



MIKE LEIGH

Peterloo

The ground is churned, dusty, an un-English yellow. This, and the scattering of broken corpses, suggest we are looking at a picture of a place far from home. Somewhere the law hasn't quite reached. Dodge City, perhaps, or one of those hot, dry locations in a Jodorowsky picture. But this is St Peter's Field, Manchester, on the morning after the bloody afternoon of 16 August 1819, and the three living people in the frame are Richard Carlile, a radical pamphleteer from London; John Tyas, a reporter from the *Times*; and James Wroe, editor of the *Manchester Observer*. Grim and exhausted, they discuss how to put what they've witnessed into print. One man compares it to the field of Waterloo. And in that exchange, they coin a word for the next day's headlines, for the history books, and for two centuries of commemorative art that encompasses Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy', an overture by Malcolm Arnold, and the Mike Leigh film that puts these images on the screen.

Peterloo is the name of the film, and the one we now give to the moment when a crowd of between 60,000 and 100,000 people, representing a wide variety of working- and middle-class opinion, gathered on a three-acre patch of open ground in the briskly industrialising settlement of Manchester. Their demands now seem rather modest: universal male suffrage, less taxation without representation and the repeal of the Corn Laws that had raised the price of bread just as wages fell in the slump that followed the Napoleonic Wars. This wasn't a scene from *Les Misérables*: few came armed, many wore their Sunday best, 'God Save the King' was sung before the speeches. Violence, however, was the only answer they received. The demo was policed by a lethal mix of professional soldiers and barely trained volunteer militia, administered by a jittery and inadequate gaggle of magistrates, empowered by an administration in London which was increasingly paranoid about losing its grip on power. Cavalrymen charged into the field, sabres drawn. Fifteen or more demonstrators were killed and hundreds injured. As men, women and children fell beneath the steel and the horses, General Sir John Byng, the supreme commander of Britain's Northern Forces, was having a flutter at York races.

'I grew up a 15-minute bus ride from where this happened,' says Leigh. 'But we didn't know about it. And loads of folk working on the film, who were from up north, had never heard of it. It was mentioned for about four minutes in my O-level history lessons in 1959, but there was no resonance. My dad was a socialist and I don't remember him mentioning it at all, and I could imagine him pontificating about it at length.' The evidence of how Leigh filled this silence is now crammed into his Greek Street office in Soho: two metres of box files containing research accumulated in the last four years; a stack of

crates in which some of the banners made for the film are stowed. These, says Leigh, have already been raised again at events to mark the massacre, taking their place in the long tail of the event, and in the debate the film has stirred about Peterloo's place in cultural memory.

Two decades have passed since Leigh first began travelling in time. It's now hard to recall the bafflement caused when he announced that he was assembling almost 100 actors and singers for a costume drama about the life of Gilbert and Sullivan. How could a director whose process begins with actors and improvisation, rather than with a lonely writer staring at a blank screen, tackle a historical subject? Once *Topsy-Turvy* (1999) was released, nobody asked that question, and the British past became as much his territory as all those modern suburban streets and living rooms. *Vera Drake* (2004) set the controls for 1950, *Mr. Turner* (2014) despatched a magnificently tumbledown Timothy Spall back to the final years of Joseph Mallord William Turner.

Peterloo, however, is a history on a grander scale. If *Mr. Turner* was the Leigh version of the artist's biopic – his *Lust for Life* (1956) or *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965) – then *Peterloo* is his *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a film that is interested in portraying castes and classes as much as individuals, which it then propels towards a bloody and canonical scene. *Peterloo* is the first Leigh film for which the press notes contain a diagram that arranges the characters by type – constabulary, reformers, the monarchy, the Home Office, the radicals.

The tree has many branches. Maxine Peake and Pearce Quigley lead a fictional family of Manchester weavers, who typify the urban working poor and conduct domestic conversations that supply the audience with the economic data we need to negotiate the story. Real historical figures – Rory Kinnear's Henry 'Orator' Hunt; Karl Johnson's stammering home secretary, Lord Sidmouth; Vincent Franklin's snaggle-toothed magistrate, the Rev Ethelston – populate scenes that often require them to gather themselves in tableaux, as if Hogarth were poised to fill the air around them with speech bubbles.

The scale of the project, Leigh insists, gave him no headaches. 'I've been talking for years about doing a film on a big canvas. I'm very comfortable with three characters on the stairs or in the back garden. But I'm a filmmaker who's turned on by wanting to capture the world. The world isn't always in one room.' And, he adds, he has no fear of managing crowds. '*Topsy-Turvy* wasn't exactly a three-hander,' he says. 'We had more issues with the chorus wearing those awful thick Mikado costumes in the Richmond Theatre under heavy-duty lighting in a heatwave than we had with all those extras on the fields of Peterloo.' Fundamentally, his famous process remained unchanged. 'Most of the actors were with us for six months, in groups. The family, the magistrates, the military, the radicals, the moderates. I'd work individually with them, discuss the background, the politics, the event, do improvisation.

The intelligence and commitment and seriousness of every actor was very impressive. There are lots of actors who'd be fucked if they tried to do this.' Lots of directors, too, particularly those who might succumb to the anxiety of influence. How does a filmmaker with Leigh's sensibility – one who avoids gesture, elaborate camerawork and editing – tackle the kind of scene for which Eisenstein created such a powerful model? 'Dick Pope,' he says, 'the cinematographer, kept talking about [Kurosawa's 1985 epic] *Ran* more than *Battleship Potemkin*. If you're a seasoned filmmaker with a proper film culture in your DNA because you've been watching movies forever, it's just there. But I'm not a genre-monger. I'm not a pastiche-monger. The approach is still very stylistic. It's just that the nature of the style is making it unobtrusively real so you don't see the cinematic wheels going round.'

During the massacre scene, Leigh makes decisions that seem positively anti-Eisensteinian. There's a moment at which a nameless character played by the much-loved actress Julie Hesmondhalgh seems ready to become the Peterloo equivalent of the lady with the pince-nez struck down on the Odessa Steps. But Leigh, with an almost extravagant lack of emphasis, declines to produce the moment for her. And unlike the Cossacks, the yeomanry regiments arrive without fanfare: their murderous progress begins as a stumbling, chaotic presence at the back of a wide shot of the crowd.

'I've spent a lifetime,' Leigh says, 'resisting voice coaches, dialogue coaches, stunt co-ordinators, fight directors, because I always thought we could just do it ourselves.' *Peterloo* would have been impossible without a cohort of mounted stuntmen, but Leigh took pains not to let them employ stock manoeuvres we might have seen in other dramas. And he can't resist sharing a story about another small victory in the war against cliché. 'At one point,' he tells me, 'there was a suggestion that we should employ the services of a storyboard artist.' He handles the phrase carefully, like Lady Bracknell naming an inauspicious stretch of railway track. 'I said no way. It will be a waste of resources. The guy will spend most of the time in his caravan, if not in hospital.'

'In hospital?'

'Yes. Because I'd beat the shit out of him.'

Matthew Sweet, *Sight & Sound*, October 2018

PETERLOO

Directed by: Mike Leigh
©: Film4 a division of Channel Four Television Corporation,
The British Film Institute, Amazon Content Services LLC
a Thin Man film
Developed with the support of: Film4
Made with the support of the: BFI's Film Fund
Presented by: Amazon Studios, BFI, Film4, LipSync
Executive Producers: Gail Egan, Ben Roberts, Lizzie Francke,
Daniel Battsek, Susie Bruce-Smith, Peter Hampden, Norman Merry
Produced by: Georgina Lowe
Co-producer: Danielle Brandon
Line Producer: Chris Lahr
Associate Producer: Helen Grearson
For BFI: Head of Production: Fiona Morham; *Head of Production*
Finance: Ian Kirk; *Business Affairs Manager:* Clare Coulter
For Film4: Head of Production: Tracey Josephs; *Head of Business*
Affairs: Geraldine Atlee; *Creative Executive:* Julia Oh; *Finance*
Manager: Suby McCarthy
For LipSync Productions: Robin Guise, Peter Raven
Unit Production Manager: Dan Turner
Production Co-ordinator: Sarah Carswell
Production Accountant: Rachel Proudlove
Unit Manager: Henry Jepson
Location Managers: Henry Woolley, Duncan Laing
Post-production Supervisor: Polly Duval
Historian: Jacqueline Riding
1st Assistant Director: Dan Channing Williams
2nd Assistant Director: Gayle Dickie
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr
Casting: Nina Gold
Written by: Mike Leigh
Cinematography: Dick Pope
Additional Camera Operators: Lucy Bristow, Mike Miller
Aerial Unit Camera Operator: Darren Miller
Camera Operator: Dick Pope
1st Assistant Camera: Gordon Segrove
2nd Assistant Camera: Ryan Adams
Gaffer: Andy Long
Grip: Colin Strachan
Stills Photographer: Simon Mein
Visual Effects Supervisor: George Zwier
Digital Grading, Sound and Visual Effects by: LipSync Post
SFX Supervisors: Johnny Rafique, Nick Rideout
SFX Services by: Elements Special Effects
Film Editor: Jon Gregory
1st Assistant Editors: Gabriel Smith, Heidi Freeman
Production Designer: Suzie Davies
Supervising Art Director: Daniel Taylor
Set Decorator: Charlotte Dirickx
Prop Buyer: Mick Pirie
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Make-Up & Hair Designer: Christine Blundell
Make-up & Hair Supervisor: Lesa Warrener
Title Design: Chris Allies
Colourist: Adam Inglis
Music Composed by: Gary Yershon
Music Conducted by: Terry Davies
Sound Designer: Robert Ireland
Additional Sound Recordists: Keith Branch, Sam Diamond
Production Sound Mixer: Tim Fraser
Boom Operator: Ben Collinson
Re-recording Mixer: Robert Farr
Supervising Sound Editor: Lee Herrick
Stunt Co-ordinators: Steve Dent, Maurice Lee
Military Adviser: Paul Biddiss
Armourers: Bapty & Co., Ben Rothwell, Charles Bodycomb
Horse Trainers: Charlotte Dent, Charlotte Dent

Cast

Rory Kinnear (*Henry Hunt*)
Maxine Peake (*Nellie*)
Pearce Quigley (*Joshua*)
David Moorst (*Joseph*)
Rachel Finnegan (*Mary*)
Tom Meredith (*Robert*)
Simona Bitmate (*Esther*)
Robert Wilfort (*Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister*)
Karl Johnson (*Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary*)
Sam Troughton (*Mr Hobhouse*)
Roger Sloman (*Mr Grout*)
Kenneth Hadley (*Mr Golightly*)
Tom Edward-Kane (*Mr Cobb*)
Lizzy McInnery (*Mrs Moss*)
Alastair MacKenzie (*General Sir John Byng*)
Neil Bell (*Samuel Bamford*)
Lisa Millett (*Jemima Bamford*)
Philip Jackson (*John Knight*)
John Paul Hurley (*John Thacker Saxton*)
Tom Gill (*Joseph Johnson*)
Lizzie Frain (*Mrs Johnson*)
Harry Hepple (*James Wroe*)
Ian Mercer (*Dr Joseph Healey*)
Adam Long (*Wroe's printer*)
Nico Mirallegro (*John Bagguley*)
Danny Kirrane (*Samuel Drummond*)
Johnny Byrom (*John Johnston*)
Victor McGuire (*Deputy Chief Constable Nadin*)
Stephen Wight (*Oliver the spy*)
Ryan Pope (*Chippendale the spy*)
Dorothy Atkinson (*singing weaver*)
Tim McInnery (*Prince Regent*)
Marion Bailey (*Lady Conyngham*)
Vincent Franklin (*Magistrate Rev Ethelston*)
Jeff Rawle (*Magistrate Rev Hay*)
Eileen Davies (*Mrs Hay*)
Philip Whitchurch (*Magistrate Col Fletcher*)
Martin Savage (*Magistrate Norris*)
Al Weaver (*Magistrate Hulton*)
David Bamber (*Magistrate Rev Mallory*)
David Fielder (*Magistrate Rev Gutteridge*)
Finetime Fontayne (*Magistrate Clowes*)
Robert Gillespie (*Magistrate Warmley*)
Jonathan Jaynes (*Magistrate Tatton*)
Nicholas Lumley (*Magistrate Rev Perryn*)
Shaun Prendergast (*Magistrate Bolt*)
Alan Williams (*Magistrate Marriott*)
Dorothy Duffy (*Mary Fildes*)
Victoria Moseley (*Susannah Saxton*)
Virginia Bottomley, Samantha Edwards,
Julie Hesmondhalgh, Kate Rutter, Katie West (*female reformers*)
Joseph Kloska (*Richard Carlile*)
Leo Bill (*John Tyas*)
Brian Fletcher (*Edward Baines*)
Gary Cargill (*John Smith*)
Patrick Kennedy (*Colonel L'Estrange*)
Guy Williams (*Lieutenant Colonel Dalrymple*)
Ben Crompton (*Tuke, the painter*)
Bryony Miller (*Bessie, Johnson's servant*)
Lee Boardman, Steve Garti (*Nadin's constables*)

UK 2018
154 mins

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