Contenidos transversales: Aspiraciones sociales agresivas durante y después del gobierno de Margaret Thatcher

Resumen
Este trabajo trata de analizar la representación cinematográfica de la situación psico-social de las clases trabajadoras del Reino Unido durante el gobierno de Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990). Se analiza brevemente el contexto histórico, centrándose en los aspectos sociales, económicos y políticos, y en los sucesos más relevantes que tuvieron lugar antes, durante y después de dicho gobierno, para así comprender las aspiraciones sociales agresivas que caracterizaron a la sociedad británica desde los 70 hasta los 80, y que se retratan en 3 películas diferentes: "Abigail's Party", "High Hopes" y "The Ploughman's Lunch".
Palabras clave: Clase trabajadora, Thatcher, aspiraciones, cinematográfico.

Abstract
This paper attempts to look into the cinematic representation of the psychosocial situation of the working classes during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1979-1990). A brief historical and contextual background is provided, focusing on the most relevant social, economic and political aspects and events taking place before and during the time, so as to comprehend the aggressive social aspirations that characterized British citizenship from the 70s to the 80s, which are portrayed in three different movies, namely, 'Abigail's Party' and 'High Hopes' by Mike Leigh, and 'The Ploughman's Lunch' by Ian McEwan.
Keywords: Working classes, Thatcher, Aspirations, Cinematic.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at presenting the cinematic representation of English society taking the premiership of Margaret Thatcher as a pivotal point. The main concern is to observe how the lives and struggles of the working classes have been faithfully portrayed through the lens of social realism. This mode of representation in the arts is based on the accurate depiction of contemporary society with the specific intention of one part of the social strata, to reflect on the 'experiences of real Britons on the screen' (Armstrong, 2013). The term realism as a valid form of expression took force at the end of the nineteenth century and its paramount evolution within the cinema industry led to a wide range of sub-types to explore the lives of people in a realistic way. There has been extensive debate on the question of accuracy as new film makers have attempted to establish their own approaches, either renovating or discarding former conceptions. We will analyse how film makers such as Mike Leigh and Ian McEwan capture the direct and indirect effects that the 80s and 90s had on the British society as a whole, focusing on the (aggressive) social aspirations that many people shared at the time. Since social realism has been described as a 'historically and socially contingent movement', the adhesion of a work of film to it should capture the hegemony of liberal capitalism in the 1980s.

The filmography chosen for this paper follows a straightforward analysis based on specific areas, which encompasses the different dimensions of social realism. In doing so, readers will get better understanding of the influence of this current regardless of their previous knowledge. The influence of the social climate may adopt several features regarding specific parts of the social structure represented: politics, economy, structure and values. In the films analysed the focus is placed on how the characters are influenced by the political debate and economic policies. As a matter of fact, 'taking risks', 'individuality', 'alienation', 'free enterprise', 'decadence' and 'Europe' are common features in the films. Then, the plot of each movie is partitioned in two major points: factors that explain change and those dealing with continuity,

namely whether the approach from film makers takes previous considerations into account to construct the world of the film or foster new attitudes from scratch.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the international sphere, the rise and success of liberal ideas were born in a very complex context, during the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the Oil Crisis in the decade of 1970 and the questioning of the welfare regimes (Conover, 1983). The subsequent social unrest caused in the Western world represented the uneasy accommodation between individual freedoms and common goals. The rethinking of welfare programmes was a consequence of the promotion of liberalism in economy and the reduction of the State in provision of social services. The liberalizing ideas spread on both sides of the Atlantic with the administrations of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

As far as the United Kingdom is concerned, its socio-economic history after the WWII could be divided in two political periods: the 'Age of Consensus' where UK bipartisanship scarcely differed in its policies; and a period where the counter-culture movements of the late 1960s were developed both in social and political grounds. The immense power of the mining industry and trade unions in English economy caused trouble to Conservative Edward Heith's and Labour Harold Wilson's terms during the 1970s. The latter decreed the Three-Day Week due to electricity shortages from industrial massive strikes, while the former faced widespread uproars from the public sector, those known as the Winter of Discontent in 1978. The liberalizing agenda followed by both premierships reduced the traditional and economic influence of trade unions, and created and internal debate in leftist ideology. At the light of its results, such course of action reinforced the need for reforms. The state of the English economy from the early 1980s went 'back in business' after a mild recession, and experimented an enormous transformation on the eleven and a half years of Tory government, but not without controversy. However, the policy carried out was highly contested from sectors that could not survive once privatized, mainly the heavy industries and the mining sector.

Post-war British society had to tackle a generational renewal from a baby-boom period and the waves of immigration after WWII. A younger, reactive and reformist population offered a vivid diversity on their way of living, fact aimed at being represented in the mass media society they had been born in. Whereas the spread of TV was thought to foster the downsides from this 'commercial culture', the concerns in cinema looked at how to take a proper representation of the working classes in the arts -which in Lovell's account adduced still and unclear boundary between propagandistic/educational and aesthetic purposes found in former decades (1972).

The sociological, economic and political turmoil had an impact on cultural manifestations. In 1969, Ian Jarvie exposed the palpable changes in British cinema, with a contemporary view that is critical to the construct of reality each cinema movement does. At that time, he saw an issue about the vogue on "swinging London" films for television and the fight for social realism to be rational instead of sentimental. Fortunately, the new wave of directors seemed to have brought fresh air to open the scope in the representation, away from commercial constraints, to deal with a wider range of issues and techniques. Authors started to take part and worked closely with directors in many creations that were meant either for big or small screens. British cinema was portraying the magnetism of the youth with a greater freedom of topics.

3. FILM ANALYSIS

Social realism in the 1980s was the paramount purpose of film makers in the 1980s, which took an attack on Margaret Thatcher's political onslaught in a country where the religion of the markets was implemented along with a new conception of self-made workforce. Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* and *High Hopes* and Ian McEwan's *The Ploughman's Lunch* exemplify the direct and indirect critiques to massive consumerism and social and mental problems derived from interpersonal relationships of the period.

3.1. (AGGRESSIVE) SOCIAL ASPIRATIONS

Abigail's Party and *High Hopes* are exercises of satire made by Mike Leigh, a man that found 'the true raw material of art in life class' and has developed a restless career for exposing the life of British working classes. His career in directing and producing began in the 1960s for TV in the midst of the European cultural turmoil and free from interference of any kind. A freedom he has always felt lucky for through the long-standing depiction he has done on a society in continuous change – in contrast with the state of English cinema back then, 'locked into an old-fashioned respectable boulevard

theatre' (Leigh on Reykiavik, 2014) –. His first feature film *Bleak Moments* (1971) put him in the map and the BBC hired him to devise and direct up to six productions in Play for Today. The case of *Abigail's Party* is the case of a script that, firstly performed at Hampstead Theatre in 1973, was adapted for TV and in a specific working method where most critics see a special focus on the product rather than the outcome (Reykjavík, 2014).

He certainly believes in the construction of reality that grows organically as the cast, director and editor start working from just a few ideas, instead of the dull direction of a set script (Leigh, 2010). As Tony Whitehead exposes, Leigh 'works with each key actor individually to invent a character. As this process goes on [...] the world of the film evolves and a screenplay is prepared' right after (2014). A loose storyline follows individual sessions of improvisation between the director and the actor that serve to construct the entire universe of each character, narrowed down to speech and manners, all with a credible piece of work when the shooting starts. Once the collective world is built up, the script is constructed and strictly adhered to (Johnston, 2008). In this respect, what he films 'is quite structured. Though the dialogue may at times be improvised, the intentions are all planned and very precise' (Leigh, 2014). Since he began writing plays before screenplays, the fact that his works take a certain time at rehearsal is expected. Therefore, it is his multidimensional perspective on his method what does credit his portrayal on the working classes and a referential figure within the UK and the "world's cinema", for he differentiates between the 'independent, free-spirited, indigenous' movies and the narrow cinema from Hollywood (Reykjavík, 2014).

The case of *Abigail's Party* (1977) works as a comedy of manners that relates its physical space to a living room that allow the characters unveil their own personalities. Alison Steadman plays a middle-class housewife, Beverly, as hostess of a social meeting in company of her workaholic state agent husband, Laurence (Tin Stern); Tony and Angela, another young married couple, and Susan, a middle-aged divorcee whose daughter Abigail is celebrating a party on her own across the street. Their interactions rely on banalities, and their desire to differentiate one another lead to unnecessary uncomfortable situations. As a matter of fact, Beverly puts his husband down at any chance, to which Tony responds with a harsh critique on his wife's musical tastes, preferring Donna Summer to Mozart and disco music to 'finer things' (Raphael, 2007). This competitive tone is followed by Angela, talking about the bargain she achieved on the price of their new house, 'from twenty two to twenty one thousand pounds' (Leigh, 1977). Furthermore, Susan's anguished face and her attempts to watch what may be happening at her daughter's party turn the social event into a nightmare. Last, leather-like sofas chic-like furniture on the set intensify the hostess' mannerism, a way of behaviour that does not disguise her controlling personality to anybody within her domestic domains. If we put an analysis according to the table proposed, the afore-mentioned section of values helps observing the outrageous classism and ridiculous snobbery that the characters present, since all of them share a common background of middle class citizens from a suburban neighbourhood.

This film shares the values with the 1988 exercise of mockery of a yuppie couple in *High Hopes*. In spite of a ten-year gap in the making and different social contexts, both *Abigail's Party* and *High Hopes* share the criticism towards how their characters represent the spiritual poverty brought by unclear social aspirations (Cooper, 1997). The characters of Laetitia and Rupert caricature a new cash-oriented 'working class' focused on the accumulation of goods, and have adopted the cut-glass accent from the upper classes – and which completes their embodiment of the conservative discourse in Thatcherite Britain-. Then, *The Ploughman's Lunch* serves the spectator as how a man falsifies his past to get present and future, personal and professional recognition. They stem from a common aim of representing their respective characters' relationship, using for that purpose techniques such as 'depth of shot and long takes that allow space to negotiate the realism in the text' (Bazin on Lay, 2002:7). *High Hopes* and *The Ploughman's Lunch* are part of Channel 4 funding after it was established as a new TV station in 1982. Lay contends that it was the birth of this public-service station which helped the film industry from the 1980s onwards, since its funding schedules were to foster the representation of minorities, the underclass by 'liberally-minded artists, performers, directors and writers expressing deep dismay at the perceived changes brought by Thatcherism' (78).

Mike Leigh relies on *High Hopes* (1988) to discuss over the new perspectives and uncertainties when Thatcherite ethos permeated in UK pathos. The plot pivots on three couples, 'their respective marital discord and familiar tensions', having the elderly Mrs Bender as a nexus (Chanda, 2013). It is 'her dislocation in Thatcherite Britain' where the film is to focus, as her offspring, Cyril and Valerie, frame the exercise of farce that the film maker seems to put as foremost (id.). According to Barker, 'instead of a working-class, we have a new cash-oriented post-industrial working class, a secure and privileged aristocracy and an unemployed underclass' (2004:153). Next-door neighbours, Laetitia and Rupert, feel morally above citizens outside the 1980s, since they portray the nouveau rich that have moved with the times whereas Cyril and Shirley represent the hippie couple who live according to their own whims, with low-paid jobs and a peaceful counter-culture

existence. The plot puts on them the angst of certain ideas and values that have no place to be executed any longer in the United Kingdom (Friedman, 2006: 28).

The spectator can see how English society has fully adapted to a liberal thinking of continuous self-improvement and how those who are left behind are just to cope with the situation. This dichotomy perseveres in the series of vignettes that *High Hopes* consists of to portray its contemporary social panorama (Hinson, 1989). Mrs Bender lives in a street that has been under the process on gentrification, so that former houses belonging to the city-council now belong to private, upgraded owners. It is important to state that the policy of selling council houses had been present in the twentieth century, being at the end of the 1970s when both Labour and Conservatives started to converge on increasing consumerism to tackle continuous budget shortages (which followed with Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' scheme in 1980). Beckett's analysis on this issue observes 'an aspirational flavour: reassuringly suburban rather than proletarian and urban' (Becket, 2015:1).

Cyril's sister, Valerie, does not happen to have upgraded her way of live in spite of her attempts to 'get into the groove', since her outfits and house decoration have been copied from bling-bling serials like Dallas or Dynasty (see Lay:8). She is a histrionic character who leads her lifestyle to an example of paroxysm for the "noisy" décor her house presents at the family meeting held towards the end of the film. In this respect, the gentrified couple has 'individualism' and 'liberalism' as positive values, whereas Valerie is alienated in an era where classism is still very much present. It is seen in the scene that follows after Mrs Bender is locked out of her own house and asks for help to her neighbour, who is at first reluctant to let the old woman in. After Laetitia has called Mrs. Bender's daughter about the situation, she tries to convince her of buying the house she has been living in, to which she argues lack of money. The conversation goes on and beyond the obvious differences there are, such as Laetitia's pronunciation and tonality, closer to the archetypical Received Pronunciation (RP) English from the upper classes and which looks unnatural.

Moreover, Cyril and Shirley as a couple are necessary in the film since their exhaustion for the contemporary affairs is permanent. The fact that they live happily in a shabby apartment and are stuck in old-fashioned ideals does not imply that they keep fighting for a better world. The historical and so-commented social conformation of community has become more complex and does not longer exist. They are perfectly aware that they have lost the 'war of the ideas' against capitalism, which leads them to live in a passive and angry isolation, individuality within a world that stresses that same value. Even though Cyril does not fit Thatcher's vision that 'socialists don't like people doing things for themselves, [but to] get people dependant on the state', he does no longer hold hope but just engage in exasperation (Thatcheritescot, 2014). Fortunately, towards the end of the movie the main character comes to an emotional change that provides a hint of hope to the spectator, even if it is just a more rational resilience where it is possible to behold a different future with Shirley 'than their previous ten years together' (Quart, 2006:29).

At a next approach, *Abigail's Party* could be said to represent an earlier and naïve advancement of what *The Ploughman's Lunch* analysed to an individual level, and what Leigh later extended to a working-class family on *High Hopes*. For the 1983 feature film explores in the figure of James Penfield the type of social being that fostered Thatcher's conservative discourse and that seemed imported from the USA as the birthplace of venture capitalism and personal branding. Jonathan Pryce plays the character of a working class, ambitious journalist and his attempts to win the heart of a snobbish upper class girl, Ann Barrington, through networking and falseness. In Quart words, the storyline is 'a metaphor for all the falsifications – private and public - on the make of Thatcher's England construct' (2006:25).

On the one hand, the plot is set after the Falklands War, a two-month military dispute with Argentina on the sovereignty of an overseas territory, and which revived the notion of empire and grandeur in a country that was not to be in retreat (Thatcher on Durkin, 2013). Seemingly, the course of action from the protagonist has to do with the UK involvement in a difficult international issue as the Suez Crisis was in the mid-1950s, since he must do a book on the issue for an American college students' readership. In the first part of the movie the spectator observes that James Penfield is a journalist committed to "tell the events as they happened" but he, somehow, defends an honourable attempt from the British Empire to defend its remains. His charade goes further as he meets Susan Barrington, Ann's mother, a middle-aged historian that shares James' views on current social injustice and critiques towards the Labour Party from his affluent existence at her Norfolk mansion (Quart, 2006). Penfield must be thus committed to socialist ideas in his quest for love and public recognition, and it is precisely this lack of self-definition what seems to foresee his eventual private failure.

The final third of Richard Eyre's work merges with the real 1982 Tory Party conference in Brighton where the afore-mentioned ideas make sense under a gathering that did foresee Thatcher's landslide victory in 1983 (see Hutchinson, 1983). As Leigh, Eyre's career is both related to drama representation – he ran the National Theatre for a decade- and he is

interested in having a free and individual perspective when doing a portrait of his country – be *Tumbledown* (1988) an example- (Dickson, 2010). With respect to *The Ploughman's Lunch*, he did not take a leftist point of view but just how social relationships were to be constructed, under allegiance and individual interests that lead to a bitter end for the protagonist. As a matter of fact, Susan Barrington, James and his friend Jeremy (Tim Curry) attend the Tory conference, and what it is supposed to be James' opportunity to conquer Susan turns into his peer's betrayal: a surprised James witnesses his friend having a moment of intimacy in the grandstand with the woman he longs for. Last, both men have an argument, to which Jeremy states: "I've known Susan for more than fifteen years. James, we're old allies" (McEwan, 1983).

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of a selected number of films that adhere to the social realist method shows an overall disapproval to the state of English society during and after the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. The two major film makers dealt with in this paper, Mike Leigh and Ian McEwan, show their reluctance to the dominant ideology fostered by the leader of the Conservative Party. The themes discussed emanate from an adverse social climate where unemployment and uncertainty act as the two essential points of tension. On the one hand, exaggerated social differences in *High Hopes* and sheer verisimilitude in *The Ploughman's Lunch* offer the spectator the adaptation of specific parts of the social structure towards affluence and upward mobility, with very unequal results. On the other hand, *Abigail's Party* (1977) must serve the reader to get a wider perspective on a genre that is always subject to debate and destined to have unclear boundaries.

In social realism, the process of communication between the government and the governed has been subject to issues regarding pressures for commercial success, the pursuit of a creative method with educational purposes and the high degree of verisimilitude expected. It is social realism which contributes in terms of artistic form in this cinematic mode of representation. The role of intellectuals like Grierson in the documentary movement in the 1930s, the treatment of youth alienation in the 1950s and 1960s and its apparent juxtaposition with naturalism in the 1990s are a few examples.

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