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STUDIO VISTA (1970)

LES BONNES FEMMES

Les Bonnes Femmes doesn't pretend to offer a 'rounded' or 'total' view of life: its subject is deliberately limited. For one thing, the men are (with the partial exceptions, in very different ways, of Jacqueline's two suitors, the motor-cyclist and the delivery man) all comic grotesques whose responses to the girls are uniformly base, trivial or egotistical; the most cursory glance at Chabrol's other films will be enough to show that this doesn't correspond to his 'view' of the male sex, but only to a part of that view which he deliberately isolates and emphasises for the purposes of the film. Similarly, we needn't see the girls as expressing his total view of women. The four (or five, if we count the anonymous girl in the 'coda') obviously have a great deal in common, to the extent that they can be considered (following Chabrol's own suggestion) as facets of a single composite figure. This figure isn't 'Woman'; rather, it must be seen as isolating a single essential human trait on which Chabrol works four variations.

This conscious delimiting and deforming of reality – rather different from the natural process of selection and organising any artist goes through in shaping his material – might seem to bring the film dangerously near to an enclosed, insulated artwork. *Les Bonnes Femmes* pretends to no such self-sufficiency: we are talking, happily, of tendencies that in Chabrol's serious work have so far been held somewhat precariously in check (*how* precariously, *Les Godelureaux* well demonstrates). Consciously constructed and circumscribed the world of *Les Bonnes Femmes* may be, but its relatedness to the real world is never in doubt. In fact the film is one of the most striking and successful manifestations of a central unifying feature of the early New Wave, shared by such disparate directors as Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, Demy and Rozier: the tension between the stylised and the naturalistic, the formal and the documentary. In the course of the film Chabrol gives us an extraordinarily detailed portrait of the urban environment: we are repeatedly returned to the external realities of the city, its buildings, its traffic, its crowds, its manifold pressures. At the same time, one's overall impression is of a highly stylised work: the shop where most of the girls' existence is passed seems to have more assistants than customers; the four girls themselves could hardly be taken for a random or 'typical' cross-section; the proprietor and the cashier both, to say the least, have their idiosyncrasies; the men the girls come in contact with all tend towards caricature. Institution suggests and analysis confirms that a rigorously formalised construction underlies the film's apparent spontaneity. The 'documentary' detail is there primarily to make us connect the constructed and delimited world of the film with the real world. But there is never the incongruity that this description may suggest. The city itself comes to assume a nightmare quality, anticipated in the credit sequence, where we see the same strip of film of traffic moving round the Place de la Bastille three times, the dissolves so neatly and swiftly done that we are scarcely aware of them, a piece of strictly documentary film on which stylisation is imposed, so that the atmosphere of a recurring dream is established at the outset and intensified by Pierre Jansen's minatory music.

Les Bonnes Femmes is an intensely personal work, for all its appearance of detachment and objectivity. It would not be difficult to interpret it in quasi-abstract 'inward' terms, as a film about the positive and destructive elements within the human psyche. 'You study us as if we

were insects,' Bernadette Lafont told Jean-Claude Brialy in *Le Beau Serge*, and that is what critics accused Chabrol of doing in *Les Bonnes Femmes*. It is difficult, though, to see in what sense the director can be said to be 'studying' characters who are so entirely his own creation. The terms 'objectivity' and 'impersonality' have occasioned much confusion. For example, led on doubtless by Eliot's own talk of artistic 'impersonality', people have been all too ready to treat 'The Waste Land' as an objective account of what the modern world is like, instead of one of the most intensely personal poems imaginable, a projection of a spiritual condition. The same could be said of *Les Bonnes Femmes*, which in some respects resembles 'The Waste Land' except that it is less raw, more tightly organised – more like the 'Sweeney' poems. To apply the epithet 'objective' to it is only to say that the artist, instead of presenting his concerns and obsessions more or less directly to his audience (as Ingmar Bergman and D. H. Lawrence have often done, in their different ways), creates out of those obsessions a particular, limited world. The obsessions no longer manifest themselves explicitly on the surface; they find no mouthpiece in a central character, no Birkin or Johan Borg. Instead, they pervade the constructed world in a symbolic or distorted form.

In *A Double Tour*, for all its clenched-teeth 'objectivity', the essential life of the *mise-en-scène* gravitated more and more unmistakably towards the son (André Jocelyn), its precariously suppressed passion erupting in the near-hysteria of the outburst culminating in Léda's murder, where he confronts his own hideous and terrifying grimace in the mirror, forcing his features to express his image of what he really is. He is driven to kill Léda because her freedom and her beauty make of himself and his mother 'sordid insects'. *Les Bonnes Femmes* can be read partly as an elaboration of that moment. The four girls of the film are not 'sordid insects' at all: they are animated by the impulse towards precisely that beauty and freedom that Léda represents. Although the impulse can express itself only in debased forms, it becomes more and more clearly recognisable through its various disguises as the film progresses. It is the men who are, for the most part, 'sordid insects', distorted into dehumanised caricature by Chabrol in much the same way Jocelyn distorts his own face. The girls' (at most) half-articulate striving after expression is defeated at every attempt.

The 'orthodox' view of *Les Bonnes Femmes* when it first appeared saw it as a very nasty film – cold, callous, empty, cynical – and assumed that its admirers must share these characteristics. Ten years later, I see no reason to retract my original estimate that it was among the very finest achievements of the New Wave – and I no longer feel guilty for liking it. What struck me then, and what strikes me now, is the film's tenderness, the impression given of a pained sensitivity qualified and partly disguised by a tough and all-pervasive humour arising from a sense of absurdity. The distance at which Chabrol holds his characters and his concerns should not be mistaken for a lack of feeling or involvement. Chabrol is certainly not (as Peter John Dyer described him in Sight and Sound when *Les Bonnes Femmes* appeared) 'a perfect example of the *Cahiers* theoretician determined to prove he can film anything, but with nothing serious to say.' One gets the feeling, from close acquaintance with the film, of an artist so personally and painfully involved that he has to hold his material at arm's length to cope with it at all. After *Le Beau Serge* Chabrol ceased to be a practising Catholic; *Les Bonnes Femmes* is the film in which the effects of this repudiation really make themselves felt. To pass from the former to the latter is like passing from *Wild Strawberries* to *The Silence:* there is the same kind of shock.

Still: Les Bonnes Femmes – *the visit to the zoo. Left to right – Jacqueline (Clotilde Joano), Jane's fiancé (Claude Berri), Jane (Bernadette Lafont), Ginette (Stéphane Audran).*

With both Bergman and Chabrol, transition is from a world which *may* be divinely ordered to a world which *may* be absurd and meaningless: primarily a matter of emphasis, but for most of us the emphasis is crucial. The sense of absurdity is most devastatingly expressed (as in *The Silence*, curiously enough) through a stage show. The more deliberate and contrived grotesquerie of most of the men in the film provides a context which alerts us to the absurdity of the more or less uncaricatured music-hall turns (Charlie Boston et ses Cadets, the little grinning man with the guitar left jigging amiably up and down as the sequence ends) and the audience who sit watching them.

EPISODE	CENTRAL FIGURE	OTHER GIRLS	MEN	SPECIAL LOCATION	TIME
I	Jane	Jacqueline	Soldier Marcel Albert (André)	Night-club	Night
(Shop i)					Next morning: a. Bélin/Jacqueline b. Poet c. Delivery man; (André) d. The girls discuss what they want from life.
II	Rita	Jane Ginette Jacqueline	Henri (André)	Restaurant	Lunch break
III	Ensemble	Jane Ginette Jacqueline	Soldier (André)	Zoo	Lunch break
(Shop ii)					Afternoon-evening session: a. Delivery man/Jacqueline b. Bélin-Ginette-Jacqueline c. (André at window) d. Madame Louise's fetish.
IV	Ginette	Jane Jacqueline Rita	Henri (André)	Music-hall	The same night
V	Ensemble	Jane Jacqueline Ginette Rita	Henri Marcel Albert André	Swimming pool	The same night
VI	Jacqueline	—	André	The country	Next morning
VII	?	—	?	Dance-hall	Night (continuity unspecified)

The chart will help clarify the film's complex structure of interlocking patterns, echoes, correspondences. Four more-or-less self-sufficient episodes, one for each girl, are sometimes alternated, sometimes combined, with a satisfyingly inclusive representation of urban locales. Apart from the film's central image of urban working-life, the shop where the girls not so much work as wait for time to pass until their next break, we have night-club, restaurant, zoo, music-hall, indoor swimming-pool and dance-hall. It is a little surprising that there is no cinema, but to some extent the music-hall stands in for it, and Bernadette Lafont and Stéphane Audran have photos of Jean-Claude Brialy and Gérard Blain in their bedrooms, so we may assume they also go to the movies.

Within this overall structure there are various correspondences which sometimes overlap with each other, counterpointing symmetry with asymmetry. The two big ensemble scenes (episodes III and V) pair off naturally because neither has a central figure (though each ends by focusing on Jacqueline). In the first (the zoo) the girls stare at and tease the animals; in the second the girls get stared at and teased by the men. The girls' shop is also a kind of cage: the parallel becomes clear when André (Mario David) is filmed peering in through the glass just as the girls were filmed from inside the glass-fronted cases in the zoo. At the same time the presence of Albert and Marcel links V and I. Episode III also ties up with episode VI: both take place in the open air, both make expressive use of animals (in VI, ducks and bird-calls). Episode II (Rita's meeting with Henri's parents in the restaurant, watched by the other girls) partly matches episode IV (Ginette on the stage): each girl suffers varying degrees of embarrassment and humiliation at becoming a spectacle for her friends, and each adopts or has imposed on her an artificial persona for the occasion (the episodes are also connected by the presence of Henri). But IV also links with I (Dolly Bell's striptease) and III (the zoo animals) in being concerned with the relationship between spectacle and audiences, both the audience within the film and the audience watching the film. The diagram reveals the all-pervading presence of André, the only character who appears in every episode (except VII). He lurks on the periphery of each scene (hence the brackets in the chart) until the climax of the swimming-pool sequence (V). Finally, the chart shows how the last two episodes stand apart from the rest. Remove them, and you have a perfect time-and-space unity, and a perfect symmetry in which recreation alternates with work: Night – Shop i – Lunch Break – Shop ii – Night. VI doesn't break the time-continuity (Jacqueline says in answer to André's question as to whether she loves him that they only met '*hier soir*'), but it is the only episode to be set outside the city. In VII the strict temporal continuity is abandoned, the lack of any defined time-relationship giving this 'coda' an effect of timelessness. The presence of Jacqueline in I (where for the first part of the episode she is scarcely subordinate to Jane) links it with VI: during I she becomes aware of André's interest in her for the first time, and VI culminates in her death at his hands. The resulting sense we have at that point of the completion of a process that has been continuous through the film serves further to isolate the final episode, emphasising its function as an epilogue.

One can explore the film further by asking what the four girls have in common, and how they differ from one another.

What links them is the theme that unifies the film: the discrepancy between dream and reality, the inability of the girls' environment to provide a means of realising their undefined yearnings, so that their fantasies assume ignoble or degraded forms.

The differences lie not only in the content of the variations, but in the quality of the girls' aspirations. The complex formal pattern of the film – its existence in space, as it were, as an object – is counterpointed by a definite progress. The first girl, Jane (Bernadette Lafont), is the coarsest, and her aspirations are the most rudimentary: she simply has vague ideas about a good time. It is she, not Jacqueline, who accepts being picked up by Marcel and Albert; in the course of the evening she alternately provokes and repudiates Marcel's advances in a strikingly ambivalent way, half-disgusted at what is happening to her even as she half-encourages it. The episode ends with her arriving home next morning, haggard and disillusioned. She seems, none the less, the girl best adjusted to her environment (as a shot late in the film of her weaving through the traffic of a busy street at night, waving her arms at the cars in arrogant self-assurance, suggests), precisely because she has the least sense of reaching out for things beyond it.

Rita (Lucile Saint-Simon), who gets noticeably the least attention of the four, in terms both of time and of the director's interest,

Stills: Les Bonnes Femmes – *in the shop; Jane and (left) Ginette.*

aspires to respectability and social advancement through marriage to the wholly ignominious Henri. Later we see him indignantly refusing to let one of the assistants in his father's shop leave one minute before closing time, and feel we have glimpsed what Rita's future will be like. In the restaurant, when she is to be introduced to Henri's parents, she seems humiliated and wretched, forced to assume characteristics (such as an academic knowledge of Michelangelo) quite alien to her. Yet she has convinced herself that Henri is the fulfilment of her dreams, and tells the other girls later in the shop that he really loves her.

Ginette's stage performance, and her horror at finding her colleagues in the audience, provide one of the film's completest statements of its theme. On stage, Ginette (Stéphane Audran) changes not only her name but her whole personality: she wears a wig, assumes a different bearing and an Italian accent. (She practises Italian with Madame Louise in the shop, supposedly with a view to singing in that

language.) She is living a dream, of fame, glory, self-expression, of being glamorous and seductive (*'J'aime l'art'*, she tells the stage-manager in her dressing-room). The presence of her friends suddenly threatens the whole structure of this fantasy: if *they* are watching her, she will cease to be her stage persona and become merely Ginette; and she will be forced to see herself through their eyes, with the illusion exposed, the glamour made tawdry.

Each girl strikes us as more sensitive, thus more vulnerable to deeper hurt, than her predecessor. The progression culminates in Jacqueline (Clotilde Joano), whose aspirations (true romantic love) are the purest of all and whose fineness of sensibility is emphasised by Chabrol at her every appearance. Far from encouraging us to consider her as an insect, Chabrol uses her at several points to rebuke the audience for insensitivity. 'What is the difference between a frying-pan and a chamber-pot?' Marcel asks her in the car, and when she fails to answer, he exclaims, 'Can't be very clean at your house'. It's a very funny joke; Chabrol's cut to Jacqueline's face – she's not exactly shocked at the joke's content, just

Stills: Les Bonnes Femmes – *Jane and Jacqueline. Left – at the music hall with Rita (Lucile Saint-Simon) and her fiancé Henri (Sacha Briquet). Above – After being picked up by Albert (Albert Dinan) and Marcel (Jean-Louis Maury).*

humiliated at the brutal familiarity of a total stranger – catches us in mid-laugh. The effect is not at all a puritanical rejection of coarse jokes, but a reminder that the propriety of a joke depends on company and circumstances: we were wrong, not in laughing at the joke, but in forgetting who was its victim. The effect is repeated towards the end of the film, through Jacqueline's reaction to André's imitation of a fart that climaxes his display of tricks (ebullience escalating to hysteria) in the country restaurant. Here the audience response is even more precisely defined (or – really the same thing – rendered more complex): Chabrol cuts first to a comically scandalised over-fed bourgeois, shocked at the affront to conventionality, before cutting to Jacqueline, her face showing the pain of a refined nature. The swimming-pool episode offers a more elaborate variation on such effects.

The film repeatedly reveals, in fact, Chabrol's acute awareness of the audience, and his desire to define – and refine – its responses. This is shown at its simplest in the night-club scene. In common with the night-club audience, we are led to await the revelation of Dolly Bell, '*la plus perverse ensorceleuse*', at the opening of the curtains behind the compère. Chabrol cuts to a close-up of the curtains, a female hand comes out to part them, and they open to reveal – the audience: our position has been reversed. The lewd goggling of the men at Dolly Bell becomes a kind of distorting-mirror reflection of ourselves: grotesquely parodied, yet uncomfortably recognisable. The music-hall scene is more complex. The turns are derisory; we see anonymous spectators reacting with a pleasure that epitomises the theme of the film – they are projecting their unsatisfied yearnings on to the inanities before them, the show we watch on the stage and the show as transformed in the spectator's responses being clearly two different things. We feel superior to these silly people with their unformed, ignorant tastes. But we are also shown Henri, his face again a distorting-mirror of our feelings of superiority, insufferably smug: more damnable than the simple, self-deluding enjoyment of the other spectators, our reaction to which can no longer be quite the same. Then with Ginette (who gives scarcely more proficient a performance than the previous acts) we are put in the position of the performer, spotlights glaring in our faces; there is a painful sense of exposure to the stares, friendly, hostile or indifferent, of the audience. The shifting viewpoint of the sequence, the way in which we are made aware of varying 'truths', and made to question our own first reactions, is characteristic of the film's method.

This tendency to 'use' audience response in order to refine it reaches it peak in the swimming-pool sequence. At first Albert, with his concern about his protruding belly, and Marcel, with his delight in his own jokes ('Honoré . . . de Balzac'), seem more grotesque and foolish than positively offensive. As they begin pushing the girls in it is possible to laugh with them as well as at them. But Chabrol prolongs the pushing and ducking far beyond the point where it can still be found funny: the tiresome repetitiveness is essential to the scene's effect. Then Jacqueline, with tremulous dignity, shoos the men away, and they turn on her. To this point the sequence has been shot objectively. Now Chabrol clinches our growing indignation on the girls' behalf by making us repeatedly descend with Jacqueline as she is ducked and by cutting off the sound, so that we share her experience of submersion and suffocation, and with her cry out mentally for help – which comes, in the form of André's spring from the high-diving board.

Jacqueline reaches highest, and receives the most final and overwhelming punishment. Yet, although all that is best in the girls reaches its fullest and finest expression in her (the progress of the film can be seen as a progressive purification or distillation), one cannot say that she represents a human ideal – the total freedom and beauty of a Léda. *Les Bonnes Femmes* depicts a corrupted world, and Jacqueline herself is tainted by the corruption. That is perhaps why Chabrol succeeds with her where he failed with Léda, and why Jacqueline's death is so much the more moving. Léda remains an essentially empty conception, a rhetorical statement of perfection rather than an artistic realisation of it; she can be killed but not spiritually violated. Jacqueline's vulnerability, on the other hand, is partly inherent; if she retains an innocence to the end, it is partly an innocence about her own nature. We see her

Still: Les Bonnes Femmes – *the swimming pool; André with Henri and Rita, Jane and Ginette.*

at the beginning of the film walk over to André's motor-bike and stroke its leopard-skin saddle with one hand while, as she smiles with quiet pleasure, her other hand feels the scarf around her throat. Later, in the zoo, she becomes aware that André is there, watching her; immediately her hand goes again to her scarf, which she tightens around her throat, a slight smile of gratification on her face, and Chabrol cuts to a coiling boa constrictor. Jacqueline flirts with the tiger, calling it a big pussy-cat; when it springs, Chabrol cuts to André grinning with pleasure as he watches. Jacqueline's behaviour reveals a certain subconscious complicity in her own fate: she associates André with danger, and in particular with her beautiful neck: she seems almost to invite him to strangle her.

Still: Les Bonnes Femmes – *André and Jacqueline.*

Chabrol hints at this subtly, and one mustn't make too much of it. It qualifies but doesn't invalidate our sense of the purity of Jacqueline's desires. Nor is it merely a matter of perverse undertones. It suggests that Jacqueline unconsciously equates the absolute for which she is searching with death. In her, the impulse towards the fullest life and the impulse towards the release of death are inextricably entwined, as they were in the Keats who wrote 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die . . .'.

Les Bonnes Femmes is a strikingly original work, and its originality is not lessened by the discovery of two possible sources from which certain aspects of it may derive, one predictable (Hitchcock), or, more accurately, Chabrol's (Hitchcock), the other extremely unexpected. One doesn't naturally associate Chabrol with Fellini, their distinctive tones being so incompatible; yet the structure of *Les Bonnes Femmes* echoes that of *Le Notti di Cabiria* closely enough to lead one to suspect at least an unconscious connection between the two. Fellini uses one woman throughout; Chabrol uses four (or five), but goes on to tell us that we can if we choose consider them as a single composite figure. That basic difference apart, the films resemble each other generally in their episodic structure, wherein each episode represents a new attempt by the girl(s) to realise a desire or find a meaning in life, and particularly in certain detailed parallels, most striking in the final thirds of both films.

1. The first major episode of *Cabiria* has the heroine picked up in the street by a film star who first takes her to a night-club then drives her back to his home, where she spends the night; she is at first dazzled by the glamour but the experience proves quite empty. Compare the first episode of *Les Bonnes Femmes*: when one has allowed for the fact that Jane and Jacqueline are much less simple-minded than poor Cabiria, the likeness is fairly close.

2. Later in the film Cabiria goes to a music-hall. She is brought on the stage by a hypnotist, and while under hypnosis is led to reveal all her naïve yearnings (rose-covered cottage, etc.) for the amusement of the audience. When she 'wakes up' she experiences intense humiliation and disappointment. Compare Ginette on the stage.

3. During Cabiria's stage appearance, she is seen by a shy young man (François Périer) who follows her and accosts her. He appears to offer Cabiria the fulfilment of her dreams: pure romantic love combined with domestic stability. He takes her out to the country for the day; they dine together at a restaurant, tenderly discussing the future. Cabiria has brought all the savings she has accumulated as a prostitute and offers them to him. His attitude to her changes as he realises what the money represents and recognises emotionally the truth about her. They walk together in the open air, the man torn between revulsion he can't control and pity for her. On the edge of a cliff he tries to strangle her. Then, unable to reveal to her the real grounds for his reaction, he desperately tries to save her face by grabbing her purse and running. Compare, almost point by point, the Jacqueline-André episode of *Les Bonnes Femmes:* the movement out into the country; the girl's sense of her finest aspirations becoming realised; the meal together; the walk, with the increasingly clear revelation of the man's neuroticism; the strangling. But the Périer character is less 'romantic', more bourgeois, than André: there is a touch of Rita and Henri.

4. At the end of Fellini's film Cabiria, distraught and penniless, her dreams disappointed, her savings gone, but still alive, walks away in the growing darkness. On the road she meets a group of young people who say 'We've lost our way', but who are smiling and singing gaily. She joins them, finding her simple faith in existence reaffirmed despite all the batterings

it has received. Compare the end of *Les Bonnes Femmes:* the anonymous girl is a 'resurrection' of Jacqueline; her touching faith corresponds to Cabiria's 'resurrection' after her near-death at the cliff.

This leaves one major episode of *Cabiria* unaccounted for: Cabiria's pilgrimage to a shrine where miracles have been reported, and her short-lived religious 'uplift', induced partly by the atmosphere of mass hysteria and collapsing when she realises its lack of relevance to her daily existence. Chronologically, it roughly parallels a similarly 'unmatched' major episode in *Les Bonnes Femmes*: the visit to the zoo. Although the two sequences have almost nothing in common in terms of overt subject-matter, they reveal interesting correspondences in their functions in the respective films, and with regard to the respective directors. Catholicism, though generally treated as a repressive and stunting force (the childhood references in $8\frac{1}{2}$ and *Giulietta degli Spiriti*) makes itself felt in the world of Fellini's films as a fairly constant 'pull'. Cabiria goes through the film with a child-like (almost childish) faith in life, as if continually expecting miracles. The religious excursion, where hopes of divine revelation are aroused and then cheated, is the point where a pervasive undertone of the film rises to the surface to become explicit.

The zoo is even more central to *Les Bonnes Femmes* than the Church to *Cabiria.* If Catholicism haunts the world of Fellini's film, it is utterly absent from that of Chabrol's, which is pervaded rather by the fear of the Absurd. One may feel a certain connection between the sense of omnipresent corruption in *Les Bonnes Femmes* and the Fallen World of Catholicism, pervaded by the inescapable corruption of Original Sin. But all sense of, or interest in the idea of, a presiding deity seems absent, and in a world come into being by accident neither the traditional assumptions of Christianity nor the humanist assumptions that are its legacy – Christianity deprived of its metaphysical basis – are tenable. Instead, attention tends to focus on the natural energies and instincts that are the sources of man's actions. The caged animals in the zoo become the central emblem of the radically perverted world Chabrol depicts. The cage metaphor is a recurring motif: the shop where the girls are enclosed for an obligatory period of time every day; the restaurant where Rita is trapped to be displayed to Henri's parents (with a further audience of colleagues); the stage where Ginette is hemmed in by spotlights and spectators; the swimming-pool where the girls are molested and maltreated: all are cages. We are led to identify certain characters in the film with zoo animals: André's grin of satisfaction as the tiger springs towards Jacqueline is also a tigerish snarl, his teeth bared; Jane's little soldier stands waiting for the girls in front of the monkey-cage, munching peanuts and scratching under his armpits; and Monsieur Bélin is subsequently described by Jane as a '*vieux singe*'. I think we can go on to make further character/animal identifications, though Chabrol leaves them inexplicit. The hyena reminds us of Marcel and Albert, the city's nocturnal scavengers – Jane calls it '*sale bête*', and grimaces at it exactly as, earlier, she grimaced at the men. The kagu (a rare bird, in danger of becoming extinct, whose unprepossessing appearance and lack of vitality lead the girls to dismiss it contemptuously as beneath their interest) is surely the little delivery-man who diffidently courts Jacqueline, the only man in the film to offer unselfish tenderness. The kagu is '*crépusculaire*'; the delivery-man takes Jacqueline into the deep shadow of a neighbouring entrance-way before asking her to go out with him.

The girls gimace at the animals without understanding, without even genuine curiosity, seeing them not as living things but merely as

Still: Les Bonnes Femmes – *Jacqueline, Jane.*

pretexts for half-frightened giggles. Through the detachment with which Chabrol watches *them,* sometimes from inside the cages, so that roles of watcher and watched seem reversed, we see the girls (as they cannot see themselves) as part of the animal kingdom subject to common natural laws. Their treatment of the animals corresponds to their treatment of the unknown and instinctive in themselves: they isolate themselves from it – some ridicule it, some minimise it or pretend its dangers don't exist. To Jacqueline the tiger is '*Mon amour, mon amour*', and just a nice big pussycat.

The character who takes on most meaning in relation to the zoo and its cages is certainly André. His identification with the tiger (anticipated earlier in the leopard-skin of his motor-bike) confirms him as the film's chief repre-

sentative of primitive energy. One registers him as not merely a character but an all-pervading presence, lurking perpetually in the (real or metaphorical) shadows – an impression that is intensified by the shots of him simply riding around Paris at night, anywhere, a part of the city's life. He is the 'Id' of urban mankind, suppressed, perverted, dangerous, and ever present.

The Hitchcock film to which *Les Bonnes Femmes* is related is *Strangers on a Train*, though this will not be at all obvious at first sight and without external prompting. If the reader will take it on trust for a moment that there *is* good reason for supposing a connection, he will see that the most obvious link is between André and Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker), the murderer in Hitchcock's film. Bruno is also a creature of the shadows, an Id-figure, continually lurking on the periphery of the action throughout the middle stretches of the film; when he murders Miriam by strangling her, it is clearly more than just a duty. Moreover Miriam, like Jacqueline, shows a certain perverse complicity in her own murder, leading on a total stranger and showing marked appreciation of the strength of the hands that are going to strangle her. The fairground murder – one of Hitchcock's most extraordinary and disturbing sequences – has something of the flavour of *Les Bonnes Femmes*: the suggestion of urban nightmare, of an urban hell (the boat that takes Bruno to the fairground's innermost circle, the island on which he strangles Miriam, is called 'Pluto'). Bruno is one of the charming and seductive devils, fascinating in their very corruption, that Chabrol and Rohmer comment on in their book; André also has great charm. The most obvious difference is that André's charm is largely independent of his perversion while Bruno's is inseparable from his: Bruno's corruption is manifest in his every word and every action, while André strikes one as a very nice man who also happens to be a psychopath with an uncontrollable urge to strangle delicate girls with long necks. He hates himself for what he is doing; Bruno views his own actions with uniform complacency.

André is a very Hitchcockian conception in other ways too. Hitchcock's murderers frequently represent the terrible and excessive fulfilment of the protagonist's desires, as if they were devils who had been conjured up. Young Charlie, in *Shadow of a Doubt*, feels her family life to be stale and craves some great event that will transform it; as if in response comes Uncle Charlie, the multi-murderer of wealthy widows. Jefferies in *Rear Window* wants to disembarrass himself of his too-demanding girl-friend, and discovers that a man across the courtyard has murdered his too-demanding wife and is distributing the pieces around the country. Guy in *Strangers on a Train* wants to be rid of his wife Miriam and shouts into the telephone that he could strangle her; Bruno does. Similarly, André can be seen as a 'demon' conjured up by Jacqueline's desires. Throughout the film we are made aware of the pressures on her. The only 'family' she appears to have are the other girls and their strange parent-figures, Monsieur Bélin, the proprietor, and Madame Louise, the cashier. Progressively, Jacqueline watches her 'sisters' reach out for release from their prison and fail to achieve it. M. Bélin has the girls (particularly Jacqueline, it seems) in his office for what Ginette, mimicking him, calls an '*examen de conscience*'; it consists of domineering and humiliating them under cover of an authoritarian old-world courtesy, while making impotent gestures suggestive of a desire to rape. In one such *examen* in a grotesque parody of the romantic love Jacqueline craves, he presents her with a flower and bursts into Don José's '*La fleur que tu m'avais jetée*' in front of the poster for 'Carmen' that adorns his wall. Madame Louise tantalises the girls with the 'fetish' (or, as she insists, souvenir) which she will never show. It is during Jacqueline's second *examen de conscience* (within a single day) that André peers in through the shop window and Madame Louise rushes into Bélin's office with the news. This is followed by André's 'demonic' ride around Paris, like a devil set free, and by Jacqueline's persuading Madame Louise to show her the fetish, which turns out to be a handkerchief stained with the blood of a '*sadique*' at whose guillotining Madame Louise, was present as a young girl: a parody of a sacred relic. We watch the handkerchief unfolded, fold by fold, sharing Jacqueline's curiosity (Chabrol's use of audience response again). At the climactic moment, instead of showing us the blood, Chabrol cuts to Jacqueline's face, ambiguously expressionless: horrified? fascinated? This in its turn is followed by the visit to the music-hall, where André is physically closer to Jacqueline than ever before. It is as if she were *willing* him nearer as the pressures build up. In the swimming-pool these pressures take on a literal, physical form as she is repeatedly ducked. In response comes André's dive, the swoop of the avenging angel, the spring of the tiger; in any case as if in answer to Jacqueline's summons.

The external prompting I spoke of exists in the Chabrol–Rohmer book. The authors interpret *Strangers on a Train* primarily in terms of its recurrent imagery, which they relate to the fundamentals of form and number: the straight line and the circle, the colour white, the number two. The various manifestations of these they find in the film (admitting that many may be unconscious) are certainly there. The problem is to decide whether they take on the expressive function the authors claim for them. It is dubious, for instance, whether the spectator feels, consciously or otherwise, any expressive connection between Bruno Anthony throttling round white throats and Guy hitting round white tennis-balls; or between the 'exchange' of a tennis-match and the exchange of murders; or between Bruno bursting a little boy's round balloon with his cigarette and the exploding of a revolving merry-go-round. What Chabrol has done, however, is (whether consciously or not) to transfer this – or very similar – imagery to *Les Bonnes Femmes* and elaborate it considerably, so that its expressive effect is beyond doubt. The circle and the straight line, and, instead of the colour white, its most extreme manifestation in a black-and-white movie – light itself – are the dominant motifs of *Les Bonnes Femmes*.

The term 'circle', admittedly, must be understood somewhat loosely, some of the film's circles being strictly squares! The credits are shown against traffic apparently circling the Place de la Bastille, which should warn us not to worry too much about the distinction. I am thinking of the circle as the most clear-cut image of enclosure. The opening shots after the credits – the Arc de Triomphe, and the flame under it, the flame seeming enclosed by the arch – inaugurate the film's geometry and its primary image of light – the light for which all the girls are metaphorically reaching. The film's 'cages' return us repeatedly to the idea of the circle: the tables lining the walls of the night-club, and the revellers circling in the Farandole; the girls facing each other from behind their opposite counters in the shop; the zoo, with its circular cage of monkeys and circular kagu cage, and the girls enclosed in the rectangle formed by glass-fronted display cases in the reptile-house; the spotlights seeming to close in on Ginette on stage, forming a semi-circle in front of her; the swimming-pool. The ever-burning flame under the Arc de Triomphe heralds the film's succession of lights: as Albert drives Marcel and the two girls through the streets, there is a striking quasi-expressionist

image of light-reflections moving over the windscreen, hypnotic and dazzling. The girls work in an electrical-goods shop surrounded by stacks of light bulbs. When they arrive for work there is a shot from inside the shop that emphasises the overhead fluorescent lights as they are switched on – the girls' illumination for the day. The only customer comes in for a battery, which one of the girls tests with a small bulb (shown in close-up). As Ginette is on stage Chabrol suggests her sense of cruel exposure by means of subjective shots of the spotlights, huge circles of dazzling whiteness, from her viewpoint. If the girls are reaching for the light, what they get is the harsh glare of electricity.

Against the circles of imprisonment is set – ironically, as it turns out – the 'liberating' straight line of André. Recurrently, we see him on his motor-bike, dynamically pushing forward. At the climax of the swimming-pool sequence, Jacqueline is encircled by her tormentors who repeatedly duck her until she is nearly suffocating from want of air. André surfaces into the middle of the circle, violently disrupting it, after a magnificently executed 'straight' dive. Some of the expressive power of the penultimate episode (which culminates in the murder of Jacqueline, whose beautiful long neck is recurrently associated with the idea of encircling – scarf and boa constrictor) derives from its development of the film's central images. It begins with a shot of a long stretch of perfectly straight road between bare open fields, down which André's motor-bike (Jacqueline clinging on behind him) zooms. For the first time in the film we are in the open country, natural light taking the place of the artificial glare, the progress along the long straight road seeming the culmination of André's liberating force; but there is no direct sunlight, and we already suspect the force itself to be very dangerous. As the two walk in the woods, the absence of sun is emphasised by the shots out across the desolate grey lake. They move further into the woods, and the camera from a low angle pans around the tree-trunks and branches in a slow circling that makes the trees suddenly appear yet another cage with the daylight up beyond, unreachable. Leading Jacqueline into a small clearing encircled by trees and shrubs, André encloses her in his jacket, then, persuading her to lie down, encloses her neck in his hands and strangles her. Throughout the walk, the animal imagery is taken up in the plaintive cry of a bird, which, as Jacqueline is strangled, appears to issue from her opening and closing mouth: the film's most poignant moment, epitomising the essential quality – the essential meaning – of the whole.

I have shown how the last scene, in which a nameless girl in a ball-room is invited to dance by a stranger whose face we never see, stands apart from all that has gone before in terms of narrative structure: the characters are entirely new, and the time-continuity is abruptly broken for the first time in the film. In terms of imagery and theme, however, it is the summation of the whole movie, and much more complex and 'open' in effect than has been generally recognised. In the middle of the ball-room is a revolving, multi-faceted globe; the globe turns, the dancers turn, the camera turns. It is the culmination of the film's light-and-circle imagery, evoking the sense of imprisonment in a dream: the girl is trusting, increasingly contented, as if hypnotised. But this ending is not simply nihilistic or cynical. The girl is more than just the epitome of the other girls. She is strikingly more like Jacqueline than like any of the others (I've even known someone mistake her for Clotilde Joano and assume that Jacqueline had somehow survived strangulation): she has the same look of sensitivity, vulnerability and purity, in this case presented without qualification. From the animalism of Jane, she represents the highest point of human evolution in the film. One sees that the straight line/circle tension in the imagery is reflected in the overall structure, the 'circle' of formal ' symmetry traversed by the 'straight line' of upward progression.

Above all, the new girl's anonymity is essential to Chabrol's purpose. The sparkling lights of the revolving globe lead us back through all the 'light' imagery of the film to its opening image, the flame on the tomb of the Unknown Warrior. *Les Bonnes Femmes* can be viewed as Chabrol's tribute to the Unknown Warrior in the persons of the girls, falling in the battle for life, forgotten but for his tender commemoration of them. But the flame burns perpetually: life goes on: there is always another to take over, to continue the fight for fuller existence. She too, perhaps, is trapped in a dream she will never be able to fulfil, another victim whose hurt will be proportional to her sensitivity.

The ending, then, represents an extraordinary, beautifully judged balancing of uplift and despair. Its effect can be defined more precisely by juxtaposing it with the endings of two other films. I value *Le Notti di Cabiria* more highly than many of my colleagues. Doubts about its ultimate worth obviously centre upon its heroine, as incarnated by Giulietta Massina. One can certainly feel that Fellini overindulged the actress; beyond that, one can ask whether he doesn't sentimentally over-value the qualities the character embodies. Cabiria's goodness is of a severely limited and simple kind, seeming at times a matter of more or less endearing mannerisms (a point at which character and actress become inseparable). The end of the film is very touching, but emotionally somewhat facile, arbitrarily restating the character's simple faith, where Chabrol's ending expresses in a beautifully pure form the highly complex impulses behind his film.

If the slightly facile simple uplift of the end of *Cabiria* makes Chabrol's ending seem negative in comparison, the antidote is to place it beside the ending of Sydney Pollack's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, which also ends with an image of couples dancing in a ball-room under a revolving illuminated globe, an 'imprisonment' image which is again offered as a 'poetic' image for life. Neither ending is exactly encouraging, but there is all the difference in the world between them. Pollack's film may appear superficially the more 'human', in that the spectator is drawn in much closer to the characters and empathises with their experiences much more directly; but it is highly suspect in motivation. It poses as an outspoken denunciation of the exploitation of human misery as a public spectacle, yet its real *raison d'être* is precisely such exploitation. (Like Chabrol's film, too, it is concerned with the relationship of audience to spectacle, but in a thoroughly ham-fisted way.) The ending – if one takes its pretensions seriously – is completely nihilistic and destructive. By the time it is reached, all the characters have been systematically degraded to a more or less uniform level, with nothing present in the film to 'place' this degradation (as degradation is placed in *Les Bonnes Femmes* by our sense of the essential validity of the girls' aspirations, however debased the forms in which they express themselves). The dancers-and-globe ending is as facile as the end of *Cabiria*, but at the other end of the emotional spectrum; as against the 'open' complexity of Chabrol's ending, it is completely closed. Not only all chances of happiness, but all possibilities of reaching out after *anything*, have been deliberately defeated by the film's contrived development, its wilful steering of its characters towards ever-greater self-degradation. One comes out of it feeling dirtied; one comes out of Chabrol's film purified.