



MIKE LEIGH

Bleak Moments

There is nothing quite like English suburbia, and a solid tradition of literary commentators, from Arnold Bennett to William Cooper, has ventured down the tree-lined avenues to unmask the mysteries of life behind the chintz curtains. Film attitudes to suburban life have ranged from that quintessentially British stance of bemused tolerance (possession is nine-tenths of happiness) to vituperative, and sometimes intolerant, rejection of all those lovingly sustained semi-detached values, a critical line extending from the generalised hostility of *Look Back in Anger* to the particular commitment of *Family Life*. In Mike Leigh's *Bleak Moments*, which seldom ventures beyond the dowdy claustrophobia of red brick and brown sofas, suburbia is hell on earth.

In this case, hell is more than other people, it's other people because of and in spite of oneself. At first glance Sylvia (Anne Raitt), around whom the other characters pivot but with whom they don't begin to connect, seems well enough equipped to cope with whatever the world has to offer. She is attractive, intelligent, and graced with an appealing if bizarre sense of humour which is as often as not directed against herself; she is also endowed with an enviable tolerance of other people's idiosyncrasies, which extends even to her typist colleague and limpet-like friend Pat (Joolia Cappleman), one of those archetypal permanent spinsters whose untuned cheerfulness and ubiquitous knitting are an unspoken admission that opportunity has passed her by.

In *Bleak Moments*, though, appearances are never deceptive. Everyone Sylvia encounters in this cramped stretch of South London is a victim of himself, trapped by circumstances like most people but also self-immured from the world outside by the unwished for agonies of the space between words.

Sylvia herself is inextricably bound by and to Hilda, her 29-year-old sister whom brain damage has imprisoned in permanent childhood; Pat, who hangs round Sylvia like a clinging vine, has befriended Hilda, but perhaps only because she sees in this mute surrogate child a welcome release from her own querulous, bedridden mother and such irritations as a set of false teeth left in a glass for visitors to remark. The film quietly, patiently documents this seemingly permanent impasse while recording Sylvia's attempt to break down the barriers of her circumscribed environment, first with Peter (Eric Allen), a paralytically diffident schoolteacher, and intermittently, when Peter advances in retreat, with Norman (Mike Bradwell), a shambling, nervous drifter who camps in her garage to operate a duplicating machine for a magazine run by his friends. Sylvia's protracted encounters with these two paragons of non-communication add up to a depressing spectacle of the danger zones of human relationships.

But it's not entirely a catalogue of depression. Mike Leigh leavens the general gloom (pervasive enough to make an audience despair of the characters as much as they despair of each other) with a layer of sidelong humour which shows through almost in spite of itself. In this, his method obviously recalls both Olmi and Forman, especially in the almost methodical way he builds a scene to a crashing anti-climax. Like these masters of observational cinema, Leigh records human eccentricity from a point of view that is critical perhaps (it is their inability to meet society's expectations of them as much as their failure to break free of their own constraints which makes these characters

what they are) but never jaundiced. In this sense Leigh is nearer to Olmi, and particularly the Olmi of *Il posto* and *I fidanzati*, than to Forman, since there is hardly a suggestion that his viewpoint is ambiguous or detached; though he shares with Forman the capacity to make us laugh at the weaknesses of others while being pulled up by an uncomfortable realisation that their frailties are only our own writ large.

Far from being sociological types of human behaviour (perennial stumbling block of British realist cinema), these people are also recognisable for what they are in their own right. Sylvia, for instance, has a way of sidling into a conversation with a totally disconnected, anarchic remark, which is both surprising and consistent with her own interior conflict – the familiar nervous, well-meaning ploy of channelling aggression through other people. Wake up and I will wake up is what she is desperately trying to say. Engaging battle with Norman, she quietly remarks that she is ‘the President of Venezuela’, which prompts him to an admission that he is not from Doncaster but from Scunthorpe, an exchange encapsulating the whole web of class consciousness which has previously (though never of course in so many words) enmeshed their relationship. For an instant, the barriers are down, a victory achieved by Sylvia’s anxious but resolute determination to assert herself; the next moment they are up again, the tide breaking through a wall of sand as Pat, who lives for other people’s birthday cards, blurts out a request for Norman to strum a song they can all join in.

The highlight, if that is the word, of the film’s observation of this war of nerves is Sylvia’s confrontation (and that is the word) with Peter, whose own bottled aggression is characterised in maybe the film’s one unsympathetic moment when he stumbles through McLuhan’s theory of communication. ‘I find it easier watching radio,’ Sylvia counters to his frustratingly irrelevant question about the relative merits of radio and television. There is one scene, a disastrous dinner in an almost deserted Chinese restaurant with a supercilious waiter dancing non-attendance, which is pure Olmi, even to the long shot isolating the two of them against a forest of tablecloths. And when Sylvia takes her feckless suitor home to ply him with sherry and finally ask him point-blank to drop his trousers, Leigh’s patient, almost immaculately classical editing communicates the embarrassment with a familiarity which makes one shift nervously in one’s seat.

Bleak Moments is perhaps a little too long and in a sense trapped by its own claustrophobia, in that what one misses is a counterpoint with the world outside; Leigh’s theatre background may account for this. But as a first film it is an entirely original and (yes) highly promising work, shot in appropriately muted colour by Bahram Manoochehri. It was made, amazingly, for about £18,000, and shot at a 7:1 ratio. Suffice it to say that this only goes to demonstrate what you can do if you want to.

David Wilson, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1972

BLEAK MOMENTS

Directed by: Mike Leigh
©: Autumn Productions
Presented by: Autumn Productions
In association with: Memorial Enterprises,
British Film Institute Production Board
Produced by: Leslie Blair
Production Manager: Pat O’Donnell
Production Assistants: Giles Camplin, Alison Read *
Continuity: Sue Vester
Scenario: Mike Leigh
Photography/Camera Operator: Bahram Manoochehri
Assistant [Camera]: Roger Pratt
Grips: Michel Préfontaine
Graphics: Esther Rowley
Film Editor: Leslie Blair
Assistant Editor: Sidney Holden
Art Director: Richard Rambaut
Assistant [Art Director]: Liz Dallas-Ross
Processed by: Rank Film Laboratories
Original Songs Written by: Mike Bradwell
Sound Recordist: Bob Withey
Assistant [Sound Recordist]: Bob Bentley
Post-production Recording: Charles B. Frater

Cast

Anne Raitt (Sylvia)
Sarah Stephenson (Hilda)
Eric Allan (Peter)
Joolia Cappleman (Pat)
Mike Bradwell (Norman)
Linda Beckett, Sandra Bolton, Stephen Churchett (remedial trainees)
Una Brandon-Jones (supervisor)
Joanna Dickens (stout teacher)
Ronald Eng (waiter)
Susan Glanville (enthusiastic teacher)
Christopher Leaver (wine merchant)
Christopher Martin (Sylvia’s boss)
Liz Smith (Pat’s mother)
Malcolm Smith, Donald Sumpter (Norman’s friends)
Reginald Stewart (man in restaurant)
Peter Chandler
Brian Chenley
Ina Clough
Pat Farrand
Sandra Jewell
Lin Layram
Ruth Lesirge
David Marigold
Marion Turner
Ken Wheatcroft
P.A. Rowley

UK 1971©
111 mins

* Uncredited

MIKE LEIGH A COMPLETE FILM SEASON

Bleak Moments

Mon 18 Oct 20:40; Thu 28 Oct 18:00

Nuts in May

Wed 20 Oct 18:00; Sun 31 Oct 11:20 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Alison Steadman, Roger Sloman, Anthony O’Donnell, Stephen Bill and Sheila Kelley)

The Kiss of Death + The Permissive Society

Sat 23 Oct 12:50

Hard Labour

Sat 23 Oct 15:10

Happy-Go-Lucky

Sun 24 Oct 14:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Sally Hawkins, Alexis Zegerman and Kate O’Flynn); Mon 15 Nov 20:40

Meantime

Sun 24 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Marion Bailey and Phil Daniels); Thu 11 Nov 20:45

Secrets & Lies

Mon 25 Oct 14:30; Sat 6 Nov 19:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Sat 27 Nov 15:00

Abigail’s Party

Tue 26 Oct 20:50; Sun 14 Nov 12:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh)

High Hopes

Thu 28 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:45 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Ruth Sheen and Phil Davis); Thu 11 Nov 18:00; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

Life Is Sweet

Tue 28 Oct 17:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Thu 4 Nov 18:15; Tue 23 Nov 20:50

Grown-Ups + The Short and Curlies

Sat 30 Oct 17:15 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Tue 30 Nov 14:15

Home Sweet Home

Mon 1 Nov 17:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Sat 6 Nov 11:45

All or Nothing

Wed 3 Nov 20:30; Wed 10 Nov 20:30; Sun 21 Nov 17:10 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Lesley Manville and Marion Bailey)

Career Girls

Fri 5 Nov 20:50; Fri 12 Nov 18:15; Tue 23 Nov 18:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh)

Vera Drake

Fri 12 Nov 20:40; Fri 26 Nov 17:40 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Imelda Staunton and Phil Davis)

Topsy-Turvy

Sun 14 Nov 17:30 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh and Jim Broadbent); Sun 28 Nov 17:40

Another Year

Fri 19 Nov 17:30 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Ruth Sheen and Lesley Manville); Mon 29 Nov 20:30

Four Days in July

Sat 20 Nov 11:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh and Brid Brennan); Wed 24 Nov 14:15

Peterloo

Sat 20 Nov 16:20 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Mon 29 Nov 17:40

Mr. Turner

Sun 21 Nov 13:10 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Marion Bailey and Dorothy Atkinson); Sat 27 Nov 17:30

Who’s Who + A Sense of History + A Running Jump

Sat 30 Nov 14:00

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