



Fullerton, K. 2021. "Blu-ray Review: Secrets & Lies [Criterion Collection, 2021] (Mike Leigh, 1996)." *Open Screens*, 4(1): 21, pp. 1-5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/os.8023>



Open Library of Humanities

## Blu-ray Review: Secrets & Lies [Criterion Collection, 2021] (Mike Leigh, 1996)

Kevin Fullerton, University of Dundee, UK, [k.fullerton@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:k.fullerton@dundee.ac.uk)

---

Secrets & Lies [Criterion Collection, 2021] (Mike Leigh, 1996), 142 minutes, spine #1070, \$39.96 (blu-ray)

---

*Open Screens* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Open Library of Humanities. © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

🔑 OPEN ACCESS



Two scenes encapsulate Mike Leigh's narrative approach in *Secrets & Lies* (1996). The first features Maurice, a professional photographer hard at work in his studio. The framing of the scene mimics the viewpoint of Maurice's camera, never shifting from his first-person perspective behind the viewfinder. Each photography session cuts within a few seconds as, off-screen, he coaxes his clients to smile, before moving onto the next client in media res. The viewer is given the same degree of knowledge of these characters as Maurice himself, and in doing so reinforces his adeptness at putting people at ease to create a naturalistic pose. Here is a busy man who understands the persona he has to assume to give his customers a good product. The next concerns Hortense, the closest thing the film has to a protagonist, as she discusses her love life with her friend. This scene is protracted, concerned with providing insight into Hortense's personal life in granular detail (incidentally, the scene was deemed superfluous by the film's distributors, who repeatedly attempted to make Leigh cut it). Outside of her job as an optometrist, which we only see her undertake for a few seconds, Hortense can explore her family connections and learn about herself. The film constantly contrasts the conflicting spaces of home and work. Each character is defined by their professional lives to the outside world, but their personal lives, their moments with family or on their own, reveal their inner turmoil to the audience. Where work contains a single dimension, the personal sphere contains multitudes. For Maurice and Hortense, the emotional distance necessary to be effective in their jobs acts as a pressure valve against the increasing dramas in their personal lives.

Appropriately, the secrets and lies of the title concern family, friends, and the most profound personal bonds. Winning the Palme d'Or, two BAFTAs and several Oscar nominations upon its release, the film revolves around Hortense Cumberbatch who, as a black woman adopted as a young child, sets out to discover her origins after the death of her adopted parents. Cynthia, her birth mother, is a white and nerve-addled wreck who works in a box factory and has kept her rejected child a secret from almost all of her family, including her 21-year old daughter Roxanne. As Hortense and Cynthia form a friendship, the lives of Cynthia's family play out, and the domestic secrets of each of its members take their toll both physically and mentally.

At its heart, then, *Secrets & Lies* hinges on a premise which Leigh has used many times, in which seemingly disparate characters converge and interact, and in doing so reveal the schisms and the points of unity in British society. Many elements of the film have come under fire in the twenty-five years since its release, particularly its perceived failure to grapple with Britain's attitude towards race, a theme which it generally elides, and what some have considered its patronising attitude towards the working classes,

a criticism which Leigh has weathered since the beginning of his career. Yet where it thrives, and why it has endured, is in its theme of filial connection strengthened through honesty, delivered via Leigh's darkly humorous approach to social realism. Each family rift is borne out of secrecy or misunderstanding, yet everyone's strains are alleviated when those secrets are revealed, as encapsulated when Maurice states, 'Secrets and lies. We're all in pain. Why can't we share our pain?' In upending all the secrets and lies of his characters, the traditional structure of family is interrogated, torn apart and, in the form of Hortense's welcome into the fold, reconstituted into a utopian ideal.

The rerelease of *Secrets & Lies* on Criterion seems apt at a time when popular media in Britain is reembracing discussions around identity, and as many people question the meaning of connection in an era of endless Zoom calls and Teams meetings. Though limited by the constraints of producing a Blu-ray during a pandemic, the special features on this release engagingly address why the film remains a pertinent examination of Britain in the contemporary world. Leigh's thirty minute conversation (via video link) with composer Gary Yershon allows the director to recount the film's production and his much-discussed approach to devising a script with his actors, as well as giving him ample opportunity to examine the plaudits and criticisms it received on its release. Many of these stories are unlikely to be new to anyone who has read Leigh's thoughts on *Secrets & Lies* before, but he nonetheless remains an engaging interviewee. Marianne Jean-Baptiste's thirty minute conversation with film critic Corrina Antrobus (also via video link) discusses the actor's first encounter with fame on a global platform, her feelings on Leigh's unique approach to direction, and the film's depiction of race. Also included is an hour-and-a-half long audio interview between Leigh and film critic Michel Ciment in 1996, which sees the director debate many of the film's themes, triumphs and controversies in heated but genial terms. Rounding off the package is a witty and insightful essay from film programmer and critic Ashley Clark, which touches on many of the film's most pertinent themes, considers what a modern version of *Secrets & Lies* would look like in the age of social media, and makes a handful of personal observations on Leigh's exploration of race. This essay, alongside the discussion between Antrobus and Baptiste, are the lynchpin of this release, providing perspectives from people of colour in a critical domain which has, until recently, been sorely lacking in Britain. In doing so it articulates that while *Secrets & Lies* underestimates the complexities of racial identity in the 1990s, it still remains one of the few major works of cinema to show the interior lives of Black British women. As Clark points out, 'Despite wishing we could have known more about Hortense's experience, I am intensely moved by, and grateful for, the moments of Black British life that Leigh does bring to the screen.' The

print is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1:85:1 with a 2k restoration approved by Leigh and cinematographer Dick Pope, as well as colour graded by the pair at Deluxe in London, with a 2.0 surround DTS-HD Master Audio track, giving the film the richest aural and visual texture available on a home release.

---

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

