

## Document Citation

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By Amy Taubin

**He-r-r-re's Johnny**, the desperate, destructive, prophet-of-the-apocalypse protagonist of Mike Leigh's brilliantly corrosive *Naked*, a sexually explicit update on a long line of British angry young men. Johnny might be mistaken for a mere misanthrope, so ultra-democratically does he direct his verbal abuse against self and other, young and old, male and female. But Johnny has a special weapon that he reserves for women alone. If he plays passive-aggressive with his tongue—his irreverent wit disarms and seduces even as it cuts to the quick—he uses his prick purely for punishment. Johnny's a hate-fucker. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. Does that seem familiar to you? Pity the woman who can't see it coming, or who deludes herself that next time will be different. After all, he's so smart, so sensitive, so needy in his anger, so little-boy-lost under the scruffy beard and adrenalized body language.

If Johnny were less magnetic, *Naked* wouldn't be tearing away at the sexual body politic from London to Toronto to New York (it opens here on December 15). The issue: is the film an endorsement of misogyny or its exposé? There have already been articles claiming that to place Johnny center screen is to valorize him. On the other hand, though *Naked* locates its subjectivity largely within Johnny, it also allows us to know Johnny in ways he doesn't know himself. From his outsider position, Johnny understands that the world—in this case, post-Thatcher England—is bent out of shape. He imagines that he resists its authority, even as he lives by the patriarchal law; he confirms his power by causing women pain. In some other narrative, Johnny might come off as a romantic antihero. But Leigh strips the character of his mystique, revealing his compulsive brutality, his wounded narcissism. We may empathize with Johnny, but we don't fall in love with him. He's the guy we're better off without.

And now, here's David Thewlis, the 30-year-old actor whose performance as Johnny has Hollywood honchos all aflutter. In real life—which is to say at 10 a.m. in his suite at the Mayflower—sitting on a couch with one leg tucked beneath him, well mannered and somewhat reserved, his face radiating farm-boy sweetness, his voice low and easy without a hint of Blackpool, Thewlis is so unlike Johnny that one can't imagine from whence came all that malevolence. The off-camera Thewlis seems like a slightly older version of the character he played in Leigh's *Life Is Sweet*—Jane Horrocks's gum-chewing boyfriend who would prefer a real relationship to mere sex but obligingly licks chocolate off her torso when requested.

Thewlis, who graduated from London's prestigious Guild Hall school, has been acting professionally for nearly 10 years but only came into his own through his work with Leigh. Revered as an "actors' director" (Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, and Phil Daniels all honed their chops in Leigh films), Leigh has developed lengthy, improvisory rehearsal



CHRIS BUCK

David Thewlis: His performance in *Naked* has Hollywood honchos all aflutter.

## Heir to the Anger

methods, which are as legendary as Cassavetes's or Scorsese's, and even more radical. Thewlis describes Leigh spending a day *after Naked* had finished shooting doing improv with Lesley Sharp (the remarkable actress who plays Johnny's ex-girlfriend), allowing her character an opportunity to resolve her feelings about being abandoned once again. Acknowledging the collaboration between Leigh and Thewlis on *Naked*, the Cannes Film Festival awarded them a grand prize for directing and one for acting.

**DAVID THEWLIS:** I actually think that character in *Life Is Sweet* is a kind of early version of Johnny. Not the way he looks, but his verbal rapidity in the last scene where he's going on about fake political agendas and feminism, the speech about how she's got all these books about women who love men too much and men who hate women and... When you work with Mike, you take a source character who is someone you know and you build the character on top of a real person. It's not an impersonation but it's inspired by a real person. Of course, for any character, you draw on all sorts of people. In Johnny's behavior there's bits of my friends, my brother, my wife, an old girlfriend. At the same time, Mike is tweaking the character, pushing me in certain directions and pulling me back, influenced, presumably, by people he knows. And that's how Mike directs in terms of creating a character who is neither me nor the original person

but someone entirely new.

**AMY TAUBIN:** And where do the words come from?

**THEWLIS:** Where *do* words come from? Well, from me. The first time I put on the clothes and started being Johnny, it wasn't as sophisticated as in the finished film. But after three or four weeks, my brain was working very fast. I was eating very little. I had discovered that if you don't eat for a while your brain gets very speedy. I wasn't eating and I was drinking a lot of water and I was reading a very eclectic mixture of books all the time—literature, science, religion, philosophy. Any spare moment, my nose was in a book. So all that was going on to create Johnny.

The words come from me and they're set in collaboration with Mike. We'll do an improvisation that might go on for four hours. Now obviously, that all can't be in the film so we reinvestigate the bits we think are important, and those are taken down in shorthand. And we do it again and again and we'll change things or we'll lose things—so it's written in the air. I've never seen a word from *Naked* written down on paper. But it's very precise before we shoot it, down to the *ums* and pauses. And sometimes we discover what we're saying right before we shoot, while the cameraman is setting up. It's exciting but it's kind of nerve-wracking because your neck's on the line. It's great fun—better than sex, better than food, better than money. You feel so alive. That's what it's like working with Mike.

**TAUBIN:** Do you like Johnny?

**THEWLIS:** I feel very ambivalent. I feel about him the way I feel about the real man who was very funny, inspiring, intelligent, very exciting to spend time with, but he had this dark side that was very violent and self-destructive. There are things to be admired and loathed about him. He's a terrible bully and a coward at the same time.

**TAUBIN:** As an actor, is anger an easy emotion for you to reach?

**THEWLIS:** It is, if it's motivated. When I was working on the character, I became much more angry in my own life, and my friends and my wife got the brunt of it. Not physically. It was like waking up and seeing for the first time how insane so much of the way we run society is, which is something I haven't come back from. Once you've seen it, you always see it. There were a hell of a lot of things that were making me angry, and because I was putting them into that character I was even angrier. I was walking in the streets shouting and assailing people. There'd be these people walking to work in the morning and I'd be going to rehearse this film that was very enjoyable, but bringing this venom to the surface. I was passing all these people and they seemed so sad. A lot of the anger came from sadness. I remember, one day I was eating a fried-egg sandwich in the street and nobody was looking at me, they were all looking at the sandwich. To the point where I was shouting, "It's just a fucking egg sandwich." And I threw it and it hit some man on

the back of the neck. This was me, not Johnny, and I thought, "David, just calm down. Nobody means any harm. It's just you getting out of hand." It just seemed terribly sad that people don't look at each other or talk to each other. And that's on a simple level. Then there are much more sinister aspects of society....

**TAUBIN:** Johnny's anger is particular in that it's so directed against women.

**THEWLIS:** He's one of those men, as so many men are, who blame women for their sexual arousal. The potential of that arousal to render him vulnerable and inadequate is very threatening. The physical violence isn't something he's happy about. It also has something to do with his frustration about his carnal appetite—that it's taking him away from his spiritual quest. He's someone who's given an enormous amount of thought to what it is to be human, what it means to be on this earth, and is there a God or is it some accident of quantum physics. And the physical needs are a distraction. Like in Beckett—the body just brings you down, the body's just a source of all sin and failure. And there were times I got quite worried because I started feeling that mind/body dichotomy in a quite real way in the improvisations, like the scene where he flails around at the top of the stairs. It was a very scary sensation, and it took a few days to recover.

We also investigated his childhood and the brutality of his father and the promiscuity of his mother, which hopefully isn't pseudo-Freudian but is a real study, based on lots of cases of beaten children. Which as far as I can see is a real epidemic.

**TAUBIN:** What do you make of the criticism that claims the film is misogynistic?

**THEWLIS:** It's inaccurate and it's also quite hurtful to Mike and to me. It's not misogynistic; it deals with misogyny. On one level, it's saying all men are bastards. Such men do exist and such women do put up with them. And such men and women do often find each other in the world. He's not a rapist. At the beginning, that's not a rape. It's sex that gets out of hand. That's not to condone it. Obviously he's out of order. And with Sophie, it's not a rape. And the woman in the window—he pulls away from her. She says "hurt me" and he pulls away and hurts her verbally. He says some very nasty things, but it's not a rape.

**TAUBIN:** I'm relieved to hear you refer to Johnny in the third person—it's a healthy separation. But after working this way, can you bear just going off and making a regular film?

**THEWLIS:** I've made four things since *Naked*, but it's always a bit of a letdown. No other director, no other film company, will give you that much time to research and rehearse a character. But if a script is wonderful, it can be good in a different way. I might do some theater now—because it's a chance to really get into some characters. I'm considering a season with the National Theatre, doing *Pericles* and Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. I don't have any desire to do a few scenes in a film like *Die Hard* just to make a lot of money. Why would I want to do that?