I just get an enormous buzz when the whole thing takes off and actors start being brilliant. What happens on the journey with every actor and every character is that there’s a certain moment when something clicks. Up to a certain point, we’re both developing the story of the character and still working on how the actor plays the character. There’s always a moment when it goes *Clunk!* and I can stop worrying about the acting. It settles, becomes three-dimensional and grows.

I mostly enjoy watching my films, but if ever I couldn’t watch them for some reason, I do have fantastically glowing memories of sitting in rooms with people, watching them doing things without a camera even being there.

*Can you imagine a life where you weren’t making films?*

On one level I’d be delighted not to have to do anything – just to lounge about and be lazy. But actually the buzz and excitement of making films is so colossal that it would be devastating not to do it all the time. For ever.

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**Bleak Moments (1971)**

*Sylvia* (Annie Raitt) lives in a south London suburb with her mentally disabled sister Hilda (Sarah Stephenson). By day Sylvia works as a typist in an accountant’s office with her friend Pat (Joolia Cappleman); by night she cares for her sister, drinks sherry and reads books. Her secret dream is to be a writer. Her lonely life is interrupted by two men: the first, Peter (Eric Allan), is an awkward, emotionally frigid teacher she vaguely knows who asks her out to dinner; the second, Norman (Mike Bradwell), is a hopelessly shy hippie who comes to do the printing when Sylvia rents her garage to an underground magazine.

Peter is nervous around women. He interrogates Norman about his education and criticises him for dropping out of school before A-levels. Peter takes Sylvia to a Chinese restaurant where there is only one other diner. The silence weighs heavily. Finally, they leave and return to Sylvia’s house, where she offers Peter sherry and keeps topping up her own glass in an attempt to relax. There is more silence, yet the atmosphere is charged with unspoken desire. Sylvia desperately tries to lighten the mood by telling Peter that, in her head, she was telling him to take his trousers off. Peter refuses more coffee, pulls on his gloves and leaves.

Sylvia knocks on the garage door to see if Norman would like to come in the house for a drink, but he already has plans. At the office Pat tells Sylvia she wants to take Hilda to see a spiritualist; Sylvia is against the idea.

Peter is in the school staff room. When another teacher discusses next term’s ‘humour project’, he says that he doesn’t think teenagers have a sense of humour.
Sylvia and Hilda bump into each other outside the library. It's an awkward, tense moment. When the sisters return home, they discover that Norman is moving out. Pat comes round and gets upset about her mother. Sylvia doesn’t respond. Pat and Hilda go to the cinema. Sylvia plays the piano in a half-hearted manner, alone.

* * *

AMY RAPHAEL: When you made Bleak Moments you were just twenty-eight years old. Can you recall much of your world view at that time?

MIKE LEIGH: Well, of course, I grew up in a socialist youth movement. At twelve and thirteen, when other kids were venturing into coffee bars, we spent our Saturday nights debating the likes of whether capital punishment should be abolished (my deep conviction was that it should). At fifteen, I went to hear Bertrand Russell at an early CND rally at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. And we were on the Aldermaston march in 1960. At RADA I was once castigated by an elderly member of staff for wearing a CND badge. ‘We all went through the war,’ she cackled, piously, ‘but we didn’t need to wear badges. We just got on with it.’ Remarkable, considering most people were in uniform and everybody was fighting fascism! But, in a way, that serves to illustrate the naive, apolitical climate of the established theatre in the early 1960s. And even for those of us who were politically on the left by instinct, it was somehow still OK to regard yourself as outside politics if you were an artist.

But for me, as for a whole generation, one became properly and totally politicised by the end of the decade. You can track this metamorphosis by looking at the evolution of the Beatles. Naughty provincial lads into flower-power exotics into active vocalisers on Vietnam. Vietnam woke us all up (incidentally, I was in Grosvenor Square in 1968). By the beginning of the 1970s everything seemed possible—and we certainly couldn’t have imagined that the world thirty-five years later would be so terminally fucked up.

So Bleak Moments is an implicitly political film. It is rooted in a social-class context and looks at how we live. But it doesn’t deal with anything beyond personal and sexual politics. True, it touches on issues—care and responsibility, education, openness—but it doesn’t do the kind of thing Ken Loach and Tony Garnett were up to on television. Cathy Come Home, which was shown by the BBC in 1966, had a direct effect on housing policy. Bleak Moments did no such thing. In that sense it is not an issue film.

Did you watch those BBC ‘Wednesday Plays’?

Interestingly, I saw virtually none of them because I didn’t have a television during that period. I didn’t watch TV; I went to the movies. If anything, I initially felt isolated from the BBC. I had applied and been rejected three times to do the BBC directors’ training course. A very frosty board plainly thought rehearsing and making up a film was just silly, really. I kept on being told to reapply, but the third time I was able to write back and say, ‘Unfortunately I’m unable to apply this year as I’m actually directing a “Play for Today” for you.’ Tony Garnett thought it was such a gas. Anyway, I finally hired a telly when I started to apply for the BBC course.

Bleak Moments started life as a play in 1970. Where did the fundamental idea come from? Were you drawing on your own experience?

The central frustrations and unfulfilled needs, aspirations and desires that afflict everyone in both the play and film were very personal. I was a deeply lonely person. In many ways I still am. Up to that time, I had had various relationships, but most of them hadn't got anywhere. I had some that did, but... a lot of it, particularly the central stuff between Sylvia and Peter, came in its essence out of my early experiences. The awkwardness and the whole thing about communicating—these were things I had experienced, yes. It was about being trapped. But the central premise of having to care for somebody, that just came out of my head. And, of course, the dead suburban world of my background has much to answer for.

It’s very much a film about how we perceive ourselves, as opposed to how others perceive us.
One of the themes that runs right through my films is the whole business of received behaviour and how we are motivated or inhibited by our notion of how we want other people to see us. In a very raw state, that's what Bleak Moments is very much about. The tension between innocent, direct honesty and inhibited, indirect behaviour - inhibited by received notions of how you should be behaving - lies at the core of all five central characters.

Hilda is somehow more direct and straightforward than the others because she is innocent of all these mores. Although Norman and Pat are both inhibited and self-conscious in their respective ways, there is, at the same time, a directness and innocence in both of them. Then there's a directness in Sylvia which is simply completely inhibited by the company she keeps and the situations she finds herself in. And of Peter, no explanation is required.

You mustn't forget the influence of Beckett and Pinter on my work. I remember conceiving the basic dynamic and spirit and feeling of Bleak Moments, and it seemed very natural just to go into this very private microcosm and explore something in a real way. It was simply what was interesting to me. I don't know if I was conscious that what I was doing was particularly radical - though it was, actually. It was quite a unique film in a way, though all sorts of influences had gone in.

Bleak Moments was certainly radical in the sense that you allowed silences to linger and people to emit strange noises or pull odd faces.

I have always thought there was something missing in Antonioni's films. He seemed to be about something important, but it never really happened. It was a glossy, sexy, magazine world he was portraying. So, at some unconscious level, Bleak Moments is my natural reaction against that kind of perfect world; I wanted to look at people grunting and twitching, because it's what we do. As a non-gorgeous person myself, my motivation was almost to dramatise the rest of us in some way.

You asked before about world view. By the late 1960s I was in many ways absolutely onto what was happening. There was a guy called Tim Horrocks who was a teacher, thinker and film-maker and who sadly died young. He wrote a piece about Bleak Moments in a magazine we produced at the London Film School. This was called Sinic and was edited by Roger Pratt, the cinematographer. Tim said, to paraphrase, 'This film sits on the cusp of the '60s and '70s. It sits on the cusp of the '60s with its protest and the '70s in which we are prone to self-absorbed introspection.' It was very perceptive to see that pretty much at the time.

One manifestation in Bleak Moments of what was happening in the world is Norman, the magazine and the world it represents. To me what's fascinating is to see the tip of the iceberg: this guy in this garage with an old-fashioned Gestetner machine and his guitar... No doubt some people would have no idea why he was there or what was going on, but a substantial number of people knew the world from which that came and everything it implied. You didn't really get much about who these alternative characters were. They were implied a bit by the clapped-out vans in which they dropped Norman off and picked him up.

It's a glimpse of another world, alien to the likes of Peter and even Sylvia.

Exactly. Whether it's the Jane Austen she's reading... There's very little that actually tells you much about the ins and outs of Peter, but you get a very clear idea of what kind of teacher he is. Partly through his interrogation of Norman, which is a key scene, and partly when you see him in the school. Education is discussed implicitly without the film being about a revolution in a comprehensive school.

Is Bleak Moments a template for all that followed?

In a way it is, yes. Don't forget that the stage version of Bleak Moments was the tenth improvised play, so in actual terms I'd already done quite a lot of work that paved the way. But what began to worry me hugely at this stage was the threat that working the way I did could only produce characters who were inarticulate or catatonic or introspective. By definition it made for non-communicative situations. This turned out to be total nonsense, of course. The breakthrough film, in this sense, was obviously Nuts in May.
How hard was it to transfer Bleak Moments from play to film?

Well, it was no big deal in broad terms. I've only ever done it with Bleak Moments and Nuts in May, although in these two cases I wasn't really turning a play into a film, rather making a film from some of the ingredients of a play. The only time I've actually pointed a camera at a stage piece was Abigail's Party. In Bleak Moments the characters were there, the dynamics of their relationships, their world. I simply had to go back and explore that world and then go off in another direction. But we had had a terribly rough ride with Charles Marowitz, who had agreed to put it on at his Open Space venue but then completely hated it. He had decadent, arty ideas about improvisation. Added to which, it played to empty houses. Yet I felt optimistic about the play.

Bahram Manocheri - who ending up shooting the film - came and took production stills of the play. Les Blair was at the London Film School with him and introduced us. We all sat around talking about how cinematic it could be. So right from the word go we were talking about making a film. Amazingly, when the play was still on, I got hold of Tony Garnett's number and, although I didn't know him, phoned him up. I said, 'I've got this play that's had bad reviews and I'd really love you to see it.' In retrospect it's remarkable that he came, because, as I soon learned, he hates theatre. He can't stand going to see plays.

But that night, after he saw Bleak Moments, I went back to Tony's flat with him and the writer Roger Smith. Apart from working on 'The Wednesday Play', both were very much involved with the Workers' Revolutionary Party at that time. I was there till about 3 a.m. talking about anything and everything. I remember saying how much I wanted to make a film of the play, and Tony saying, 'Well, how would you do it?' And we talked about the possibilities. Roger then reviewed Bleak Moments in the Workers' Press. He saw it as a fundamentally Marxist play.

You didn't work with Garnett until your second film, Hard Labour. Instead, you formed your own company, Autumn Productions, with an old school friend, Les Blair. How instrumental was Blair in raising the money?

Very. He said he'd like to produce and edit the film version of Bleak Moments. In the meantime, I went off to do a disastrous production of The Life of Galileo in Bermuda. Albert Finney had taken a percentage rather than a fee on Tom Jones, which was very successful, and had decided to set up Memorial Films with Michael Medwin. So he put money into Gumshoe, which Memorial made, which Finney was in and which Stephen Frears directed. They made another film called In Loving Memory. Then they decided to take a gamble on Bleak Moments. They offered to put up £14,000. We ran out of money in post-production and they forked up the rest, taking the total to £18,500.

You've said in the past that this is the only time you've ever benefited directly from the BFI.

The BFI Production Board had this agreement with the ACTT, the old film union, where the crew could be paid way below union rates simply to ensure an experimental film can be made. This would make it an official BFI Production Board production. When I first came up with the idea of making Bleak Moments into a film, the director Bruce Beresford was head of the BFI board. He came to see the play and was very positive. But by the time it came to make the film, other people had taken over. Anyway, the BFI weren't very interested; the minimum they could give was £100, which they did. But, still, it became a BFI Production Board film, so we were licensed, as it were.

Did you earn any money from the film?

Not really. Everyone, myself included, was on £20 a week. The actors, who weren't covered by the ACTT agreement but by Equity, were on a minimum of £40 a week. They all invested half their wages back into the film. So while we were in production everybody was on £20 – just about enough to live on.

You said somewhere that shooting rumbled on for ever . . .

Well, it went on a bit. We shot for longer than was originally scheduled. Up to then my only film-making experience was acting in a film, Two Left Feet, as soon as I'd left RADA. I got the hang of how it happens because I used to go on set all the time, whether
they called me or not. I was also in some other bits, including Michael Winner's *West 11*. I went to the London Film School and did the night course, which was good but limited. I'd directed some shorts in Birmingham which are now lost. So I'd been around a bit of filming and later I'd taught how to direct actors at the Film School. But I hadn't really done the whole thing.

As a consequence, making the film was a massive learning curve. It was really my education in film-making. I hadn't directed a film with sound until that point. I remember that very early on in that shoot I lost my confidence. You've got to feel sure that people are behind you, and here it was so chaotic. We had very limited resources and manpower: a cinematographer, a sound recordist, a focus puller, a boom swinger and a fifth man, who was part of both crews. There was no catering. There were no sparks, so it took for ever to do anything.

But by the time shooting got into full swing, I was very freed up by it. I had the confidence, for example, to deal with the shots in the tea-party scene: you get all those tight shots and then a shot where you see the hatch, and Pat and Peter are right on the edge of the frame looking out. I remember everyone saying, 'You can't do that! They should be looking inwards or be within the frame.' But I knew I was right.

But another massively important thing I learned was that you have to have time with these films – more than an ordinary film – to develop and rehearse the action in the location, without the crew. Because we got ourselves into a real pickle. We did mad things like shooting all night. It was so undisciplined in a way. I wasn't giving myself time to get on top of the material. We'd be shooting things that hadn't really been digested. So we decided with Albert Finney and Michael Medwin's collusion and support to lay off the crew for a week to ten days in the middle of the shoot – just so I could engender a lot of material. And of course that was fantastic; it unlocked the film.

Then what made it special was other people's contributions, not least Bahram Manocheri's: he shot it on Eastman colour, 35mm, but he built home-made lights and lit it using bits of Aertex underpants. He had hardly any expensive stuff; it was all done on the cheap. But, as you can see, he actually got the quality.

I could go into a cutting room now and chop out twenty minutes and it probably wouldn't suffer at all. It's got 'first film' scrawled all over it, but it still has a discipline and integrity. For all its faults and the ponderousness of its conception, I think I was motivated by a very strong sense of emotional purpose. And that holds it together.

**How evolved was your 'method' at this point?**

I think the real point is this: well before *Bleak Moments*, and certainly with *Bleak Moments*, there had come into existence a pretty sophisticated way of creating an inner world, a world with people in character that lay beyond merely acting out situations in a literal way. Everything that happened in the procedures that created *Bleak Moments* had already taken place in the previous productions. *Bleak Moments* wasn't the first improvised play I did with professional actors. I did one at the RSC that was very crude but interesting and another with drama students at East 15 Acting School. But in a sense, since the rest of them were with people of an amateur status, this was the most grown-up exploration. It was dealing with grown-up issues. There was something about getting together a gang of grown-up professional actors... part and parcel of that was the moving forward of the way of doing things.

**Despite the fact that it was challenging, hard work and, at times, shambolic, did you have fun making *Bleak Moments*?**

Yes. It was a very rich experience. But very, very tough. It was grindingly hard work; it always is, but we were particularly undercrewed.

**How was the film received on its first release?**

It was premiered at the London Film Festival, where it had a really good response. It ran at the Paris Pullman. It came out the same week as Hitchcock's *Frenzy*, and George Melly reviewing it in the *Observer* said something like, 'Alfred Hitchcock is famous for treating his actors like cattle and it shows. Mike Leigh, however, does no such thing...'. And he went on to rave about the film. That was great, a shot in the arm. Other critics were supportive, notably Derek Malcolm in the *Guardian*. Eventually it won the
Golden Leopard at Locarno and the Golden Hugo at Chicago.
Roger Ebert, in the Chicago Sun-Times, raved, 'It is a first film by a young British director who exhibits in every scene a complete mastery of the kind of characterisation he is attempting.' Yet even he acknowledged that it wasn't entertaining in the conventional way. But there weren't many British films around at the time - which is why, of course, I didn't make another feature film for a hundred years.

One of the keys to making your films work seems to be your ability to keep empathy going, no matter how frustrating and hard to like the characters might prove to be.

I don't think about it as such. What motivates me - when I'm making all the choices in arriving at what you see in the moment on the screen - is what is interesting, and that can be for a whole variety of reasons. Part of the fundamental philosophy of my films is that everybody is interesting and, as in real life, every character is three-dimensional and rounded and at the centre of his or her universe. So, despite what some ridiculous people have said over the years, there are actually no stereotypes or ciphers. All the characters, even the minor ones, must be resonant. On that principle, the fact that a character may be unpleasant or hard to sympathise with would only be a problem if I didn't get them working or make them three-dimensional.

I suppose that even with a character as hopeless and difficult to empathise with as Peter you still watch the film shouting at the screen, 'For God's sake, man, pull yourself together! Just kiss Sylvia!'

'Get on with it!' Exactly. That's what it's about. The chemistry of how these films work - Bleak Moments not least - is exactly that. It's the audience constantly reacting to things in terms of how you know it should be, could be, ought to be. How you think it's wrong being the way it is. All of those things. And that's what this kind of story-telling is about.

There was a screening of Bleak Moments, early on, that I went to at Southampton University. It was shown at midnight and everyone had pints and it was very jolly. They were onto every gag, and it was hilarious. Finally, when she says, 'I was thinking, take your trousers off,' there was a cheer, an explosion. Of course, I've also been to screenings of my films where I thought everyone had died.

How close was the final scene between Sylvia and Peter to the first improvised version of it?

Oh, that's a very complicated question. The following answer applies right across the board: you don't do an improvisation, just fix it up and shoot it. There were maybe a dozen to fifteen investigations - in other words, separate improvisations. When you then structure the thing, and you're drawing from things that have happened in improvisations, you still carry on reinvestigating it, even as part of the defining process. In fact, if you look at the scene in Secrets & Lies where the two women sit side by side at the table in the cafe, it's a clear descendant of the one from Bleak Moments you're talking about, in the sense that it's absolutely distilled and it's all going on, but it's drawn from a whole series of improvised explorations.

At this early stage in your career, how did you ascertain whether an actor would be capable of working in such a way?

I wasn't sure they could do it; I just hoped they could. I knew some of them could because I'd worked with them, but it was mostly shooting in the dark.

Did I have the choice of every actor in the world? Not at all. Often the people I cast were those I could persuade to take part. 'Sorry, what did you say? No script?' It was far out, barking mad. They'd say, 'Oh, you mean a happening? Oh, you mean a documentary?'

Anne Raitt I knew because I'd worked with her at Stoke, where we were both in Twelfth Night. Sarah Stephenson had been in Individual Fruit Pies at East 15. Eric Allan I knew vaguely from the RSC. He was a good sport. Mike Bradwell I taught at East 15 and he was a friend. Joolia Cappleman I was going out with, and she was original and off-beat. The famous George Coulouris, who was Thatcher the lawyer in Citizen Kane, started off in the early stage version - mad man, big eyes, long face, been in lots of movies, about seventy at the time - but he baled out after four days. He
thought it was bollocks. He'd been really enthusiastic to start with, saying he'd always wanted to do something experimental! He'd talk about Orson and the Mercury Theatre, and this was fantastic. But, in the end, it wasn't his cup of tea.

I then held auditions for the additional parts in the film, and out of that came Liz Smith, who came from nowhere and is now, of course, a national treasure, and Ronald Eng, who played the Chinese waiter. He was rather wonderful.

**Bleak Moments is an emotional rollercoaster and yet not much at all really happens in it.**

'Not much happens' as defined by the general convention of things happening in films. Say that a man walks down a street, comes through a gate, walks up to a house, rings the doorbell. I would say that in a lot of movies that is a straightforward and uninteresting conjunction that has to happen merely by way of information. The second unit could go out and shoot it.

However, if you look again at the man walking down the street, there's a whole number goes on just getting through the gate. In **Bleak Moments**, this guy Peter is inhibited because he thinks Sylvia's watching him out of the window. There is complete silence in the street - and by the way, we never needed crowd or traffic control as it was that quiet. That's how it was in Tulse Hill in 1971.

I remember shooting Hilda coming back from the daycare centre, walking up the street with all those sawn-off trees, backlit. At one point in that sequence Hilda turns the corner of a street and a van goes past with 'Lambeth' written on it. That just happened. But you get a real buzz from the real world. Through the joy of looking at ordinary, banal things and finding what can be made interesting about them, it becomes something else, something meaningful, poetic.

*It's interesting how the film documents an era quite specifically, from the quiet streets to Sylvia buying a bottle of sherry for fifty-nine pence...*

Fifty-nine and a half pence. If you look very carefully behind the salesman there's a sign that says 'Decimalisation'. We shot that scene just a few days before decimalisation. It's important that he says fifty-nine and a half pence; everybody feared that everything would become more expensive as prices would be rounded up. And, of course, that's exactly what happened. So fifty-nine and a half pence, which is a preposterously fussy sum, was an exact conversion of duodecimal to decimal. It would have been 12/6d or something. Within months it would have gone up to 50p.

*To what extent is Sylvia anaesthetising herself from the reality of the world with her sherry drinking? Or is it simply a release from the mundane nature of her life?*

Both. She's lonely. She's intelligent and perceptive and aware enough to know how bad this is and how unfulfilled her life is in relation to its potential. She's trapped in this situation. In the booze shop, when she buys the sherry, there's a certain level of self-conscious guilt about it. She's a lone boozer. And so when she gets a guy in the house, she wants to share it with him.

*The fact that Sylvia is very beautiful somehow makes it all the
more tragic. You sense she has so much potential, yet she is being denied a Technicolor life. As a viewer you're desperate for someone to come and give her an opportunity to really live, but instead there are just these two hopeless men.

Totally, I've reflected on this a lot over the years: the film doesn't explicitly raise the question of Sylvia's choice as to whether to put Hilda in a home. It's implicit in the film that Sylvia has chosen to look after Hilda at home. And I remember thinking, 'Oh well, that's obvious.' Whether I should have dealt with it more explicitly, I wouldn't like to say. Certainly you know this is a woman who could make that choice and find another life for herself.

Because Sylvia doesn't discuss Hilda in that way, we immediately view her as a 'nice person', a selfless person who is looking after her difficult sister.

Absolutely.

Roger Ebert wrote, 'This is a new kind of suspense of real stories happening in real time.' The suspense is incredible: as well as not much really happening, the film moves very slowly, but you find yourself sitting on the edge of your seat.

As I said, I could go and remove a chunk out of it. But in a way one of its many subversions is that it's naughtily saying to the audience, 'Well, just be patient and take your time to get into it.' The other thing is that the bubble never bursts. There are four times which should be the climax; you think it's the end, but it carries on. Again, in subsequent films - mostly from Nuts in May onwards - you do get a kind of climax. In Bleak Moments it's very deliberate that it feels climactic, but there's never a climax. That's an important part of the subversion, of the treatment the audience is getting - forcing them to participate.

The humour, however, keeps us going. Its timing is very important. Like Sylvia's daft jokes: when Norman asks her what she does, she replies, 'I'm the president of Venezuela.' She's such a strong female character with a gentle sense of humour, to which the men have no idea how to respond.

I don't disagree with what you're saying, but I suggest you might want to distinguish between Peter's total lack of humour and Norman's... well, he gets it, but he's just a young, shy lad. But you mention the placing of the humour. I sometimes get asked, 'How do you decide when it should be funny?' The truth is that I don't ever really take time to ponder this. Humour is an organic, instinctive thing.

It's a bleak film, yet there is so much hope and possibility.

It's making the audience see those possibilities. The minute the audience aspires to things, or wishes for them, then the positive exists in their experience of the film.

With Bleak Moments you set up an approach that you've pretty much stuck to with every subsequent film and play: you avoid moral judgement. You don't judge Peter's intellectual pretensions or emotional deficiencies, you just present them.

Well, yes, it's a fundamental principle. Laying out ideological, didactic arguments and so on - I'd find that very hard. It's not a conscious choice of mine not to judge the characters morally; the fact is that I just don't. For me the most distressing line of criticism I get is precisely that - that I'm judgemental. But I never am. I simply reflect and lament on how we live our lives.

Might that criticism come, in part, from people feeling uncomfortable with the realness of your films? Perhaps they'd rather not contemplate the existence of Beverly in Abigail's Party or Colin in Meantime.

I think that's right. If you start with an awkward, slightly overweight, grubby guy with greasy long hair in an old black overcoat, people may say, 'Ah, you've made him like that so we can laugh at him,' as if he were inferior or degenerate.

Let's talk about the iconic nature of tea in your films. It's a constant in the whole body of work. Is that how you were brought up?

Everybody in these islands was brought up with tea. In Vera Drake Vera makes it all the time. The point, however, is not the cups of tea
themselves but the focus on the detail around. Throughout the films there are all kinds of moments to do with things – for example, the sudden presence of a dinosaur-shaped nutcracker in *Grown-Ups*.

I am endlessly fascinated by things. As a kid, I remember sitting in art class in primary school making electric irons out of clay and painting them, anticipating Claes Oldenburg by over a decade. I was always fascinated by Heath Robinson as a kid and Rowland Emmett, the railway cartoonist. Indeed, you will find in my library, perhaps surprisingly, books about old buses and cars and trams and railways.

*Music is very important in your films, but the first film to have its own score is The Kiss of Death in 1976. In Bleak Moments Sylvia hesitantly plays Chopin on the piano and Norman plays his three-chord ‘Freight Train’ on the guitar. Why didn’t you have a music score for Bleak Moments? Was it a matter of money?*

No. I didn’t want one. I thought it was absolutely wrong and unnecessary. In the original stage version, Norman sang Bob Dylan’s ‘She Belongs to Me’. Of course, we wanted that in the film but we couldn’t for copyright reasons, so we used a couple of songs that Mike Bradwell wrote. Somebody told us they’d checked and ‘Freight Train’ was traditional and therefore out of copyright, but when the film came out in the States we received a bill for £900 because Elizabeth Cotton had written it in 1948.

Not having music was part of the deliberate radical policy of the film. I remember saying that all films have scores and often don’t need them. In fact, I was quite militant and purist about it at that stage, which is why you don’t get a music score till *The Kiss of Death*. Which is eccentric in one sense, because if someone had said to me, ‘OK, name twenty films that you love, and love not least because of the music,’ I could have done so easily. From *Jules and Jim* onwards.

*It’s fascinating to look in your films at how we perceive ourselves as opposed to how we are perceived by others: the notion that if there are two people in the room there are really six people in the room. Sylvia’s boss wants to be smart, philosophical and funny but instead they’re laughing at him . . .*

I talk about this in the introduction to the script of *Two Thousand Years*. All my films have in one way or another dealt with identity, with the conflict between what we are and how we live, with what we believe in.

I’ve always thought I ought to do a film called ‘The Done Thing’. I grew up in a world you constantly heard that phrase: ‘Don’t do that, it’s not the done thing.’ What is the done thing, then? There was a lot of pressure in the 1950s to conform. We had ballroom-dance classes that were done jointly with the girls’ school next door. Who the fuck wanted to learn ballroom dancing? My folks, bless them, actually got a guy to come round and give me bloody boxing lessons in my bedroom. I think my father worried that I was gay! There were layers and layers of received behaviour and having to conform . . .

*Did that end with your generation?*

It’s a pertinent question. I never completely put all this into perspective until we were making *Vera Drake*. I realised, looking at that world, why people were conforming and ‘behaving properly’. We who were teenagers in the 1950s couldn’t wait to kick it all out in the 60s, which, of course, we did. What we knew but didn’t really think about or realise was that between the 1930s and the early 50s, our folks had gone to hell and back in the Depression and the war. They’d been through shit. The whole awful respectability of the 50s and its effect on youth – encapsulated in everything from *The Catcher in the Rye* to *Rebel Without a Cause* – was about my parents’ generation putting the world straight. They had gone through chaos.

A whole generation of us were fundamentally critical of this repressive world. So *Bleak Moments* is that very suburban world with this bubbling anarchy dying to get out. In a way, it’s a metaphor for my own background.

*Did your parents enjoy Bleak Moments?*

They thought it was great. They were very surprised and bemused by it, of course. It hit the headlines. They had seen nothing of what I’d done in the 1960s. They didn’t really know what I was doing till quite late on.