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ADRIFT IN THE WASTELAND

★★★ NAKED
Directed and written by Mike Leigh
With David Thewlis, Lesley Sharp, Katrin Cartlidge, Gregg Cruttwell, Claire Skinner, Peter Wight, Deborah Maclaren, and Gina McKee.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

Mike Leigh's virtuosity as a writer-director and the raw theatrical power of David Thewlis, his lead actor, combine with the sheer unpleasantness of much of *Naked* to make it a disturbingly ambiguous experience. The apocalyptic, end-of-the-millennium rage of Thewlis's Johnny—an articulate, grungy working-class lout on the dole who abuses women and spews negativity—registers at times as Leigh's commentary on the bleak harvest of Thatcherism. But at other times it registers as the ravings of a malcontent too frustrated and paralyzed to even know what he wants. Sorting out the intelligence from the hysteria is no easy matter, and the picture rubs our noses in this uncertainty so remorselessly that we sometimes forget that what we're watching is largely a comedy.

The first glimpse we get of Johnny, he's having some very rough sex with a nameless woman in a Manchester alley. Some reviewers have described this ugly encounter as a rape; but it might also be sex that's turned progressively more violent and punitive—which is just about the only kind of sex we see in this movie, whether the sadistic male is Johnny or Jeremy (Greg Cruttwell), his upper-class doppelganger. That most of the women are so desperate that they wind up tolerating these brutes is part of what makes *Naked* so disturbing, though the fact that each of these misogynists finally gets thrown out of a house by a woman allows us some respite. By the time these moments arrive, we may even feel like applauding. (If we barely remember Thewlis from his previous Leigh appearances—as the gangling, goofy youth in *The Short & Curlies* and as the somewhat put-upon lover of Nicola, the neurotic sister, in *Life Is Sweet*—this may be largely because his characters were much less mean and aggressive.)

Much as Johnny's rants, oscillating between commentary and pseudocommentary, profundity and pretension, confound our responses to him, the compulsive laughter of the cartoonish Jeremy—a laughter as mirthless as the titters of Beavis and Butt-head—tends to make our own amusement stick in our throat. If we periodically forget that we're watching a comedy, Leigh's Brechtian strategy ensures that even when we remember we still aren't likely to be amused.

★ ★ ★

Part of this Brechtian strategy, as always with Leigh, is to mix various styles of acting, and even what might be termed various styles of conception and presentation of his characters. Leigh does a lot of preparatory work with his actors, creating veritable dossiers for their characters, much of which never figures on-screen—a form of "research" leading to workshop improvisations and eventually a script. One of Leigh's ground rules in this process is that each actor develop her or his own character in collaboration with Leigh but in isolation from the other actors—increasing the possibility of spontaneous frictions and fusions between the various styles of representation when the actors finally come together in rehearsal and in front of a camera.

The locus classicus of this manner of preparing and staging existential confrontations between different styles of acting (and "being") is Jacques Rivette's work in the early 70s, *Out 1* and *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, though in these French movies fantasy and paranoia create a very different sort of discomfort and uncanniness. In Leigh's movies, once the diverse actorly strands have been woven into fairly containable units, like the families at the center of *High Hopes* and *Life Is Sweet*, we wind up responding to what passes for a unified story; the stylistic anomalies—the upper-class caricatures in *High Hopes*, for example, or the loony character who opens a restaurant in *Life Is Sweet*—seem relatively marginal. In *Naked*, which is about individuals rather than a family unit, the continuity is more attenuated, and some form of narrative chaos always seems to be waiting in the wings. The results are also somewhat more uneven, despite the focus and power provided by Leigh and his actors; Jeremy in particular registers as a satirical monster left over from some earlier Leigh picture, forced into the story to make Johnny seem a little less repugnant.

To a large extent, the unevenness and the threat of narrative chaos both seem to stem from the story's rambling, picaresque qualities. After Johnny flees from the woman in the Manchester alley, and she flees in the opposite direction, he steals a car and drives to London. From this point Leigh's characters make up a veritable gallery of isolated individuals, most of them doomed or at least desperate. Johnny's former Manchester girlfriend Louise (Lesley Sharp) is now living in a flat in London's Islington with two other women, holding down a nondescript office job. Johnny turns up at her flat—for reasons that he never clarifies, though he says he got her address off a postcard she sent him—while she's at work. One of her flat mates, Sophie (Katrin Cartlidge), lets him in; like him she's on welfare, and together they smoke joints while waiting for Louise to get home. (The other flat mate, who is away on holiday and turns up only shortly before the end of the picture, is Sandra—a stammering nurse played in telegraphed sitcom style by Claire Skinner, adding one more stylistic contrast to the heady brew already established.) Intercut with the gradual mutual seduction between Johnny and Sophie—consummated only after Louise arrives home and Johnny begins to berate her—are glimpses of Jeremy, a yuppie with no apparent link to any of the other characters. We see him working out in a gym, asking his masseuse out to dinner, and after dinner taking the waitress back to his flat and sexually abusing her. Jeremy's violence and nastiness are explicitly rhymed with Johnny's as he becomes increasingly abusive to Sophie after she tells him she's in love with him.

Leaving the flat, Johnny has separate street encounters with Archie and Maggie, an argumentative homeless Scottish couple angrily looking for each other. (It's no surprise that Jim Jarmusch especially likes this absurdist sequence, whose grubby setting and comic behavioral styles could have come straight out of one of his own pictures.) Next Johnny is offered shelter for

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Film Ratings
★★★★ = Masterpiece
★★★ = A must-see
★★ = Worth seeing
★ = Has redeeming facet
• = Worthless

NAKED

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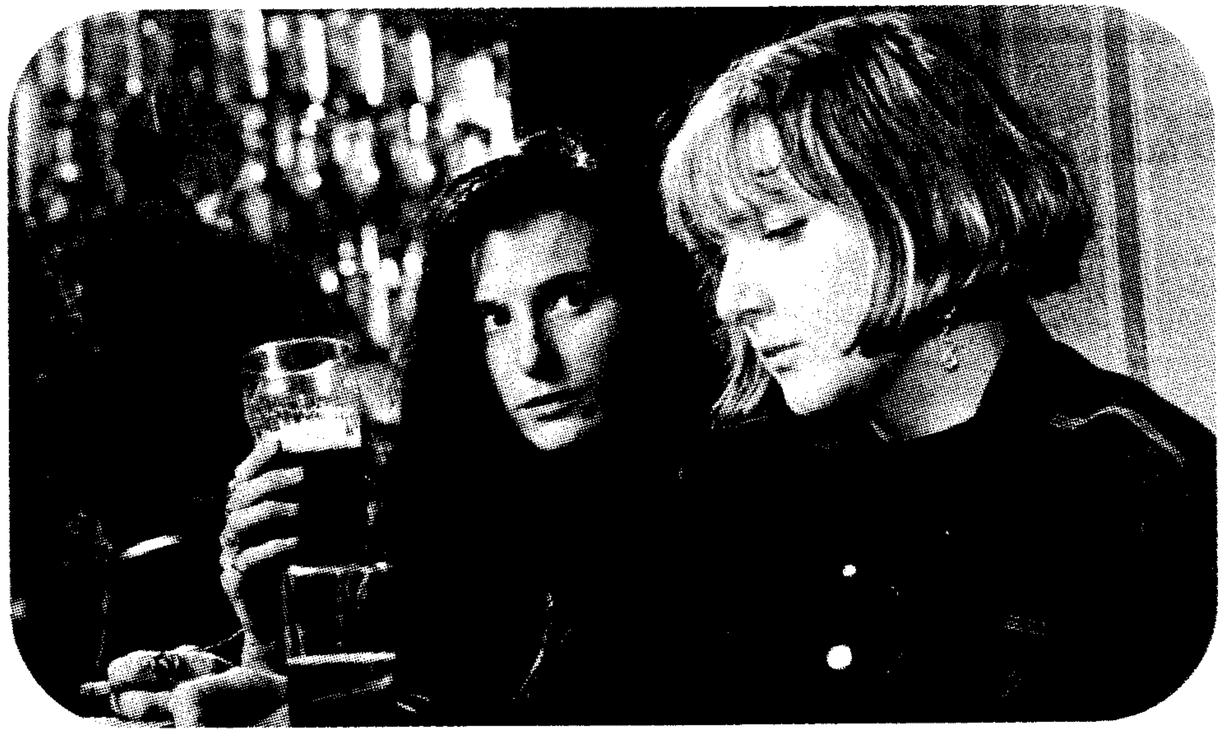
the night in a strangely unfurnished but immaculate office building by a thoughtful, lonely security guard named Brian (Peter Wight, who played a hippie in Leigh's *Meantime*). The philosophical conversation between the two as Brian makes his rounds is one of the film's high points; for all the darkness of Johnny's discourse, he's a bit more civil here than he is in most of the rest of the movie. ("Good exists in order to be fucked up by evil," Johnny insists at one point. "You see, Brian, God doesn't love you. God despises you. . . You see what I'm saying is, basically, you can't make an omelet without cracking an egg, and humanity is just a cracked egg. And the omelet . . . stinks.")

Johnny spies a drunken woman in her flat from the office building and, possibly goaded as well as threatened by his sudden kinship with Brian, decides to call on her; she lets him in, and after manhandling her, Johnny finds himself unable to have sex with her and winds up berating and humiliating her as a cover-up. Meanwhile we see Sophie return to her flat and find Jeremy on the sofa; he claims to be the landlord and a friend of Sandra's, gives a false name, and soon gets Sophie to put on Sandra's nurse uniform, then rapes her.

Johnny encounters Brian on the street and gets treated to breakfast, after which



the waitress (Gina McKee) invites him to the flat she's subletting. She offers him food, drink, and a bath, then unexpectedly turns on him and throws him out. This happens shortly after he tells her she has a very sad face, provoking her tears, and asks if she has a boyfriend; but she never offers any explanation for her abrupt change of mood—or what might be more accurately described as coming to her senses. Back on the street, Johnny gets a ride from a man putting up posters and starts to help him in his work, but suddenly this person also turns on him, throwing him down, kicking him, and driving off with his bag. Youths in an alley further attack and more seriously injure Johnny, who finally staggers back to Louise's flat, where Jeremy is still camping out and Sandra is about to return.

At one point Brian asks Johnny whether he has anywhere to go, and Johnny replies, "I've got an infinite number of places to go. The problem is where to stay." That line might almost stand for Leigh's own kaleidoscopic stylistic procedures. In addition to the contrasts in acting styles, the movie's production design (by Alison Chitty) changes in style as Johnny lurches from one encounter to the next. Louise and Sophie's two-story flat, technically a maisonette, is strictly naturalistic, while the streets and alleys at night are distinctly more metaphysical. The man in the truck puts up two series of absurdist posters whose relation to each other encapsulates the movie's bleakness: the first, featuring an enormous mouth with clenched teeth, is headlined "Therapy?" and the second is a banner with the word "Cancelled," placed over the first. In the bombed-out England we see here, even querulous speculations about possible improvements get canceled before they can be properly entertained: at one point Johnny even berates Louise for having a job.

Though Thewlis's footloose Johnny is far less appealing than Jean-Paul Belmondo in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*—a film Leigh seems to have in the back of his mind, especially at the very beginning and very end of *Naked*—the sense of a man drifting by wit and instinct through a moral wasteland is equally pronounced. And indeed, just as Martial Solal's piano jazz in *Breathless* conveyed the existential urgency propelling Belmondo down his arbitrary yet doom-ridden path, Andrew Dickson's beautiful, comparably percussive score here—nervous harp arpeggios against mellower and more soulful melodies from the other strings in a staccato pattern—seems to drive the peripatetic hero. (The relentlessly steady pulse and sweet-and-sour mood, if not the texture and instrumentation, are very close to those of Tangerine Dream's new-age score in *Risky Business*, implying a similarly ambivalent relation to all the characters and the action.) Such music, like the conclusion of John Updike's early novel *Rabbit, Run*, seems predicated on the sense of a burnt-out hero in perpetual flight—though from what and to what is hard to say.