

An interview with Mike Leigh, director of *Peterloo*: “You don’t run out of steam if what you do...is to literally hold the mirror up to nature”

By David Walsh
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I had the opportunity, during the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2018, to speak to Mike Leigh about Peterloo.

David Walsh: I think *Peterloo* is a tremendous film. I was astonished to hear that the Cannes film festival turned it down.

Mike Leigh: There are many theories. But mine is the most straightforward. It’s not a red-carpet film. There are no stars; it’s not very sexy. Frankly, I don’t care.

DW: Yes, I understand, from your point of view.

ML: We did what we always do, including working very hard to get excellent French subtitles. It’s not arrogance, but we assumed we would be in Cannes. Then the word started to come back that there was an issue, and they said, no. “We respect the film, but it’s not for us.”

What I found far more upsetting and disappointing was that it was rejected by the New York Film Festival. Because almost every one of the films I’ve made, with perhaps one or two exceptions, has been in that festival. I was pretty cross about that.

DW: It’s not what they’re interested in; it’s not what they’re oriented toward.

When I heard you were making a film about the Peterloo massacre, I was intrigued. Not surprised exactly, but intrigued. You were *not* thought of as a filmmaker—although your general sympathies were obvious—who treated political and historical subjects or processes head-on, but obliquely, at an angle, more through their personal or psychological consequences.

I had to think there were a number of factors. First, that there was the accident of the upcoming anniversary next year. Second, that the event took place near to where you grew up. Third, that it was an event that was unrepresented, or underrepresented artistically—except for Shelley’s poem [*The Masque of Anarchy*, 1819], which hardly counts in this context.

Fourth, most importantly, that it had some appropriateness to the state of the world.

ML: First of all *that*.

Of course, we decided to make *Peterloo* knowing that the bicentenary was coming up—it’s next August. And, yes, I did grow up in Manchester. I could get to where the massacre happened in 15 minutes on the bus, when I was a kid.

But here’s the interesting and remarkable fact. We didn’t really know about the event growing up. Nobody talked about it. Why—as primary school kids—we weren’t taken down there, a short distance, and marched around and told “this is what happened here,” I have no idea.

Working on the film, there were people of various generations, from their twenties to people of my age, from the area, who said, “I didn’t

know about this.” And yet the massacre was widely reported and is a famous and significant, seminal event in the history of democracy in Britain, the labor movement, etc., etc.

The last of your various assumptions is of course correct. I had the idea quite a long time ago, before I ever had the idea of making period films, that someone ought to make a film about Peterloo. After I made *Mr. Turner* [2014], it became far more concrete. And on almost a daily basis, we began to say to each other, this is actually very prescient, very relevant to things that are happening. And now, four to five years later, having made the film, it resonates with so many things. The meaning of the concept of democracy needs to be scrutinized.

DW: Particularly under conditions of such vast inequality. Is democracy conceivable when, for example, three individuals in the US have the same wealth as the poorest 160 million people?

ML: Absolutely.

DW: I think the film will resonate with audiences for the same reason.

ML: I hope so. Someone asked me before, well, how would people relate to it now? The fact is an audience can only relate to anything in terms of what they understand about the world they live in. It’s not a polemic; it’s not a film that leaves you with a black-and-white message. I deliberately end it when your emotions are aroused, and I don’t slap all kinds of text on the end.

DW: I was going to raise that issue.

ML: You can go away and find out about those historical facts. I want the audience to go away and deal with feelings of sympathy and anger, and reflect, all those sorts of things.

DW: I don’t mean to speak condescendingly, although I suppose I’m about to, but there is a certain kind of historical drama that would end with soothing, calming titles referring to the Reform Act of 1832, and explaining that the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846 and that by 1875 such and such a percentage of British men could vote, and so forth.

ML: I think that would dissipate the experience.

DW: Yes, absolutely, in a number of ways. Also, the implication of the lack of titles, whether you fully meant it or not, is that the situation itself is open-ended, that the processes extend to the present day. ...

ML: Totally, absolutely. Of course, on one level, it is a distilled dramatization. If you want to use the term very loosely, it’s a reconstruction. But, in fact, it’s not. It’s a metaphor, it’s a film. You can take from it and apply it to things for yourself.

DW: I have no more a crystal ball than anyone else does, in terms of guessing how a work will be received in the immediate here and now, but I deeply feel that it’s a film with a long shelf life, it will continue to work

on people.

ML: We've received generally positive reviews, but not all of them. ...

DW: Do you read your reviews?

ML: Yeah, yeah, at this stage, sure. You have to take the rough with the smooth, and you actually can learn something. Actors on the stage who don't read their reviews, that's different, that's perfectly understandable.

DW: One of the difficulties must have been to reimagine or reconstruct conversations and speech as it took place in the early 19th century, including discussions in working class homes about whether to join certain kinds of protests or not, with all the risks involved. There's inevitably hesitation in the face of such action. It's a serious business for workers and their families. Particularly in 1819—if a worker is blackballed and can't find work, he or she and his or her family might starve to death. How did you go about accurately recreating conversations from 1819?

ML: It's an interesting question. If I was to decide to make a film set, let's say, in the 9th century, I really have no idea how I would set about reproducing accurately a 9th century conversation. But the 19th century. ...

DW: I know, it's not so long ago.

ML: It's all researchable. Apart from anything else, a number of us, from that part of the world, know or remember how old people talked who were the grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of the people in this film. 1819 is less than a century before my parents were born. Plus, for example, Samuel Bamford, who is a character in the film, a famous political activist who lived until the 1870s, published a guide to South Lancashire dialect in 1854. That was terribly useful.

When I put *Topsy-Turvy* [1999] together, about Gilbert and Sullivan, I hadn't done a period piece before. I had a shopping basket full of books and we used to work carefully on each scene, organizing and constructing it. But the key really was the Savoy operas of W. S. Gilbert and their dialogue; that gave us the Victorian edge.

People like Maxine Peake, who plays the mother in *Peterloo*, come with a kind of sense of this, a received sense of it. But the same applies to the dialogue of the magistrates, even the scene of the Prince Regent and all that. There are the plays of the period, with which we are all familiar, as well as the caricatures of James Gilray, Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruikshank.

DW: What were working-class people, as well as radical reformers and so forth, reading at the time? What were their intellectual influences?

ML: That's a really good question. Of course, there was no formal education. And yet you see these working-class radicals who not only made very articulate speeches, but quoted the ancient Greeks. They learned to read, or they were self-taught, or they went to Sunday school. They read everything. I didn't put it in the film because it would have involved too much exposition, but they all read Tom Paine. But, generally speaking, they read everything.

DW: They were presumably familiar with the figures of the French Revolution, Babeuf and so on?

ML: Yes. As the film indicates, the French Revolution was both an inspiration for the radicals and, of course, continually scared the shit out of the authorities. It was only a few decades before.

DW: Like the 1990s for us. There was such a determination to know, to study. One of our difficulties today is the lack of historical knowledge.

ML: I couldn't agree more.

DW: It's not their fault, but I speak to audiences who don't know much about the Vietnam War or the Watergate scandal, much less the Russian Revolution, the French Revolution or *Peterloo*. Again, I don't know what the immediate reaction will be, but I think a film like this is enormously important in that context. It provides a jolt to the whole social and cultural organism.

Have you read your Wikipedia entry recently? It says, "The anger inherent in Leigh's material, in some ways typical of the Thatcher years, softened after her departure from the political scene." I was amused, on

seeing this film, just how your anger had "softened."

ML: It's twaddle.

DW: We spoke in 2008 about this issue, that "entertainment" and art were not mutually exclusive. One of the strengths of *Peterloo* is its liveliness, its texture, its unevenness. There's an artistic choice at work, but it seems to me that it's more than that. There are a good many well-intentioned films at present that are glum, self-serious, suffering from a type of "passive realism." I think this also has to do with the age of the filmmakers, with the generations they belong to.

We are old enough to have lived through certain things. The Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam protests, mass strikes. I was in Britain during the first partial general strikes against the Heath Tory government in 1970 or '71. We witnessed the French general strike in 1968. We know that under certain circumstances people are pushed to the point where they oppose the way things are, and even rise up. Your film is very unusual these days in that it shows that process honestly and concretely. As I say, I think your ability to do that has something to do with what you've seen and experienced, as opposed to what a younger generation of filmmakers, again through no fault of their own, has seen.

ML: I agree. Also, there are films where it's possible for us to be blinded by their seriousness and intent and fail to see that the filmmakers are still, at some level, more concerned with their art than their subject. More concerned, for example, with genre and pastiche than they are with actually investigating the realities of what they're dealing with. To some degree, that may be a key to what we're talking about. If you really are concerned to point your camera at the realities of the world, subject matter drives the form, the content drives the form, motivates the form. It's obvious, of course.

DW: It may be obvious, but it's not the predominant view.

ML: If you are preoccupied with aesthetics or genre, and all of those things, that will get in the way and result in what you're talking about. I've been asked a couple of times what movies I watched in preparing this one. I didn't go and watch any movies. "What about Kurosawa and Eisenstein?" Well, yes, they're in my DNA; I've been watching movies for decades. But you don't set out to reference other movies.

DW: It doesn't feel as though you had. There isn't a particular historical film that came to mind when I saw this film.

ML: Of course, I admire Kurosawa's *Ran* and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, but you're not setting out to imitate or reference them. After all, with the first book you open about *Peterloo*, the juices start to flow, ideas start to emerge. There's no shortage.

DW: What's your sense of Henry Hunt, a central figure in the mass meeting?

ML: Wealthy, a radical, without question a massive, self-serving egocentric. Profoundly in love with himself. Something of a bohemian—he lived with his mistress openly, and all that kind of thing. In terms of what Rory Kinnear and I were concerned with: a great orator, incredibly arrogant, disdainful of ordinary working folk. An interesting contradiction. A key scene, of course, is where the Northern radicals go to his meeting, invite him for a drink and he all but tells them to piss off, basically.

DW: He seems almost a figure left over from the 18th century rather than someone of the mid-19th century, the Chartist movement, the early labor movement, Robert Owen, and so on.

ML: Definitely.

DW: I do think *Mr. Turner* and this film are among the most beautiful and remarkable you have made. We know something about how many artists have suffered declines, sometimes catastrophic decline. It must be somewhat pleasing to still be making these kinds of films at this point.

ML: Yeah, of course, it is. Very pleasing indeed.

But—and this has nothing to do with false modesty—this is just a fact: unlike novelists and painters and poets, you don't make films by yourself.

This film is the product of not only a team, but a regular team that's been at it a very long time. Dick Pope, for example, has shot everything I've done since 1990.

DW: Point taken. But then it makes the following point even stronger. Because while this development must be pleasing personally, I wonder if it doesn't say something as well about the present circumstances. In other words, despite all the surface difficulties that we are familiar with, there is something quite favorable to more serious and ambitious artistic efforts in the present situation. There is an interest in and a hunger for it, which also communicates itself to filmmakers such as yourself.

ML: That's the other answer to the question you're posing. People say to me, "Are you thinking about your next film?" Of course, I am, all the time. I get out of bed in the morning and I live in the ordinary world, I live in the middle of London, I travel on the Underground and all the rest of it. I read the paper. You can't help but be motivated to want to tell stories about now, and "it," on all sorts of levels. I know there are people and some filmmakers who run out of steam, but you don't run out of steam if what you do, by way of a job, is to literally hold the mirror up to nature.

DW: There's a peculiar sense in which this film is one of your most acutely contemporary.

ML: Sure.

DW: We haven't been through that kind of experience in recent years. It's prescient.

ML: Yes, I agree. Big things happen in Britain in years ending in '19. Peterloo in 1819. The closest we've ever come to a revolution was in 1919. It will be interesting to see what 2019 has in store.

DW: I'm not a numerologist, but big things are coming. Thank you.

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