

## **“WIFE. MOTHER. CRIMINAL(?)”: REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORTION IN MIKE LEIGH’S *VERA DRAKE* (2004)**

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Mike Leigh’s *Vera Drake* (2004) is a “tight-budget”, period film (Lawrenson 2005: 12) set in the early 50s in a working-class area in London. Acclaimed by critics and winner of the Golden Lion for best director and of the *Copa Volpi* for best lead actress, *Vera Drake* remains largely unexplored in scholarly terms. Leigh’s film focuses on the life of the protagonist Vera Drake (Imelda Staunton), a working-class woman in her fifties, and her family: husband Stan (Phil Davies), and grown-up children Ethel (Alex Kelly) and Sid (Daniel Mays), who still live with their parents. While to the eyes of her family Vera lives a very ‘normal’ life as an exemplary, devoted housewife and mother, she keeps a very dark secret: she performs abortions on working-class and lower-middle-class women, and it is around this secret, its discovery, and consequences that the whole narrative revolves.

Generically, *Vera Drake* can be examined in the context of a whole tradition of British social realist cinema. It draws on some elements of the late 40s and early 50s British social problem films, recalling in some thematic and formal respects works such as David MacDonald’s *Good Time Girl* (1948), Montgomery Tully’s *The Boys in Brown* (1949), Ralph Smart’s *A Boy, A Girl and a Bike* (1949), or Basil Dearden’s very popular *The Blue Lamp* (1950) and *I believe in You* (1952), among others. These early social problem films, especially concerned with criminality and crime detection (Landy 1991: 442; Bell-Williams 2006: 270), developed further

and gave rise to the British kitchen-sink film tradition (or “Free Cinema” film tradition) of the mid-to-late 50s and early 60s. *Vera Drake* could also be said to fit in within such a tradition (O’Hagan Hardy 2006: 211). Represented by classics such as Tony Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger* (1959), and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), to name just a few, this kitchen-sink trend used realism to dramatise the alienation experienced by individuals living in a hostile environment (Monterde 2001: 79; Farré 2005).<sup>1</sup> In particular, these films often showed a strong “commitment to addressing contemporary social realities”, especially those of the working class (Hill 1997: 1). The fashion of social realism anticipated by the 50s and 60s kitchen-sink tradition has been taken up and developed by more contemporary British social realist filmmakers (Lay 2002: 2, 3; Sargeant 2005: 342). Examples of this more recent social realist trend of films (to which *Vera Drake* also belongs) include works by consolidated directors: among others, Mike Leigh’s *Meantime* (1984), *High Hopes* (1988), and *Secrets and Lies* (1996), and Ken Loach’s *Riff-Raff* (1990), and *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994) (Lay 2002: 102). Likewise, the contemporary trend of British social realism encompasses works by ‘new’ directors like Gary Oldman’s *Nil by Mouth* (1997), Lynne Ramsey’s *Ratcatcher*, (1999) and *Morvern Callar* (2002) or Paul Pawlikowski’s *My Summer of Love* (2004) (Lay 2002: 102).

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An important difference between *Vera Drake* and the other ‘social problem’ films mentioned here, however —regardless of year of production and release—, is that the former is a *period* film made in 2004, whereas the others deal with *contemporary* settings; for example, the kitchen-sink films of the mid-to-late 50s deal with 1950s Britain. While period films are a fairly common phenomenon in British cinema (Sargeant 2005: 326-330), it should nevertheless be noted that *Vera Drake* is quite different from many other British *period* dramas. During the 30s and up until the late 40s, such dramas, often set in the distant past, were very popular in Britain (Higson 1998: 503). Many of them were mainly concerned with representations of the upper classes, the aristocracy and the monarchy, as was the case, for example, in Basil Dearden’s *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (1948) or Marc Allégret’s *Blanche Fury* (1948) (Harper 1994: 5, 9; Cook 1996: 64, 65). Even later, more recent period productions (which are usually set before World War II) show a special interest in the upper-middle classes and the upper classes and, unlike *Vera Drake*, often leave the working class in the background when not completely to one side. This is the case, for instance, with David Lean’s *A Passage to India* (1984), Joe Wright’s *Atonement* (2007), and many of the filmic adaptations of Jane Austen’s work, including Joe Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice* (2005).

This particular ‘period quality’ of *Vera Drake* needs therefore some attention. As Landy notes, “there is by no means unanimous agreement about the [...] role of

historicising” (2001: 2). In fact, the use of the past in different films may have specific, different roles and connotations in each case. A recuperation and retelling of aspects neglected in mainstream, official, historical versions of the past are often main preoccupations for authors who use ‘historicising’. This can certainly be the case with *Vera Drake*, a serious, well-documented film which apparently aims to address and therefore shed light upon a fairly common phenomenon of contemporary British social history, namely, abortion. This problem mainly affected working class women, but has neither been approached in depth in British cinema, nor has it figured in many mainstream historical accounts. The search for other motivations behind Leigh’s decision to create a period piece rather than a contemporary drama remains a speculative exercise. Still, this tentative exercise deserves to be carried out, even if in passing. This is especially so considering the film’s subject matter: the (for many) thorny issue of abortion. In fact, this film’s ‘period quality’ may be likely to affect the way it works for audiences and the way it approaches issues of abortion. Several plausible reasons behind this particular ‘period quality’ might include the following: a desire to attract a wider number of audiences on the part of the director, with the effect of promoting widespread serious debates on abortion (and, of course, increasing box office profits). It should be remembered that, apart from *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), Leigh’s incursions into the making of ‘period films’ have been few. Thus, *Vera Drake* could be seen as a breath of fresh air, as an apparently atypical film in Leigh’s repertoire, and perhaps as able to take onboard not only his faithful devotees, but also, potentially, other types of audiences. In this respect we should also remember that, in the last few decades especially, period films have often been associated with ‘quality’ films, probably thus appealing to a wider British *and foreign* audience; furthermore, at least since the 80s and to judge by the amount of period feature films produced in Britain since then, a large number of domestic and international viewers seem to have felt attracted to the exoticism of the costumes, landscapes (urban and provincial) and stories of characters from the past (Sargeant 2005: 297-301). Likewise, it should be noted that the setting reconstructed in *Vera Drake*, the immediate post-World War Two period, is a scenario which has attracted (and still attracts) a lot of attention in audiences in the West. At a different level it is also noticeable that post World War Two Britain is a rather ‘extreme’ setting in which anti-abortion laws were particularly severe. Post-war London was an especially harsh habitat for the working classes, who forcibly led a life of austerity, rationing and poverty. In such a severe milieu where survival was often at stake, (some) audiences might have felt more understanding and sympathy towards the stories of the women involved in the narrative, and towards their decision to have an abortion —as I shall argue, these feelings of sympathy for Vera and for many of her ‘patients’ are triggered in the film in other ways as well—, which in turn may have raised the issue with some

audiences of the morality/immorality of abortion practices more generally. Moreover, it is also worth noting that, in spite of the fact that *Vera Drake* presents abortion as a piece of history, it is still a current topic, suggesting, as Landy puts it, that “the media’s representations of the past are a barometer of the social and cultural life” of contemporary settings (2001: 1). It is perhaps a piece of history in the British context in the sense that, today, Vera’s abortion practices would have been permitted in the UK if carried out by medical specialists in hospitals or clinics. Yet, the film is not outdated, since it poses very interesting questions for contemporary societies, as we witness a period of history marked by heated debates on the subject and by very strong anti-abortion feelings among some circles in the West, as the emergence of movements like the *Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child*, the *UK Life League*, or the *Comment on Reproductive Ethics*, all of them operating in the UK, suggest.<sup>2</sup>

As this paper will show, there are two other important related differences between *Vera Drake* and other social problem films, especially between Leigh’s film and the ‘social problem’ films of the late 40s and early 50s and the kitchen-sink film tradition of the 50s and 60s, both of which *Vera Drake* most explicitly and accurately recalls and tries to evoke, both formally and thematically. The first difference refers to the film’s concern with women and women’s issues, and its allusions to and representations of abortion. The second (closely related) difference concerns *Vera Drake*’s approach to the causes of ‘crime’ and criminal abortion, which, as I shall argue, greatly differs from that offered in the social problem and the kitchen-sink film traditions of the 40s, 50s and 60s. By and large, the latter “adopt a psychological treatment of the characters” and link their problems with their environments (including those of unwanted pregnancy and abortion) to essentially individual and personal weaknesses and/or moral prostration, which often ultimately reveal “unresolved oedipal conflicts and [...] repressed sexuality” (Landy 1991: 438). *Vera Drake*, however, mainly concentrates on the economic, institutional, social and class issues and structures that shape and determine the different characters’ approach to abortion.

Regarding the first difference noted above, it should be stressed that, while concerned with the working classes, films belonging to the ‘social problem’ and the ‘kitchen-sink’ film traditions were mainly preoccupied with the *male* working class and often presented rather male(-centred) perspectives (Lay 2002: 108; Murphy 1992: 32; O’Hagan Hardy 2006: 212).<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Leigh’s *Vera Drake* is completely different and, as this article will try to show, could be read as an attempt to offer a ‘feminine/-ist-oriented’ film of the type that was rarely found in the ‘original’ social problem film and kitchen-sink film traditions of the 40s, 50s and 60s. Regarding more specifically the topic of abortion, it should be noted that a few films of the 50s and 60s belonging to the ‘kitchen sink’ film tradition did

occasionally make allusions to the (not infrequent in real life) fact of unwanted pregnancies and to the possibility of termination (e.g. Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1960] or Gilbert’s *Alfie* [1966]). Yet, in such films, abortion, which was a criminal offence in Britain up until 1967, remained a totally secondary concern and was also often demonised *a priori* and treated simplistically, moralistically, and/or as unrealizable. A notable, unique exception is Tony Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1961), in which the unwanted pregnancy of the protagonist Jo (Rita Tushingham) and her consideration of abortion (finally discarded) becomes a central theme mediated through her own perspective and sensitivity. Leaving aside the exceptional *A Taste of Honey*, however, the usual treatment of abortion in these kitchen-sink films is well exemplified, for instance, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, where the main character’s attempt to terminate her pregnancy fails and abortion is criminalised and presented as morally despicable. Brenda (Rachel Roberts), the protagonist’s married lover who becomes pregnant does not really gain the spectators’ sympathy: she is depicted as hedonistic, ethically dubious and unfaithful to her hard-working husband. When talking to her lover Arthur (Albert Finney) about her ‘problem’ she asks: “What do you think having a kid means? You’re dull and sick for nine months, your clothes don’t fit, nobody look at you”. In *Look Back in Anger*, Alison Porter (Mary Ure), the protagonist’s abused wife asks her doctor about the possibility of having an abortion, but she is immediately told to forget about it:

- Doctor ...is it too late to... I mean... to do anything? [She says this without looking at him, as if ashamed of her question.]
- I didn’t hear that question [Answers looking at her angrily].
- I’m sorry.
- I hope you won’t ask it again, or anyone. Or try to do anything foolish.  
[Comments in brackets added by the author].

In the classic *Alfie*, abortion is also linked to adultery and criminalised as the film concentrates on the male protagonist’s distress when shown his married lover’s dead foetus. At the most obvious level, *Vera Drake* differs from its generic predecessors in its *central* focus on abortion and on its consequences for women (and, secondarily, for men), and there lies part of its strength and courage. By 2004, when the film was released, (medical) abortion had already been legalised in Britain, although it remained, and still remains, a crime in many other countries. As suggested earlier, however, even in those societies in which (medical) abortion under certain conditions is not a criminal offence anymore, it often continues to be a thorny issue, if not a social taboo (Strickler and Danigelis 2002: 188). Moreover, as Icart, Rozas et al. note, when considering the film’s content it should be remembered that abortion is an ideologically charged ‘problem’ about which spectators usually hold rather fixed and rigid pro- or anti- views and positions

(2007: 113).<sup>4</sup> In this article I will argue that one of the most interesting aspects of Leigh's *Vera Drake*, beyond the prominence given to the issue of abortion, is its apparent ability to potentially upset (some) spectators' pre-conceived thoughts on abortion and abortionists, and its successful questioning of simplistic, longstanding, *a priori* links between abortion, "crime" and evil (Alward 2007: 183-4). To this end, I shall first try to show how the film deconstructs and partly problematises the notion of abortion as crime while pointing to the existence of links between notions of crime and power at different levels. All this is achieved through the use of a number of narrative and formal (visual) strategies, which interact with one another in complex ways and provide a very powerful whole. In this article I will concentrate on the former, its narrative devices. As I shall argue, narratively, this partial 'decriminalisation' of abortion relies on, among other things, the film's characterisation of Vera and particular treatment of time, its salient emphasis on Vera's abortion method, and on the prominence given to Susan Wells' abortion. As I shall finally argue, what the film ultimately seems to be doing (though not in an uncritical fashion) is to criticise the social and juridical criminalisation of an individual (Vera Drake), suggesting that a "social harm theory" rather than a "crime theory" (Pemberton 2007: 28; Hillyard and Tombs 2007: 16) could explain the problems surrounding abortion in the context of the film.

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According to Carney and Quart (2000: 1), Leigh acknowledges his tendency to "posit questions rather than provide answers" in his films. In *Vera Drake* such a tendency is especially noticeable. In terms of narrative, Leigh seems to lead audiences to question official discourses on the *a priori* immorality and evil of abortion through, among other devices, the protagonist's characterisation.<sup>5</sup> Vera is characterised through her name, speech, and, especially, through her acts. "Vera" is a name of Latin origin meaning "true", "truthful", "faithful". Although in the eyes of the legal system and of some members of her family she is not "truthful" in so far as she has kept secret her illegal activities, she is certainly true to herself and faithful to her own moral standards, which, as she shows throughout, are anything but low. As her speech and that of her family and neighbours reveal, Vera is working class and lives in a working-class environment, but she does not incarnate the problematic, working-class woman living in a broken home. In fact, her family circle is depicted as extremely close and loving. Nor does she embody the stereotype of the back-street abortionist which prevailed in Britain in the early 1950s.<sup>6</sup> As Brookes notes, such a stereotype depicted these women abortionists as "slovenly and avaricious back-street operators providing services for promiscuous single women" (1988: 163). Vera's acts in general, and abortion activities in particular, are not driven by avarice or selfishness, but rather by altruism, love and sympathy for others, and especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged

individuals of society. She is extremely hard working, and her goodness and piety are highlighted from the very beginning of the film. She is first shown walking vigorously, humming and with a smile on her face as she goes to the bleak home of one of her neighbours: George, who cannot move and sits in a wheelchair. Vera gets him tea and does some tidying up in the house for him. More importantly, she tries to alleviate his loneliness by speaking to him gently and affectionately. In one of the first shots, the camera moves to show *a close up* of Vera’s hands as she gently puts George’s feet, which had fallen on the floor, back on his wheelchair footrests. The shot lasts long enough to underline this particular aspect of Vera’s character, and to help spectators broadly associate Vera’s piety, kindness and compassion with that of Jesus Christ, who washed his disciples’ feet with his own hands. Vera’s selflessness, truthfulness and naivety are such that when her secret is finally discovered by the police, her first worry is that her daughter’s engagement celebration is being ruined because of her: “we were having a party today... I do not want to spoil it for my family”. Moreover, when questioned by the police inspectors, she puts herself into more trouble by candidly revealing that she practises abortions regularly, and that she has treated many women “for about twenty years”, instead of keeping to the facts of the case for which she is being accused.

Besides this characterisation of Vera as a kind, good-hearted, and naïve woman, the film’s particular treatment (or, rather, manipulation) of time may also lead spectators to question long established, official discourses that link abortion with criminality and immorality. When considering the film’s treatment of time, which coherently accompanies the story narrated, the existence of three rather distinct parts can be noted. The first one goes up to minute twenty. The second part starts around minute twenty-one and runs up to minute fifty-six, when the third and final section begins. The general feeling that spectators are likely to experience when watching the film is that the initial slow pace of the narrative seems to be succeeded by a speeding up of time, only to be slowed down again and ‘stretched out’ significantly around minute fifty-six. In the first ‘section’ of the film, Vera’s ‘decriminalisation’, as it were, is partly achieved through the use of strategies of delay and then a gradual revelation of information, strategies that last until up to the end of the first half of the film’s runtime. It is not until minute twenty-one that spectators learn of Vera’s hidden business. Nothing much seems to happen in the first twenty minutes of the film, if ‘action’ is considered in its traditional sense and as a succession of important events that help significantly in the development of the narrative. As noted earlier, this first part is mainly devoted to showing Vera’s love for others, her altruism and good spirits with her family, neighbours, and employers —she works as a cleaning lady in a number of wealthy houses; nothing in her behaviour leads audiences to suspect her double life.

Spectators are thus left disarmed from the very beginning by Vera's charm and goodness as a person, only to be shocked and disturbed later when they discover her 'darker' side. Such a discovery only comes when the spectators' opinions about Vera are already likely to have been almost fully shaped in very positive terms. Viewers would have probably felt 'on alert' if her secret role as an abortionist had been revealed right at the beginning of the film, or earlier in time. This seemingly deliberate late revelation of her secret probably serves to unsettle those moral axioms which identify abortion with crime and evil. Yet audiences' empathy towards Vera may be shaken later in the film when spectators learn of her activity as an abortionist, since it remains uncertain whether or not she receives money for her practices. It is only after minute forty-four, when the film has already presented a number of abortions practised by Vera, that we learn it is not a money-making endeavour on her part and, moreover, that she is being cheated by Lily (Ruth Sheen), the person who puts her in contact with the pregnant women, whom she considers her good friend but who turns out to be an unscrupulous black marketeer. In fact, Vera is totally unaware of the fact that Lily is charging women who go to her for help:

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Lily: Have you got the money?

Pregnant woman: I've got the two pounds.

Lily: Two pound?

Pregnant woman: That's what she told me.

Lily: Well, she told you wrong. It's two guineas.

Pregnant woman: Oh, I'm sorry.

Lily: Ain't no use being sorry [...]

Pregnant woman: Two guineas.

Lily: Thank you very much. [...] *She'll be there at five o'clock* [referring to Vera now]. *Don't mention the money. That's between me and you. Understood?* [emphasis added]

Vera's naivety and altruism become totally explicit later in the film, once she is discovered by the police:

Police Inspector Webster: How much do you charge, Mrs. Drake?

Vera: What?

Police Inspector Webster: How much do they pay you?

Vera: I don't take money [...] I never take money. I wouldn't... That's not why...

Police Inspector Webster: You do it for nothing?

Vera: Course I do. They need help.

While this depiction of Vera as an angelic 'victim' of the system, and more particularly of Lily's greediness, may seem unrealistic, her case might well have been grounded on real facts (Brookes 1988: 138-9).<sup>7</sup> In fact, most women admitted to prison for criminal abortion during the 1950s "were housewives or retired pensioners aged between 50 and 70" (Brookes 1988: 138).



Furthermore, Vera’s refusal to accept payment for abortion is realistic (Woodside 1971: 128); “for most of the older, working-class women jailed for abortion in the 1950s money was but a minor consideration” (*American Historical Review* 2005).

Time is also manipulated in other ways (though apparently for the same purposes) in *Vera Drake*. From the moment spectators discover Vera’s secret (minute twenty-one), time seems to speed up. During the following thirty minutes, viewers witness seven abortions in various degrees of explicitness. Six of them are practised by Vera and the seventh, carried out on Susan Wells (Sally Hawkins), is performed by medical doctors in a private clinic. Regarding the abortions practised by Vera, it is immediately noticeable how fast they succeed one another in the film, suggesting that abortion, even though illegal, was a fairly common phenomenon in 1950s Britain. In fact, abortion was the third most popular method of birth control (Brookes 1988: 6), withdrawal being “the method used by the majority” (Cook 2004: 300), and the sheath “a much less popular second preference” (Brookes 1988: 6), partly due to its unreliability and high price (Cook 2004: 138). The film is set during the peak of illegal abortions in the UK, a period “between 1945, when the wartime conditions brought a reassertion of traditional social values, and 1960, when the moral climate began to change and contraception was more readily available” (Murphy 2005: 16). Hence, as contraception methods at the time were neither safe nor easily available for the poorest classes and sexual ignorance was still a reality in 1950s Britain (Cook 2004: 123), abortion was especially “common and apparently increasing in working-class urban areas” (Brookes 1988: 5), as reflected in *Vera Drake*. The high incidence of abortion among the working classes is not insignificant, especially when considering that “at least two-thirds of the population were working class in 1951” (Gillet 2003: 8). The links between Vera’s abortion practices and working class poverty are emphatically underlined in the case of the wretched, haggard-looking, working class mother of seven who, with almost no resources, can do nothing but procure herself an abortion in her dirty, badly-lit bedroom while complaining that her ailing husband is “always on top of [her]”. Poverty and squalor are also protagonists in the case of a young mulatto immigrant of Jamaican origin whom Vera assists: her abortion is performed in the house where the mulatto woman lives, in a dark, badly-painted bedroom with only one piece of furniture: an old, rusty bed.

Vera’s secret is disclosed around minute fifty-six, after one of Vera’s ‘patients’, Pamela Barnes (Liz White), a young, single woman in her late teens, becomes seriously ill as a result of the abortion. Once in hospital, Pamela has to be operated on urgently to save her life and the doctor reports the case to the police. Vera’s family get to know about her secret shortly after. Once Vera’s clandestine activity

has been revealed, the rhythm of the action suddenly slows down. The film is one hundred and twenty-five minutes long, which means that it devotes about seventy minutes, that is, almost half of its whole run time, to show the legal consequences of Vera's activities as an abortionist. This deliberate 'deceleration' suggests once again a well-planned, ideological intention on the director's part. Whereas the time span represented in these thirty minutes dedicated to Vera's 'Friday activities' (i.e. practising abortions) is, *at least*, a month and a half in the 'real' lives of the characters, the whole police investigation and judicial process in which Vera gets involved as a defendant last less than two months, starting after 17<sup>th</sup> November 1950 (the date of Pamela's operation), and ending on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1951, when the Central Criminal Court sentences Vera to prison.<sup>8</sup> The 'stretching out' of time in the last part of the film seems to help create a feeling of sympathy and even empathy towards Vera; it recreates well the trauma experienced by the protagonist and her family; the psychological time which spectators are obliged to share as they endure the long, difficult, tedious, belittling and exhausting process that culminates in Vera's imprisonment. Such a feeling of sympathy/empathy towards Vera, apparently created through Leigh's particular treatment of time, is also heightened visually, as spectators are often shown long-lasting close-ups of Vera crying and suffering deeply, both for the fate of Pamela, and for the well-being of Stan, Ethel and Sid once she is not with them. In contrast, by having most figures of authority shown only through medium and wide shots, a distance that is not only physical but also emotional, is created between these figures and the spectators.

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In addition to the film's treatment of time, its concern with Vera's abortion method also prompts a 'questioning' of the protagonist's criminality. In this respect, it is noteworthy that she only treats women in the very early stages of their pregnancy.<sup>9</sup> In fact, when asked by the police inspectors whether she performs abortions, which they immediately equate with helping women "to get rid of the *baby*" [emphasis added], Vera denies it, stating that "that's not what I do, dear [...] *that's what you call it*, but..." "when they can't manage... *I help them start their bleeding again*", "they need help [...] Who else are they going to turn to? They got no-one. I help them out" [emphasis added]. Interestingly, Vera's words point to the strong connection that exists between language and power: while those in authority use eloquent expressions to criminalise her and her acts, Vera does not see herself as killing babies. In fact, by showing the discrepancies between Vera's point of view and that represented by the Police, the Judiciary, and society in general, the film highlights how, as noted by Newman (1996: 5), linguistic choices are extremely important, since language and rhetoric not only shape reality but our attitudes towards this reality, and, more specifically in this particular case, our attitudes in favour of or against abortion. When "helping young women out", Vera makes use of a Higginson syringe, a bottle of disinfectant and some carbolic soap. With such

ingredients, she prepares a bowl of soapy water, a preparation which she then syringes into the women’s vagina. It is significant that her ‘hygienic’ measures (thoroughly washing her hands), her equipment and procedure are carefully shown in the film right from the beginning during her first abortion. These early, lengthily drawn-out *close-ups* enable spectators to appreciate for themselves that she is not using any sharp, apparently dangerous object. In fact, perhaps in Vera’s view, the items and products she uses are innocuous. As a housewife and cleaning lady, she is used to handling disinfectants on a daily basis. It is also likely that she uses carbolic soap at home, this being an apparently harmless cleansing product available in many shops at the time (and still commercialised today) which people often used for personal hygiene. Hence, when asked whether she uses any sharp objects, which were obviously unsafe but not infrequent amongst abortionists of all kinds at the time—even among some doctors—(Newman 1996) she denies it assertively: “No, I wouldn’t do that”. It seems therefore that Vera is inadvertently jeopardising her patients’ lives out of piety *and* ignorance. Although apparently careful with hygiene at domestic standards, Vera does not seem to be familiar with the concepts of medical asepsis and sterilisation and uses the same syringe once and again on all the women she treats, unaware as she is of the huge risks involved in so doing. Nevertheless, as compared to some of the most common methods of abortion used in Britain at the time, Vera’s ‘technique’ seems to lose some of its aggressiveness:

‘Simple means’ to procure an abortion [...] included infusions made from soaking nails and pennies in water, gunpowder, gold leaf from painters’ shops, lead scraped from lead plaster, and rat poison. These home remedies were supplemented with a range of commercial cures: ergoapiol, quinine [etc.] (Brookes 1988: 117)

And yet, as Worth, for example, claims: “the idea that Drake had used this method for 20 years is sheer fantasy [...] I was a midwife in London in the 1950s and I certainly never saw a survivor of that method” (2005). She argues that, as a writer and film-maker, Mike Leigh

can be excused for not knowing, but his medical adviser should certainly have known that Vera’s method of procuring an abortion—flushing out the uterus with soap and water—was invariably fatal. One of the most severe pains a human being can endure is the sudden distension of a hollow organ. Inflating the uterus with liquid will induce primary obstetric shock, a dramatic fall in blood pressure, and heart failure. Thousands of women have died instantly from this abortion method. (Worth 2005)

Other ethnographic sources, however, seem to contradict Worth’s blunt claims and suggest that this type of abortion method rarely resulted in death. Thus, when an English woman called “Minnie Roberts came to trial for the death of Beatrice Hill, she stated that she had ‘treated 800 cases in twenty-five years’ and that Beatrice was her first fatality” (Brookes 1988: 34).

The film's depiction of Vera's abortion practices and the circumstances under which they take place raise more than a few questions. Although Vera jeopardises women's lives with her abortions, she is totally confident of the safety of her method. Furthermore, she treats women for free, risking her freedom and family life and stability in the process (and eventually losing them). Some of the questions that arise are whether she is committing crimes or whether her acts are morally right or wrong. The inclusion of Susan Well's abortion case pushes these questions even further. In fact, the constructedness of 'crime' and the connections existing between 'crime' and power are not only suggested in the film through the previously-mentioned link between language and ideology (i.e. killing babies vs. start one's bleeding again), but also, and more importantly, through the prominence given to Susan's story. As against Vera's usual, working-class 'cliente', Miss Wells is the daughter of one of the rich and powerful families for whom Vera works as a cleaner, a situation that enables Leigh to focus on the abortion issue in upper-class circles. Living in an uncaring home (unlike Vera's children) and being naïve, shy and insecure to the extreme, Susan is raped by the boy she likes. As a consequence, she gets pregnant. Yet, her destiny is totally different from that awaiting Pamela Barnes. Susan's father "works in the Ministry of Defence" and she can therefore afford an expensive, private clinic in which she will be treated professionally and with total discretion for "over a hundred pounds". She can meet the expense of visiting a doctor, a psychiatrist whose report that an abortion was necessary to preserve the mother's mental health was a requisite at that time, and an obstetrician. Her "operation" takes place at an expensive, elegant and clean nursing home, in a private, nicely decorated room with an open fire which looks more like a hotel room than a hospital ward. Leigh's depiction of Susan's case seems to be well grounded in reality. As Brookes notes, "when an unplanned pregnancy occurred [...] women in the upper income bracket were likely to ask their doctor for a 'small operation'. If they were sufficiently well informed to ask the right doctor, and could pay a substantial fee, they could expect to have a 'routine' dilatation and curettage at a private nursing home" (1988: 137). As could be expected, Susan is operated on successfully, although she also has to suffer some of the consequences of living in a world led mostly by and for males. Unlike Vera's 'patients', who feel her care and support and are not asked questions, Susan is treated by her male (money-driven) doctors in a cold, extremely paternalistic and moralistic manner. In fact, every time she visits a doctor, she undergoes gratuitous police-like interrogations, aggravated by the slow pace of the enquiries, as if the doctors were gloating over Susan's embarrassment and feelings of shame and guilt. Both the apparent ease with which Susan is able to procure herself a safe, medical abortion and the doctors' behaviour point to the direct connections between power and crime along class and gender lines. They first reveal

the official hypocrisy of the time, which allowed well-off women ‘in trouble’ to get rid of their ‘problem’ safely (and with the help of institutional, medical discourses), but criminalised abortion when performed by and on working class women. In fact, part of Brookes’ denunciation is that the “access which middle-class women had to safe abortion may well have slowed down the impetus for reform [of the anti-abortion laws]” (1988: 137). Secondly, *Vera Drake* also seems to demonstrate that most of the hegemonic discourses which criminalise abortion (those coming from the Police, the Judiciary and, paradoxically, from doctors) are created, shaped and enforced by males. Hence audiences witness the feminisation of abortion as a crime, while they are also allowed to see that, when it is the male doctors that perform abortions, their procedures are not criminalised by the legal system, but are actually protected by it.<sup>10</sup> In fact, what the film seems to insist on throughout is that, “‘crime’ serves to maintain power relations” (Hillyard and Tombs 2007: 15) and that, as Friedrichs and Schwartz note, the (male) “privileged segments of society” (embodied in the film by the Judiciary, the Police and the medical practitioners) are those with power “to define crime, and to support enforcement of laws in accord with their particular interests” (2007: 4).<sup>11</sup> At the time *Vera Drake* is set, “population size was considered an indicator of national vitality” and the country was “afflicted by a relatively weak demographic performance and the ‘menace’ of an ageing population” (Thane 1990: 292). Hence anti-abortion laws were maintained while policies aiming at raising the birth rate were strongly encouraged:

In a broadcast delivered in March 1943, Winston Churchill warned that if Great Britain were “to maintain its leadership of the world and survive as a great power that can hold its own against external pressure, our people must be encouraged by every means to have larger families”. (Brookes 1988: 134)

Yet, as the film makes clear, in the early 50s, keeping a family, let alone one of these large, officially-sanctioned families, was too heavy a financial burden for many members of the working class, and especially for female working class individuals, whether married or single (the latter also having to face social exclusion). In fact, the “period of British post-war austerity” “did not entirely disappear until the mid-1950s. Many commodities were impossible to obtain or were highly priced, *and although food rationing was eased by stages, it was not abolished until 1954*” (Robertson 1999: 17) [emphasis added]. Thus, Ethel’s fiancé Reg (Eddie Marsan) protests following Vera’s arrest: “it don’t seem fair. Look at my mum. Six of us in two rooms. It’s alright if you’re rich. But if you can’t feed them... you can’t love them, can you?” Yet, Leigh’s piece is far from being the “tendentious” “pro-abortion statement” that critics such as Rodríguez Chico (2005) claim. Instead, it is an extremely complex text. Some of Vera’s patients are not

characterised as naïve, helpless victims, but rather as frivolous, irresponsible individuals, whose behaviour apparently problematises radical, *a priori* pro-abortion positions. This is the case, for example, of a rather cynical (unnamed) woman in her late thirties who is shown laughing, listening to music, drinking and smoking while Vera is getting things ready to ‘help her out’. In fact, it is suggested that this is not the first time that she has got rid of an unwanted pregnancy by means of abortion, and her frivolous manners make audiences feel detached from her and from what she is doing. Still, while *Vera Drake* presents a nuanced, wide variety of cases of women who seek abortion —some of which seem morally more problematic than others—the film’s deep purposes conspire to reveal the intimate links between squalor, poverty and abortion: many of the women who resort to abortion in the film do so out of necessity, because they see themselves trapped in highly unfavourable socio-economic circumstances. In fact, unlike many 40s, 50s and 60s ‘social problem’ and ‘kitchen-sink’ films whose “concern [was] finally less with the social aspects of crime, with legal crime and punishment, than with the underlying psychology” (often pathological and sexually motivated) of the offenders (Landy 1991: 445), *Vera Drake* focuses on the social context and structures that give rise to unlawful behaviour. By emphasising this highly unfavourable socio-economic milieu that conditions people’s behaviour, the film appears to criticise “crime theories”, which, as Hillyard and Tombs note (2007: 17) focus solely “on the individual” and on the ‘criminal’ acts committed by the individual. Instead, and in line with the theories on criminology endorsed by Hillyard and Tombs (2007: 16) and Pemberton (2007: 28), the film seems to stress that, rather than committing crimes, Vera is inadvertently causing *harm* to others in a heartfelt attempt to counteract the poverty, deprivation and despair of women, most of whom are presented as victims of the system in which they live.

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## Notes

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1. These films were mostly adaptations with scripts often written by the authors of the source text.

2. Information about these groups can be found, for example, on their Internet official websites <http://www.uklifeleague.com/>, <http://www.spuc.org.uk/>, <http://www.corethics.org/>. Needless to say,

anti-abortion movements and campaigns are even more powerful in the USA, although medical abortion is legal in many of the States.

3. Even contemporary social realism tends “to focus on male protagonists” and “few social realist texts centre on working class female protagonists” (Lay 2002: 108).

“Notable exceptions include *Stella Does Tricks*, *The Girl with Brains in Her Feet*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, and *BabyMother*” (Lay 2002: 108).

4. Pro- and anti-abortion positions are in turn often linked to moral debates “about personhood” (Newman 1996: 18), which consider “whether or not the biologically human organism, which comes into existence at conception, acquires the status of moral personhood before birth” (Alward 2007: 183). If that is the case, then “abortion is seriously wrong at that time” and, if not, “it is more or less morally unproblematic at the time” (Alward 2007: 183–4). As Newman notes, radical anti-abortion positions have been to a great extent shaped by the history of “anatomical illustration and sculpture” and early obstetrics, which expressed “the medical belief in ‘preformation’, in which the fetus was conceived of as a pre-formed [...] tiny adult that simply grew in size” (1996: 26, 33). Moreover, until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the uterus was believed to be passive and the fetus active during labour, with birth taking place thanks to the autonomous efforts of the fetus” (Newman 1996: 33).

5. The reading of *Vera Drake* offered here is just a plausible interpretation of how (some) audiences may have received and understood the film. Further future research into the film might include ethnographic work (e.g.: interviews, focus group meetings) to explore reception of the film in particular viewers.

6. As Gillet notes, in the British context speech is an especially significant class-marker, as it often appears “as the most frequently-used way of ranking people by class” (2003: 19). Vera’s speech and that of her family, friends and neighbours is full of localisms and non-standard grammatical structures which can be associated with working class registers: “innit?”, “we done demolition before the war” “my brother won’t

talk about it, neither” “was you?” “he don’t talk about it, Stan”.

7. Further details can be found, for example, in Woodside (1971: 126–137).

8. As Brookes notes, “imprisonment was the typical penalty for breaking the abortion law” (1988: 144).

9. An early abortion is for many less problematic morally, as it can be argued that the foetus has not acquired “moral personhood” yet (Alward 2007: 183–4).

10. As noted earlier, the law allowed doctors at the time to procure abortions if they were “necessary” to preserve the mother’s mental health. This covering of psychological grounds was introduced in 1938 under the Bourne Ruling (United Kingdom, R. v. Bourne, 1939, 1 K.B. 687). In *Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy: The Law and Clinical Practice in Northern Ireland*. Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk> [Accessed 12 April 2009].

11. The fact that the word “crime” was popularised with the beginning of the industrial revolution and was associated with working-class crowds in big cities is rather telling and far from innocent (Lee 2007: 36). The hypocrisy of official responses towards abortion throughout British history has become increasingly clear. Thus, birth control policies have clearly been informed by political agendas and have accordingly changed over the decades, even when extreme cases such as infanticide were at stake. Such a practice was not uncommon in Victorian times (Briggs, Harrison et al. 1996: 180; Robinson 2002: 153) and was often criminalised. Yet, when fears of overpopulation affected the powerful and ruling classes “infanticide was quietly accepted as an unpleasant but necessary action to lower effective fertility” [emphasis added] (Robinson 2002: 167).

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