DEVISED AND DIRECTED BY MIKE LEIGH

EDITED BY
BRYAN CARDINALE-POWELL AND
MARC DiPAOLO

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For Jennifer
– Bryan

For Quentin
– Marc

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Introduction:

The Politics and Poetics of Comic-Realist Cinema

Marc DiPaolo

Renowned for making films that are at once sly domestic satires and heartbreaking 'social realist' dramas, British writer-director Mike Leigh confronts his viewers with an un-romanticized dramatization of modern-day society in the hopes of inspiring them to strive for greater self-awareness and compassion for others. This collection features new, interdisciplinary essays that cover all phases of the BAFTA-award-winner's film career, from his early made-for-television film work to his theatrical releases, including *Life is Sweet* (1990), *Naked* (1993), *Secrets & Lies* (1996), *Career Girls* (1997), *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), *All or Nothing* (2002), *Vera Drake* (2004), *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) and *Another Year* (2010).

Leigh has frequently explained that the inspiration for his domestic comedy-dramas is his exploration of – and challenging of – the notion of bourgeois respectability drilled into his head by society during his 1950s upbringing and how difficult it was for anyone he knew to do anything but 'the done thing'. Consequently, Leigh's heroes are those who have a mordant self-awareness and are capable of laughing at the ridiculousness of society and go about the business of living despite the limitations placed upon them by social values and economic circumstance. Leigh's heroes – especially his economically disadvantaged ones – are not defined by their noble victimhood or frozen in time as tragic examples of economic and militaristic oppression like the countless dead bodies littering the Odessa steps in *The Battleship Potemkin* or the humbled father in the final, suffocating moments of *Bicycle Thieves*. They are more than mere signifiers in

a Marxist melodrama existing primarily to make a political point. They are, instead, people who 'just get on with it' and live life as Leigh puts it time and again in interviews.

Those characters in Leigh films that do seem to be frozen in time are those who, to a degree, imprison themselves. Many of his characters occupy the roles of tragic failures or villains in the narrative because they are self-centred without being self-aware. They are intractable, humourless, lack any sense of irony, force others to follow their own idiosyncratic standard of behaviour and are prisoners of their own personalities. These figures often make little 'progress' during the course of the film and have no character arc, while the more good-humoured, clever and independent-minded sometimes are allowed to achieve at least a degree of happiness in their lot, even if they are unable to transcend their immediate socio-economic circumstances (see previously published work on Leigh by Carney and Watson).

To a degree, Leigh's films frequently involve examining one extended urban family occupying a lower-socio-economic class that becomes embroiled in a conflict with wealthier neighbours or representatives of a higher, distant authority. Other Leigh films are about several small families of similar means that are pitted against one another, fighting for one small piece of the larger 'pie' that has been promised them. The set-up seems almost a parody of Jane Austen's notion that 'Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on.' Like Austen, Leigh's humour and drama frequently arise during hilariously tense mealtime encounters between members of different families with very different personal and political values and very different ideas of decorum. *Who's Who*, for example, is replete with uproariously tense discussions over food, and the entire final act of *Secrets & Lies* is constructed around one extended, brilliantly suspenseful slow-burn mealtime conversation. Like Austen, Leigh's work is more nuanced and varied than the generalized, sometimes caricatured, representation of it would indicate.

Another aspect of Leigh's film-making career that makes him worthy of critical study is his approach to crafting the narratives of his films. In broad strokes, he begins with collaborating with actors to create characters and relationships and a fully formed fictional community of characters. *Then* he constructs a basic plot. *Then* he holds improvisational rehearsals. Only *then* does he write the script. (It is, of course, all more complicated than this, but we'll deal with that later.) Leigh called this approach 'devising' films early in his career and then thought better of it. But it is a term that intrigues me, and a process that intrigues me even more.

I only found out that he used this approach to story construction relatively recently, when my co-editor told me about it. Indeed, although I had seen and enjoyed *Naked* many years ago, and remembered fondly the 'I'm never bored' speech, I must confess that I owe my discovery of Leigh to Bryan Cardinale-Powell, who has a poster of *All or Nothing* hanging in his office at Oklahoma City University. I had known that Leigh's movies were favourites of my favourite critic, Roger Ebert, and that several character actors from *Doctor Who*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* populated his films, but I couldn't muster the enthusiasm to watch them all after seeing the excellent-but-depressing *Naked*. When I asked about *All or Nothing* and Bryan enthusiastically vouched for its quality, I decided to rent all of Leigh's films and watch them over the summer as my wife and I were sequestered from the world with our newborn son, Quentin. I had time for little else but Leigh and helping with the baby, and wound up loving the films. During the Quentin-Leigh-movie-marathon, one of the things that struck me about Leigh's early television films was that his screen credit read 'Devised and Directed by Mike Leigh'. I really liked the sound of that, and not just because of the alliteration. I had heard from Bryan about Leigh's unusual method of creating plot and character and writing scripts and I thought that 'Devised and Directed' was a great way of signalling that Leigh was doing something different and innovative. After all, if '*Death-Proof*' was 'Written and Directed by Quentin Tarantino', then the normal process of 'auteur' script writing is no guarantee of artistic quality. If '*Death-Proof*' is 'Written' and *Hard Labour* is 'Devised', then who needs 'Written'? I'll take 'Devised' any day.

I informed the half-awake Quentin, 'Mike Leigh is a real director. Quentin Tarantino is a hack. Learn this lesson well.' He gurgled and moved his fist slightly.

'By the way, you're not named after Tarantino', I reassured him.

I was disappointed to see the label 'Devised and Directed' fall away from the TV films before long and still more upset to hear that it had been used by some of Leigh's detractors as a means of questioning his integrity as a film-maker. If he was 'devising' movies, some critics claimed, he was not the true auteur. He was, they claimed, someone who generated stories vampirically, exploiting the hard work of improvising actors, not giving them proper credit and not really steering the direction of the film after all. I had made no assumptions along these lines when seeing the 'Devised' credit and soon decided that it was time to re-appropriate and redeem the credit as a mark in Leigh's favour and not a mark against his character.

Hence the title of this book.

Figure 1.1 Hannah Mills (Katrin Cartlidge) and Annie (Lynda Steadman) get to know each other in the under-appreciated *Career Girls* (1997)

Leigh's work has received a great deal of acclaim in both the popular press as well as notable placement in widely publicized lists of classic British films and television narratives. One of his greatest admirers in America is film critic Roger Ebert, who championed Leigh as a gifted film-maker in a 1972 four-star review of Leigh's first film *Bleak Moments*. Over the decades, Ebert has granted all subsequent theatrically released Leigh films the same perfect score with the exception of *Career Girls* (Figure 1.1), which he assigned three out of four stars. Leigh has also been honoured with film-making awards. He won two directing awards for *Vera Drake* in his home country – the British Academy of Film and Television Arts' David Lean Award for Direction and the British Independent Film Awards' Best Director accolade. Also, in 1996, *Secrets & Lies* won the Alexander Korda BAFTA Award for Best British Film and Leigh won a BAFTA for best Original Screenplay for *Secrets & Lies*.[1]

Leigh has had his detractors, including the late Dennis Potter, who was the most notable of several British critics that have claimed that Leigh is not accurately depicting British society in either his theatre or film work. Some have taken issue with Leigh's apparent caricaturing of the British class system in general and the working classes in particular, while others have felt that his filmic style is now easily identifiable and over-familiar – that is to say, Mike Leigh has made a career making 'Mike Leigh films' – and he has outstayed his welcome. In contrast, the co-editors of this anthology – Bryan Cardinale-Powell and myself – are American scholars who share Ebert's consistent enthusiasm for

Leigh's work. Our enthusiasm for Leigh's work does not, however, preclude our ability to criticize it, or to break from either the 'scholarly consensus' concerning his canon or his own firmly stated views and readings of his films. We can also respect Leigh's style of 'realism' without expecting him, or any other single director, to bear the weight of responsibility of finding a way to represent an entire nation accurately on film.

As Bryan and I sought contributors to write essays for the book, we noted that several of the British critics we approached expressed an eagerness to participate because they had recently 'rediscovered' Leigh after having spent some time undervaluing his post-telefilm career. Some had remembered disliking his 1990s films and had assumed he was past his prime, but the viewing of a recent great Leigh film shocked them out of thinking of him only as the bloke who had peaked with either *Nuts in May* or *Meantime*. Perhaps more interestingly, several scholars who have written pieces for this text were vocally despondent over the return of a Tory prime minister to 10 Downing Street and nostalgic for the anti-Tory films Leigh made while Margaret Thatcher and John Major oversaw the state of the nation. After all, they said, David Cameron's austerity measures and the London Riots seemed to bring certain notorious elements of 1980s culture roaring back to life in the present-day – this despite the omnipresent contemporary cultural fixtures of Facebook, the European Union and the London Eye ever reminding them that much has changed since the days of the Falklands War, the National Union of Mineworkers strike and Bobby Sands, and the 1981 Irish hunger strike.

American viewers of Leigh films might have similar reservations about the strength of the conservative social and economic movements in the United States, but many fans from 'the colonies' are merely grateful to Leigh for providing them with films about 'real' people during an age when every film in the multiplex appears to be about superheroes or amusing drunks on a road trip cruising for sex. (I write this as someone who quite likes superhero movies – in their place – and even wrote a book about them.) We also share Ray Carney's assertion that Leigh's films are to be appreciated because they are of a rare breed. They are humanistic, involve and challenge audiences and avoid simplistic characterizations or predictable Hollywood tropes and plot outlines (e.g. the nuclear countdown thriller; the articulate, mob-assassin mentor film; the 'meet cute' romantic comedy, etc.). Far from seeing Leigh as a heartlessly snarky caricaturist – as Potter did in his famous review of *The Play for Today* production of *Abigail's Party* – we see him as a crafter of sincerely

heartfelt, sincerely funny, and unabashedly human films, and as one of the few contemporary film-makers who *isn't* a heartlessly snarky caricaturist. Carney made much the same assessment in his uncannily apt skewering of American popular culture in the closing chapter of *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World* (2000), though the passage of time has provided even better targets than the ones he cites.[2]

In *The Films of Mike Leigh,* Carney depicts Leigh as the ultimate realist film-maker – one who does not use tried-and-true Alfred Hitchcock film-making techniques to imbed in his narratives paint-by-number melodramatic plots, cheap sentimentalism, careworn audio-visual tropes and overt political statements, nor does Leigh attempt to mesmerize viewers into direct identification with a solitary protagonist with a stable, clearly discernable emotional state and infallible moral compass. Chapters by Leonard Quart bring a more biographical and cultural studies sensibility to the forefront, acting as a corrective to Carney's understandable-but-intractable refusal to adopt such methodologies or acknowledge them as anything but reductive and destructive to the artistic and humanistic sensibility.

Bert Cardullo observes in *Loach and Leigh, Ltd.*: *The Cinema of Social Conscience* (2010) that Leigh '*used* to be an *auteur* who, in films like *High Hopes*, *Naked*, and *Secrets & Lies*, was making anything but agenda-driven movies. But he is getting to be a lot like his colleague Loach at his worst: a tendentious, if not downright socialistic, agitator' (59). It is important to note here that Carney, who has not written on Leigh's post *Life is Sweet* work, reportedly shares Cardullo's assessment of Leigh's later works. Cardullo's comments are understandable, as propaganda from both the political Left and the Right can be equally dehumanizing and antithetical to good art and good taste. However, in light of the increasingly corporatized, conservative nature of the mass media, a little socialistic agitation on Leigh's part might be considered a good thing – and maybe a necessary and laudable thing.

In *Mike Leigh* (2011), Sean O'Sullivan reveals his own impatience with extant Leigh criticism. O'Sullivan is weary of critics that depict Leigh as a magician who effortlessly transforms real life into 'perfect' movies, just as he feels that too many published critics are fascinated with Leigh's 'Britishness' and obsess over his politics and his relationship to the British social realist film-makers. These observations strike close to home, as I am drawn to Leigh's work, in part, for these reasons, and I have taken O'Sullivan's observations to heart as a corrective to my own view of the film-maker's oeuvre. Instead of embracing my approach, O'Sullivan

is much more interested in Leigh as an auteur who uses real filmic techniques, not magic, to craft films that are far more formalist and postmodern in their sensibilities than existing Leigh scholarship admits. O'Sullivan employs a David Bordwell-like methodology to examine how Leigh uses shot compositions and audio techniques to juxtapose polar opposite figures (which he calls 'centaurs') as both a joke and a poetic idea. As O'Sullivan aptly argues, Leigh is not Tim Burton or Baz Luhrmann, but his films do feature visual imagery reminiscent of Edward Hopper, thematic ideas found in Italo Calvino and minor characters defined by their amusingly Dickensian foibles and affectations. According to O'Sullivan, none of these stylistic devices are 'sins' against the Platonist, Ideal Form of Realist Cinema, but should be regarded, instead, as brilliantly executed filmic storytelling techniques and narrative contrivances.

Leigh has stated in interviews that he is proud of his debt to Dickens and other Victorians (Gilbert and Sullivan included), and has recently begun acknowledging more firmly his debt to the tradition of Jewish humour and – as a Jewish director – has seen himself as part of the same broader tradition of ethnic humour that Woody Allen belongs to. The notion that both of these traditions influence Leigh further complicates any assertion that Leigh is a purely objective, influence-free chronicler of modern-day British society, and I acknowledge that even as I remain appreciative of what I see as the realism inherent in his works.

Also weighing in on the topic of psychological and social realism in Leigh's films, Tony Whitehead observes in *Mike Leigh* (2007), that 'throughout Leigh's work, laughter is a survival mechanism, and *shared* laughter is the key to a clear understanding of oneself and happy, healthy relationships with other people. To be fully appreciated, then, Leigh needs to be seen not as a failed realist, but as a hugely successful humorist' (4).

Finally, Garry Watson's closing remarks on Leigh in *The Cinema of Mike Leigh* seem particularly well formulated. He notes that much of the impression of realism in Leigh's films comes from the fact that his characters are 'so exactly situated within the English class system' (186) and that they – like *real people* and unlike *movie people* – are prone to fart, have pimples and be allowed to sport blemishes and personality defects that are beyond those even demonstrated by most American character actors in independent films. He writes:

> The problem is that most movies do not show us people as they are . . . a need is felt to ensure that the characters in most movies are effectively *cleansed* – with the dictionary definitions of 'bland' (meaning 'smooth and soothing in manner or quality', 'exhibiting no personal concern or embarrassment') and 'bleach'

> (meaning 'to remove colour or stains from' and 'to make whiter or lighter') . . . effectively summarizing the main ways in which the mainstream media tries to erase the real. (187)

Our anthology builds upon the scholarship discussed above as well as attempts to break new ground in scholarship on Leigh. The essays in this book include those that examine individual Leigh films; recurring themes and motifs in several films; representations of class and gender, overt social commentary and political subtexts; visual stylizations and storytelling techniques ranging from explorations of the costume design to set design to the music and camerawork and editing; the collaborative process of 'devising and directing' a Mike Leigh film that involves character-building, world-construction, plotting, improvisations and script-writing; the process of funding and marketing for these seemingly 'uncommercial' projects, and a survey of Leigh's critical reception and the existing academic scholarship on his work. The articles are written by academics from the United States, Great Britain and Australia for a primarily academic audience, but any informed reader who is a fan of Leigh's work can appreciate the book's content. The contributors to this text are scholars from a variety of fields, including film studies, film production, art, theatre, literature and cultural studies. These scholars apply a variety of methodologies when examining various aspects of Leigh's career including gender studies, new historicist, semiotic and reader response theory.

The book is broken down into four sections. The first, 'Devising Leigh', concerns the process by which Leigh funds his films, makes them and then markets and distributes them. Also considered are some of the critical and audience responses to these films upon their release. The second section, 'It's an Ordinary Life', considers the argument that Leigh's films do, indeed, come from a tradition of domestic realism, and said realism is central to his artistic success. Section Three, 'Beyond Verisimilitude', looks at the filmic techniques Leigh employs to simulate realism while simultaneously generating works that can be regarded as formalist film art. Section Four, 'Leigh versus the Tories', revisits Leigh's early works and examines them through the eyes of cultural criticism, especially focusing on the anti-neo-liberal sentiments present in films produced during the Margaret Thatcher and John Major administrations.

Opening both the 'Devising Leigh' section and the anthology as a whole is Christopher Meir's 'The Industry and the Auteur'. Meir's essay examines Leigh's relationships to his producers, especially Simon Channing Williams, and considers how Leigh evolved from an-up-and-coming crafter of leftist telefilms

to an unlikely, bankable 'brand name' in the international independent film market and fan community. Following the principle laid down by Leigh himself that only those who attempt to write and direct a film in his style can possibly understand his style, Australian film-maker Robert Marchand has worked to recreate the Leigh 'system' of film-making in his own work and chronicles his efforts in 'Devising and Directing'. Marchand uses as evidence observations based upon his own experience in devising and directing films and upon what Leigh has revealed about his mysterious film-making process in interviews and directing master classes.

W. S. Gilbert biographer Andrew Crowther considers Leigh's love affair with Victorian light opera and examines the difference between truth and fiction in 'Every Performance is a Contrivance: Art & Truth in *Topsy-Turvy*'. Crowther examines all that is historically accurate about Leigh's Gilbert and Sullivan 'biopic' and explores how some deviations from historical fact may have arisen from Leigh consulting faulty source material, while other 'errors' in the film were deliberate 'mistakes' made for dramatic effect or to illustrate Leigh's conception of the nature of collaborative storytelling.

Brenda Wentworth, Christopher Jordan and Sharon Cogdill look at how Leigh's characters are defined, in part, by their clothing, the props they are associated with and the sets they inhabit in 'Costuming Choices: Stylization and Leigh's Selective Realism'. Since realistic costumes and sets do not call attention to themselves, these scholars demonstrate how clever and subtle costumes create a sense of realism, while not, in fact, being 'realistic' in and of themselves.

In 'Cultural Stillbirth: An examination of reactions to *Vera Drake*', Bryan Cardinale-Powell examines why Leigh's period piece abortion film failed in both of its intended goals: to court widespread controversy and affect the outcome of the 2004 American Presidential Election.

Section Two, 'It's an Ordinary Life', begins with a re-presentation of Leonard Quart's 'The Uniqueness of Ordinary Lives: *Grown-Ups* and *Home Sweet Home*', a landmark essay and close-reading of two of Leigh's best-remembered made-for-television films. Sarah Godfrey's '"Taking the Temperature": Masculinities and Male Identities from *Bleak Moments* to *Happy-Go-Lucky*' offers an overview of Leigh's most memorable male characters, from those found in *Bleak Moments* and *Hard Labour* to the men of *Nuts in May* and *Another Year*. In 'Transgression and Transcendence', William Verrone offers an almost spiritual and psychoanalytic take on how Leigh's films inspire viewers to acts of

transcendent rebellion by modelling such actions with the protagonists Poppy (*Happy Go Lucky*), Phil (*All or Nothing*) and Johnny (*Naked*).

Stella Hockenhull's 'Melodrama and Tradition in *Vera Drake* and *Another Year*' begins the third section, 'Beyond Verisimilitude'. Hockenhull provides close readings of two of Leigh's most recent films, examining Leigh's signature film style and considering how it compares and contrasts to the British 'kitchen sink' film dramas of the 1960s. Formalistic set design and photographic framing are central to F. E. Pheasant-Kelly's analysis of one of Leigh's most popular films in 'Class, Loss and Space: Reframing *Secrets & Lies*'. Bryan Cardinale-Powell's 'All or Nothing: Mike Leigh and the Fickle Finger' looks at how Leigh's parallel storytelling, pairing of related character types and calculated use of cutting and photography helps instigate specific emotional and intellectual reactions in the viewer that crafts a worldview, propels a narrative and shapes audience identification with (and alienation from) character.

Then begins the final grouping of essays, Leigh versus the Tories. Steven Morrison's '"Those Days Are Over": *Naked* & Something Rotten in the1990s' takes readers back to the days of Prime Minister John Major, and the apocalyptic feel of the final decade of the twentieth century. Morrison's cultural studies essay notably compares the anti-hero Johnny to iconic, disaffected protagonists like Hamlet and Withnail, and places Johnny in the context of 1990s popular culture. In 'Gendered Troubles on Screen: Reproducing Nationalism in *Four Days in July*', Derek Gladwin considers Leigh's handling of the Irish Troubles, offering historical context of the split between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, an overview of the way the conflict has been dramatized on screen, and a consideration of the symbolic role of femininity and motherhood in Irish political propaganda and in Leigh's telefilm.

The most vulnerable of figures, a developmentally disabled, unemployed, working class young man living in Thatcher's England is the focus of Ana Miller's 'Fluctuating Identifications, Learning Disability and Class in *Meantime*'. Miller challenges previous scholarship on *Meantime*, which she sees as too judgemental of the central characters and, simultaneously, too reluctant to diagnose Colin as disabled. While Leigh has joined several of his most vocal critics in describing his *High Hopes* as too over-the-top and campy, Kevin M. Flanagan rehabilitates it as a prime example of a subversive sub-genre of films that includes Lindsay Anderson's *Britannia Hospital* (1982) and Peter Smith and Alan Bleasdale's *No Surrender* (1985) – the 'State of the Nation' film. His essay is called 'The Grotesque State of the Nation: Mike Leigh's *High Hopes* and the Thatcherite Comedy of

Errors'. The book ends with David Sweeney's personal essay '"I Spy": Mike Leigh in the Age of Britpop', which examines the Leigh films that were most embraced by the British youth culture and music industry. Sweeney pairs Jarvis Cocker's music with the inspiration it took from *Abigail's Party*, considers Graham Coxon along *Meantime*, places Suede and Blur with *Naked* and aligns Oasis with *Nuts in May*. Sweeney ends with a consideration of the sitcom *Gavin and Stacey* as the heir apparent to Leigh's early, youth-friendly work.

Collectively, these essays strive to bring new critical perspectives to bear on the long and venerable career of Mike Leigh. They deal with the widest possible array of Leigh's film work from the beginning of his career up to his 2012 Olympics short film 'A Running Jump', while returning repeatedly to two of Leigh's most significant works, *Naked* and *All or Nothing*, as conversational touchstones. Our hope is that the combination of film theory and cultural criticism approaches featured in these pages, as well as the variety of scholarly voices, will help energize and advance the study of Leigh's films and inspire further critical discussion and appreciation of this innovative, comic-realist film-maker.

Notes

1 Additionally, two British institutions – the British Film Institute (BFI) and *Time Out Magazine* – have singled out Leigh's work for distinction. In 2000, BFI released its list of the 100 best British television programmes, granting *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979), *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 1996) the top three slots, while landmark Leigh *Play for Today* telefilms *Abigail's Party* (1977) and *Nuts in May* (1976) occupied slots 11 and 49, respectively. BFI's 1999 list of the 100 best British films – which featured *The Third Man* (1949), *Brief Encounter* (1945) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) in the top three positions – placed *Secrets & Lies* at position 40 and *Life is Sweet* at 95. In 2011, *Time Out* magazine also published a list of the 100 greatest British films, placing *Don't Look Now* (1973) first, *The Third Man* second and *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) third. Mike Leigh appears four times on the list, matching the number of entries by Alfred Hitchcock, David Lean and Nicholas Roeg: *Naked* was #11, *Secrets & Lies* #33, *Nuts in May* #63 and *Topsy-Turvy* #64.

2 I, for one, would here single out for approbation Seth McFarland, Michael Bay and Dick Wolf as the producers of some of the aesthetically and morally worst, high-profile and financially successful film and television projects. I would then single out for special praise their polar opposites – Alexander Payne, Liza Johnson,

Nicole Holofcener, Zoe Cassavetes and screenwriter Angus MacLachlan – for making recent American films that could speak to the same kind of psychological depth, humour and humanism found in Leigh's films.

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Part One

Devising Leigh

1

The Industry and/of the Auteur: Producing and Marketing Mike Leigh

Christopher Meir

The paradigm of the auteur has always been one that is implicitly and sometimes explicitly Romantic in nature, tending to see the auteur director as one that stands apart and in isolation from all worldly concerns and contexts. Among other problems, this bent on the part of auteur critics has led to the neglect of important creative collaborators, a tendency to view directors as somehow existing separately from history and culture and a sometimes willful disavowal of the economic realities of film-making. All of these tendencies can be found in the scholarship surrounding Mike Leigh, and they have collectively created gaps and misunderstandings about the film-maker's career that must be remedied if we are to more fully appreciate the historical realities of Leigh's film-making and various contexts that surround his work.

This chapter will illuminate the commercial contexts of Mike Leigh's film-making, aspects of his work that have received surprisingly little attention from critics and scholars. As such, it will first provide an overview of the production contexts for his films and television plays. This section of the chapter will examine the entities that have funded and continue to fund his work – including British subsidy bodies and public service broadcasters – as well as the producers who have worked with Leigh throughout his career and who have often gone unheralded by nearly everyone except – significantly – Leigh himself. This latter concern is particularly of interest following the death in 2009 of Leigh's long-time producer Simon Channing Williams. This section will also engage with the economics that underpin Leigh's film-making, including budget, box office performance and business models, all concerns that ultimately fall to film

producers. The chapter's second section explores the marketing of Mike Leigh's films, which, unsurprisingly, centres on Leigh himself. Here I will elucidate Leigh's auteur persona as seen across the vast corpus of interviews that the director has given over the years. As such, this section will discuss the ways in which Leigh is branded as an auteur director in a time when the figure of the auteur director has become an accepted staple of popular film culture, even while theorists and historians continue to debate its usefulness for Film Studies.

This exploration of the commercial side of Leigh's career will shed new light on the director's work and answer questions that may have puzzled admirers of his films. These questions typically centre around how it is that Leigh continues to get his films made when they seem so patently non-commercial in form and content and when he almost never has a script or even outline to pitch to potential funders. This chapter will take on these questions and in so doing demonstrate that the films are in their own way very commercially viable as long as they are made and marketed in the correct manner. Appreciating the ways in which Leigh's films have been handled from pre-production through marketing and distribution means starting with the figure of the producer, a figure who typically looms large in both of these spheres of a film's commercial life.

Producing Mike Leigh

> One learned how to produce Mike Leigh.
>
> David Aukin[1]
>
> My debt to him is massive and my respect is huge.
>
> Mike Leigh on Tony Garnett[2]

The figure of the producer is one that has been widely neglected in Film Studies, with stars and directors receiving the bulk of the attention from critics and scholars. Auteurism has played a large role in this marginalization, not only by favouring directors but also by habitually pitting the auteur director against avaricious and philistine producers. Film history is thus littered with stories of Hitchcock's feuds with Selznick, Von Stroheim's struggles with Thalberg, and others, all of which cast the director as the hero and producer as villain.[3] But more often than not, the great auteurs have actually benefitted from producers who have managed the commercial and organizational sides of film-making and thus allowed directors the freedom to bring their visions to the screen.

Though the producers who have worked with auteur directors are vitally important to the films they work on, the scholars who study those films seldom recognize them. In this regard, Mike Leigh scholarship is no exception: Simon Channing Williams, Leigh's producer for almost 20 years, is not mentioned a single time in Garry Watson's book on Leigh,[4] and he only gets the briefest possible mention in Raymond Carney and Leonard Quart's book on the director, that being in the authors' acknowledgements.[5] Similarly, Sean O'Sullivan's recent monograph on the director[6] only features one mention of the producer, that being in a chapter-length interview with Leigh himself.[7] This latter example is not surprising. The one place Channing Williams is discussed at length is in Leigh's interviews, where the director pays homage at several points to the important role played not only by Channing Williams but also other important producers and executive producers, including David Rose, David Aukin, Georgina Lowe and others. This is perhaps the best testament to the importance of producers in Leigh's career.

Like many independent film-makers before and since, Leigh's career began with an audacious attempt at scraping together whatever money could be begged and/or borrowed from friends to make his debut feature *Bleak Moments* (1971). Unlike Kevin Smith or John Cassavetes, however, Leigh had an established product in the successfully staged version of his play *Bleak Moments* and wealthy and famous friends like actors Les Blair and Albert Finney. Finney – who attended Salford Grammar School at around the same time as Leigh – agreed to fund almost all of the film's budget, save for the paltry £100 provided by the BFI Production Board, the leading subsidy body at the time for new film-makers. The micro-budget feature was made for a total of £18,500[8] and, along with his established career in theatre, put Leigh on the radar of the first important producer that would shape his film-making career.

Tony Garnett – one of the most important producers in the history of British television – was then in charge of the BBC's *Play for Today* series. In this role he had worked with a virtual who's who of British auteurs in the making, including Stephen Frears and Ken Loach. In retrospect, the amount of future film-making talent employed by the BBC in the early 1970s supports Leigh's claims that, 'the British film industry was alive and well and hiding out in television'.[9] Garnett provided Leigh with the break the director needed to move from the unstable footing of maverick independent film-maker to the relatively predictable world of television drama.

As Garnett told Michael Coveney, this decision was made based on his knowledge of Leigh's now famous working methods and the practical problems the producer knew these would cause:

> I could see that [Leigh] was never going to be able to do what he wants to do in the cinema. His conditions were expensive, not for the scale of the thing . . . but for the time required. I knew nothing would happen for him until he got established. So I decided that I would give him one of my last available slots.[10]

While there is no reason to doubt Leigh's claims of complete autonomy during his BBC days, the impact of the *Play for Today* 'house style' – a sort of realism infused with Lord Reith's dictum that public service media should 'inform, educate and entertain' – on Leigh's style, or indeed that of Loach, Frears and other great British auteurs, remains underappreciated.

Once Leigh began working with *Play for Today*, he entered a period of steady and prolific film production. Despite working in what was for all intents and purposes a studio job, Leigh has spoken favourably of the creative freedom he enjoyed at the BBC. Leigh was allowed to make whatever films fit his interests while seldom if ever worrying about budgets.[11] Two of his most popular works were made during this period: *Nuts in May* (1973) and *Abigail's Party* (1978). Leigh enjoyed the free reign offered by the BBC, but he grew increasingly frustrated with the limited scale of television distribution, describing it in one interview as 'really, really choking'.[12] This frustration would ultimately lead Leigh to film-making aimed at theatrical distribution, and his time at the BBC gave him occasion to work with two producers who would play central roles in his later transition to the cinema: David Rose and Simon Channing Williams.

In the early 1970s, David Rose was head of English regions drama at the BBC. In this capacity, he not only commissioned *Nuts in May*, but also put his personal stamp on the film when he suggested that Leigh shoot on location in Dorset – Rose's home county – a decision which Leigh still credits as being vital to the film's satirical project.[13] As Coveney points out, *Nuts in May* 'marked Leigh's major breakthrough with the British public',[14] an accomplishment due in no small part to the vision and influence of David Rose. Rose continued to play a major role in Leigh's development as a film-maker, commissioning and producing *The Kiss of Death* (1977), set in Lancashire. By this time, the relationship between director and producer was so close that Leigh included an inside joke aimed at Rose in the film itself.[15]

Rose went on to play a significant role in British film and television history as commissioning editor at Channel 4 which was established in 1982 as an outlet for independent television production by the otherwise neo-liberal and deeply conservative Thatcher regime. Here Rose not only commissioned some of the most important works of the 1980s, including landmarks such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) and *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, 1982), but he also pushed the channel – and consequently all of British television – towards theatrical distribution of its films. This policy reshaped British cinema and ultimately provided Leigh with the scale of distribution he had sought in the 1970s.

Even before greenlighting the channel's investment in *High Hopes* (1988), Leigh's first theatrical film since *Bleak Moments*, Rose played a vital role in Leigh's career in the 1980s. Rose commissioned *Meantime* (1984), which along with *Four Days in July* (1985) and *High Hopes* formed what Leigh would later describe as 'a trilogy of Thatcher-motivated films'.[16] The success of these films laid a foundation for Leigh's eventual move to theatrical distribution. *Meantime* in particular proved very popular with audiences and had a theatrical run in Australia.[17] Rose also stepped in to revive Leigh's career in the mid-1980s when he commissioned Leigh to make *The Short and Curlies* (1988). This project was intended to provide Leigh a chance to show potential backers that he was again able to stand the rigors of film-making after suffering a bout of depression after the completion of *Four Days*.[18]

Beyond Rose, perhaps the only person who cast a longer shadow over Leigh's career was Simon Channing Williams. Channing Williams met and worked with Leigh during the director's time at the BBC on the film *Grown-Ups* (1980). As first assistant director, Channing Williams demonstrated the unique set of skills needed to produce Leigh's mode of film-making. At a pivotal moment in the making of the film when Leigh was attempting to formulate its ending – a decision he always makes during shooting – Channing Williams arranged for the cast and crew to take a break from work on the film which allowed Leigh the time he needed to write the necessary scenes.[19] According to theatrical producer David Aukin – who would later act as Head of Film at Channel 4 and in this capacity invest in nearly all of Leigh's films in the 1990s – 'One learned to produce Mike Leigh'.[20] Channing Williams, however, did not need to learn how to produce Leigh. Instead, he immediately displayed the organizational, persuasive and improvisational skills needed to protect Leigh from production pressures, a task he performed again and again over the next 28 years.

Channing Williams began his career at the BBC as a runner doing more or less anything that was asked of him on set.[21] As he rose in the ranks at the corporation, he took on the position of first assistant director, overseeing the on-set production of a number of films including seven with Stephen Frears.[22] Ironically, he lost his job at the BBC because of his use of petty cash to smooth over relations with homeowners who lent their homes to the production of *Grown-Ups*, his first project with Leigh. Speaking of this incident, Channing Williams claimed he actually saved the BBC money, but he nonetheless paid the price for not following protocol at the notoriously bureaucratic broadcaster.[23]

Channing Williams went on to work as a freelance associate producer and first assistant throughout the mid-1980s. He was offered a role in making *Meantime*, though he turned it down to work on *Wagner* (Tony Palmer, 1984).[24] The next Leigh film that Channing Williams worked on was *High Hopes*, which he co-produced with veteran television producer Victor Glynn who assembled the funding package for the film. Soon after, Channing Williams and Leigh founded Thin Man Films, and Channing Williams took on the key responsibility of finding funding for the company's projects, which was no small task considering the director's refusal to provide treatments or scripts to funders. For the first film, *Life is Sweet* (1991), Channing Williams followed the precedent Glynn set with *High Hopes* – raising money from Film4 and British Screen. He also added an American distributor in the form of October Films, a company he himself helped found,[25] and which later handled the US distribution of a number of Leigh's films including *Secrets & Lies*. Channing Williams continued to use this basic funding formula as a starting point for Leigh's films up to and including *Another Year* (2010).

Film4 and British Screen (or its successor, the UK Film Council) participated in nearly every film during this phase of Leigh's career. Beyond personal contacts like Rose, Aukin, and Simon Relph, head of British Screen in the 1990s, these funders were drawn to Leigh because of his popularity and auteur reputation. Channel 4 hits like *Nuts in May* and *Abigail's Party* demonstrated the director's ability to find an audience and paved the way for commissioning of *Meantime,* which was seen by over 6 million people over the course of two evening screenings on the Channel.[26] That success then paved the way for investment in his features.[27]

Moreover, funding through Channel 4 and British Screen/UK Film Council advanced public cultural policy through the patronage of British auteur film-makers like Leigh, Ken Loach, Stephen Frears and others even if their

completed films proved more popular outside of Britain than at home, as was sometimes the case with Leigh. The 'stamp of approval' these companies lent to projects in the United Kingdom was very valuable as a fund-raising resource. Such support showed that the film was likely to be completed and that the film was guaranteed distribution, at the very least on British television. Also, funders such as the UK Film Council and British Screen typically agreed to be the last investor to be recouped, allowing private investors to get paid in a manner that is faster than on most productions.

As Leigh's career progressed, Channing Williams, later with the help of executive producer Gail Egan, built on this production base with increasingly complex deals with a range of national and international investors. The international critical success of *Naked* (1993), which was made for £1.5 million (approximately $2.5 million USD) led to a relatively larger budget for *Secrets & Lies*, $4.5 million.[28] Channing Williams raised that money through CiBY 2000, a French-based production company with a history of investing in British co-productions, including auteur works such as *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Though *Career Girls* (1997) was made for Channel 4 on a modest ($1.9 million) budget – a budget that reflects the fact that the project was commissioned before the release of *Secrets* – the film involved a new, complex fundraising strategy on the part of Channing Williams. The producer engaged Matrix Films, a company that matches film producers with 'high worth individuals' looking to invest in films.[29] Channing Williams sought this option as a way to secure even greater freedom for Leigh by releasing the director from the constraints of working with normative film financiers.[30]

The runaway success of *Secrets & Lies* (having made over $50 million USD worldwide)[31] deserves closer examination. Not only did the film's box office results help Thin Man secure larger budgets for Leigh but the financing of the project reveals a great deal about the business plans underpinning the company's film-making. Channing Williams' rough estimate of its global box office returns – $53 million USD – is nearly nine times the most generous estimate of its budget (between $4.5 million and $6 million depending on sources). Even after discounting its distribution costs and the 'creative accounting' that distribution companies routinely use to hide profits from producers, *Secrets & Lies* was an extraordinarily profitable film on box office receipts alone, not to mention the revenue from all other sources. The important term here is profitability, which is distinct from the total profits produced by a film. A film made for $100 million may make $20 or $30 million in profits for a Hollywood

studio but this would not be as profitable as a film like *Secrets & Lies*, which would boast a much higher rate of return (perhaps 400% or 500% compared to 20–30% for the Hollywood film). Thus, highly profitable films are more attractive to investors, particularly investors who wish to limit their overall risk by making relatively small investments in multiparty co-productions. This approach – not surprisingly, the standard commercial strategy adopted by independent cinema in general – underpinned the arrangements made by Channing Williams for the remainder of Thin Man's films. As Tiuu Lukk details in her work on film marketing, films as disparate in tone and content as *Howards End* (James Ivory, 1993), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Todd Solondz, 1995) have been made and marketed in hopes of achieving high rates of profitability, not necessarily widespread popularity.[32]

Once the financial success of *Secrets & Lies* was apparent, Thin Man began work on *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), their most expensive film to date. Channing Williams once again turned to co-production and unconventional sources of finance, this time involving backers from eight countries including Japan, Korea, Germany and France.[33] Close examination of this arrangement provides insight into both the potential benefits and hazards of transnational co-production. By diversifying the investment sources involved in the film, Channing Williams was able to make sure that no one backer would have too much power over the production. This strategy of using co-production to *increase* creative freedom for film-makers is one that contradicts conventional wisdom. Most assume that as the number of co-producers increases, creative freedom for film-makers decreases. Not so from Mike Leigh's perspective. Leigh credits the creative financing arranged by Channing Williams with ensuring complete control over the film.[34]

However, there were some concessions and unexpected complications. To raise the initial budget of £11.75 million from these disparate financiers, Leigh had to provide a treatment for the film and guarantee a cast for the first time in his career. Once the funding package was in place, other problems began to surface. Firstly, due to a devaluation of their currency, the South Korean backers pulled out at the last minute, taking approximately $800,000 USD with them. Then the UK distributor for the film – Pathé Pictures – cut their valuation of the film and consequently their minimum guarantee by $1 million USD.[35] This left the company short of funds and forced them to cut scenes. Later in the production process, backers in Japan and Germany demanded Leigh cut song sequences they felt would alienate their home markets. Leigh refused and the

film was not released in either territory,[36] robbing the film of proceeds from two lucrative markets. In part because of these problems, *Topsy-Turvy* was a commercial disappointment for Thin Man who, due to the structuring of the deal, absorbed most of the losses. Still, by falling on its sword, Thin Man left the co-production partners (and therefore their relationships with Thin Man) unharmed.[37]

Undeterred, Channing Williams was able to cut a deal with French producer Alain Sarde – another veteran co-producer of European auteur films whose collaborators have included Roman Polanski, David Lynch and Jean-Luc Godard – to pre-sell the distribution rights to Thin Man's next three films to French media powerhouse StudioCanal. Although this agreement was very advantageous to Leigh in creative terms as Sarde was extremely supportive of the director,[38] it turned out to be a commercial disappointment. The first film made under the deal was *All or Nothing* (2002), Leigh's least successful film ever at the box office. Stung by their losses on the project, Sarde and StudioCanal backed out of the contract after *Vera Drake* (2005), which ironically was a much more successful film in Europe than *Topsy-Turvy* and *All or Nothing*.

Beginning with *Vera Drake*, Thin Man hired Gail Egan, an entertainment lawyer with a background in finance, as an expert in raising production finance. Channing Williams had already worked with Egan at Potboiler Films – a company that the producer had set up to pursue his own projects – and wanted to put her skills to work for Leigh's films. Through Egan's and Channing Williams' efforts, Leigh's budgets have from this point consistently remained around the $12–$15 million USD mark, with large portions coming not only from Film4 and the UK Film Council but also from private investors. This figure allows Leigh the resources he requires to make films on the scale he requires but remains small enough to keep investors from meddling too much in the films, a freedom further guaranteed by the complex structuring of the deals. In short, Channing Williams and Egan have created the industrial conditions for Leigh to be the auteur he is.

Channing Williams passed away in 2009 following a long battle with cancer, but with the continuity provided by Egan's presence at Thin Man and the efforts of Channing Williams' protégé Georgina Lowe, who has worked with Leigh and Channing Williams since *Naked*, it is likely that Leigh will continue to have access to a dependable production base and supportive producers. Lowe has indicated that she will maintain the creative role that Channing Williams played on Leigh's sets (which is to say a very minimal one) and will continue to work

with Gail Egan on raising funds for the director's films.[39] In other words, Egan and Lowe will continue to 'produce Leigh' in the ways in which they learned from Channing Williams.

Besides the transition to a new producer, one other concern going forward for Thin Man is funding Leigh's films in the wake of the abolition of the UK Film Council by the coalition government headed by David Cameron. While this policy decision was initially decried by many in the independent film community in the United Kingdom, including Leigh himself,[40] the initial worries over a substantive cut to Lottery funding has so far not been realized. For their part, the government has promised the film industry the same amount of previously available funds, with cuts only affecting the administration of that funding and the BFI replacing the Council as custodian of the monies. It remains to be seen whether these promises will be adhered to by this or indeed future governments, but for the time being Leigh's film-making appears to be less at risk than others. Given his high critical profile as an indigenous auteur and relatively healthy commercial track record, it is unlikely that his films will be denied funding. Instead, it is more likely that new, emerging and untested film-makers – perhaps the Mike Leighs of the future – are most at risk if cuts begin to weigh on the sector.

Marketing Mike Leigh: Evoking auteurship

Marketing discourses – discourses that are often overlooked by auteur scholarship – shape the commercial life of a film and a film-maker. In the case of Mike Leigh, the discursive emphasis placed on Leigh himself in academic circles – at the expense of recognizing other collaborators – reflects a similar imbalance in popular discourses around Leigh's films. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this imbalance can be traced to the work of those who market and promote Mike Leigh films. Leigh and his partners mobilize auteurism, and such a strategy is inextricably linked to the fundamental economics of his brand of cinema.

As Timothy Corrigan has influentially documented, auteurism, despite its relative decline in popularity in academic circles during the 1970s and 1980s, became central to the popular commercial discourses surrounding cinema during that same period.[41] Such discourses, Corrigan demonstrates, were visible in the most influential movements of the period including New German Cinema and New Hollywood. Directors and studios harnessed the cultural

capital inherent in these discourses to secure funding and bring in audiences on a mass scale. But the usage of these strategies did not stop in the early1980s. Instead the 'commerce of auteurism' has remained a significant part of world film industries as shown by scholars like Catherine Grant and Devin Orgeron who have built upon Corrigan's ideas and applied them to the examination of new film marketing technologies and tactics. Following their lead, discussion of the marketing of Mike Leigh's films in terms of the discursivity of authorship in cinema begins with the following basic premises: auteurs are at the heart of the marketing of their films; auteur cinema is in essence an industrial genre with marketing conventions based on the cultural assumption that a film is more valuable if it is the product of its director;[42] and the popular conception of film authorship residing solely with the film's director. Hence the most significant promotional materials for these kinds of films are directors' interviews in various media, including newspapers, magazines, television appearances, websites, blogs, DVD extras and commentary tracks and so on.

As Lukk shows in the case of Todd Solondz's films, such marketing tactics carry significant commercial advantages. For instance, media outlets often seek out promotional materials based on director interviews and pass them on as original content to their audiences.[43] Many auteur films can thus promote and publicize themselves without paying for airtime or space in newspapers, realizing great savings on prints and advertising ('P&A') costs. Since P&A costs are often the biggest distribution expense on many films, savings in this area can go a long way towards ensuring the rates of profitability critical to the success of the independent cinema business model. Even when other promotional materials like posters, trailers and television commercials are produced, such campaigns typically feature the director by name and include evidence of good critical 'word of mouth' in the form of festival prizes and/or positive comments from reviewers. These marketing elements bolster the cultural capital necessary for this branch of the film industry to survive commercially.

Focus on the director in marketing discourses surrounding auteur films underscores another of Corrigan's insights. Drawing on Richard Dyer's seminal analysis of the popular personae of film stars,[44] Corrigan argues that directors also take on personae that are products of self-promotion and the content of their films.[45] With this in mind, Corrigan suggests we should pay attention to the ways in which director interviews frame the director and place his or her work in relation to the marketplace rather than simply take the content of such interviews at face value. As Howie Movshovitz reminds us, film-makers like

Mike Leigh do not do interviews because they like talking about their films, they do them to promote those films.[46] This does not mean that Leigh's (or any director's) interviews are necessarily disingenuous or cynically calculated to draw in audiences, but it does remind us that when a director is as central to the marketing of his films as Leigh is, we must understand this aspect of his career if we are to understand his relationship to the market.

The prominence of Leigh himself as a 'hook' in the marketing of his films can be easily seen in the media surrounding his films. Without exception, marketing materials such as posters and trailers mention Leigh by name and feature other markers of cultural capital including festival prizes, awards and examples of critical praise for the film and/or Leigh himself. Aside from these fairly standard materials, publicity interviews with Leigh – and to a lesser extent the actors in his films – dominate the discourses around his films. While no formal count of these interviews has been undertaken, it is reasonable to assume that Leigh has done hundreds over the years. So prolific has he been in speaking about his films that two books of his interviews have been published, one being a collection of the promotional interviews he gave after the releases of films ranging from *High Hopes* to *Career Girls*[47] and one book-length interview on his oeuvre as a whole (up to *Happy-Go-Lucky*) that, significantly, seems to have been commissioned by Leigh himself, or at least by Thin Man Films.[48]

Leigh's persona is multifaceted and a complete description is beyond the scope of this essay, but sketching some of its contours can be useful for understanding the commercial discourses of auteurism in Leigh's career. One unique contour for Leigh involves his famous working methods. Leigh's improvisational and collaborative approach to screenwriting is perhaps the single most famous aspect of his career, but it has led to confusion on the part of the popular press and audiences, a confusion that threatens to undermine his auteur status.

As both Movshovitz[49] and Raphael[50] have noted, Leigh is very defensive about this issue when being interviewed. When asked about his working methods, Leigh generally makes two interrelated points. The first of these is that some think his films are wholly improvised and therefore chaotic and unplanned, that Leigh's method is comparable to the techniques practiced by film-makers like John Cassavetes. Leigh has spent years stridently disputing this misconception, speaking often of the control he exerts over the script and characters and the precision with which he works on set. As described by Robert Gore-Langton, 'finesse has always been his [Leigh's] aim'.[51] Similarly, Leigh told Kenneth Turan that not a single extraneous line of dialogue is allowed to be spoken on his sets

when the cameras are rolling.[52] The second conclusion drawn by audiences and critics that Leigh regrets is that the director's role in creating the final film is marginalized. Leigh worries that critics and audiences attribute too much creative influence to his films' actors. During his television days, Leigh himself encouraged such an understanding by officially crediting his films as 'Devised and Directed by Mike Leigh'. He later rued this decision, calling it in one interview 'one of the biggest single mistakes of my career',[53] because of the confusion it caused over questions of authorship. Explaining to Amy Raphael the decision to change his credits, Leigh put the reasons rather bluntly: 'auteur films are *written and directed* by the auteur'.[54] Such strong language leaves little doubt about how Leigh wishes to frame his own persona.

In part to clear up confusion regarding his working methods, Leigh routinely recaps the process and his creative role therein, and he goes further, using interviews to explain the autobiographical subtexts of his films. The result is that many films are portrayed as being essentially 'about' Mike Leigh himself. The quarrels over whether or not to have children in *Grown-Ups* and *High Hopes*? Those arguments are said to mirror similar arguments in his own home.[55] The marital strife in *All or Nothing*? That reflects the dissolution of his own marriage to Alison Steadman.[56] Leigh says even small details such as the security guard's routines in *Naked* stem from the director's own experiences.[57] This personalization project is most apparent in historical works like *Vera Drake* and *Topsy-Turvy* – films whose settings appear difficult to view as reflections of Leigh's biographical experience. Leigh assures interviewers that *Vera Drake* is based on his remembrance of a childhood neighbour.[58] *Topsy-Turvy* was developed based on his family's theatre-going tastes and Leigh's own historical interests.[59]

These attempts to emphasize his own creative control over the films and to discursively personalize them are attempts to place his work comfortably within the domain of auteur cinema. While even the most militant auteurists of the 1950s and 1960s would not naively claim the director was the sole contributor to what ends up on the screen, a large segment of international film culture has adopted such an understanding. Given this commonsense (mis)understanding of film authorship, Leigh's frustration over the perceptions of his role in his own film-making process can be seen as an attempt to claim the cultural capital that Grant argues comes from being the single person responsible for a work of art.

This is not to say that Leigh's contributors are ignored in Leigh's interviews. Throughout his career, Leigh has been quick to credit his contributors. Indeed, much of what we know about some figures, including Channing Williams,

comes from Leigh's interviews. At first glance, all of the credit given to actors, cinematographers, producers and costume designers would seem to weaken Leigh's claims to auteur status, but as Orgeron has shown in the case of Wes Anderson, directors' humility and deference to collaborators often is a way of implicitly reinforcing auteurist discourses.[60] By firstly making it clear that the director is atop on the on-set hierarchy and then explaining how contributions fit into the overall scheme of his authorial vision, Leigh has managed to balance these seemingly paradoxical stances. Leigh can praise the lighting methods Dick Pope utilized to achieve the look of *Naked* while making it clear that Pope was going for a look that fit the specifications Leigh provided, thus demonstrating Leigh's understanding of the medium as well as his role orchestrating all the elements of the film into a cohesive whole, one of the signature qualities of a director aspiring to auteur status. Actors, of course, are the most widely discussed collaborators in this regard, and the publicity campaigns for Leigh's films are chocked full of anecdotes which basically speak to Leigh's role in generating the films' performances and the creative thrill of working with Leigh and *his* method.

In his influential theorization of art cinema – the auteur-driven film genre par excellence – David Bordwell points to the textual strategy of ambiguity and the related dynamics of knowledge and power at the heart of narration in many art films, saying that the invisible presence of the auteur tantalizes the audience with its superior knowledge of the film's 'true' events and meaning.[61] All of Leigh's films exhibit these tendencies with little ever being made explicit and open endings being *de riguer*. In the promotional efforts surrounding his films, Leigh does what he can to encourage such ambiguity and to frame his mode of cinema as one that is challenging, one that poses questions to viewers. Speaking in an interview on the UK DVD release of *Another Year*, for instance, Leigh says it is up to the viewer to decide what the fate of Mary (Lesley Manville) will be at the end of the film. Similarly, when promoting *Naked* Leigh told interviewers from *Cineaste*, 'All of [my] films . . . ask for more questions than give answers . . . What is important . . . is that you share questions with the audience, and they go away with things to work on.'[62] This refusal to give interviewers 'the answers' is tantamount to Leigh saying he doesn't want to tell audiences what to think, a refusal that frames his films as an alternative to popular cinema, with its easy answers and safe, contained endings. Yet at the same time, Leigh also often reminds interviewers and readers of his own superior knowledge of the films. When pressed by interviewer Will Self, Leigh clears up the purposeful ambiguity