

Secrets and Lies

(1996, Mike Leigh, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)
Component 2: European Film (AS)

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Narrative
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- What do we keep hidden from those we love most? And why? A family drama structured like a mystery thriller, that explores the corrosive effect of secrets on our lives.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Hortense and the adoption office. 00:19:42 – 00:29:30
- Hortense and Cynthia meet. 1:10:59 – 1:19:31

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The film is so intimate that often it feels like we are eavesdropping on private (and awkward) conversations. This is especially true at the climactic barbecue, where the camera lingers on the exterior scenes as if we are an extra character: first from the end of the garden as people gather outside, then in this extended single shot where the empty chair at the table emphasises the feeling that we are the 'eighth guest' at the party. This heightens the naturalism

and the sense we are witnessing 'real life'.

- Sequence 1: LS of Hortense sat waiting for her appointment suggests her solitude – it shows her mixture of slight anxiety but also her self-possessed calm. Despite situations of increasing emotional stress throughout the film, Hortense seems able to maintain her composure. This is contrast with the social worker who is harried and stressed at the start. When they begin talking, the shots are mainly MCU to show the body language of the two characters: nervously inquisitive for Hortense, overstretched – but turning empathetic – for the social worker.
- Sequence 2: The first shot here is an ELS, reflecting the distance (and denial) Cynthia feels from Hortense – yet they are alone in the café, sat together which foreshadows their later bond and the sense Hortense will be the person Cynthia feels closest to. The next is a seven minute long extended single MS two-shot where we see both characters, but especially Cynthia, run the gamut of emotions: from shock, to shame, to guilt, envy and regret. Leigh rehearsed with two actresses (Brenda Blethlyn and Marianne Jean-Baptiste) separately without revealing that Jean-Baptiste's character was black, so the moment Cynthia realises who Hortense's father might be is entirely spontaneous. Within the space of one shot we witness the birth of their entire relationship, fraught and difficult, but with a genuine connection by the end. By seating them side-by-side Leigh has also emphasised the contrast between the two women: in their race, class and emotional composure. (See also Narrative – Binary Oppositions).

Mise-en-Scène

- Mike Leigh uses naturalistic settings for all the scenes, though these are actually designed to reflect characters who inhabit them: the cluttered house Cynthia and Roxanne live in, filled with the 'junk' of deceased parents and past family life; the 'chintzy' middle-class perfection of Monica and Maurice's home; the modern, clean lines and white

furniture of Hortense's flat. (see Aesthetics).

- Sequence 1: Production design is used as carefully as dialogue to drip-feed us information and create enigmas. This also links to the theme that we don't initially know people and that their real lives are revealed over time. The set decoration of the adoption office is initially ambiguous: Hortense is clearly in a waiting room (we see another person waiting and a receptionist) but it could easily be a doctors' surgery or benefits office. The posters refer to childcare, domestic violence and other family-related issues, but don't spell out this is related to adoption until the characters state it explicitly. (This enhances the use of the 'enigma code' – see Narrative). The use of the social worker's 'Rolo' chocolates also shows that she is humane and sympathetic despite first appearing stressed and over-stretched.
- Sequence 2: The use of costume further emphasises the difference between Cynthia and Hortense. The former is wearing a cheap nylon jacket with elasticated sleeves, whilst the latter has a professional-looking blazer with clean lines and expensive-looking earrings. This shows the class difference between them and this is actually more significant than the racial difference.

Editing

- The scenes are arranged so that Cynthia and Roxanne, Maurice and Monica, and Hortense's narratives are initially compartmentalised. After Hortense and Cynthia meet, their scenes are grouped together, but only meet with Maurice and Monica's when they are actually in the same scene at the end of the film. In between these are montage-like sequences where Maurice takes photographic portraits, each adding to the richness of the narrative and emphasising the main themes about families and relationships; what we show in public and what we hide.
- Sequence 1: Most of this scene uses the conventional shot/reverse-shot technique of editing conversations. Leigh is well-known for his extensive work with actors before shooting, allowing them to develop characters through rehearsal and improvisation, and only then writing the script. The 'back-and-forth' editing here allows both actors to fully express their emotions and to reveal the situation gradually. It also continues the sensation that we are a third character, sat on the same eye-level, almost part of their conversation.

- Sequence 2: There are only two cuts here, from LS of Hortense and Cynthia in the empty café, to a MS two-shot. The cut happens on the line '*Is this your signature?*' and shows the moment Cynthia's denial and distance turns to shocked acceptance.

Sound

- Music is used sparingly throughout, and often has the funereal tone adopted from the opening shot: mournful or intensely emotional strings. This suggests that these are melancholic characters, with the past weighing heavily upon them. Horns are introduced later in the film, as Hortense and Cynthia's relationship blossoms, to mark a fresh emotional level to Cynthia's life.
- Sequence 1: The dialogue here maintains naturalism, whilst carefully withholding key information about what is actually going on in the scene. We don't know at this point that Hortense is adopted, and the social worker's questions about her family life suggest she may have a medical condition, then that she may be looking to have children herself. Questions like '*Why now?*' and '*Were you ever able to discuss this?*' maintain realism (and the social workers' professionalism) without telling us explicitly why Hortense is here. Only about five minutes into the scene is adoption even mentioned, and then this creates a series of further enigmas e.g. '*Your birth mother may not want to see you.*' (see Narrative)
- Sequence 2: Hortense says very little after she asks Cynthia to check if it is her signature on the adoption papers. From that point, she sits silently, bearing witness to Cynthia's emotional rollercoaster of denial, realisation, guilt and regret, as she reveals all the secrets she has buried for decades. Significantly, it is Hortense who finishes the scene, stating that her adoption wasn't kept a secret from her. This establishes her as a more emotionally well-balanced character than Cynthia's repressed and bitter family.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- Class: Though some have criticised Leigh for ridiculing the British working class, this film is seen by critics as more sympathetic and generous, whilst still pointing out the class differences that remain in British society.

Monica looks down on Cynthia and Roxanne's jobs (her early comment about Roxanne, '*She'll be on the streets again*', makes it sound like Roxanne is homeless), while Cynthia makes bitter asides about Monica and Maurice's middle class aspirations, especially when she visits their home. Their 'perfect' house seems to be a replacement for the children Monica can't carry, and though Maurice has a successful career (contrasted with Stuart, his old partner), his wealth hasn't made him happy. This is especially shown in the brief scene of him in a plush-looking pub, surrounded with trappings of wealth but utterly alone and despondent.

- Age: The middle-aged characters seem weighed down by their personal histories: the secrets they can't share, the lies they tell to cover them. Cynthia, from the outset, is bitter about her wasted youth, spent first caring for her father and brother, then later bringing up Roxanne. One character that seems to embody this bitterness and resent is Stuart, who enters the narrative briefly to bemoan the lack of opportunity for someone his age in Australia (*'It's alright if you're young or a millionaire.'*). Here is a character that tried to start afresh, and failed. Before he nearly begs Maurice for a job (and meaning for his life) he says, '*You sweat your balls off for years, trying to make people happy and what do you get back? Nothing*'. The subsequent scenes of soul-baring and revelations at the barbecue seem like a decision *not* to live like this – to be honest, and happy in that honesty.
- Race: Leigh said one of the aims of the film was to portray the current generation of Black Britons who defy Caribbean or 'ghetto' stereotypes. Hortense – and her friend Dionne – are educated, successful, independent women who can affectionately mock the values and accents of their parents without diminishing their cultural heritage. Interestingly, race seems to be the least of the Purley family's issue with Hortense – she seems more markedly 'different' due to her education and job than her ethnicity, and this could be seen as Leigh's comment on an oft-repeated observation that in the UK class is a bigger divider than skin colour.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Mike Leigh's career – similar to his contemporary, Ken Loach – began in theatre and

TV drama. The seminal *Abigail's Party* (1977) set the template for his satirical explorations of the British middle class in awkward and chaotic social situations. Though often classified as 'social realism', his films are less political than Loach's and more character-driven. To this end, he is known for his lengthy rehearsal and improvisation sessions with his actors. When developing his scripts, Leigh begins with sketches of characters and events, then works with his actors one-on-one (often encouraging the performers to base their characters on people they know). The next step is to stage full-costume, in-location rehearsals where the characters encounter each other for the first time and improvise their reactions. Leigh records these and then fashions them into a final script. This lends his films what critic Roger Ebert described as '*the rhythm of real life*', an authenticity and emotional honesty that can nonetheless have satirical bite.

- One of the motifs used throughout the film is that of the photographic portrait. These are created by Maurice as part of his business, but the vignettes that accompany each are also emblematic of one of the film's main themes: the desire for a 'perfect', 'happy' family. This is offset by the tensions and conflict between the people being photographed. '*Do you want to look happy or sad?*' asks Maurice jokingly. The line elicits smiles from his subjects, but they often revert to frowns. The final subject, the scarred woman is perhaps the most honest: '*I want it to look as bad as possible,*' she says. Her candour foreshadows in the way the Purley family bare their emotional scars in final cathartic scenes.
- Though naturalistic locations are used, the production design is also heavily symbolic of the characters' class. Cynthia's house is dusty, leaking, packed with old 'junk' and still has an outdoor toilet. By contrast, Monica's is pristine, covered in stencils ('Like you see in a magazine') with toilets upstairs, downstairs and en suite. Yet it also feels empty and soulless, the fact she and Maurice have separate bathrooms indicating a lack of intimacy between them. To show the link between these characters – that both women are pained by the secrets they harbour – their homes have the same pale turquoise colour scheme. Hortense's apartment is completely different: mostly white, with modern IKEA-style furniture, but without the clutter of a full emotional life.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Historical

- During the 1950s and 60s there was a mass migration from the English-speaking Caribbean to the UK. For the black immigrants there were more opportunities for employment in Britain, while for the UK they represented a much needed labour force that had been depleted by the Second World War. Throughout the decades that followed, they faced racism and discrimination. However, during the later years of the 20th century, political representation and changes to legislation and policing methods aided the integration of people of Afro-Caribbean origin into British society. Though racism is often characterised as part of lower class culture, in fact Black working people were often embraced by these communities. High performance of Afro-Caribbean children in education led to a more middle class, university-educated Black community and this is Hortense's background. In 2010, Communities Secretary John Denham said that '*class, not race*' was the main cause of discrimination in Britain, a controversial statement, but one which seems borne out by *Secrets and Lies*.

Institutional

- Mike Leigh has often struggled to develop film projects due to his working method. His process spends so long on improvisation and rehearsal he produces a script only at final stage before shooting. Because of this, he has difficulty finding financial and institutional support for film projects, who want to see a final script before they commit. This led to him working only in theatre and TV (mainly for the BBC) during the 70s and 80s, but in 1988 he formed Thin Man Films with Simon Channing Williams, specifically to fund his film projects. This led to a slew of critically-acclaimed films from *High Hopes* (1988) onwards. *Naked* (1993) won Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival, and *Secrets and Lies* won the Palme D'Or. He has also been nominated seven times for Academy Awards.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Narrative and Ideology - STARTING POINTS

Starting points - Narrative

- Binary Oppositions: Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss were 'Structuralists' who sought to identify an underlying structure to the way human language and society functions. 'Binary oppositions' are concepts that appear opposite but actually need each other to define their meaning. Binary oppositions are often used in film and other narratives to achieve a narrative (or aesthetic) tension. There are numerous uses throughout *Secrets and Lies*. Some are embodied by characters: 'catalyst' (Cynthia/Hortense) vs 'conciliator' (Maurice); 'aspirational' (Hortense) vs 'defeated' (Cynthia); black vs white culture. Some are aesthetic: cramped and cluttered space, full of family 'junk' (Cynthia's house) vs pristine and spacious, but emotionally devoid (Monica's). Some are thematic, the most obvious being secrets vs revelations, lies vs truth. The tension between these create dramatic conflict and power the narrative towards a point of closure.
- Enigma-code / Action-code: Linguist Roland Barthes identified two narrative 'codes' that engage readers and drive a story forward. One is the 'enigma' (or hermeneutic) code, an element of the story that isn't fully explained and which raises questions in the reader's mind. It's the desire to answer these questions that compels them to read on. Much of *Secrets and Lies* is structured this way. Though it is a family drama, it is presented almost like a mystery thriller, with hints dropped about past grievances and painful events that have been hidden. One form these enigmas can take are as 'snares', where the truth is deliberately avoided e.g. when Maurice and Monica talk in their kitchen: '*I wonder if she knows about us?*', '*What about us?*', '*You know...*'. Another form is an 'equivocation' where the truth is hinted at but also obscured e.g. in the start of Sequence 1 where the language of the social worker is ambiguous: '*Why now?*', '*What do you know?*'. The final form is a 'jamming', where characters acknowledge there is no answer to the question e.g. when Hortense asks if her father was a 'nice man' and Cynthia answers '*Don't break my heart*'.
- Leigh also uses what Barthes called the 'action' (or proairetic) code. This is where the reader is encouraged to guess the consequences of actions or events. This builds tension in the narrative. The most effective use of this in *Secrets and Lies* is when Cynthia invites Hortense to the barbecue. We can guess that

there will be some sort of confrontation or revelation and are eager (and a little afraid) to find out what form it will take. By establishing (or hinting) at characters' secrets earlier, Leigh builds an almost thriller-like suspense, which intensifies as we see Cynthia becoming more drunk and emotional as the party continues. The series of enigma and action codes are answered in a chain reaction of revelations and confrontations that leads to a 'denouement', a drawing together of all the narrative threads.

Starting points - Ideology

- Representations of Family: There are a range of familial relationships depicted in the film - from the Purleys who form the main focus of the narrative, to those who have cameos (Stuart and Dionne), and those seen in just a glimpse (the subjects of Maurice's portraits). Few seem to represent the happy 'nuclear family' that is often held up as an ideal. Cynthia's family is fragmented in a number of ways: her giving up

Hortense for adoption; her resentment towards Roxanne (and father) for her lost youth; her dislike of Monica that damages her relationship with Maurice. Cynthia seems desperate for the affection and security a family can provide, yet the imposition of family responsibilities at a young age has led to a bitterness that drives them apart. Monica and Maurice also both crave the strong emotional bonds that a family can provide, but are prevented by Monica's inability to bear children, and by Maurice's conflicts between 'the people he loves most in the world who hate each other'. This could be a very bleak portrayal of families - in common with many of Leigh's earlier films - but after the cathartic revelations at the barbecue, we are left with a sense of hope. '*How would you introduce me?*' Hortense asks Roxanne. '*As my sister*', Roxanne replies. '*Nah, man, too much explaining to do*', suggests Hortense. '*I would though*', asserts Roxanne. This suggests that familial relationships are complex and difficult,