

Differences, Paradoxes and Exclusions Regarding Abortion. A Possible Interpretation of *A Story of Women* and *Vera Drake*

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Summary

This article attempts to provide insight on the different approaches of cinema to a socially controversial topic such as abortion, and on the impact these different approaches might have on the viewer. Two films are analysed for this purpose: *A Story of Women* (1988) by Claude Chabrol and *Vera Drake* (2004) by Michael Leigh. Special attention has been paid to the analysis of the role of women as active agents in abortion services and their influences in the medicalization of such practices.

Keywords: Cinema, Abortion, Penalty, Medicalization, Gender, Women.

Technical details

Title: *Story of Women* (USA). *A Story of Women* (UK).

Original title: *Une affaire de femmes*

Country: France.

Year: 1988.

Director: Claude Chabrol.

Music: Matthieu Chabrol.

Cinematography: Jean Rabier.

Film Editing: Monique Fardoulis.

Screenwriter: Colo Tavernier O'Hagan and Claude Chabrol, based on Francis Szpiner's homonymous book.

Cast: Isabelle Huppert (Marie), François Cluzet (Paul), Nils Tavernier (Lucien), Marie Trintignant (Lulu/Lucie). Lolita Chammah (Mauche #2), Aurore Gauvin (Mouche #1), Guillaume Foutrier (Pierrot #1), Nicolas Foutrier (Pierrot #2), Marie Bunel (Ginette), Dominique Blanc (Jasmine),

Evelyne Didi (Fernande), Dani (Loulou), François Maistre (president Lamarre-Coudray)...

Color: Color

Runtime: 108 minutes.

Genre: Drama

Production Companies: MK2 Productions, Films A2, Films du Camélia and Sofinergie Films.

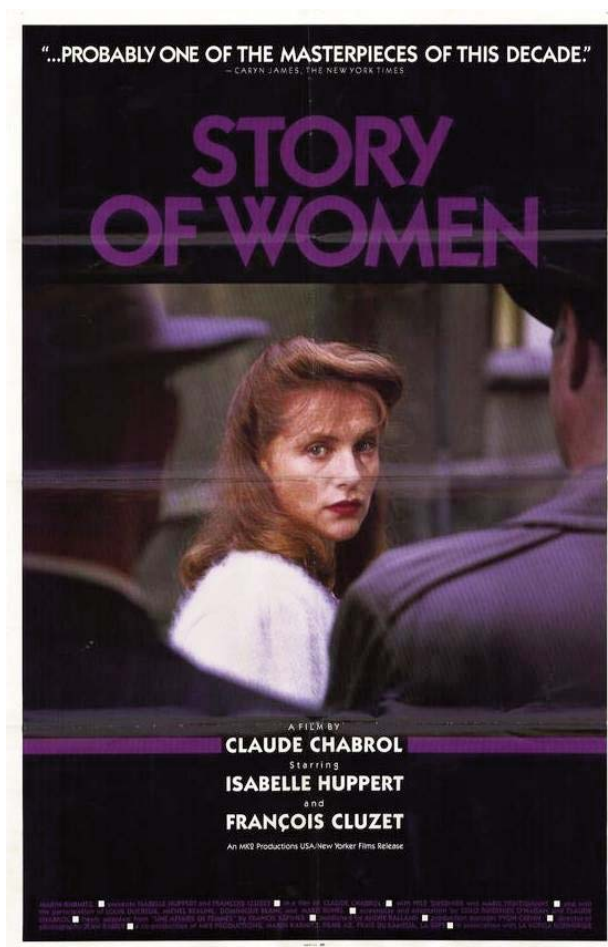
Synopsis: Marie Latour carries out abortions for women who wish to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in times when this is illegal.

Awards: Venice Film Festival: Volpi Cup for Best Actress (Isabelle Huppert) (1988). Valladolid International Film Festival: Best Actress Award (Isabelle Huppert). Bogota Film Festival: Golden Precolumbian Circle for Best Actress (Isabelle Huppert) and for Best Screenplay (Claude Chabrol and Colo Tavernier) (1989). César Awards: nominated for Best Actress (Isabelle Huppert), Best Director (Claude Chabrol) and

Best Supporting Actress (Marie Trintignant) (1989). Los Angeles Film Critics Association: LAFCA Award for Best Foreign Film (1989). New York Film Critics Circle: NYFCC Award for Best Foreign Film. Golden Globe Awards: nominated for Best Foreign Film (1990)...

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096336>

[Trailer](#)



Original title: *Vera Drake*.

Country: UK.

Year: 2004.

Director: Mike Leigh.

Music: Andrew Dickson.

Cinematography: Dick Pope.

Film Editing: Jim Clark.

Screenwriter: Mike Leigh.

Cast: Imelda Staunton (Vera), Richard Graham (George), Eddie Marsan (Reg), Anna Keaveney (Nellie), Alex Kelly (Ethel), Daniel Mays (Sid), Philip Davis (as Phil Davis, Stan), Lesley Manville

(Mrs. Wells), Sally Hawkins (Susan), Simon Chandler (Mr. Wells), Sam Troughton (David), Marion Bailey (Mrs. Fowler), Sandra Voe (Vera's mother),...

Color: Color.

Runtime: 125 minutes.

Genre: Drama.

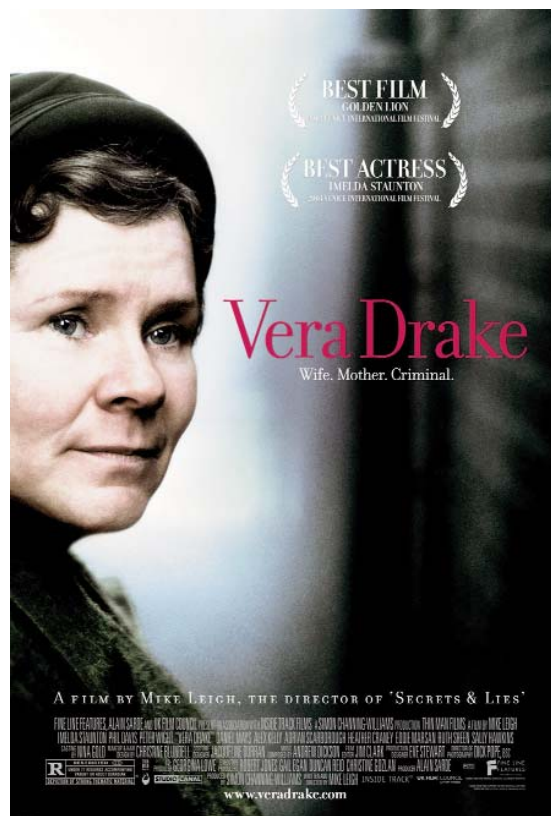
Production Companies: Les Films Alain Sarde, Film Council, Inside Track Productions, Thin Man Films, Film Council Premiere Fund, Ingenious Film Partners, Inside Track 1, National Lottery through UK Film Council and Untitled 03.

Synopsis: Vera Drake carries out abortions for women who wish to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in times when this is illegal.

Awards: Academy Awards: nominated for Best Director (Mike Leigh), Best Actress in a Leading Role (Imelda Staunton) and Best Original Screenplay (Mike Leigh) (2005). Venice Film Festival: Golden Lion for Best Film (Mike Leigh) and Volpi Cup for Best Actress (Imelda Staunton) (2004). European Film Awards: Award for Best Actress (Imelda Staunton) and nomination for Best Film (2004). Golden Globe Awards: Nomination for Best Actress (2005)...

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0383694>

[Trailer](#)



It is by no means casual that the films that I will proceed to analyse are set in war or post-war contexts. Neither is it coincidental that abortion was legalized in Great Britain in the sixties and in France in the seventies, since the laws regarding abortion have often been linked to population-related aspects, and it is common knowledge that during war and post-war years governments are quite eager to increase the population.

On the other hand, throughout history and as far as women are concerned, public health has generally been linked to populationist policies. In this sense, the acknowledgment of legal abortion as a health problem has been marked by alleged population needs established by the different governments and linked to moral standards. Thus, women have been historically deprived of their right to freely take decisions regarding their maternity in cases of unwanted pregnancy. In this sense, totalitarian regimes, among others, have strongly insisted on the moral aspects of abortion, relating it to the most traditional conceptions of public order and moral standards, a veil that covered repressive populationist policies¹.

Regarding how abortion has been approached in cinema, it is worth noting that the films that deal with this topic can be used to articulate different types of speeches related to the decriminalization of the voluntary termination of pregnancy. In this sense, there are examples such as the comments made by Luis Fernando Afanador Pérez and Jerónimo José Martín about the film *4 Months, 3 Weeks & 2 Days / 4 luni, 3 saptamini si 2 zile* (2007) by Cristian Mungiu^{2,3} (Figure 1). The latter claimed that, while *Vera Drake* might be a film that defended abortion and its legalization, “its message lost force because of the mental disorder of the protagonist”³. However, other interpretations of the film claim that Leigh “openly takes the side of abortion”⁴. All this shows that a sort of dialogue or discussion is established between viewers and films, and that when it comes to controversial topics there can be different interpretations. My purpose is to analyze the reason why different conclusions are drawn from this process by establishing a dialogue and a discussion between myself and these films in order to encourage potential viewers to engage in similar debates.

For strictly chronological reasons I will begin by analyzing *A Story of Women*. For this purpose I must point out that, as other authors have already revealed, underlying Claude Chabrol’s work is the interest in the hypocrisy displayed by a society that claims to defend certain values and acts according to others.⁵ The film is set within the context of World War 2, in German-occupied France with its Nazi-collaborationist government, all of which makes it easier to bring such hypocrisy to light.

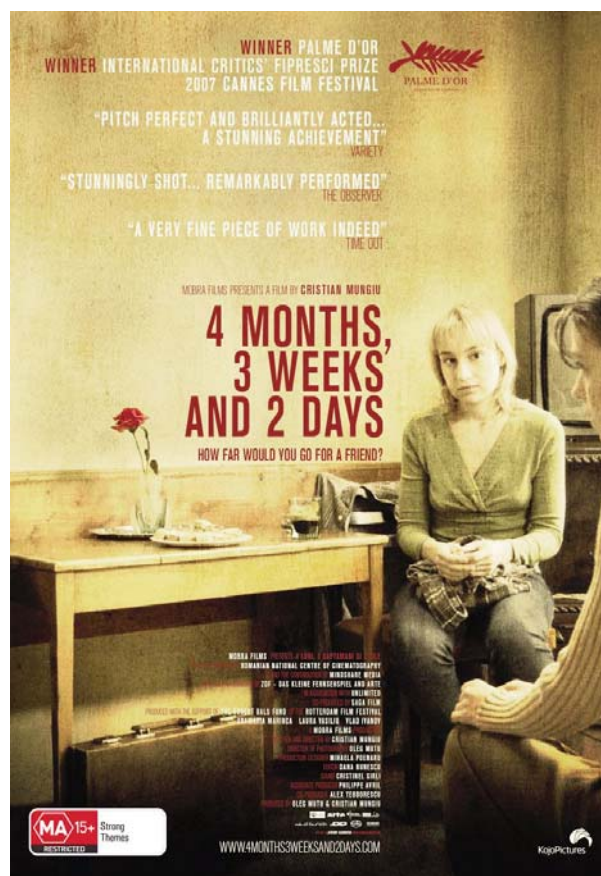


Figure 1

A Story of Women draws inspiration from the real life of Marie-Louise Girard (Marie Latour in fiction), accused of carrying out abortions and executed in 1943 by the government of Pétain. In those days in France, abortion was considered a crime against the state, since, in Charol’s own words, Vichy’s regime had replaced the motto “Freedom, Equality and Fraternity” with that of “Work, Family, Homeland” (duties, not rights according to one of the characters in the film) in his crusade in defence of alleged moral standards. Meanwhile, women and children were being deported to die in gas chambers and the children of France were sinking deeper into sadness and hunger. These issues are illustrated in the scene in which two lawyers talk about Marie Latour’s case (1:38). This explicit revelation of conflicting and Manichean moral standards is seen by some as “a pitiful sequence (the worst in the film)” and, therefore, a ground for criticism⁵. However, it is very effective at showing the hypocrisy in the arguments related to the criminalization of abortion, questioning the predominant ideology by revealing its contradictions. The paradox in Marie’s lawyers’ words brings down the image of decent moral standards, revealing the true nature of Vichy’s political regime, where the rights of born children are nonexistent. The fade-to-black that follows Marie’s anguished wait before she is put to death (1:37) gives way to her children’s display of pain, which is triggered

by an execution that will mark them for life, a fact that is made clear by the voice-over and the written words that appear in the last minutes of the film: *"Have pity on the children of the condemned"*, all of which reveals the conflicting nature of the discourse of power and articulates the performative contradiction that establishes it^a.

As another way of reversing the representations of power and marking their limits, the director of *A Story of Women* has emphasized the fact that the health risks run by women during clandestine abortions are a consequence of such secrecy. However, as the film reflects, in totalitarian political regimes public health as regards maternal mortality is not a concern, and the moral aspects of the problem, which in this case are closely linked to the populationist policies of the fascist governments of the time, prevail. This morality pays no attention to women's needs and the circumstances they have to confront in order to survive and live. In this sense, the problem also becomes a gender issue when Marie, talking about those who are judging her, tells her cellmate: *"also, they are all men. What can men understand about this?"*(1:29), words that reinforce the implications in the film's title and question the productive order of power, while at the same time uncovering a different kind of performative contradiction^b that challenges this productive order of power. On the other hand, although abortion as a public health issue has served to expropriate women from the right to decide over their maternity, it has also allowed society, under the assumption of abortion as an inevitable de facto reality, to strip it from its moral patina and come to consider abortion services as a technical issue. However, Chabrol has no intention of solving the moral conflict by medicalizing the problem, but he rather attempts to prove the moral hypocrisy and double standards that hover over the issue of abortion. It is a question of power, of power exerted over women's bodies. The lack of understanding of a husband towards an independent wife who tries to improve the life of her family as well as her own, and who wishes to make her feelings prevail, leads him to use the power society bestows on him to punish Marie. The issue is not a moral dilemma related to abortion, but a real life fact that is the only option for many women. This is why Marie's supposed lack of morality is questioned in several scenes that show how in societies such as that of occupied France, people have to learn to survive and manage if they wish to lead a successful and comfortable

life: *"To do nothing wrong is easy when you are rich"* (1:29).

However, Chabrol does not avoid the existing discussion around the topic, which is made dramatically clear when certain women do not understand why Marie Latour is sentenced, while others blame her and reject her, allowing for a diversity of positions concerning this issue. Regarding the different ways of approaching the problem, the illocutionary force of the cinematographic image triggered the response of a section of the public who held positions that were far from those of the film producer's and close to those of institutions that, like the legal system and the Church, were presented as examples of hypocrisy. Possibly, the passionate protests triggered by the film's release were not oblivious to the creation of strong cases of resistance symbolized by the protagonist's sacrilegious answer when she whispers a blasphemous prayer while waiting to be put to death: *"Holy Mary, full of shit, rotten is the fruit of thy womb"* (1:36). Chabrol claimed that these reactions came from people who *"were undoubtedly against abortion or who defended the execution of the women who carried them out"*⁸. The film also had problems for its release in countries like the USA.

Whereas *A Story of Women* represents a performative discourse that challenges the performative capacity of power, *Vera Drake* presents a discourse that complements the words/actions of power, both in its speech acts and in its silences. When his film *Vera Drake* was competing for the highest award of the Venice Film Festival 2004 and Mike Leigh claimed at a press conference that since the *"main topic of the film, abortion, is, and has always been, a relevant issue, we felt it was time to deal with it directly"*⁹, he was forgetting about *A Story of Women*, made in 1989, whose influence is clear in certain scenes (Figures 2-7).

However, as I have already mentioned, Leigh presented the problem in different terms. He intended to deal with the issue *"in a way that might pose a moral dilemma for the public, so that they don't just draw black or white conclusions"*⁹; even though the contrast between light and darkness and black and white is often used throughout the film. This is why, from my point of view, as far as dialogue and discussion are concerned, in the case of this film it is vital to bear in mind the contrasts, the

^a. The performative contradiction lies in stating (denying) a principle that is denied (stated); when it is expressed it is made obvious. See Judith Butler on the meanings of performative contradiction⁶.

^b. This type of performative contradiction refers to a person who is not authorized to speak/act claiming the right to do so. In this sense, there is a denial of the rules established by hegemonic power to regulate discourse, and what might be called a resistance contradiction takes place. Thus, it becomes a new performative reality that, as Christian León claims, does not take the shape of power's actions but of the complete opposite and its limit. See the aforementioned studies by Judith Butler⁶, and Christian León⁷.



Figure 2



Figure 6



Figure 3



Figure 7



Figure 4



Figure 5

paradoxes, the lights and the shadows (both in the figurative and in the literal sense) presented to us by Mike Leigh.

In this film there are two discourse axes: class and gender. Both are presented as contrasts, playing a central role in the medical issue and influencing the view of abortion that is offered. To present these contrasts Leigh uses film language based on a very strong chromatic symbolism: colour and white light and clear and luminous scenes, contrasting with dark colours and scenes. These chromatic contrasts are used to present the different social classes to which the characters belong and their surroundings: light, order and cleanliness for the wealthier and emergent social classes, as opposed to darkness, chaos and sordid environments for the working class and the poor. These chromatic contrasts used for poverty vs. wealth match the representation of hygiene failure and disease vs. hygiene and neatness. Shades of white are used for surgeries, the homes of the middle class, the police station and the prison; the court is also luminous. In this sense, the fact that Vera's house is rather dark but the scene turns luminous when the police question her in her bedroom is striking.

Through these contrasts Leigh represents the existence of classist double moral standards that cause women from the lowest social classes to be the ones who most suffer the consequences of unwanted pregnancies.

On the other hand, sexist double moral standards can also be perceived, since women alone bear the consequences of the acts of the couple, sometimes because their partner does not feel responsible, and others perhaps for fear that he might take a different decision that might bring significant consequences^c.

However, regarding gender contrasts, female characters appear as women that are unable to take rational decisions [Ethel (Alex Kelly), Vera's daughter (Imelda Staunton), and even Vera herself when she takes on her second personality from scene 1:06 onwards], capricious and merciless women who call Vera stupid and selfish (her sister-in-law), covetous women who would do anything for money (Vera's contact), irresponsible women ("modern women", adulterous women, Vera herself); as opposed to determined men who are morally in charge, take firm decisions, make their positions clear, and are understanding and forgiving (compare the different characters of Sid [(Daniel Mays), Vera's son] and Ethel [Vera's daughter], of Vera's brother-in-law and her sister-in-law, of Reg [(Eddie Marsan), her daughter's boyfriend] and Ethel). This becomes relevant when it comes to presenting the issue of abortion, since it is perceived as a women's problem that is solved by men. Men are entitled to reestablish order, going from the professionals who solve the technical problem to Vera's husband who, after assuring his son that he was completely unaware of the practices his wife performed, claims: "If only she had told me I would have put a stop to it" (1:42).

Leigh's film reflects a reality, but it also builds it by establishing imaginary facts; hence the weakening of the message defending the legalization of abortion that Jerónimo José Martín referred to, although he attributes this loss of force to the characterization of the female abortionist as mentally unbalanced. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the reason for this possible interpretation of the film is more complex. The possibility of abortion as the exercise of one of women's rights, the right to control over their own bodies and lives, to decide when they want to have children, a fundamental right in a society that has exclusively assigned to women the responsibility of looking after their children and that has based the shaping of the so-called female identity on the reproductive role of women, is not presented without a hint of moral condemnation. The problem is dealt with from a medical perspective, within the area of public health and its parameters, an intention that is made clear in the words of acknowledgment dedicated to the father/ doctor and the mother/midwife (Figure 8 1:59). Compare this still to last scene of *A Story of Women* (Figure 9 end),

which I have mentioned before, in order to assess the different points of view in the approach to the problems posed by the illegal nature of the voluntary termination of pregnancy. Mike Leigh has no suggestions to solve the issue of abortion; however, he does tell us who does it well and who does not. The contrasts build an argument for the claiming of control over women's bodies and lives by professional agents, capacitated to take rational decisions. Law and medicine play an extremely important part in such control. The relationship between medicine and the law is one of mutual understanding and support. The doctor who has to operate on a teenage girl on whom Vera had conducted an abortion asks her mother to report whoever had done it to the police because "Those people must be stopped" (0:56), and he states the problem as concerning both the fields of public health and public order: "the sister and I see cases like this every weekend [...] she will no doubt use the syringe again, and again, and again, and again, and the sister and I will have to deal with dozens of cases like Pamela's"; "if you don't report this to the police, I'll have to. Unfortunately I'm forced to do so ... it's the law". On the other hand, the judge assures that "were it not for the medical profession" (1:51) Vera's sentence would be even greater, since



Figure 8



Figure 9

^c. Gender-related dualism regarding the roles played by the different characters appears throughout the whole plot. In this sense, Leigh shows us how the members of emerging social groups are dazzled by a gender-marked consumer technology: men-cars, women-washing machines.

it is the doctors who have saved the life of the teenager on whom Vera conducted an abortion.

The termination of pregnancy appears as an individual problem, while treated at the same time as a social issue to which the law must provide an answer. In this sense, women's bodies, as the receptacle for the foetus, are considered a public asset that must be protected, even from women themselves. Women themselves are the source of danger and medicalization establishes control over such danger. The medicalization of abortion saves women from malpractice (and danger) at the hands of other women, placing them under the control of doctors who take supposedly "aseptic" decisions concerning the termination of pregnancy.

The medicalization of abortion is presented as a solution to the social, moral and sanitary conflicts caused by the termination of pregnancies. To treat abortion as a problem related to maternal mortality, as a public health problem, is a way of achieving the intended demoralization (in the sense of stripping it from any negative connotation) of the act itself, of the techniques to succeed in the termination of pregnancy. So much so that nuns (sisters) are the auxiliary nurses that assist abortionists in medical contexts with aseptic efficacy (0:41 y 0:55)^d. However, this action does not involve the same intentionality regarding the moralization of the women who decide to have an abortion and their reasons, and that of other women who have conducted abortions. In this sense, the film might be considered an example of how the medicalization of certain controversial issues does not exclude them from the moral level, leaving agents, decisions and non-professional actions out of this moral neutrality. Here there are different ways of morally justifying the different actions and reasons that lead women to terminate their pregnancies. Thus, poor women are presented: an immigrant and a mother of seven, as opposed to a cynical woman (who smokes, drinks and is sexually liberated) and an adulteress who describes herself as "*a horrible person*" (46:47). Another of the most characteristic resources of the film, paradoxes, is presented regarding this issue. Certain comments made by Vera and certain scenes where the women who wish to terminate their pregnancies appear (dis)qualify them at a moral level. However, despite the fact that the actions of such women might not be considered morally acceptable, Vera concludes that "*they must be helped*". Yet, is Vera responsible enough and aware of the consequences of this assumption?

Vera is generally presented as a woman who selflessly shows her concern for others; however, because of this she often brushes the limits of irresponsibility, which leads her to commit dangerous acts unawares. For this reason, her jailer offers the following warning as a final piece of advice: "*Vera, watch your footsteps*". Vera's lack of awareness can be appreciated in several sequences: one of them is the scene where she is having fun with her husband in a pub while the teenage girl on whom she has conducted an abortion is almost dying. The repetition of this image of a person who is not conscious of her acts opens the possibility of a recontextualization that turns Vera into a "mentally unbalanced" woman (Jerónimo José Martín). Thus, the representation policy that underlies this discourse is that of the lack of responsibility and the need for guardianship.

On the other hand, paradoxes and contrasts overlap in the treatment of characters and their actions. The contrast between the two Vera's begins with the still shot of Vera's tense countenance when her husband announces the arrival of the police (1:06), and this is in my opinion what allows Jerónimo José Martín to state that the protagonist of the film is mentally unbalanced. From my point of view, this image constitutes the central paradox of the film: the happy Vera that helps women to overcome a difficult situation but who puts their lives in danger. Although the physical danger run by the women who have illegal abortions is undeniable, the magnification of the danger of the practices performed by these women abortionists seems paradoxical and contrasts with the stated fact claiming that none of the women treated by Vera in twenty years of practice has had any problems, and, nevertheless, danger plays a leading role.

After the aforementioned scene Vera goes from being the happiest woman to being the unhappiest amongst all the female characters in the film. It is the day when she has to acknowledge that what she does is neither legal nor morally acceptable, although she refuses to call what she does abortions (1:09). The word abortion is unspeakable, only the police use it. Others use euphemisms. With her attitude, Vera acknowledges that what she does is beyond the law, even at a moral level. Vera accepts her guilt. Vera never defends her actions, even when her son addresses her saying: "*It's wrong*", she answers with a quiet: "*I don't think so*", while he emphatically insists: "*Of course it is. They were babies; you have no right. It's dirty*" (1:39). As opposed to the

^d. Concerning this issue, Jennifer Worth, a nurse and a nun, made an interesting statement: "*When I was a gynaecology ward sister at the Elizabeth Garret Anderson hospital in London, I was sometimes asked whether or not I approved of it. My reply was that I did not regard it as a moral issue, but as a medical issue. A minority of women will always want an abortion. Therefore, it must be done properly*"¹⁰. I wish to express my thanks to Carlos Tabernero for providing the reference of this interview.

case of Chabrol and Marie, Leigh ends up turning Vera into a person who is unable to question the dominant discourse or to point out its contradictions and failures. Her daughter's boyfriend, in a short scene, is the only one to rationally defend the right to abortion: "*Take my mother. There were six of us in two rooms. It's fine if you're rich, but if you can't feed them you can't love them, can you?*" (1:40). This defence is so brief that it goes unnoticed in the analyses that describe the film in detail, such as the ones by María Teresa Icart, Rosa Rozas and María del Carmen Icart, who believe that the film "does not speak in favour of abortion at all"¹¹.

On the other hand, the legal, social (1:42) and affective punishment by certain relatives seems unavoidable. The forgiveness Vera needs from her family is justified because, in her husband's words, "*she will receive enough punishment for what she did*" (1:43). However, the condemnation of women abortionists goes further. Leigh also uses the contrast to state the fact that not all women abortionists are as "saveable" as Vera Drake (whose presentation took 19 minutes of showing her good nature), even though the services they conduct are the same. Displaying what critics call narrative economy, Leigh ends the film by presenting the women abortionists who spent time in prison with Vera, contrasting them and showing how far these "non-repentant" women were from Vera. The moral discussion dealt with by Leigh is about whether non-professional women should conduct abortions, and the answer seems clear in the film: definitely not, without concessions. This seems to have been very clear in the Spanish version where the English word "criminal" was translated as "murderess" in the film's subtitle.

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