared was that of an arrogant, vindictive Margaret Thatcher as a political villain. Hence, if the British directors of "state of the nation films" (excepting Ken Loach, whose explicitly socialist appeals to an increasingly beleaguered working-class have remained unchanged)⁶ did not have an antidote to Thatcherism, their work at least represented a potent way of exposing, denouncing the injustices, meanness, greed, and absurdity of much of contemporary life during the Thatcher era.

This is certainly the case with *High Hopes* which was critically applauded as the best film in the 1988 New York film Festival (Quart & Quart, 1989: 56) and which represented Mike Leigh's return to the big screen after seventeen years' break from the medium.⁷ Set mostly around the King's Cross area in London, the film examines the interconnected lives of seven characters: the hippyish couple made up of Cyril (Philip Davis), a despatch rider, and his gardener girlfriend Shirley (Ruth Sheen); Cyril's bitterly morose mother, Ms Bender (Edna Doré), the last elderly council tenant on a gentrified Islington street⁸ and next-door neighbour to the repellently yuppie Rupert and Laetitia Boothe-Brains (David Bamber and Lesley Manville); and Valerie (Heather Tobias), Cyril's sister, a neurotic, hyperactive social climber married to the crassly entrepreneurial Martin Burke (Philip Jackson).

Through the actions and interactions of all these characters and some striking secondary figures, Leigh conveys (or "articulates") a view of the social tone and class tensions developed during the eighties in Britain. For instance, as Shirley jokingly comments, she has named one of the spikiest cacti in her collection of

plants "Ms Thatcher", "because it's a pain in the arse". *High Hopes* is undoubtedly an acutely political film. However, as a perceptive article in *Cineaste* remarked (Ellickson & Porton, 1994: 10), it is also typical of Mike Leigh to refuse to engage in straightforward political sloganeering, preferring instead a distanced view and dispassionate tone. In Ellickson and Porton's words, Leigh "is a left-leaning director who has no inclination to make films that will inspire the working-class to mount the barricades". In a sense, Cyril can be seen as a mouthpiece of this attitude for while he frequently condemns the Tories with articulate fury, his mixture of cynicism and languor prevents him from being the exemplary radical, left-wing hero. Nor does Leigh offer easy (political) answers (and certainly not Marxist solutions). Instead, he prefers to "share" ideas, predicaments, feelings and emotions with the audience (Petley, 2000: 591). Hence, as occurs in many of Leigh's other films, the whole story in *High Hopes* hovers between comedy and tragedy, with despair constantly lurking beneath the surface. It is this pervading feeling of impending doom, sometimes amidst hilarious scenes, that makes Leigh's work "political" in the personal, formal and aesthetic sense rather than in any easily identifiable party political sense.

It is impossible to discuss Leigh's work without discussing his working methods. In fact, as Michael Coveny asserts (1997: 96-7), the director's methods have changed little since he developed them in the theatre in the mid nineteen sixties. As Leigh himself stated in 1973:

I begin with a general area which I want to investigate. I choose my actors and tell them that I don't want to talk to them about the play. (There is no play at this stage). I ask them to think of several people of their own age. Then we discuss these people till we find the character I want. Each actor then builds up his or her own character through a lengthy process of research and improvisation, both in the rehearsal room and in real locations. Only when the actors have fully "found" their characters are they brought together and the all-important relationships are formed between the characters: the play is what happens to the characters, what they make for themselves. Behaviour dictates situation". The main work, therefore, is done in research, improvisation and rehearsal long before the camera appears; by that time "there's very much a script. It just happens that I don't start with a document, that's all" (Petley, 2000: 591).

This points us towards a central fact of Leigh's oeuvre: that it is absolutely *not* naturalistic (Carney & Quart, 2000: 34-35). In reply to those critics who try and pigeonhole the director as incapable of portraying "real people" (Kennedy, 1991: 18; Coveny, 1997: 190-1), his work may best be described as "distilled or heightened realism" (Petley, 2000: 591), which certainly does not preclude elements of humour and even caricature in his depictions of characters. In this

respect, the Booth-Braines, are certainly caricatures of typical Tory "nouveaux riches" but they are entirely believable, as is Cyril's sister, the appalling Valerie. Thus, for all the inordinate characterisation of some personae, a great deal is suggested indirectly by showing, in a distorted, figurative way, the world of the eighties as it actually was (Ruchti, 1989:19). Leigh is a merciless observer of the British but his critique is subtly "camouflaged" under the quotidian surface appearance of the film. Speaking at the time of the release of *High Hopes*, Leigh talked revealingly of "distilling my metaphor out of an absolutely tangible, real and solid and plausible and vulnerable and unheroic and unexotic kind of world" (Petley, 2000: 591). Not for nothing therefore does Leigh have his most positive characters, Cyril and Shirley, visit the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, on which is written, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to *change* it" (my emphasis).

High Hopes is not built around a narrative that moves neatly from incident to incident to a conclusion. Leigh begins the film with a stranger, Wayne (Jason Watkins), a dim provincial who arrives from a place called Byfleet to stay with his sister.⁹ Completely lost in the metropolis, he asks Cyril and Shirley for directions, "she lives in London, do you know her?" The couple take pity on him and offer him shelter for the night. The trouble is that, in the following days, he keeps returning to use their bathroom and sleep over, to their gently amused annoyance. He then finally leaves (early in the film). He is someone who has no connection at all to the other characters or to anything that happens later in the film, except that in this character's slightly retarded and dissociated manner Leigh manages to create his distinctive, odd blend of comedy and plaintive desperation. Wayne's role as the vague, totally lost "country bumpkin" serves to counterbalance those other characters who have adapted to the "new Britain". Simultaneously, his plight in London establishes an early basis from which Cyril and Shirley's relation to someone in need can then be compared with how the Tory couple, the prime beneficiaries of Thatcher's reign, behave towards Ms Bender when she locks herself out of her house.

Clearly, the couple which unifies all the episodes in *High Hopes* is the one made up of Cyril and Shirley. As representatives of good, good-humoured civic solidarity, both young people are archetypes of the society left behind by the Thatcher revolution. Cyril is a bearded, demi-intellectual who reads *Lenin for Beginners*. He wears jeans, smokes pot, and at the age of thirty-five, works at a dead-end job as a motorbike messenger. He is clearly an alien in Thatcher's Britain, a man with no interest in money, social status or material goods. He simply adapts each day to a cold, impersonal world which treats him as if he were invisible. He is also a quietly angry man filled with class resentment. Even so, as a very marginal and bohemian member of the working-class, his is a very English sort of socialist.¹⁰ In other

words, his socialism derives more from his moral revulsion with capitalist greed and upper-middle-class life-styles than from adherence to a set of ideological positions. In this sense, his answer to the sneeringly put question of what exactly he stands for, "I want everyone to have enough to eat, places to live, jobs to work in", typifies his broad humanism and idealism rather than any resolute political allegiance (Adair, 1989: 65). Still, he is a traditional enough socialist to pay obeisance to Marx and his ideas by reverentially standing in front of his massive bust and grave and reading out loud the epitaph about the need to change the world. For Cyril, however, Marx's "High Hopes", his vision of a classless society, is now merely "pissing in the wind". This idea is forcefully underlined in the cemetery scene by having Cyril and Shirley suddenly surrounded by a group of Japanese tourists, avidly and endlessly taking photographs of the grave. Marx, it seems, has become merely a stop on a package tour, the ideological prestige and influence of his work having dissipated into nothing (Quart & Quart, 1989: 47).

Cyril wants social change but is not sure how to set about getting it. In another telling scene, Cyril and Shirley are visited by a zealously politicised and emotionally chaotic friend, Suzi (Judith Scott), who blazingly, and simplistically, denounces Thatcherism and advocates power for the people. She plans to go to Nicaragua and change the world but Cyril and Shirley appear to have grown out of all that. Cyril softly derides Suzi's "meetings about meetings" and puts down as nonsense her frantic talk of the coming revolution in Britain but, at the same time, he also ruefully admits that he only "sits on his ass and does nothing". Although Suzi does not show up again in the film, her (momentary) appearance in this and the next scene (in the bedroom) is no mere detail in the story. In the first place, an internal, ideological clash is evidently being played out in or through the succession of close-ups of the three friends' faces, their expressions, their silences. By momentarily "pausing" the narrative in this way, it seems that Leigh's goal is to allow viewers time to reflect on what they are being shown. It turns out that Suzi's verbal earnestness, her avowedly revolutionary stance and attempt to persuade her friends is all "surface-talk". Unaware that she has enslaved herself to arbitrary ideas, she does not have the ability to choose among various courses of action. At bottom, she is only someone "playing at" being what she is and deceiving herself in the process. In contrast, the same episode leads Cyril and Shirley to ponder on the meaning of their lives and relationship. Despite his feelings of political despair, Cyril (unlike Suzi) still finds in Marxist ideas a moral centre, an intellectual basis for refusing to fit in to this "new-look England" (Corday, 1989: 47).

The difference thus established between the couple and their irrational guest suggests that judgement is being passed on (empty) rhetorical leftist politics, an

equally harsh condemnation, let it be said, as that lashed out throughout the rest of the film on New Right policies, thoughts and practices.

This said, Leigh does not simply define his main characters in terms of their social and political positions. In his emotionally constricted way, Cyril is portrayed as a tender and gentle man. His warmth is conveyed in his relation to Shirley, with whom he has lived for ten years. They joke, they bicker and talk intimately with each other, and their relationship is helped by their sharing similar social and political values. Interestingly, one of the aspects that stands out most conspicuously in *High Hopes* is the extent to which these lovers are poles apart from the Hollywood ideal of an attractive couple: Shirley is bucktoothed and something of an ugly duckling but the more we get to know her, the more radiant and even beautiful she becomes. She is a warm, kind and loving young woman. She loves plants and flowers and yearns for a child. This does not mean however that she is characterised in any way within broad, conventional "feminine" parameters. She is shown, for instance, to be confident enough to handle on her own Martin's crude, lecherous attempt to come on her sexually.

32 Of the three couples, Cyril and Shirley are the only ones whom Leigh treats without satiric edge. In contrast, the characterisation of the snobbish couple who live next-door to Ms Bender's council house makes one's hair stand on end. Finding Ms Bender on her door-step, having locked herself out of her home, Laetitia Booth-Braine (whose affected accent and supercilious attitude immediately signal her as pertaining to the growing sector of egotistic, money-minded go-getters) asks the old lady if there are any neighbours who can help her. Such a fiercely uncharitable reaction to the helplessness of an elderly neighbour subtly points to or serves as a metaphor for the disintegration of social relationships. In Thatcher's "new Britain" Ms Bender should fend for herself. A world governed by materialism, competitiveness and enterprise has no room for societal solidarity. The weak and defenceless, like Ms Bender, should remain invisible and not encroach on the lives of the rich and successful. This idea is further amplified by means of a host of revealing behavioural or verbal notations. Examples range from Laetitia's expression of exquisitely pained forbearance when she realises that she will have to harbour the old lady until a set of spare keys can be fetched. Likewise, her bracing "chop chop!" as the aged woman totters up the stairs is profoundly offensive, as is her airily callous, "I'll show you where it is in a minute", when Ms Bender asks, with some urgency, to go to the toilet ("Oh, you mean the lavatory!"). Later, when Laetitia tells her husband Rupert that she has agreed to do some charity work and wants him to donate some cases of champagne, his immediate, irritated response is, "Who are we helping *this* time?" (my emphasis).

An everyday mishap (the lost keys) thus serves to present an iconic confrontation between the two extremes of Ms Thatcher's political legacy. Rebutting the reproach made by several critics concerning the unflattering image of Britain projected in such scenes, Michael Coveney argues in Leigh's defence that, "no film-maker has an obligation to be fair [...] about the society he by rights claims as his material. His only obligation is towards the truth as he perceives it, and Leigh perceived a divided and demoralised nation" (1997: 191). With this in mind, Mike Leigh is not only contrasting the economic and spiritual conditions of the age but, by means of Rupert and Laetitia especially, he is evidently incorporating in the film some of the nastier aspects of "gentrification", that is, the process by which houses in decaying and relatively poor areas of the city are bought by upper-middle-class professionals (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002: 319). For a couple like the Booth-Braines, a neighbour like Ms Bender is an embarrassment, someone that only lowers the property values on the street. This is the spirit reflected in Laetitia's brisk advice to Cyril's mother to buy her house and then resell. Even though their designer house is a mystery to Ms Bender, and fascinates Valerie who, after having literally gate-crashed into their home, exclaims, "amazing what you can do with a slum!", what the Booth-Braines have done with this traditional working-class property is to show that while all property can rise in value, and class, the same does not necessarily apply to people.

33 Mike Leigh's venomous parody of the times is further accentuated by his portrayal of the Burkes. Cyril's sister, Valerie, and her husband, Martin, embody that segment of the working-class who identified ideologically with the enterprise culture and thus came to swell the ranks of the new "symbolic majority" (to use Stuart Hall's term) around Thatcher's political project (in Smith, 1994: 41).¹¹ Martin's thriving business as a second-hand car dealer has enabled them to break out of their humble origins. However, the couple's lack of taste, culture and manners is made painfully evident in their lifestyle and surroundings. As lower-scale "nouveaux riches", they own a house in an outlying district, "designed like a hair-dresser's saloon" (Coveney, 1997: 89) and overstuffed with kitch ornamentals like (to name but a few) the fake log-fire, the decorative brass fruit or the glass chess set (in which the pieces are laid out wrongly). By means of this couple, Leigh thus gives vivid expression to the social pretensions and suburban tastes of a working-class "corrupted" by materialism and consumerism (Hill, 1999:194). Since ostentation has become an end in itself for Valerie, she "sniffs" contemptuously at the Tory couple who live on what, to her, is a mere working-class street. At the same time however, Val strives to emulate the Booth-Braines' life-style and, more particularly, Laetitia's costume and manner: as a consequence, she overdresses and wears too much make-up. On this point, although a critic like Harlan Kennedy (1991: 24) sees the grossly exaggerated traits assigned to the character as proof that

Leigh's comic stereotyping is unrealistic and unconvincing, the truth is that the image of Valerie, lonely, insecure and unloved (with an abusive husband who is constantly on the look-out for other women), filling her anxious days exercising and consuming is poignant enough to make her unforgettable.¹²

This said, different as they may be from one another socially and economically, the Burkes and the Boothe-Braines are, in Carney and Quart's view, basically the same (2002: 184). Both couples see absolutely everything and everyone in terms of their own personal perspectives. Martin, for example, assumes that all women are whores and men entitled to sexual favours, which is why he feels free to proposition Shirley, emotionally abuse his girlfriend, and prey sexually on every woman he meets. As he says at one point, "They're all the bleedin' same".

Valerie is motivated by another kind of generalised understanding of experience. Like Beverley and Lawrence in *Abigail's Party* or Aubrey and Nicola in *Life is Sweet*, she thinks that you can *become* someone simply by having the right possessions, wearing the right clothes, or speaking in the right way. In other words, as she demonstrates in her attempt to "be" Laetitia by mimicking her way of dressing and talking, for Valerie you *are* your clothes and mannerisms.

34 For their part, Rupert and Laetitia condescendingly treat everyone below their own social class as being indistinguishable from a tradesman. Rupert's remark, "What made this country great was a place for everyone and everyone in his place" unpleasantly recalls the nationalist maxim of bygone Victorian times, repeatedly re-echoed in New Right essentialist views of (white) upper-class Englishness as the timeless core of Britain (Smith, 1994: 70-1).

The consequence of these characters' incapacity to appreciate, recognise or even consider dissimilar life-styles and points of view is the obliteration of differences and the denial of particular, distinct individualities. Thus, instead of being open and responsive to "others" and other attitudes and outlooks, people like Rupert, Laetitia, Valerie and Martin are shown to trim everything and everyone to fit into their *own* tiny emotional and intellectual categories. Rupert and Laetitia, for example, can't even imagine Ms Bender having ideas, feelings and values different from their own. For her part, Valerie can't even conceive that Cyril and Shirley might want to behave differently at the birthday party from the way she thinks they should. Meanwhile, Martin simply treats Valerie, Shirley, and his girlfriend like dirt. Such a rigid, narrow or "closed" conception of life decidedly calls to mind the political/ideological climate of the times. In other words, if attention is fixed or focussed, not on the "text" (that is on fictional individuals), but on "context" or real-life institutions, it then appears that *High Hopes* is Leigh's reply to Thatcher's systematic, impersonal and totalising conception of society, a version that will not admit any kind of divergence and that demands that individuals conform to it.

With this in mind, one way to think of many of the scenes in *High Hopes* is as contrasting the fixed identity or robotic rigidity of those characters who literally "act out" their lives and relationships according to predefined roles and modes of interaction with the openness, flexibility and emotional responsiveness of characters like Cyril and Shirley who show themselves capable of adapting to every circumstance and to everyone who crosses their path.

The most important illustration of Cyril and Shirley's receptivity to different ways of being, feeling and thinking is their openness to each other's differences of opinion and point of view. To put it differently, Cyril and Shirley don't necessarily agree or see things the same way. Their differences can be comical (as when they give Wayne contradictory directions on how to get to the taxi stand), semi-comical (as when they briefly spar over whether they should go to Valerie's party), or deadly serious (as in their feelings about having a child).¹³ The important point made in the film is that their differences are never suppressed or hidden but aired, respected and, as far as possible, dealt with.

35 Leigh invites the viewers to compare Cyril and Shirley's relationship with that of the other two couples by means of three consecutive bedroom scenes.¹⁴ Seeing all these characters either going to bed or in bed enables one to observe how they genuinely interact with each other in the intimacy of the bedroom. The first of these scenes shows the Boothe-Braines on the stairs, engaged in a ridiculously childish sex game: Rupert, the bow-tied wine merchant, is tearing off his clothes while Laetitia in silk under-garments fondles her scrawny teddy bear (ridiculously and tastelessly named "Mr Sausage") as she pretends to be terrified of her husband's sexual advances. A more extensive view of Rupert and Laetitia's imaginative and emotional limitations comes next as they prepare to go to bed after a night out. As against Cyril and Shirley's mutual understanding, fun and continual play-acting in the preliminaries for sex,¹⁵ there is no inventiveness, no good-natured teasing and joking, no mutually responsive and stimulating exchange of emotions. As Carney and Quart observe (2000: 182-3), Rupert and Laetitia's so-called interaction consists of mismatched, nonintersecting pro-nouncements. They don't really listen, let alone respond, to each other. Their "conversation" is closer to being a series of alternating monologues. Their comments (the nature of which is summarised by Rupert's "Two steaks, same day, totally different" and Laetitia's narcissistic "I thank god every day I've been blessed with such beautiful skin: you really are a very lucky boy. You take me for granted") leave no room for a response or reply. They are so wrapped up in their *own* private worlds that they might be talking to themselves. There is no communication here. The couple is thus shown to be as emotionally estranged from each other as in their relation to others. This fact is trivially expressed by the iciness of Laetitia's tone, scolding Rupert for not remembering the plot of the opera they have just attended; by the stasis of her

physical position, lying in bed with cucumber slices on her eyes, and her reference to the coldness of Rupert's hands.

Just as with the other couples, night-time also implies sexual role-playing games for Valerie and Martin. However, again here, one appreciates an evident contrast between their love-making and the fluidity and harmony in Cyril and Shirley's creative, fun-making improvisations. Apart from being utterly grotesque, the rules set by Valerie, "You're Michael Douglas [...] I'm a virgin", demonstrate that there is nothing personal or original in her way of interacting sexually with her husband. Rather like her treatment of identity as something acquirable (the way she thinks she can acquire Lactitia's identity if she wears the right clothes) her sexual fantasy is derivative, involving *imitating* the roles of popular Hollywood actors. Close ups of her, eyes closed and body contorted in what she imagines to be alluring readiness ("Nah, *you* begin"), provoke nothing but boredom on Martin's part, and thus make up the knife-twisting comedy that, according to John Pym (1989: 10) Mike Leigh has made his own over the years.

Valerie's apotheosis as a comic-pathetic character is the gaudy birthday party that she forces on her reluctant mother and where she toasts her by blurting out that "it could be her last!" Here again, Valerie sets the rules and directs the "surprise" party in such a way that the surprise, the party, and the interest all disappear. Instead of a welcoming hostess, she functions as a kind of dictator who refuses to tolerate the least deviation from her pre-established plan.¹⁶ Since she has decided *how* her family should play their roles, she treats them as puppets whose movements and reactions she can control. In other words, rather than letting the people she has brought together spontaneously exhibit their feelings and attitudes, she forces them to play their parts according to *her* conception of them. This said, if what is (re)presented in the film as a tragi-comic family-scene is magnified and transposed to the reality of the eighties, one can begin to appreciate a deadly subtle depiction of Thatcher's intolerance towards and dominance over anyone defined as the "other" (be the "other" the Argentinians, the EC, trades unions, nationalists or riotous immigrants). As Stuart Hall claims in "Blue Election, Election Blues", this was one of the prime ways in which the new Conservatism of the eighties came to exert "hegemony" over people's attitudes and aspirations (1988: 259-67). And yet, for all her attempts to manipulate other people's thoughts and actions to suit her own pre-conceived designs, Valerie evidently has little of the skills of statesmanship. As a consequence, the family gathering ends up in general chaos and cacophony, rather like *Abigail's Party*, with tearful, drunken Valerie retreating to the bathroom with her dog. In this respect, even though the scene does seem to go somewhat over the top, it nevertheless succeeds in being one of the most pointedly funny and emotionally moving episodes in the film, its only "happy" result being that it finally brings Cyril and Shirley closer to Ms Bender.

Cyril's mother is undoubtedly one of the most convincing characters in the film. She is a working-class widow who has little relation with her children or anybody else in the world. Leigh's camera looks at this isolated woman, and conveys the struggle of her walk as well as the dignity and wear of her face (the film doesn't even turn away from her removing her dentures). Under the camera's careful scrutiny, her seemingly morose and/or uncomprehending silences turn out to show full understanding (and therefore hurt) of what is being said around her. Even so, there is no sentimentalising of the working-class in this portrayal. In a short but telling scene, Leigh subtly uses Mrs Bender to express the nature of British white, working-class, racist attitudes. At the chemist's, the old woman rattles on accusingly about having been robbed, while the camera captures the fear-filled eyes and retreating movement of the young black female shop-assistant. And yet, as with all Leigh's characters, Ms Bender is not presented as an entirely negative character. She is such a depressed and pathetic person that we are just as surprised as Cyril and Shirley are when she says that the wool shawl they have just given her for her birthday is "nice".

The film's final scene sees Cyril and Shirley taking the old woman up on the roof of their building to show her their garden (a few plants near a chimney stack) and point out the sights of London, including King's Cross where, Cyril reminds her, "dad worked". Ms Bender is amazed by the vision of the city from such a height, remarking that it must be "the top of the world" (while what the camera ironically shows us are two enormous gas tanks in the distance).¹⁷ Ultimately, therefore, it could be argued that the tone of the film is not one of despair, but rather of optimism in the face of seemingly impossible odds. However flawed the family might be, perhaps after all it *is* worth something; and perhaps in these acquisitive times, and despite the ascendancy of the appalling Burkes and the Boothe-Braines, there *are* worthwhile family-duties such as the care of the old and the nurture of children (Pym, 1989: 10).¹⁸ Then again, one should be wary of such a simple, straightforward (and almost sentimental) reading of the film's resolution — an interpretation that assumes too readily that Leigh's text offers a transparent surface upon which we may discern its (true) meaning. As mentioned above, it is here — in the question of the relations between discourses and the realities they purport to represent — that cultural critics locate the question of ideology (Grossberg, 1997:136-7). In Hall's view, for instance, because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or practice or event, the ideology of this text, practice or event is not "guaranteed" in any way. In practice, this opens the possibility of "articulating" a reading of Leigh's family drama as less resistant to dominant conservative ideology than it first appears to be. Put simply: in celebrating the virtues of the privatised family, *High Hopes* — for all its apparent leftist, defiant dramatisation of current trends — appears to end up *reinforcing* the very scepticism

about more collective (or "socialist") forms of political action so prominently featured in conservative ideology. On this reading, the film's mood is decidedly more pessimistic, confirming as it does the hegemonic paranoia about the Left and the Left's traditional grand solutions instigated by Thatcher and conservative government members throughout the eighties.

To conclude. Given that films are, by now, the most prominent form of publicly consumed art, their force as sites for interpreting *Culture* is undeniable. This said, the choice of a cultural studies' lens for the discussion of Mike Leigh's film *High Hopes* has been determined by Stuart Hall's concern to think of culture politically. From there the "radical contextualisation" of the film as a "text" whose meaning is both connected to and conditioned by context. In this respect, although the subject matter of *High Hopes* may seem utterly prosaic—ordinary people doing ordinary things—it is nevertheless deadly serious, "articulating" as it does a vivid reality. The film centres on Cyril and Shirley, two ungainly, left-wing relics of an earlier era. Through them, we get to meet the embarrassingly awful Valerie (Cyril's sister) and her husband Martin. Both are caricatures of the offensively loud, vulgar, Tory-voting sector of the working-class that have more money than sense. When one day, Cyril and Valerie's mother locks herself out of her home, the whole family is brought into contact with Ms Bender's next-door neighbours, the Thatcherite yuppies, Laetitia and Rupert, whose values evidently exclude compassion, consideration and generosity. By thus interweaving the "stories" of three different couples, Mike Leigh allows a political dimension to creep in, encouraging us to apprehend (and reject) the cultural "barbarity" associated with the economic beneficiaries of Thatcherism. He does this by contrasting Cyril and Shirley's receptiveness to different ways of being, feeling and thinking with the Burkes' and Boothe-Braines' patronising knowingness, lack of tolerance and spiritual emptiness. By thus calling attention to the failures of communication and connection of couples and families, the film succeeds in expressing values of care and responsibility which cut across the prevailing ethos of Thatcherism. Indeed, while Thatcherism is hardly explicit as a theme in the film, its spirit and inheritance is nevertheless a key presence, both as the target of Leigh's excruciatingly sharp criticisms and in the text's conformist upholding of the traditional nuclear family. For this reason, a film like *High Hopes* is for cultural studies a site of ideological struggle—a terrain of resistance and capitulation. Even so, *High Hopes* is a strikingly powerful film that combines a biting sense of humour with a true-to-life look at the social consequences of the impelling, money-making, culture of the times. In sum, for all its humour and caricature, Leigh's film is, at bottom, a sad comment on the sickly state of Britain.

Notes

1. The research for this paper has been financed by the DGICT thanks to the research project:245-87. I would also like to thank my colleague Celestino Deleyto for his helpful comments on and critiques of this essay.

2. The central point here is that upon their arrival in Spain, cultural studies underwent a kind of mutation as they joined existing academic concerns with issues of race, gender, sexuality, identity etc., eventually being forced to capitulate to the disciplinary-based organisation of knowledge and text-bound imperatives of the Spanish university.

3. The first service to be privatised was the telephone, then followed gas, electricity, water, coal, British Railways etc. (Elles, 1987: 100-103).

4. The most commonly used method of measuring poverty (adopted by the EU and the British government) counts as "poor" those whose income falls below fifty per cent of average income. According to the British government's *Households Below Average Income* measure, poverty is shown to have increased substantially during the last two decades of the twentieth century, from 9 per cent of the population in 1979 to 24 per cent in 1995/6 (Abercrombie & Warde, 2002:124).

5. On heritage cinema see especially Higson (1993; 1996; 1997; 2000;)

6. On Ken Loach's films see for instance, García Brusco (1996); Petley (1992); de Giusti (1999).

7. After the making of *Bleak Moments* (1971), most of Leigh's screen work was done for television, where he established a strong reputation for a very particular approach to filmmaking. Like his compatriots Ken Loach and Stephen Frears, Leigh had

already built up a remarkable body of television work years before he became known to a wider international audience. Some of his memorable TV films include *Nuts in May* (1976), *Abigail's Party* (1977), *Grown-ups* (1980), *Home Sweet Home* (1982), *Meantime* (1983) and *Four days in July* (1985). Although, since the release of *High Hopes* (which was followed by features films such as *Life is Sweet* [1990], *Naked* [1993], the international success of *Secrets and Lies* [1996], *Career Girls* [1997] and *Topsy-Turvy* [1999]), Mike Leigh is now better known than he was formerly. His dedication to television work is probably the reason why he is virtually ignored in most accounts of British cinema.

8. Michael Coveney (1997: 189) relates how, during the filming, cooperation from the "gentrified" neighbourhood in Islington was so unforthcoming that Leigh and his crew had to move down to Bethnal Green to find the two adjacent houses, one privately owned by the stuck up, opera-loving, Boothe-Braines, the other Ms Bender's.

9. Wayne apparently left home after a row with his mother; he went out and bought pork pies instead of steak and kidney pies.

10. The Labour party was formed in 1901. What mostly distinguished the British left from radical parties in other European countries was that it emanated more from humanitarian ideals or a pragmatic response to poverty and the conditions of working-class life than from Marxist ideology (Thompson, 1981: 150-156).

11. In "Blue Election, Election Blues" (1988: 259-67), Stuart Hall emphasises that material interests are important factors in the choices between political projects. Thus, elections are not won or lost on so-called "real" majorities, made up by a clearly defined class or social bloc. In effect, through the

eighties, Thatcherism received the support of a very diffuse, ever-changing "symbolic" or "imaginary" majority, that included at times "many people in the underclasses, the unskilled, part-timers, young, unemployed, women living alone, black people, the homeless, inner-city casualties" (1988: 264). According to their circumstances and aspirations, members of these social groups would vote Tory either because there was no convincing alternative to the established Conservative political project or as a means of bettering their situation, securing their own material interests and social positions.

12. Hill comments that, as with many of Leigh's heroines, the three young female characters in *High Hopes* are all childless. He associates Valerie's and Laetitia's childlessness with the "sterility" of the values they represent (1999: 197-8). Whereas the Boothe-Braines are portrayed as having only one ambition in life—succeeding economically and accumulating goods (designer house, the Saab, the country residence)—Valerie screens her unhappiness at her failure to become a mother in the love she devotes to her pet dog (a pedigree Hafgan) significantly called "Baby". It is also interesting to note that, as occurs in both *Meantime* and *Secrets and Lies*, a woman's inability to have a child is associated with an obsessive interest in home decoration and furnishings.

13. Throughout the film, Cyril is dead set against having a child, not only because "families fuck you up" but because "no one give a shit what sort of world [...] kids are [...] born into".

14. As Leigh himself explained in an interview, the three consecutive bedroom scenes were not part of the initial structure of the film but something that came from the

actors' analysis and research into their characters (Ruchti, 1989: 22).

15. On this point Carney and Quart (2000: 188-189) depict at length what they call the "died with the boots on" bedroom scene which shows, in a five-minute sequence, the many emotional shifts and tonal adjustments Cyril and Shirley are capable of displaying in their sexual play. Shirley begins by wittily casting Cyril and herself as characters in a Western. After many rapid, improvised scenarios, ranging for the humorous to the macho-stance, Shirley ends up adopting a motherly attitude, playing "this little piggy went to market" on Cyril's toes.

16. In this respect, Valerie very much recalls Beverley, the monstrously insensitive hostess of *Abigail's Party*, who trips about her lounge, compels her guests to listen to her favourite Demis Roussos's album and forces unwanted gin-and-tonics on her polite neighbour Sue.

17. As Leonard and Barbara Quart point out (1989: 47), the concluding image somewhat recalls those late fifties' and sixties' realist English films like *This Sporting Life* where the working-class hero is shown standing on a hill staring down at the town and a world that figuratively imprisoned him. In a similar manner, this ironic, "top of the world" view of London can be interpreted as an iconographic "comment" on the unlikelihood of British society—so riven with avarice and inequity and dominated by the politics of Thatcher—ever being transformed in accord with Cyril's high hopes.

18. At this point, Cyril's adamant views concerning the irresponsibility of bringing children into this unjust world have given way to a more yielding attitude towards both the imperfections of society and the possibility of parenthood.

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THE ANXIETY OF BEING POSTCOLONIAL: IDEOLOGY AND THE CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL NOVEL

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In a recent essay that begins by recording the joy of returning home, the Sri Lankan author Shyam Selvadurai talks about his decision to return, together with his male partner, for an extended visit to Colombo.¹ The description begins along conventional lines (large mansions, curious but well-meaning relatives, sumptuous meals), but the idyllic trip is interrupted one night by security forces, ostensibly searching for Tamil Tigers.² Selvadurai's instinctive response to the presence of the soldiers outside the house is to rush into his bedroom and remove all things that would indicate that he was sharing a room with his partner. Before the security personnel could enter the room, everything that pointed to his partner's presence in the room had been removed. "Defagging" is what he calls the process. It was for Selvadurai a moment of considerable anxiety, not because he was a Tamil or because he could be suspected of having links with militants, but because he was gay. In this instance, ethnicity and political opinion gave way to sexual orientation as a signifier of otherness. Someone who had written a novel that was clear about its political stance would normally expect a very different motive for the visit, a backlash from an unforgiving state. Given the political message of his first novel, *Funny Boy* (1994), it would have been totally reasonable for the author to fear some reprisal from the government.³ But the soldiers were not there to interrogate a subversive author. They were on a routine check or were investigating complaints about a gay couple.