Mike Leigh and the Age of Anxiety: The Changing Needs of Caretakers and Patients

"They give birth outside a grave, the light gleams in instant, then it's night once more" – Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

Sandra: Enough. I've had enough. It comes at me from all angles. You all of you just…it's the tin lid… When…how…will…the world…ever…
Johnny: End.
Sandra. Yes! (Naked 94)

We very much live in an age of anxiety. The twentieth century saw the advent of weapons of mass destruction and grand scale genocide, compounded by a general cultural apathy. Albert Camus, in The Myth of Sisyphus stated, "Mere 'anxiety,' as Heidegger says, is at the source of everything" (Solomon 182). Anxiety became epidemic during the twentieth century in a way that it had never been before. Man's survival did not seem eminent.

Just as America began to feel the effects of the decisions of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s, and the rich seemed to get richer and the poor seemed to get poorer, similarly, England began to feel the effects of the Thatcher administration. Skyrocketing unemployment rates and an increasing class gap stirred up class loathing and resentment to unforeseen proportions. Leigh's 1983 chronicle, Meantime, illustrates this friction and examines the differences and similarities between the "have" and "have-nots." Meantime, however, is much more than a political and economic snapshot of the issues in Thatcher England. The film is an existential exploration of the anxiety that ensues when man is confronted with major survival issues and life choices. Leigh's genius lies in the subtle display of the soul manifested during every day routines. Leigh himself described the genesis of the movie to Coveney:

> When I was shooting Home Sweet Home, I had this terrible flat, with a bath, no shower, over a shop in the barren Bedfordshire countryside. I was in the bath, listening to the radio very early in the morning, and this story came on about two unemployed kids in Warrington or St. Helens or somewhere who had committed suicide. And I thought – I always go through something like this – what we're doing is irrelevant. That's what we should be doing. Something about unemployment. We were two or three years into Thatcher, it was already an issue, and it lingered at the back of my mind" (172).

Leigh took the topics of mass unemployment and economic hardship and expounded upon them in Meantime. The film focuses on the Pollocks, a family of acerbic, terminally struggling working-class Londoners barely surviving in their East End council house. The parents, Frank and Mavis, and their two grown children, Mark and Colin, are all unemployed. We enter the film at a point when the spirits of each have already been broken. Mavis and Frank are sour people who have spent so long simply surviving that they are shells. There is no time for love, companionship, or kindness in a world where eating and paying the rent are major undertakings. Both Frank and Mavis inhabit a realm of anxiety over their family's survival, and the tonal quality of their communication with other members of the family betrays this anxiety as much as the words that are actually spoken.

The film begins with the Pollocks taking what appears to be a twice yearly trip to the suburbs to visit Mavis's sister, Barbara, and her husband John. John clearly has a well-paying white collar job, in stark contrast to the unemployed working-classness of the Pollock family, and he and Barbara live in a large house beside a tree-lined lake. John is cordial but somewhat distant, and we see that the seemingly cheery Aunt Barbara has the welfare of Colin and Mark in mind more than their own parents. She fancies herself a caretaker, of sorts. In a conversation with John later that night, Barbara defends the slow-witted Colin, saying:

> Barbara: He's not retarded. He's just never been given a chance. You could be a good influence on those boys if you wanted to be."
> John: Who me? They're not my responsibility, Barbara. They've got to learn to stand on their own two feet.
> Barbara: I want to redecorate this room. It's depressing.
> John: Do you know, before 1980 the last time England won the grand slam was in 1956.

This scene serves to illustrate two major points. Barbara is interested in the welfare of Colin and Mark and recognizes the interconnectedness of them all and her and John's ability to help the boys. We also see her shift gears when John responds that they are not his responsibility. Barbara immediately goes into decorating mode, indicating that this hobby is a diversion from unhappiness and anxiety. In a very Pinteresque moment, the two really are not communicating at all, as evidenced by their disparate, un-related comments to each other about decorating and the grand slam.

Barbara's middle class status does not exempt her from the same anxiety felt by the lower class characters in the film. Just as they are anxious about being trapped in their difficult world, so, too, is Barbara bound by the middle class constraints and expectations of her life. Carney writes,

> In the most explicitly Pinteresque moment in all of Leigh's work, Barbara and the maintenance man verbally spar on the subject of money. Leigh orchestrates a hilariously 'absurd' demonstration of how neither can get out of his or her respective 'imaginative box. Barbara is trapped in an idealized, economics-course Yuppie-ish conception of the importance of money; the maintenance man is imprisoned in a hippie—dippy, flower-child, Marxism-lite opposition to it. The completely nutty argument goes round and round, with neither character understanding a syllable the other utters. Contributing to the wonderful wackiness of the moment is the stratospheric disconnection of their verbal joust from the actual poverty of the apartment in which they are conducting the discussion. All the high finance never comes within a million miles of the problems of the high-rise (175).

It is Barbara's imprisonment within her middle class sensibilities that leads to her anxiety, and by the end of the film we see that she has a love/hate relationship with the world she inhabits. After Colin leaves and the decorating project for which she has hired him has fallen through, Leigh ironically cuts from the scene between Mark and Frank:

Mark: You've got to take your hat off to them [Barbara and John] really though, ain't yer.
Frank: You what?
Mark: For getting out of this area. New life. Respectable friends. High standard of living. All you've got to do is look at them together. Picture of happiness.

to the scene of a drunken and tearful Barbara sitting in a corner of the room that was to be redecorated. Watson writes, "Her room is in a state of disarray, as are her hopeful plans for brightening up her own life – because she had, after all, stripped and prepared everything for the decorating project that has now fallen through" (83). We have witnessed Frank and Mavis behaving resentfully toward Barbara and John for much of the film. They have wrongfully assumed that being financially secure must equal an easier and happier existence. But it is precisely this scene of a drunken and emotionally naked Barbara alone, and the subsequent scene in which she musters up the courage to confront her husband, that we see that existential anxiety is pervasive and unbound by economics. John comes home to find Barbara cowering with a bottle of gin in the corner of the room she was going to decorate:

John: Have you gone through all that today?
Barbara: No. Yes.
John: You must be feeling very merry [he walks away]
Barbara: I'm feeling very merry. Are you feeling merry, jumbo?
John: I'm just tired, that's all.
John: Allright, what's wrong?
Barbara: Nothing.
John: I want you to tell me what's going on.
Barbara: Is that an order?
John: I just want to know, that's all.
Barbara: You're not talking to the office juniors now, John Lake. Guv'nor.
John: Don't be silly. What's all this decorating material doing here?
Barbara: What decorating material?
John: I'm not prepared to play games with you, Barbara.
Barbara: I'm not playing games.
John: Allright. Fair enough.
Barbara: You ever fancied anyone John?
John: What?
Barbara: 'ave you? Ever fancied anyone?
John: How do you mean?
Barbara: Since we've been married.
John: Not in that sense, no.
Barbara: What sense is that?
John: In the sense I take that you mean it.
Barbara: Oh. Is there more than one sense to fancy somebody? Oh. Wish I'd known. I've been missing out haven't I?
John: We'll, you're obviously upset about something.
Barbara: Yeah. Obviously I'm upset.
John: What's for supper?

Barbara: Nothing.
John: You know what I think?
Barbara: What do you think?
John: I think you're suffering from pre-menstrual strain.
Barbara: Tension.
John: Tension.
Barbara: What, do you think I'm getting old?
John: I didn't say that.
Barbara: That's what husbands say to their wives when they think they're going through the change of life. Is that what you think?
John: No, of course not.
Barbara: I'm getting old.
John: Look, Barbara, if you're tired just say so and I'll cook supper. I rather fancy some bacon and eggs.
Barbara: Fuck off!

Barbara is clearly not the self-confident person we understood her to be in the beginning of the film. It is not that through a series of events she becomes less confident, but rather by the end of the film she acknowledges the absence in her life and this leads to her expressing her anxiety. She can conceal it no more. It is precisely the scene between Barbara and John that allows us to see how Barbara really feels. She is anxious about her marriage to her husband. She is anxious about approaching middle age. She is anxious that she is no longer attractive to her husband and worries that he may have had an affair, and she is anxious about being alone so much of the time and finally realizes (or admits) that her obsession with interior decorating may be only to fill up the hours.

Coxy, the neo-Nazi skinhead, is the Beckettian embodiment of this anxiety and frustration. Coxy, much like Johnny in Naked, is a compelling and complex study of anxiety. He is not an articulate man, and he lacks the verbal skills to truly communicate his anxiety about the world he inhabits, about the immense poverty around him, and about the lack of human connection in his life. So, Coxy outwardly manifests the frustration he feels inside by making a conscious choice to reject the cultural norm and to become a skinhead. The elevator scene in Hailey's apartment building reveals that Coxy is not completely comfortable in the role of racist skinhead he has taken on, and he seems more afraid of the Jamaican man he is attempting to bully than the man does of him. While Coxy does act like a bully throughout much of the film, he seems like more of a scared child than an intentionally harmful man. Carney writes, "The scene with the punk Coxy (brilliantly played by Gary Oldman) illustrates the complexity of identity in this world. In some scenes Coxy seems hostile and dangerous, in others childlike and innocent; in some serious, in others playful; in some he seems threatening, cruel, and unkind; in others a genuine friend to Colin" (168).

Leigh uses images rather than words to best express Coxy's anxiety, frustration, and verbal disconnectedness. Coxy always seems to be on the verge of destroying something or hurting himself by slamming his head with his fist in a fit of anger. But the most fitting existential image we have of Coxy is that of him curled up in a fetal position, rolling around in a tin drum on a dirty London street. Coveney

writes, “Coxy is a pathetic sideshow, banging around the pool table in the pub, scissor-kicking like a sitting-room psychopath on the sofa, taunting a black neighbor and finally (our last sight of him) rolling around in a tin drum, like one of Beckett’s doomed dustbin-dwellers in Leigh’s beloved Endgame, bashing it noisily in a self-absorbed later of pointless, energy-consuming bravado” (173-4).

Meantime is a fascinating existential examination because we come to realize that all the characters, despite gender and social class, are not immune to the frustration and anxiety that comes with daily life. This is evident in Mavis’s distress over the broken washer, which drives her to an hysterical pitch, and Frank’s sheepish behavior at the unemployment office when the officer realizes the mentally slow Colin is his son. Frank is so embarrassed he leaves the queue without accepting his unemployment check -- a check his family desperately needs. Mark’s anxiety is that of a man who is unable to support himself. This becomes evident in his jealousy over Colin’s potential job with Aunt Barbara, and much of the film examines Colin’s anxiety over making his own decisions.

The setting of Meantime is as much a wasteland as anything in Leigh’s film Naked, created ten years later. Wrecking balls, distorted bars on fences, filthy city streets, discarded baby carriages in the middle of city parks -- these images signify a wasteland as significant and desolate as anything Eliot every dreamed of, and if Mark were a more articulate man, we can imagine him whispering Eliot’s words, “I could not speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither living nor dead, and I knew nothing. Looking into the heart of light, the silence. Od’ und leer das Meer [Desolate and empty the sea].” Theirs is a bleak existence, and all characters inhabiting the wasteland fill the existential void, as it were, with alcohol, cigarettes, violence, bullying, arguing, and interior decorating – all devices for toning down the dull roar of the ever-present anxiety.

The driving force of Meantime is the Caretaker motif. The action – and thus the conflict -- in the film is driven by Barbara’s desire to do something good for her sister’s under-privileged children. Barbara seems, at first, to be the true caretaker in the film, but we come to discover that her desire to take care of Colin and Mark is borne of a desire to fill a void rather than to truly assist them through life. Barbara’s role as caretaker serves a selfish purpose. And while Mark’s relationship with his brother is exceptionally complicated, much like the relationship between Aston and Mick in The Caretaker, we see by the end of the film that Mark genuinely is the protector and caretaker of his little brother. Despite the fact that we have witnessed Mark bully his brother at various points in the film, “…it seems highly possible that Mark himself may not be sure about his reasons. His negative reactions seem instinctive, rather than thought out” (Watson 83). Of all of Leigh’s characters, Colin is perhaps the most explicitly similar to Pinter’s mentally slow Aston and Mark is most similar to Mick.

The strength of Meantime lies in its examination of the complex relationship between Mark and Colin. The two brothers bicker often, and the beginning of the film portrays Mark as somewhat of a bully toward his younger brother. But it is important to understand that while Mark anxiously finds his own way in the world as an unemployed grown man still living with his parents, his behavior is complicated. He can simultaneously be taunting, domineering, bullying, loving, and guiding. Just as Mick could be disdainful of and condescending toward Aston in The Caretaker, Mark, “in his strange perverted way is

motivated by some sense of ethical responsibility and does have Colin's welfare at heart. The moment shimmers at a place beyond categorization, unreachable by concepts like 'candor' or 'hypocrisy'" (Carney 171). Mark can and often does act manipulatively toward his brother, but that does not negate the fact that his actions can also be sincere and heartfelt and that he really cares for Colin.

The turning point in the relationship between Colin and Mark takes place during one of the final scenes of the film. We see that Mark's tutelage has come to fruition when Colin finally stands up to his bullying and to his sometimes quite cruel parents. During a barrage of verbal insults from his parents, Colin can finally take no more:

> Colin: Shut up!
> Frank: You talking to me?
> Colin: Yes.
> *Frank and Mavis stand with their mouths open in disbelief of Colin's defiance.*
> Frank: Eh?
> Colin: It's my room. Get out.
> Mark: Alright? *He looks at Frank and Mavis, challenging them to leave the room.* You gonna give us five minutes?
> Frank: You wanna be like him. Fine.
> Mark: 'Scuse ya. *Closes the door.*
> Mark: Aw right?
> Colin: Aw right.

The following morning, Mark wakes up first to discover that Colin still has his parka on – covering his head. While Colin is asleep, Mark lifts the hood to discover that Colin has shaved his head bald. Mark is shocked at the defiance:

> Mark: Who made you do that, Coxy?
> Colin: Nothing to do with Coxy.
> Mark: What, no-one tells you what to do?
> Colin: That's right.

It is the following exchange that allows us to see that Mark has allowed Colin to arrive at a new understanding of himself:

> Mark: *(Teasingly)* My brother's a skin-head.
> Colin: [Smiling] No he ain't.
> Mark: You sorry you had it done?
> Colin: Don't know…Yeah.

In his first truly loving gesture in the film, Mark reaches out and strokes Colin's head. He tells Colin he must not be ashamed of it and that he should not keep it covered. Watson writes of the scene, "Whereas up until now, Mark had tended to patronize Colin, often calling him Muppet, he now treats him more like an equal" (84). Mark starts to leave the room, looks back at Colin, and issues a new

nickname. The much more respectable Kojak replaces the once disdainful Muppet, and "In effect, Mark's loving interpellation of his brother functions here like a christening – especially with the earlier hand-on-the-head moment kept in his mind" (Watson 84). A corner has been turned.

If Leigh demonstrates anything in Meantime it is that anxiety is pervasive and non-discriminatory. Despite race, class, gender, and financial hardship or windfall, each of us is more or less confused and anxious about what our role is in the world and what it all means. And just as in previous films such as Bleak Moments and Abigail's Party, Leigh again incorporates the Caretaker motif in Meantime to illustrate how we attempt to make sense of this anxiety. Leigh explores, as he does in so many of his films, that we give our own lives meaning by being a caretaker to others or allowing ourselves to be cared for (patients). Leigh also explores the symbiotic nature of caretakers and patients and the ever changing needs and understandings of the two. Barbara is a caretaker and Colin is a patient in the beginning of the film, but by the end of the film, both have undergone a transformation which has empowered each and led to a deeper understanding of the nature of life. Barbara, a seemingly self-assured solidly middle class woman with the best interests of the Pollock brothers always in mind in the beginning of the film, finds herself emotionally naked and honest by the end of the film. She has undergone a transformation in which she freely admits her anxiety about life and drops the mask she has been wearing. This newfound honesty with which Barbara approaches her life allows her to transform from caretaker to a patient herself, and her pivotal scene with John demonstrates she desperately needs him to care for her. Similarly, Colin undergoes a transformation by the end of the film, and this is due to Mark's love and care for him. Their realistically complicated relationship makes Colin's transformation all the more powerful, and we see that he has changed from a seemingly dimwitted underdog, who is bullied by everyone from his parents to Coxy, to a more self-assured young man who dares stand up for himself. His deepening relationship with Mark also leaves us wondering if down the road, Colin might teach Mark a thing or two.

Sartre, in Existentialism and Human Emotions, declares, "A man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these understandings." Whether caretaker or patient, there is no denying the interconnectedness of us all. Leigh demonstrates the agony, the happiness, the complication, the futility, the joy, and the messiness of this interconnectedness, but he arrives, as he always does, at the conclusion that no matter how difficult our relationships are with each other, we are better off living in a world where we all try to work together in the most honest and authentic way we can. Meantime channels the Sartrean spirit which declares vehemently, "In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person" (Sartre 37-38).