Prisoners of Gender: The Representation of Women in the 1950s Films of J. Lee Thompson

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Introduction

When the director J. Lee Thompson died in August 2002, his obituaries gave little indication that he might ever conceivably be regarded as a 'woman's director'. "Director of Guns of Navarone and other films of derring-do" ran the subheading of the obituary in the Daily Telegraph (3 September 2002), which continued with a suggestion that Thompson's hugely successful 1961 war film "was probably projected on to the gymnasium wall of every prep school in Britain in the days when boys liked their heroes to have craggy faces and inexhaustible sang-froid." The obituary in the Independent (4 September 2002) bracketed The Guns of Navarone along with Thompson's earlier war film Ice Cold in Alex (1958) and his Imperial epic North West Frontier (1959) as examples of the "rousing adventure stories" in the "rip-roaring boys-own" vein in which he particularly excelled. The Guardian's obituary (4 September 2002) also drew attention to Thompson's first film in Hollywood, the suspense thriller Cape Fear (1961), later remade by Martin Scorsese, in which a lawyer (played by Gregory Peck) is forced to go outside the law in order to protect his family from the threat posed by a vengeful rapist (played by Robert Mitchum). The scenario of the lawful man turned vigilante would be one to which Thompson would obsessively return later in his career, in a series of low-budget action thrillers made for Cannon films as vehicles for Charles Bronson, including Thompson's final three films before his retirement, Death Wish 4: The Crackdown (1987), Messenger of Death (1988) and Kinjite: Forbidden Subjects (1989). From its origins in Britain to its finale in Hollywood, Thompson's career is depicted in the obituaries as an overwhelmingly masculine affair, running the gamut of war films, dramas of empire and macho vigilante thrillers.
It is left to *The Times* (3 September 2002) to draw attention to a different side of Thompson's filmmaking career, mentioning in its headline the fact that before he directed "some of Britain's vintage war movies", Thompson had made several films that "explored the plight of women caught up in crime". The films the writer has in mind are *The Weak and the Wicked* (1954) and *Yield to the Night* (1956), both set in women's prisons and detailing the experiences of their inmates. While the former film ends happily with the rehabilitated heroine looking forward to a new life, the latter closes on the most pessimistic note possible: the young woman who has been condemned to death gets no reprieve and the film ends on her final walk to the scaffold. Both films were adaptations of the work of writer Joan Henry, who had herself served time in prison for fraud, and whose collaboration with Thompson would transcend the realms of the purely professional: the pair were subsequently to marry. In addition to these two women's prison dramas, during the British phase of his career (approximately 1950-1960), Thompson directed several other films which showed a special interest in female experience: *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957), about a hapless housewife whose husband wants to leave her, *No Trees in the Street* (1959), a tale of 1930s slum life, and *Tiger Bay* (1959), a thriller in which Hayley Mills made her debut as a little girl on the run with a criminal. Even his war film *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958) was unusual in the prominent role it gave to the army nurse played by Sylvia Syms. These six films are the subject of this thesis, and I would contend that they offer some of the most interesting representations of women in British cinema, at that time or any other, and that their director, J. Lee Thompson, is a figure of some significance when it comes to understanding the complexities of the construction of femininity in 1950s Britain. His films often deal with women who find it difficult to fit in with the norms of the age: the unfit mother, the gambler, the jealous murderess, the slatternly housewife, the tomboy. What is more, the stories are often told from the point of view of the deviant characters,
presenting their world sympathetically from within, allowing a degree of understanding with their feelings and their motivations, rather than holding them up as objects of derision or opprobrium. Some critics have recognised the importance of these films. Marcia Landy notes Thompson's recurrent focus on "strong female protagonists" and Sue Harper suggests that his films were frequently "radical on gender matters" and "challenged anodyne representations of women" common at the time. Steve Chibnall, author of the most substantial appraisal of J. Lee Thompson's work, concurs, arguing that the female perspectives adopted in Thompson's forays into the social problem film genre "provide an interesting contrast to Basil Dearden and Michael Relph's more male-oriented approach." However, the fact that Christine Geraghty's recent study of 1950s British cinema, which paid particular attention to gender issues, included no index entries for The Weak and the Wicked, Woman in a Dressing Gown, No Trees in the Street or Tiger Bay, indicates the ongoing neglect of these films within British cinema studies and the still-urgent need to put them on the critical map.

Thompson's recurrent attention to women in his films is all the more remarkable given the peculiarly masculine temper of British cinema at this time, described wittily by Andy Medhurst as a time when "the hegemony of the tweed jacket" reigned supreme. The 1950s saw the eclipse of the female stars of British cinema who had been so important in the previous decade, such as Margaret Lockwood, Phyllis Calvert and Anna Neagle, whose popularity and frequency on the screen was superseded by male stars such as Jack Hawkins, Kenneth More, Richard Todd and, the most popular of all, Dirk Bogarde. Stephen Frears' flip observation that the 'sexiest girl' in British films of

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that time was not actually a girl at all but Dirk Bogarde offers a telling indication of how far women had been erased from the picture at that time. In addition, the two most popular genres of 1950s British filmmaking were the war film and the comedy, both of which, Christine Geraghty has argued, "tend[ed] to present women as childish, silly and vindictive or valorised and saintly." Comparing British cinema of the fifties with that of preceding decades, we can see that the fifties war films tended to marginalise women in a way that even their forties equivalents did not, and the fifties comedies offered no female comedienne equal to the popularity of someone like Gracie Fields in the 1930s, concentrating more on the difficulties encountered by the 'little man' persona of Norman Wisdom or the antics of the young medics in the Doctor films. Costume dramas, which had proved hugely popular with female audiences in the forties, were on the wane, and the genre became increasingly masculinised, shifting its focus from flamboyant heroines to steadfast heroes: from The Wicked Lady to Rob Roy, to cite two paradigmatic titles.

Within such a context, the female-centred films directed by J. Lee Thompson were all the more unusual. Moreover, it is worth noting that these films were significantly popular with audiences: The Weak and the Wicked, Ice Cold in Alex and Tiger Bay all feature in Josh Billings' annual list of the year's box-office successes in the trade paper Kinematograph Weekly. Woman in a Dressing Gown makes an appearance in the Kine Weekly listings and actually comes out as joint-third most popular film of 1957 in Janet Thumin's retrospective popularity ratings, making use of data from Motion Picture Herald and Picturegoer as well as Kine Weekly. Yield to the Night gets an honourable...
mention in the Billings' ratings of 1956\textsuperscript{13} and might have been a bigger hit had it not been for its X certificate, which inevitably hampered its performance.\textsuperscript{14} The point is that these films were not esoteric oddities seen by a few people but commercial films that reached large audiences. Their popularity at the time provides another reason for treating them seriously. Acknowledging their significant presence in the mainstream of British filmmaking of the 1950s necessarily entails a change in the way the period is perceived, which has usually been in terms of masculine hegemony.

It is worth making clear that although this thesis is organised around the work of one particular director, it is not an auteurist analysis. The critical debates on auteurism are well documented and do not need to be rehearsed again here,\textsuperscript{15} but suffice to say that despite the countless attacks levelled against it, the idea of using the director as a way into the study of films has tenaciously held on, and with good reason, for as Stanley Cavell makes clear: "As long as a reference to a director by name suggests differences between the films associated with that name and ones associated with other such names, the reference is, so far as I can see, intellectually grounded."\textsuperscript{16} Auteurism has had a more chequered history within British cinema studies, which has arguably never recovered from the body blow dealt by Movie's infamous 1962 talent histogram which could find only one 'British' director worthy of auteur status, and that was the expatriate American Joseph Losey.\textsuperscript{17} British directors have seldom been championed as auteurs and instead British cinema has tended to be studied through frameworks other than directorship, such as government policy, studio or genre. When the figure of the director

\textsuperscript{13} Kinematograph Weekly, 13 December 1956.
\textsuperscript{14} At this time, X certificate films were not shown in Rank cinemas, the biggest exhibition circuit, because of Rank's policy of providing 'family entertainment'. See Vincent Porter, 'Methodism versus the Market-place: The Rank Organisation and British Cinema', in Robert Murphy (ed.), The British Cinema Book (London: BFI, 1997), p. 130.
has made an appearance, as Peter Hutchings notes, it has usually been "as a kind of heuristic device, a means of ordering, and making sense of, a particular sector of British film production". Although one could argue that approach stems from a rather worrying British inferiority complex, still not willing to lay itself on the line and claim full existential auteurship for its great directors, one might equally see it as a sensible modification of director-idolatry, using the director as "one means amongst many of interpreting and valuing British cinema." Certainly, 'director-as-heuristic-device' is the approach adopted in this study. It does not aim to cover J. Lee Thompson's entire career, or even every film he made during the British phase of his career. Instead it will focus on six key films which will then be used as a point of entry into the issues surrounding the representation of women in British cinema of the 1950s, rather than examined exclusively in terms of the director's overall oeuvre. The disadvantage to this particular approach is that some important and interesting films directed by Thompson during this period will be left out, including his directorial debut Murder Without Crime (1951), his film about a young boy in peril The Yellow Balloon (1953) and the aforementioned Imperial epic North West Frontier (1959). It will also be noted that Thompson's intermittent forays into the genres of comedy and musical (For Better, For Worse (1954), As Long As They're Happy (1955), An Alligator Named Daisy (1955) and The Good Companions (1957)) are not dealt with in this study. The reason for the omission of all these films is threefold. First, there are the limitations of space in a study this size and in order to deal with the six key films at sufficient length, commentary on other films has had to be curtailed. Second, although these films do contain some interesting meditations on contemporary femininity, such as the whole household of women who go gaga over a Johnny Ray-style crooner in As Long As They're Happy, the ambitious teenage starlet Susie Dean (Janette Scott) in Thompson's updating of The Good

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18 Ibid., p. 33.
19 Ibid.
Companions, the divorced dancing teacher who befriends the runaway boy in *The Yellow Balloon*, who Chibnall accurately describes as "one of 1950s British cinema's least stereotypical women"\(^{20}\), and even the sweet young newlywed Ann (Susan Stephen) in *For Better, For Worse* who could act as a useful yardstick of how women were customarily presented in the mould of "virtuous potential homemaker"\(^{21}\), I would contend that none of these films offers a portrayal of women as rich, nuanced and sustained as that presented in my six chosen films - justification enough for concentrating exclusively on them. Third, all the films omitted from this thesis have been dealt with at length in Steve Chibnall's comprehensive study of Thompson's career, the existence of which has enabled me to escape the pressures to be exhaustive in this study and allowed me to concentrate on a selection of Thompson's films, knowing that the others have already found an interpreter and a champion elsewhere.

Although much emphasis is placed upon the significance of these films' atypical depiction of women in the context of 1950s British cinema, I would not wish to limit my discussion in this thesis to issues of representation. While it is vital that the films are recognised as important historical documents, it is equally vital that they are seen as something more than that. I first encountered most of these films not through the pages of reference books but through the serendipities of afternoon television scheduling with its random diet of old Hollywood and British films. *Woman in a Dressing Gown, Ice Cold in Alex, Tiger Bay* and *The Weak and the Wicked* (or more specifically, the section featuring Babs' story) all simply leapt off the screen and stayed in my memory when there was no reason that they should, no vested interest in them on my part. It was only much later that I made the connection between them in terms of their director, and later

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\(^{20}\) Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 54. She was created by Thompson's co-writer, and author of the film's scenario, Anne Burnaby, who also collaborated with Thompson on the script of *The Weak and the Wicked*. One of several female writers with whom Thompson worked, her work is described by Sue Harper as having "strong feminist undercurrents" (Harper, *Women in British Cinema*, p. 182). The unconventionality of her writing appears to have been matched by her own personality: Thompson described her as "a little off the wall...She was a great character." (Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 53).

again that I began to study them. In a way, my first experience of these films was that of a cinephile rather than a film historian. Peter Hutchings outlines the difference: "Cinephilia speaks of a passion and a desire for film; cinema itself is figured as an experience that is both unique and mysterious. Film history by definition is concerned with contextualisation, with the placing of films within particular frameworks; for a cinephile there are no contexts, only the immediacy of cinema itself as a self-sufficient object."22 I would never wish to dismiss the valuable and often brilliant inroads made into British cinema by historical approaches to its study, nor would I wish to discard all considerations of historical context in examining films (as should be evident from this thesis), but at the same time I believe that British cinema has undoubtedly suffered from a dearth of cinephilia, the way of appraising films that functions as "the Other of history", marking the point "where historical methodologies end and something else begins"23, and where subjective intuition takes over from objective inquiry. It is perhaps because of this lack of cinephilia that British cinema has not excited enough passionate advocacy in its critics, and as a result, its criticism seems somewhat enfeebled when it comes to understanding the 'something else' beyond the historical context, which may be contingent, hazy, mysterious, and perhaps ultimately unfathomable, but which is nonetheless indispensable to any full appreciation of what cinema means. Or, as Hutchings puts it, "If these films matter, it is because people care about them enough to remember them."24 I remembered these films, and evidence from various quarters of popular culture suggests that I was not alone in that remembrance. For example, The Weak and the Wicked and Woman in a Dressing Gown make significant appearances in Michael Bracewell's eccentric and eclectic history of twentieth century Britain, England

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 165.
Is Mine, alongside texts by WH Auden and Oscar Wilde, while images from Yield to the Night and Tiger Bay have been used for the sleeve art of albums by the pop bands The Smiths and Catatonia, and Ice Cold in Alex has been immortalised in a lager commercial. It would be going too far to say that these films have a cult following, but they do seem to have an afterlife denied many of their contemporaries in British cinema of the 1950s, which suggests that they have some kind of cultural currency which other films lack, some vital spark which triggers a cinephiliac following.

It is perhaps because of this desire to try and reach the 'something else' in British cinema that a more aesthetic approach to its study has been tentatively rehabilitated. Robert Murphy makes a solid case for its importance ("Aesthetic concerns should not be the only criteria for examining films, but this does not mean that they are useless. It is important to acknowledge that some films are richer, more resonant and more significant than others." while Peter Wollen goes even further: "Perhaps the point has come when we need to step back for a moment and make some broad judgements about British cinema, to look at it again as an art form. Which are the films that really count, the films we wouldn't mind seeing again and again?"

On the evidence of my first and many subsequent viewings of the films under discussion in this thesis, I would argue that they are suitable candidates for inclusion, particularly Yield to the Night and Woman in a Dressing Gown (the fact that the two chapters on these films are longer than any of the others is testimony to that). They are not just significant films because of their representations of women but also because they are good films that each contain, to quote Raymond Durgnat, (whose cinephilia-informed criticism of British cinema has been an inspiration to me throughout this thesis), "very short, but very sharp, moments

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worthy of the greatest directors."28 Of course, as Richard Dyer has argued, "the aesthetic and cultural cannot stand in opposition"29, and these films are undoubtedly moving and powerful to me partly because of the bare facts of their subject matter and their historical context, the fascinating glimpses they provide into the often hidden worlds of women living in 1950s Britain. But it must be acknowledged that they would not be able to delineate the contradictions and difficulties of women's experience at that time with such eloquence and resonance, they would not stay in the memory to the same extent, were it not for the aesthetic inventiveness with which their stories and situations were conveyed. Although J. Lee Thompson is being used mainly as 'heuristic device' in this thesis, it would be stretching the bounds of credibility if my clear recall of many of these films, above and beyond their peers in the BBC Two/Channel Four afternoon matinee slot of the 1980s and 1990s, did not have something to do with his exceptional skill and talent as a director. Although it is important to recognise that the director is a subject within ideology, if we see them as nothing more than that, we are doing their artistry a disservice.

Extensive space is given over in the following chapters to close analysis of key sequences, in part as a way of beginning to assess the films' aesthetic achievements. Mise-en-scene criticism, dogged by its association with romantic auteurism, fell out of favour for a long time, as John Gibbs has noted: "film style and its consequences became neglected in some quarters. Although it is the sort of thing that should never become unfashionable, mise-en-scene went out of fashion."30 However, Gibbs provides a spirited defence of the merits of a mise-en-scene based criticism, one that I would wholeheartedly endorse:

To be able to relate our sense of the meanings of a film back to the movement of the camera, a use of colour, or the organisation of décor and character is one of the reasons why a mise-en-scene approach makes for a most satisfying criticism to write and read. One of the great pleasures and advantages of a mise-en-scene, or more generally style-based, approach is that it enables you to anchor your understanding of a film, and to support your arguments with evidence. It gives us a way of sharing and communicating enthusiasm for a film, and for making an interpretation persuasive. [...] Mise-en-scene criticism is accessible, and does not depend on knowledge of an arcane set of terminology. It invites the reader to assess the validity of an argument against experience or against further viewing.  

Although style-based analysis of films has often been linked to auteurism, it does not have to be. In this thesis, for instance, close analysis also forms a vital part of the feminist approach to the material: it is often the case that while the plot and the dialogue are telling us one story about its women characters, non-verbal elements like camera angle, distance, lighting, setting and costume, are telling us another. In order to get a full idea of how these films elucidate some of the paradoxes of fifties femininity, we have to look at them (and listen to them) very carefully.

A further modification of the traditional tenets of auteurism in this study is that while the director's role in the creation of the text's meaning is discussed, equal weight is given to his collaborators and what they bring to the film. So, for instance, Woman

31 Ibid., p. 98.  
32 It is worth citing Thompson's own published views on the role of the director. On one hand, he extols a collaborative ideal: "Some critical notices of a certain film pointed out 'the director's touch in this scene was so and so'. I would like to point out that no director could have any kind of so-called 'touch' unless he
in a Dressing Gown and No Trees in the Street are discussed in terms of writer Ted Willis' contribution as much as Thompson's. The work of Thompson's colleagues, cinematographer Gilbert Taylor, editor Richard Best and art director Robert Jones, are invoked, along with the significance of the musical scores composed by Leighton Lucas and Laurie Johnson. Peter Hutchings makes a vital point when he draws attention to the "sexual division of labour within the film industry", arguing that "any account of cinema that defines creativity solely in terms of the director runs the risk simultaneously of marking creativity as inherently 'male', and of obscuring those inequalities in the industry and in society generally that have prevented women from becoming film directors."33 Because of this potential danger in a single-director study, I want particularly to shed some light on the contributions made to Thompson's films by his female collaborators. This includes the actresses he worked with on several occasions, Diana Dors, Sylvia Syms and Yvonne Mitchell34, as well as his most significant female colleague, the writer Joan Henry, who indicates that she had an unofficial advisory role in several of Thompson's films besides the ones for which she has screen credit. Henry describes rewriting scenes in Woman in a Dressing Gown: "I'm supposed to be rather good at dialogue and love scenes so I was always having to do these. Lee said 'My God, look at what Ted Willis has written! [...] You'll have to change this.' So I did a lot of that."35 These fleeting suggestions of Joan Henry's covert influence upon her husband's films brings to mind the case of Alfred Hitchcock and his wife Alma Reville, herself an experienced film writer prior to their marriage. Although Donald Spoto suggests that

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34 Mitchell indicates that she had been given leeway to improvise in Woman in a Dressing Gown which, as she points out, was virtually unheard of at that time. ('Wearing the Archetypal Dressing Gown', Guardian, 27 April 1970).
Alma's contributions were merely "given in the ordinary manner of a helpmate's suggestion"36, her exalted status as 'madam', casting her appraising eye over all her husband's projects, suggests a rather more integral role in the creation of the masterpieces assigned to the auteur structure 'Hitchcock'. One might see a possible parallel in Thompson and Henry's partnership, although, of course, this would be impossible to establish firmly. However, a tactic of 'cherchez la femme' feels a bit simplistic as a way of trying to explain why Thompson's films showed an interest in women's lives when those directed by most of his contemporaries did not. A more useful means of elucidation is suggested by Tania Modleski's work on Hitchcock's depiction of women. She argues that Hitchcock, despite his appearance as the patriarchal director par excellence - always torturing beautiful women - has actually internalised a female discourse in his work that runs parallel to and disrupts the more obvious male discourse. For example, in Rebecca (1940), Modleski argues, "by being forced to maintain a close identification with du Maurier's 'feminine' text to the point where he felt the picture could not be considered his own ('it's not a Hitchcock picture'), Hitchcock found one of his 'proper' subjects - the potential terror and loss of self involved in identification, especially identification with a woman."37 Here the feminine discourse not only invigorates but actually galvanises the artistic identity of the director. Previous critics had posited the notion of a cinematic "discourse of the woman" which could "render the dominant discourse of the male fragmented and incoherent"38, but it had always been linked to a woman director. Modleski cuts the 'woman's discourse' free of its biological moorings and argues that films directed by men can also contain this

35 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 172. Chibnall also notes that Henry played her part in encouraging Yvonne Mitchell to increase the sense of mania in her performance in that film (p. 156).
'woman's discourse'. This concept also provides an escape route from the need to label films as either ideologically progressive or reactionary, and allows the critic to see them as both at once. Modleski demonstrates how this duality might be explored in the work of Hitchcock: "It has long been noted that the director is obsessed with exploring the psyches of tormented and victimised women. While most critics attribute this interest in a delight in seeing his leading ladies suffer [...] I would nevertheless insist that the obsession often takes the form of a particularly lucid expose of the predicaments and contradictions of women's existence under patriarchy." Transposing this onto the work of J. Lee Thompson, one can see that it is unnecessary to suggest that he is either an outright feminist, espousing the cause of women's liberation several years before the fact, or a misogynist taking pleasure in the degradations of his incarcerated heroines. Rather, one can see how his films act as a conduit through which certain ambiguities about contemporary femininity can be channelled and expressed, and that the manner in which those ambiguities are then interpreted by the audience is entirely up to them. My viewpoint of these films is inevitably different from their original audience, most crucially because it is informed by insights provided by second-wave feminism. It is, as Annette Kuhn describes, "a situated reading made at a particular historical moment" and in response to any accusation that I am focussing on some aspects of these films at the expense of others, I would offer the defence used by Christine Gledhill: "The critic opens up the negotiations of the text in order to animate the contradictions in play. But
the feminist critic is also interested in some readings more than others. However, I would not want to rule out the possibility that some of the conclusions I reach in this study might also have been reached by contemporary viewers of the films, although it would take extensive research into the films' original reception in the 1950s to 'prove' it. The only thing that I would argue is indisputable is that Thompson's films offer representations of women that other British films at this time do not, or at least not as frequently nor as popularly.

Apart from the war film *Ice Cold in Alex*, all the films under discussion in this thesis could be usefully categorised as 'woman's films', following Jeanine Basinger's wider application of the generic term to any film "that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social and psychological problems connected to the fact that she is a woman." The genre of woman's picture has never been welcomed fully into the fold of British cinema, instead being generally regarded, Justine King remarks, as a "cuckoo in the nest" in a national film culture dominated by ideas of reticence and restraint rather than intense emotionality. In fact, many British films which might have been considered 'woman's pictures' have instead been appropriated into different movements, King argues, citing the examples of *Millions Like Us* (1943), *The L-Shaped Room* (1962), and *A Room with a View* (1986), all potentially woman's pictures but seldom regarded as such, each one commonly looked at in the context of wartime propaganda, social realism and heritage cinema respectively. Although the Gainsborough melodramas have received extensive critical analysis in terms of their appeal to female audiences, they are the exception to the

general rule. The result is that a wealth of a female-oriented British filmmaking has been left relatively untouched by critics. Extrapolating from King's observation, it is easy to think of many other examples, often critically neglected but sometimes from the heart of the canon, which could comfortably be categorised as women's pictures: limiting discussion to the period 1945-1970, one could name Great Day (1945) Brief Encounter (1945), The Seventh Veil (1945), It Always Rains on Sunday (1947), Good Time Girl (1947), The Red Shoes (1948), Portrait of Clare (1950), Young Wives' Tale (1951), Mandy (1952), Women of Twilight (1952), Turn the Key Softly (1953), The Divided Heart (1954), A Town Like Alice (1956), The Story of Esther Costello (1957), A Taste of Honey (1961), The World Ten Times Over (1963), The Beauty Jungle (1964), Poor Cow (1967), Ryan's Daughter (1970), as well as many others. Put together they might reveal a hidden lineage of 'woman's cinema' in Britain, submerged beneath its masculinist surface, as significant a discovery as the 'lost continent' of British cinematic excess outlined by Julian Petley in his much-cited article, as well as a key constituent of it. And J. Lee Thompson, with his films about female lives and feminine dilemmas, would have to be a key figure in that process of rediscovery.

Thompson's atypicality in terms of British cinema of the fifties is not only a matter of his choice of subject but also the style he uses to tell those stories, and in particular, his willingness to adopt heightened melodramatic modes. Raymond Durgnat highlighted Thompson's exceptionality within his national film culture when he commented on his "splendid lack of the inhibiting English fear of violent emotion" and Isabel Quigley pointed out that for foreign audiences, Thompson's depiction of British life "as raucous, vigorous and exuberant" aroused "surprise and interest and even

48 Of course, the 'woman's picture' and melodrama are often linked and frequently confused. For more on this, see Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 33-36.
incredulity, so unfamiliar a picture does he present of us [...] for his people are passionate creatures and the physical world about them, however drab, is, to match them, passionately observed.\textsuperscript{50} Thompson's use of melodrama will be discussed more fully in the chapters dealing with the two films where that tendency comes most notably to the fore, \textit{Woman in a Dressing Gown} and \textit{No Trees in the Street}, but for now, it is worth quoting Christine Gledhill's summary of what this particular cultural form can achieve: "Melodrama addresses us within the limitations of the status quo, of the ideologically permissible. It acknowledges demands inadmissible in the codes of social, psychological or political discourse. If melodrama can only end in the place where it began, not having a programmatic analysis for the future, its possibilities lie in this double acknowledgement of how things are in a given historical conjuncture, and of the primary desires and resistances contained within it."\textsuperscript{51} This provides the perfect framework for understanding the representation of women in Thompson's fifties films. While the films present the status quo on women's position, they also suggest something else at work - newer tendencies that would come to fruition in subsequent decades but at this stage were still emergent, and which were left largely untouched by more official discourses. There is a clear parallel to what Brandon French discerns in the American cinema of the same period: "On the surface, fifties films promoted women's domesticity and inequality and sought easy, optimistic conclusions to any problems their fictions treated. But a significant number of movies simultaneously reflected, unconsciously or otherwise, the malaise of domesticity and the untenably narrow boundaries of the female role", and they achieved this through "a double text, which contradicted itself without acknowledging any contradiction - that is by imitating the culture's schizoid

\textsuperscript{49} Raymond Durgnat, 'Cape Fear' \textit{Films and Filming}, February 1963.
\textsuperscript{50} Isabel Quigly, 'Unfamiliar Picture', \textit{Spectator}, April 3 1959.
\textsuperscript{51} Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field', p. 38.
'double-think'. French argues that the paradoxes these films struggled with acted as an inchoate expression of the discontent that would eventually give rise to second-wave feminism - they were "the gathering thunder of revolt that an entire culture chose not to hear, or hearing, failed to comprehend." Or, as Raymond Durgnat put it, Thompson's films "suggest a moral upheaval, which, ahead of its time, could find only feelings, devoid of concepts". Exactly how far the vague 'feelings' about women's discontent expressed in these films would join up with the 'concepts' that were provided later by the feminist movement is one of the subjects this thesis will investigate.

The 1950s have generally been regarded as the absolute nadir of 20th century feminism, when women were firmly ensconced within traditional feminine roles of wife, mother and homemaker. A version of femininity dominated by notions of kinder and kuche (kirche an optional extra) emerged during this period "with a force and uniformity", Alison Light noted, "which one might associate more with the demands of the 1850s than with those of a century later." The return to the home, as Martin Pugh suggests, has puzzled and exasperated many second-wave feminists who have "asked why women were so eager to return to femininity and domesticity after enjoying their freedom during the war", neglecting to realise that "many women had not felt any sense of freedom and welcomed the opportunity to establish a home and family of their own". The nature of domestic life had also undergone profound changes that made it a more attractive prospect than twenty years before, with greater availability of birth control (part of the larger changes in healthcare provision in the postwar period) limiting the number of years of a woman's life that would have to be dedicated to an

53 Ibid., p. xxiv.
endless cycle of pregnancy and child-rearing, as well as the increasing affordability of labour-saving devices such as the vacuum cleaner and the washing machine promising to take the drudgery out of housewifery. In a society characterised by growing affluence, housewives were perceived both as its main beneficiaries and the engines behind it - in Harry Hopkins' words, "the essential pivot of the People's Capitalism and its natural heroine." Deborah Philips and Ian Haywood accurately characterise the familiar (and enduring) image of fifties woman as the "glamorised happy wife and mother, a postwar Angel in the House, surrounded by labour-saving gadgets", a winning combination of the traditional and the innovative. However, they also point out the illusory and divisive basis of that image, which was always a "distortion of real social experience, the product of advertisers and consumer capitalism." Ironically, the desire for the consumer durables which were advertised with beguiling images of women in the home, actually had the effect of increasing women's employment outside it, in order that they and their families should benefit from the consumer revolution. Although representations of women in the 1950s were dominated by the stay-at-home wife and mother, the percentage of married women in paid work increased steadily throughout the decade. Despite this, ways of thinking about women in the fifties indubitably took place "within a framework which accepts the primacy of the woman's role as wife and mother and which assumes that other aspects of women's lives must be fitted into that."

Probably the most influential example of the age's emphasis on woman as wife and mother came in the work of psychologist John Bowlby, and in particular, his widely

59 Ibid.
promulgated theory of 'maternal deprivation'. According to Bowlby, any 'prolonged' (more than a few hours) separation of the young child from its mother resulted in terrible psychic trauma for the child and "may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life."62 Bowlby's work gave the scientific seal of approval to the moral panic centred on selfish working mothers and their 'latchkey children', destined to be the juvenile delinquents of tomorrow. However, women's acceptance of mature motherhood in the 1950s did not necessarily preclude an interest in keeping up an attractive appearance. The transition described by Richard Hoggart, wherein women put away childish things upon motherhood and "rapidly become the shapeless figure the family know as 'our mam'"63, dwindled in desirability in the postwar period. Instead the fifties saw the 'birth of a new "sexual mother figure"'64, brought into being by contemporary discourses on femininity which, as Geraghty notes, deemed that "the wife and mother must also be sexual and smart, attentive to her husband as well as to her children."65 The greater acceptance of birth control (although not yet the pill) helped to disentangle heterosexual intercourse from its reproductive roots, creating the possibility for sex as a means of marital bonding as well as begetting children. As such, Jeffrey Weeks argues, this period saw "a new stress on the duty of the married couple to provide each other with sexual pleasure as a cement of the relationship."66 Furthermore, the best-selling second Kinsey report, The Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female (1953), which was widely discussed when it first appeared in Britain, problematised any notions of women's inherent sexual modesty.

62 John Bowlby, Maternal Care and Mental Health (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 1952), p. 46. The fact that Bowlby was working from data based on the exceptional cases of wartime evacuees and children in institutions, whose neurosis disturbance might have other origins than maternal separation, has been noted by many subsequent anti-Bowlbyites. See Pugh, Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, p. 296.
65 Geraghty, British Cinema in the Fifties, p. 158.
Wife, mother, lover, shopper, worker - Kenneth Allsop's general description of the 1950s as a time when "so many oddly arraigned forces [were] at work" seems especially true of the widely differing discourses of femininity circulated at this time. If fifties woman is remembered in terms of the anodyne happy housewife, then that says more about the triumph of image over reality, and the force with which that norm was espoused, than it does about any enduring truth of what women's lives were actually like at the time. As Michael Wood has succinctly put it, the aura of blandness symptomatic of our cultural memory of the fifties is a deceptive hangover of "the time's own attempt to invent itself, a contemporary cover-up. The fifties' is what the fifties were trying to be". ⁶⁸

In Elisabeth Wilson's pioneering study of women in postwar Britain, Only Halfway to Paradise?, she admits that she originally set out to discover "why there was no feminism between 1945 and 1968" ⁶⁹, only to realise that the idea of feminism's total disappearance during that period was something of a myth, partly a by-product of second-wave feminism's "over-emphasis on the horrors of the fifties as a period of undiluted reaction" ⁷⁰ to provide a polemical rallying point. The situation was rather more complicated than she had previously thought, and rather than being an indication of feminism's astonishing vanishing trick, "the orchestration of consensus on the position of women in postwar Britain was the achievement of a deceptive harmony out of a variety of noisy voices", among them the voices "of women in revolt, of women despised, of women despairing". ⁷¹ Although misgivings about the narrow confines of women's role in life may have been repressed during this time, they were not entirely eradicated. Wilson cites the fact that the popular paperback editions of Simone de

⁶⁹ Wilson, Only Halfway to Paradise, p. 2.
⁷¹ Ibid., p. 3.
Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, first published in English in 1953, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) "sold out over and over again." She surmises that they "must have had a kind of underground influence on hundreds of thousands of women who read them": "Which women read them, which were influenced by them and how, we cannot altogether know. But their yeast must have been working in the doughy femininity of the fifties and early sixties." But sometimes the signs of a nascent feminism were less obvious and less clearly theorised than in the polemics of de Beauvoir and Friedan. This brings us back to the cinema, with its ability to act as an unwitting 'Trojan horse' for smuggling into public discourse representations of contemporary femininity left untouched in other cultural fields. As a popular form, it is necessarily driven by the fears and desires of the populace - the films that are popular are the ones that capture the public's imagination, for whatever reason. Even in an age of declining female film attendance, these films were popular, they tapped into something in the public psyche. I would argue that it is not unreasonable to read into that popularity an indication of something stirring in the hearts and minds of women, akin to Brandon French's 'gathering thunder'.

Images of imprisoned men are inescapable in fifties British culture. The main reason for this was the popularity of films about the experience of being a prisoner-of-war, such as *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and *The Colditz Story* (1955). These were often adaptations of memoirs that were themselves huge best-sellers, and consolidated the ubiquity of stories about men "fight[ing] for their freedom against the enormous odds of wartime imprisonment." Although very different in temper, the Angry Young

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72 Ibid., p. 194.
73 Ibid.
74 See Harper and Porter, 'Changing Audience Tastes in 1950s Britain'.
Men texts of the time also hinged upon incarceration, although metaphorical rather than actual - witness Look Back in Anger's Jimmy Porter, who declares that he is "buried alive" and "going mad" in his shabby flat and loveless marriage. The film made from Alan Sillitoe's novel Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (novel 1958, film 1960) emphasises Arthur Seaton's impending entrapment through its mise-en-scene which, as Sue Harper notes, "oppresses the male characters and makes the claustrophobia impinge intensely on them. The Seatons' kitchen [...] is tightly framed, with choking close-ups of Arthur as he rebels against limitation. None of the female protagonists are shot in this way." In Sillitoe's next book (and the subsequent film adaptation), The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (book 1959, film 1962), imprisonment for the young working class man had shifted to a literal incarceration - the hero is a borstal inmate, as was the protagonist of another media cause celebre of the fifties, Brendan Behan's autobiography, Borstal Boy (1958). On top of that, another image gave an international resonance to the trope of imprisonment: as John Russell Taylor points out, the fifties was "the age of the Unknown Political Prisoner", a legacy of the escalating Cold War.

In the face of all this emphasis on masculine imprisonment, real or fictitious, the films of J. Lee Thompson offer an interesting counterbalance in their focus on women trapped in imprisoning situations. By their very nature, the two prison films, The Weak and the Wicked and Yield to the Night, deal with the experience of confinement and make use of an imprisoning mise-en-scene, but crucially, so do the other films whose locales ostensibly bear no resemblance to prison at all - one thinks of the heroine of Woman in a Dressing Gown stuck in her cramped flat surrounded by her undone housework, the young woman in No Trees in the Street trapped in the squalor of her tenement slum, or even the army nurse in Ice Cold in Alex stuck within the steel walls of the back of an ambulance, forced to communicate with the men through a tiny aperture. Sometimes the

non-prison films go even further and actually provide an image of the female subject trapped behind bars: it occurs in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (the wife framed through her barred bedstead, a replica of a shot of the condemned prisoner in *Yield to the Night*), *No Trees in the Street* (a similar shot of the heroine glimpsed lying drunk on the bed as she is about to be seduced by the local gangster) and *Tiger Bay* (the film's first shot of the young girl heroine shows her gazing disconsolately through railings that resemble prison bars). Thompson once stated that one of his thematic preoccupations was "confinement" ("I feel that it's very dramatic, to put people in confined spaces and have their characters examined in what I call 'confinement'."\(^8^0\)), reflected in his (unrealised) ambition to set a film in a lift "with just three people stuck in it."\(^8^1\) However, in the films about women, Thompson's preoccupation with confinement takes on a different complexion. It corresponds with an idea that would attain the status of a cliché after the sixties, but in the fifties was still a vague feeling: the housewife as domestic prisoner. Hints of it creep into some official discourses. After the war, one Mass Observation report hinted that women who had been their own masters for several years would find it hard to readjust to domestic life and that "many will also feel that they are going back to a prison unless they have some life away from sinks and brooms and washtubs"\(^8^2\), a warning that is supported by the evidence of one woman interviewed for Mass Observation, who said of her war work: "you feel you've got out of the cage and you're free", a sentiment echoed by countless other women who were interviewed at the time.\(^8^3\) Metaphors of incarceration and imprisonment to describe women's domestic lives continued to be used in the fifties. In Judith Hubback's 1957 study, *Wives Who Went to College*, one wife described her situation in terms not unlike the prisoner awaiting

\(^{8^0}\) Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 185.  
\(^{8^1}\) J. Lee Thompson, 'My Battle with the Censor', *Photoplay*, October 1962.  
parole: "I get tired of having very few personal contacts outside my family in which I am anything more than my husband's shadow. He does not realise this, fortunately, and one day, when the children are bigger, I may be able to escape." As Elisabeth Wilson noted, "the themes of escape and imprisonment were in fact the dominant metaphors used by these women to describe their condition." The assumption that feelings of housewifely discontent were limited to middle class women is demolished by a look at the evidence provided by Hannah Gavron in her symptomatically titled book, *The Captive Wife*, for which she interviewed women of every social stratum. The wives of labourers, plumber's mates and dress cutters articulated the same feelings of desperation and isolation as their middle class counterparts: "I'm used to an office with people coming and going, and now I don't get any company at all", "Some days I'm so fed up I could scream". They even used the same metaphors of imprisonment to describe their state, one woman confessing "I feel like I'm in a cage" and another describing motherhood as "a kind of captivity" - no wonder Ann Oakley's review of Gavron's book was entitled "The Prison House of Home". Perhaps the most unsettling instance of the metaphor of imprisonment haunting women's lives in the fifties is the historian's Denise Riley's recollection of her girlhood being dominated by the dire warnings passed on to her by her mother:

85 Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise*, p. 57.
86 Gavron's book was published in 1966 but it used interview material collected in 1961, which inevitably meant that the interviewees were recounting things they had felt in the 1950s.
89 Frances Heidensohn, *Women and Crime* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), p. 176. However, it is important not to overstate the home/prison equation. The domestic is the site of pleasure and accomplishment, not just drudgery. As Alison Light points out, "Lamenting the deadening and demoralising effects of being at home can make little sense to those who are longing to put their feet up [...] The animus which was directed by the Women's Movement against the 'housewife syndrome' may have been one of the reasons why it failed to become a truly 'mass' movement, involving women from all walks of life." (Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 220).
You would go to the women's prison. You had heard that there was one, Holloway, and that was for you. Some wickedness you would perhaps unknowingly perpetrate would see you in there, or some gesture towards a justice no one else subscribed to. Your cell was already waiting for you. How could you endure the time? [...] In the 1950s people were killed in prison. A woman was hanged. There were agonising nights and mornings. You will sit alone in your prison cell. It will go on waiting for you until the day you enter it.90

Riley's description recalls *Yield to the Night*'s 'agonising nights and mornings' as the heroine 'endures the time' until her execution, but also *Tiger Bay*, where another young girl is warned that she will end up in prison if she doesn't change her ways. Looked at in the light of all this socio-historical evidence, it is clear that J. Lee Thompson's films, in so consistently invoking the experiences of women imprisoned, were not so much providing a fascinating entree into an unknown world as recreating an experience that must have felt uncannily familiar to many women at the time.

This thesis makes use of a variety of theoretical frameworks through which to interpret its chosen films. There is no dogmatic adherence to a single theorist or theoretical school throughout, and instead the chapters make use of diverse theorists, from Betty Friedan to Sigmund Freud, from Laura Mulvey to the researchers at Mass Observation, as and when they are deemed appropriate. However, if one theorist might be seen as the *eminence grise* behind this thesis, whose work has a particular resonance in relation to this topic, then it would be Michel Foucault. His work provides the foundation for many of the chapters, and because of this, it is worth briefly outlining some of the most salient features of his work and elucidating some of the reasons why I

have found them particularly relevant to my study of these films. The first and most obvious reason is simply that Foucault is a formidable penal historian, and his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, an examination of how systems of punishment stopped destroying the deviant body and began disciplining and incarcerating it, is invaluable to anybody studying any aspect of prison life, including fictional representations of it, such as prison-based films. Second, Foucault links what happens in prison with what happens outside. Although his studies are often grounded in the close study of the practices of particular institutions (clinics, asylums, prisons), they are habitually used as a means of discerning larger societal tendencies outside the strictly therapeutic or penitentiary environments. For Foucault, the marks of disciplinary society are everywhere - "Is it surprising", he asks, "that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"91 - reaching their apotheosis in Jeremy Bentham's design for the Panopticon. This model prison was to be composed of a central observation tower surrounded by a peripheral ring of cells. The cells would "have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other". Foucault explains exactly how it would work:

> All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so

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many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualised and constantly visible. 92

The effect on each inmate is "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" 93. The inmate is totally isolated, with nowhere to hide from the gaze of the tower. They could be observed at any given moment without being aware of it. Because of this, eventually there is no need for a permanent supervisor to be installed in the tower: the prisoner will become his own jailer by internalising the process of surveillance. In short, power is successfully maintained not by physical force but by actually entering the mind of the subject and establishing self-surveillance there. Extrapolating this to the whole of society, we can see how disciplinary power works not by use of force (that is the last resort when all other means have failed) but by "creating desires, attaching individuals to specific identities, and establishing norms against which individuals and their behaviours and bodies are judged and against which they police themselves." 94 Foucault elucidates the idea of "the power of the norm" 95, the entity against which we measure ourselves and to which we try to adhere. This concept seems particularly fitting to a discussion of the 1950s, when 'the norm' seemed to exercise exceptional power. This can be partly attributed to Cold War paranoia, with its atmosphere of continual surveillance, and self-surveillance, and the terrible stigma that went along with being regarded as an undesirable element in society. Red-baiting might not have reached the same heights as it did in the USA, but the British polity was affected by a similar climate of fear and recrimination. One might also attribute the norm's burgeoning power in the fifties to the growth of state intervention in private life, via the welfare state, which inevitably created and validated

92 Ibid., p. 200.
93 Ibid., p. 201.
95 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 184.
new models of suitable behaviour. Harry Hopkins describes the proliferation of social workers and health visitors as a significant part of the postwar scene\textsuperscript{96}, along with professional 'experts', all popularising the discoveries made in academic growth-areas like psychology, psychiatry, pedagogy, sociology and criminology, whether in person or through the mass media of radio, TV and paperback publishing. It is interesting that the social sciences seem particularly to enervate Foucault, and he reserves his severest criticism for them, recognising their important role in constituting 'the power of the norm': "These sciences, which have so delighted our 'humanity' for over a century, have their technical matrix in the petty, malicious minutiae of the disciplines and their investigations."\textsuperscript{97} One can see the same kind of attention to 'minutiae' in the postwar surge of surveys, studies and government commissions on various aspects of private life, especially the family (e.g. the Curtis Commission in 1946, the Royal Commission on Population in 1949, the Morton Commission on Divorce in 1951 and the Ingelby Commission in 1956\textsuperscript{98}) and sexuality (the Wolfenden Commission in 1954, reporting in 1957, on homosexuality and prostitution, and the massively publicised Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality of 1948 and 1953). Each of these collections of observations, facts and statistics would assist the creation of a norm of familial and sexual behaviour to which people would compare their own experience (especially true of Kinsey) and worry about how normal or abnormal they were in relation to it. But the power of the norm gains a particular resonance when applied to the situation of women at this time, since they seemed to suffer most from its imposition. The feminine norm of the happy housewife and mother seems to have had such power that it made women doubt their own very different feelings about their lives and prevented them from speaking up. As Elisabeth Wilson points out, for a woman in this position, "self-doubt

\textsuperscript{96} Hopkins, \textit{The New Look}, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{97} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, p. 226.
\textsuperscript{98} See Birmingham Feminist History Group, 'Feminism as Femininity in the 1950s?', p. 49.
sets in: 'There must be something wrong with me if no-one else feels like this.'\textsuperscript{99} exactly the feeling articulated by the women who wrote to Betty Friedan, thousands of them all fearing that they were alone in their misery.

Foucault might initially look like a theorist of questionable relevance to any kind of feminist analysis. According to Edward Said, he "showed no real interest in the relationships his work had with feminist or postcolonial writers facing problems of exclusion, confinement and domination\textsuperscript{100} and as Sandra Lee Bartky points out, his unfailingly androcentric perspective has presented a problem for many feminists: "To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed."\textsuperscript{101} However, other feminists have insisted upon the important role Foucault might play in feminist theory. Lois McNay suggests that his work provides an "analytical framework to explain how women's experience is impoverished and controlled within certain culturally determined images"\textsuperscript{102} while Jana Sawicki demonstrates how Foucauldian discourse theory is of use to feminists as an instrument for understanding "the multiplicity of subtle forms of social control which are found in the micro practices of daily life."\textsuperscript{103} A brilliant examination of how certain gendered micropractices in everyday life might exert social control over women is contained in Sandra Lee

\textsuperscript{99} Wilson, \textit{Only Halfway to Paradise}, p. 195.

\textsuperscript{100} Edward Said, 'Michel Foucault, 1926-1984', in Jonathan Arac (ed.), \textit{After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 9. But he certainly did not close down the possibilities of his work either and was open to its being mobilised by whosoever had the inclination: "All my books are little tool boxes. If people want to open them, to use a particular sentence, a particular idea, a particular analysis like a screwdriver or a spanner...so much the better." (Quoted in Lindsay Prior, 'Following in Foucault's Footsteps: Text and Context in Qualitative Research', in David Silverman (ed.), \textit{Qualitative Research: Theory, Methods and Practice} (London: Sage, 1997), p. 77).

\textsuperscript{101} Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power', in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (eds.), \textit{Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory} (NY: Colombia University Press, 1997), p. 64.


\textsuperscript{103} Jana Sawicki, 'Feminism and the Power of Foucauldian Discourse', in Jonathan Arac (ed.), \textit{After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 176. A counterweight to Sawicki's advocacy of Foucault in regard to feminism is provided by another essay in the same collection, Isaac D. Balbus, 'Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse'.

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Bartky's analysis of women's care of the self through dieting, exercise, skincare, cosmetics and fashion. She highlights the processes by which women's bodies are disciplined and made docile through the compulsion to attain the chimera of 'femininity', which turns "women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers." They too are inmates of a prison of self-surveillance, this time a specifically feminine one, governed by "a panoptical male connoisseur" who resides within them and before whose gaze they perpetually stand. Thus, Bartky concludes,

The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance.

This link between the prisoner trapped in the cell of the Panopticon and the woman trapped inside the strictures of her beauty routine is very apt to the films under discussion in this thesis, which often delve into women's relationship to the accoutrements of beauty. In The Weak and the Wicked, the heroine's first conversation with her boyfriend after she has been imprisoned is a request to get her face cream and powder that she will be allowed to take into prison with her. In Henry's original text, she recalls the strangeness of talking about cosmetics "as though they were the most
important things in the world" when she has just been sent to prison for 12 months, and her shock at the experience is symbolised by the way her "pink Elizabeth Arden pot" looks "strangely indecent in its present surroundings". In *Yield to the Night*, the heroine actually works in a shop selling cosmetics prior to her imprisonment, and the film juxtaposes the elegant surroundings of her former place of work with the grim asceticism of the condemned cell she now inhabits, as well as juxtaposing the change in her appearance from high heeled glamour girl (not far away from the persona of the star who plays her, Diana Dors) to ill-groomed penitent with no make-up and greasy hair.

One of the key sequences in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* centres on the heroine's attempt to make herself over with a new hairdo, which unfortunately goes flat when she gets caught in the rain, and in *Ice Cold in Alex*, the heroine's lipstick is worn down to a stub when it is used to write another nurse's name on a cross marking her burial ground.

The well-groomed feminine appearance is rarely presented as natural and given in these films, and instead its upkeep is often shown to be a struggle. The work of Foucault, or more precisely, the work of Foucauldian feminists, provides a way of linking these two recurring features of these films that appear to have little in common: real physical prisons, with barred windows and high walls, and prisons that have no concrete barriers but are no less imprisoning for that, those norms which incarcerate subjects within particular identities, and which veer in a particular direction when it comes to women, urging them to be neat, pretty, slender, quiet and pleasing. As the title of this thesis suggests, the female protagonists in all these films are 'prisoners of gender' whether they are incarcerated within real prison walls or not. In fact, one might trace in the films a gradual movement from total imprisonment to the beginnings of an escape. The first two films, *The Weak and the Wicked* and *Yield to the Night* are set in prison. The next three range over a variety of female experiences, from contemporary domesticity

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108 Ibid., p. 22.
(Woman in a Dressing Gown) to recent history (the war in Ice Cold in Alex, and the 1930s in No Trees in the Street). After this comprehensive overview of the state of modern femininity, in the private domain of the home and the public realm in extremis of the prison, in the thirties, forties and fifties, the last film of the six reaches into the future, by virtue of its young girl protagonist. Tiger Bay is not about a mature woman trapped in a cell but a little girl on the run, not yet having yielded to the imprisoning constrictions of full-grown femininity.

One criticism of Foucault's conceptualisation of disciplinary power is that it allows scant room for resistance, mainly because the overwhelming majority of his work deals with the intrusion of disciplinary mechanisms into the minutiae of every aspect of human behaviour and thought. Its forces seem depressingly omnipresent and inescapable. However, a means of possible resistance to their all-encompassing power is suggested by Foucault through an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges". One criticism of Foucault's conceptualisation of disciplinary power is that it allows scant room for resistance, mainly because the overwhelming majority of his work deals with the intrusion of disciplinary mechanisms into the minutiae of every aspect of human behaviour and thought. Its forces seem depressingly omnipresent and inescapable. However, a means of possible resistance to their all-encompassing power is suggested by Foucault through an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges".109

Subjugated or disqualified knowledges are those discourses which have been denied official status because they stem from the experiences of subordinate and marginalised groups in society: Lois McNay lists as examples the discredited knowledges "of criminals, of those who undergo psychiatric treatment, of homosexuals, of women, of children, etc."110 Sawicki compiles a similar list of low-ranking knowledges that "fall below the level of scientificity", including those of "the psychiatric patient, the hysteric, the midwife, the housewife, and the mother, to name only a few".111 These peripheral voices can be unearthed through genealogical investigation, a form of history "that would account for the traces of the Other suppressed by conventional historiography but would also allow the Other to speak across the barrier established by the regime of

110 Lois McNay, Foucault and Feminism, p. 136.
111 Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault, p. 57.
Looking at several of these categories of those who possess disqualified knowledges - criminals, women, children, housewives, mothers, hysterics - one can see how closely they correspond to the protagonists of J. Lee Thompson's films, who often belong to more than one of these groupings. One might argue that in these films, there is a form of subjugated knowledge being expressed. It is inevitably contained and compromised, but it is still there nonetheless, providing an alternative version of what it meant to be female in 1950s Britain. Thus it follows that this thesis is an exercise in genealogy, using these films as a way of getting into the gaps and fissures of the dominant norms of the time, in order to get a better understanding not only of women's history but also how that history is mediated through cultural representations. It seeks to live up to Foucault's designation of genealogy as "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allow us to establish an historical knowledge of struggles, and to make use of this knowledge tactically today."
The shift from austerity to affluence, those alliterative opposites so often evoked in histories of the fifties, was well underway by 1954. Macmillan's 1957 declaration that most British people had "never had it so good" may be the better remembered clarion call of the affluent society but as early as June 1954, Conservative Chancellor Rab Butler had heralded future prosperity, posing the rhetorical question, "Why should we not aim to double our standard of living in the next twenty five years, and still have our money as valuable then as now?" The next month, food rationing finally came to a close, signalling the end of the long hangover of wartime restriction. Those looking for symbolic representation of the dawning of a glorious new age needed only to look to the Coronation of Elizabeth II during the previous year, which had been accompanied by much talk of a new Elizabethan age as great as the last one: to make clear the parallel the Daily Express even mocked up a picture of Frank Whittle in doublet and hose and T S Eliot in a ruff. That year also saw the beginning of a huge and irrevocable shift in popular entertainment, as the BBC's live coverage of the Coronation, watched by viewers in their millions, gave new impetus to the growth of television ownership in Britain - to the inevitable detriment of the cinema. However, this process would take some time to come to fruition and in 1954, cinema still occupied the central territory of popular entertainment. The year's biggest hit was the Rank Organisation's amiable medical comedy Doctor in the House, whose "air of gay, youthful, relatively modest contentment and sauciness" seemed to capture the prevalent national mood of growing

optimism. However, another box office success of 1954, *The Weak and the Wicked*, presented a different side of contemporary British society. In many ways, the two films have much in common: both deal with the progress of a 'green' young protagonist through an institutional environment, each learning its arcane traditions and befriending its misfit inhabitants, before eventually leaving to begin a new life. But whereas Dirk Bogarde's Simon Sparrow works his way through medical school, Jean Raymond (Glynis Johns) undergoes the rigours of a prison sentence. One might argue that both are engaged in a form of state-sponsored training, one to be a doctor and the other to be a doctor's wife.

Based on Joan Henry's best selling account of her own time in prison for fraud, *Who Lie in Gaol* (1952), *The Weak and the Wicked* undoubtedly sanitises the more unsavoury elements of Henry's depiction of prison life. Her sharp critique of Holloway prison (renamed Blackdown in the film) was blunted in order to placate the censors, and the essential grimness of her narrative was supplemented by more commercially acceptable elements like comedy and romance in order to placate the studio. One reviewer even felt that the "vice, squalor, sex and life" of Henry's text had been usurped by "a pale cloying 'niceness'" to such an extent that the film could have been retitled "Mrs Dale's Gaol". But even taking all this into account, *The Weak and the Wicked* is still notable for the window it offers on a world seldom acknowledged in the better remembered British cinema of the time, a world populated by gamblers, shoplifters, bad mothers and murderesses rather than war heroes, meritocratic professionals or raffish young men in eccentric motor cars. Furthermore, its box-office success points to the fact that it answered a need in the British cinemagoing public that was left unaddressed elsewhere. In the midst of the all-male camaraderie of the hugely popular war films of

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4 For an indication of the film's success, see the annual round-up in *Kine Weekly*, 16 December 1954, pp. 9-10, where the film is described as "scoring heavily wherever it was shown". Thompson himself makes clear that its commercial success was the shot in the arm his directorial career required at that point, after two films which had not been successful. See Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 70.
the fifties, _The Weak and the Wicked_ presented a kind of female equivalent, with its focus on the all-women environment of the women's prison. Just as the war film offered "an extreme version of masculinity based on separation and difference"\(^6\), so the women's prison film enabled a similar investigation of femininity _en masse_ rather than solely within the mitigating circumstances of home and family.

One way of looking at _The Weak and the Wicked_ is as an early example of the 'social problem' film genre, as both Hill and Dyer categorise the film.\(^7\) This genre (or as Raymond Durgnat suggests, more of a "loose category by class or topic"\(^8\)), which gained a particular momentum during the fifties, aimed to tackle contemporary social concerns such as juvenile delinquency, race relations and homosexuality, but at the same time make films that would be entertaining and commercially successful by using the tried and tested formats of popular cinema, especially the crime thriller/investigation.\(^9\) Although these films allow for the representation of extreme emotions and divergent viewpoints, the ultimate resolution comes through consensus and, as Hill notes, "an integration, or an assimilation, of troubling elements through an appeal to 'good sense' and reason."\(^10\) The watchwords of the social problem film are adjustment and rehabilitation which leads Hill to define its overall ethos as "the reduction of sensation"\(^11\), a wholesale dampening down and repression of the desires (often sexual) that cannot be accommodated by the status quo in order to achieve a sense of closure. However, the social problem film is marked by the difficulty it has in quelling the trouble in the text - put simply, the social problems raised in such films are

\(^5\) _Sunday Chronicle_, 7 February 1954.
\(^6\) Geraghty, _British Cinema in the Fifties_, p. 178.
\(^9\) For a discussion of specificities of the 'social problem' film genre, see Hill, _Sex, Class and Realism_, pp. 67-125.
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 70.
much bigger than any of the solutions the films can offer. In addition, its liberal reform project is frequently undermined by the charisma of its deviant characters who possess a vitality denied the representatives of good in the films. Andy Medhurst argues that Dirk Bogarde's "compelling, thrilling, and above all, erotic" performance as the young criminal in *The Blue Lamp* (1950) displaces Jimmy Hanley's young policeman, "drab, bland, and neutered"\(^\text{12}\), as the hero of the film. Similarly, Raymond Durgnat argued that the performance of Joan Collins in *I Believe in You* (1951), "sullen, electric" and full of "insolent savoir-vivre"\(^\text{13}\), provided an inchoate validation of juvenile delinquency in the midst of a film ostensibly in praise of the probation service. Like the femmes fatales of film noir, the misfits and deviants of the social problem film sometimes exceed the economy of their narrative function so that "it is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality."\(^\text{14}\)

Looked at in Foucauldian terms, we can see that the social problem films attempt to assert a "power of normalisation"\(^\text{15}\) in their handling of difficult areas of contemporary life. They draw upon the authority of the social sciences, particularly psychology and sociology, to reach conclusions about contemporary society and its deviant factions, turning the "offender of the law" into "the object of a scientific technique".\(^\text{16}\) But at the same time, they run the risk inherent in any public discussion of an issue, that while their discourse "transmits and produces power [and] reinforces it", it also potentially "undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it."\(^\text{17}\), as is

\(^{11}\) Ibid. He takes the phrase from Dearden and Relph's film about brainwashing, *The Mind Benders* (1962).


\(^{15}\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 308.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 256.

evident from Medhurst's and Durgnat's alternative readings of *The Blue Lamp* and *I Believe in You*.

On the face of it, *The Weak and the Wicked* offers less opportunity for this kind of subversive counter-reading. It throws up no obvious equivalent to the other films' destabilising glamorous juvenile delinquents, offering instead a more sober and mature central protagonist in the ladylike shape of Glynis Johns, with the more potentially troubling personage of Diana Dors worked into the story as less of a defiant recidivist than the more manageable stereotype of a woman done wrong by her feckless boyfriend. Glynis Johns' Jean has been selfish and a gambler, but she knuckles down to her punishment with the minimum of glowering resistance, and is rewarded for her efforts by being allowed to re-join respectable society at the end of her sentence through marriage to a suitable man. In the process, the film makes its point that open prisons, with their more therapeutic regimes, are far more likely to be able to effect this positive rehabilitative transformation than the traditional prison environment. Dyer defines the genre of the social problem film as a "hegemonic project" and it is possible to see *The Weak and the Wicked* as one of the examples of the genre that actually manages to attain the sought-after quality of hegemonic agreement, refusing to be thrown off course by the dazzle of a charismatic villain. However, the film still exhibits signs of strain, and one of the reasons for this tension is suggested by the publicity material for the film in its official pressbook. While the pressbook certainly pays attention to the 'social problem' aspects of the film (suggesting a newspaper debate on the ruling that six month old babies are taken from their mothers in prison, advising that the film could be specially screened for local police, welfare officers, magistrates and other interested parties), it also takes care to emphasise the film's "tremendous appeal to women patrons": "It is a woman's picture, a tear jerker, so sell to this vast audience of

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women.

The idea of *The Weak and the Wicked* as a 'woman's picture' gives an entirely new perspective on the film. Where the social problem film is concerned with the rational study of a social phenomenon from a critical distance, the woman's picture is a form predicated upon exactly the opposite: proximity, empathy and emotional identification. So we can see that while *The Weak and the Wicked*'s social problem discourse works to stress the exceptionality of its deviant women, the woman's picture discourse contradicts this. Instead of keeping the criminal woman at a safe distance, it invites the female spectator to identify with her, eradicating the gap between 'normal' women and those who are beyond the pale. This tallies with Joan Henry's view of the purpose of her original book which she says, was not "designed for those to whom there is a great gulf fixed between the law-abiding citizen and the wrongdoer" but for those "who can watch, or read of, the man or woman convicted of any crime, from petty theft to murder, and say: 'There' - but for the little kink in the brain, the tiny twist in the mind, the shuffle of circumstance - 'but for the grace of God, go I.'"

This encouragement toward identification is all the more remarkable considering how the criminal female has customarily been regarded, in the words of Patricia O'Brien (paraphrasing 19th century criminology), as "the worst moral evil visited upon society". Women, as criminologist Frances Heidensohn notes, "are not only much less criminal than males, they are so much less criminal that whereas convictions are, statistically at least, 'normal' for males, they are very unusual for females". The criminal woman's very rarity makes her appear more of an aberration. Criminality is perceived as inherently 'unfeminine' and thus the female criminal is doubly deviant, because she "offends both against society's behavioural rules about

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19 The *Weak and the Wicked* pressbook.


property, drinking, or violence, and also against the more fundamental norms which
govern sex-role behaviour."\(^2^4\) Because of this she has often been punished more harshly
for the same offences that would earn a lighter sentence for a male felon. As
Heidensohn argues, female criminals "have been punished not just for wrongdoing but
also for not keeping to their proper places."\(^2^5\) Unsurprisingly, such an abomination as
the female criminal is inevitably the object of horrified fascination and prurient interest,
and we can see signs of this in the opening scenes of *The Weak and Wicked*. Here at
least, the film is firmly embedded within the discourse of the social problem film,
which so often hides morbid curiosity under the guise of earnest investigation. The film
begins with the titles superimposed over a set of bars while Leighton Lucas's
thunderously dramatic score accompanies the image. Eventually, in the background of
the shot, we see a lone woman, flanked by two policewomen, walking towards us along
a corridor. She is well dressed (in neat New Look suit with matching gloves and hat),
well groomed and played by a 'nice' actress (Glynis Johns), all of which helps to
generate a sense of mystery as to why such a woman should find herself waiting to be
sentenced in a court of law, being advised by her guard to "take it, whatever it is". The
mystery deepens once the woman, whom we discover is called Jean Raymond, ascends
the stairs to the courtroom for the judge to pass sentence on her. He remarks upon the
fact that she has had "advantages in life denied to many; the benefits of a good home
and an education which should have taught you the difference between right and
wrong". Because of this, the judge takes "the gravest view" of her crime, recalling
Foucault's comment that in the modern penal system judges have been led "to judge
something other than crimes"\(^2^6\), weaving extra-judicial elements into their sentencing
that have more to do with the nature of the offender rather than the nature of the offence

\(^2^4\) Ibid., p. 47.
\(^2^5\) Ibid., p. 83. For a salient discussion of the patriarchal bias of the law, specifically examining the 1950s,
see Smart, 'Law and the Control of Women's Sexuality: The Case of the 1950s'.
\(^2^6\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 22.
itself. Having contravened both the rules of gender and the rules of class, Jean is given the stiffest sentence possible, 12 months - but at this stage, we still do not actually know what offence she has committed. Instead, Jean is made into an enigma, the object of speculation, as the camera studies her distraught face when the verdict of guilty is announced, zooming in for a close up, and her anxious body language, dipping down to show her gloved hands gripping the dock.

The subsequent scene where she is visited by Michael (John Gregson) offers no revelation because she immediately turns the conversation onto his recent job interview rather than her current plight ("Don't let's talk about me, what about you?"). In fact, it only serves to add another layer of mystery to Jean's characterisation - what exactly has this smartly dressed, well spoken (upper middle class) young woman, who even has a doctor for a boyfriend, done to get herself 12 months imprisonment? The explanation is finally given in the next scene where Jean is taken to a remand cell to await transportation to Blackdown prison to begin her sentence. The warder calls out "here's a friend for you", and as the cell door swings open, Betty Brown (Diana Dors) is revealed already waiting in there. Jean sits down next to Betty and the pair are tightly framed together through the barred window in the cell door, suggesting the sudden enforced closeness of two random women thrown together - it also offers a marked contrast with Jean and Michael's separation on opposing sides of a mesh partition in the previous scene. Betty strikes up a conversation with a request to "give us a fag, there's a pal", and this is the first of many 'cigarette moments' between the two women who will indeed become the closest of 'pals'. As Richard Klein notes in his semiotic history of smoking, the cigarette's status as a token of friendship is determined by its "insertion in a gift-giving economy. Cigarettes give the gift of giving - to the other, to oneself, to the beyond". Hence the logic of Betty's request for a fag being naturally followed by a request to be her 'pal'. This moment becomes all the more significant when we discover
that the object that got Jean into prison was a gold cigarette case. She has come a long way from such sophisticated smoking paraphernalia to a shared fag in a remand cell, but it is symptomatic of the process that awaits Jean in prison - to be divested of her airs and graces and to learn what really matters: not the glitzy façade but the cigarettes inside and the camaraderie they represent. Jean obliges Betty with a cigarette and the two women begin to talk, Jean seeming to relax slightly, even smiling for the first time in the film. Although she initially maintains a slightly supercilious air toward Betty, particularly when she tells Jean about taking the rap for Norman despite the fact that he ignored her in court ("And me lying my head off for him. But he's a good boy really"), indicating a kind of middle class bemusement with the situation, her ironic detachment soon collapses as the sharing of cigarettes leads to the sharing of stories. Jean finally tells Betty (and us) what it was that landed her into prison: a conviction for fraud. At this point, the film dissolves into its first flashback sequence as Jean begins to narrate her story over the images.

We might say that it is at this point that the woman's picture discourse in the film comes to the fore, taking over from the social problem discourse which had held sway up to this point. In the social problem film, deviant characters are seldom allowed to tell their own story, and this is especially true of the genre's deviant women. In *Sapphire* (1959), for instance, the eponymous heroine appears only as a corpse and a photograph and the enigma of her death has to be deciphered and explained by a pair of male detectives. In a similar vein, the early social problem film *Good Time Girl* (1949) presents the story of delinquent Gwen Rawlings (Jean Kent), but mediated through the narration of a social worker who uses it as a cautionary tale, rather than told by Gwen herself. By contrast, *The Weak and the Wicked* allows Jean (and later, several of her fellow inmates) to tell their stories themselves rather than have them related on their behalf by an intermediary authority. They do not yield to the interrogations of a male

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investigator figure, but they tell their stories to their fellow women inmates. They are permitted to draw their own conclusions about how and why they ended up in prison. Giving the enunciative authority of the narrative over to a criminal creates an inevitable tension in the film's exposition. Such moments offer an exploration of what Foucault designated 'subjugated' or 'disqualified' knowledges, "the marginal and submerged voices which lie 'a little beneath history' - the voices of the mad, the delinquent, the abnormal, the disempowered."²⁸ In such unofficial and unheralded knowledges lie the possibility for a wholly new way of understanding the world. As Jana Sawicki puts it:

"Because these disqualified knowledges arise out of the experience of oppression, resurrecting them serves a critical function. Through the retrieval of subjugated knowledge, one establishes a historical knowledge of resistance, of struggle."²⁹ One might argue that in the case of the female deviants of The Weak and the Wicked, one can discern an inchoate struggle against the strictures of 1950s femininity. Heidensohn asks if "women's criminality and women's liberation [are] inextricably linked", if "acting violently or aggressively [are] role-breaking as well as rule-breaking".³⁰ In that case, the stories and experiences of these women who have ended up in prison for breaking the law provide a view of the 'beneath' of femininity in the fifties narrated by those who could not fit in with its norms. Although they are ostensibly talking about their criminality, they are actually telling us a whole lot more about the unspoken laws that governed society at that time, and what happened to the women who trespassed against them.

However, it does not automatically follow that the narratives the women construct to explain themselves are radically oppositional. Rather, they operate within the dominant discourses of femininity. Steve Chibnall points out that the film would be more aptly titled "'The Weak and the Weaker' because wickedness (at least among

²⁸ Sawicki, Disciplining Foucault, p. 28.
²⁹ Ibid., p. 57.
prisoners) is largely absent from its Christian Socialist discourse and this tallies with Hutter and Williams' identification of the stereotype in criminology of the deviant women as "sick and not 'sinful'", categories remarkably close to 'weak' and 'wicked'. This removal of the barb from female criminality was something that disconcerted the critic C.A. Lejeune, who was troubled by the film's effect of making "crime committed by women seem a bit of a freak, a loveable eccentricity or lark, or at the very worst, an error of judgement." In Jean's case, this desire to distance the prisoner from any kind of endemic 'wickedness' goes even further as we discover that Jean is not actually guilty of the crime for which she has been imprisoned. Although this could be due to the film's basis in real life events (Joan Henry pleaded not guilty to her own charge of fraud and maintained that she had been set up), it also provides an interesting parallel to the process described by criminologists as 'labelling' and how it relates to the act of denying one's crime. Because being labelled a criminal is all the more damning for a woman because of its incongruity within acceptable femininity, it is to be all the more stringently avoided. Hence, as Heidensohn notes, although "adult male criminals also, of course, deny their offences and claim to have been 'framed'", it seems that "women reject a criminal identity with especial rigour". By presenting Jean as the victim of a set-up, the film ensures that Jean is not really guilty and thus not really a criminal. Yet the fact that the film hardly troubles itself with this miscarriage of justice is testimony to the fact that she deserves punishment for something. She may not be guilty of fraud but she is guilty of another crime, that of avoiding marital respectability in favour of the thrills of the gambling table. As Foucault points out, in disciplinary society, "we punish,

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30 Heidensohn, Women and Crime, p. 25.
31 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 69.
33 Observer, 7 February 1954.
34 This is noticeably different from Thompson's next women's prison film Yield to the Night, which will take equally great pains to assert the fact of its heroine's guilt in its pre-credit sequence.
35 See Henry, Who Lie in Gaol, p. 9; Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 58.
36 Heidensohn, Women and Crime, p. 16.
but this is a way of saying that we wish to obtain a cure\textsuperscript{37}, to convert the unruly body into a docile, socially useful one. In Jean's case, this means that she must be cured of her hubris and learn to accept her domestic destiny. Prison will be the disciplinary mechanism that will affect that transformation by, as Anne Morey notes, "retool[ing] the female inmate for domestic life".\textsuperscript{38} After a spell in Blackdown, Jean will recant all her earlier misgivings about marriage to Michael, confessing to the prison chaplain that: "When I first came here, I wanted to die [...] and then I knew that to live for somebody else is the finest thing in the world [...] I want to make him a good wife". Jean is transformed from a feckless gambler into a mature woman with a new resolve to be a housewife - the cure has been successful. It might be possible to dismiss this as narrative expediency (the convention that'demands the film fades out with the heroine in the hero's arms) were it not for the fact that this idea of prison as a means of domesticating women obviously has clear parallels in real women's prisons, and not just those from the 1950s. Dahl and Snare discuss the example of Bredveidt, the only Norwegian women's prison, unofficially labelled a 'housewife's school' because of its rehabilitation programme. Bredveidt "promotes an ideology which increases the pressure on women to gravitate towards the traditional function for a woman of caretaker of the family. Individual adjustment of erring women to their 'natural' feminine role becomes the key concern in the resocialisation process in institutions of this kind.\textsuperscript{39} This ideal often holds true even when the inmates concerned are fundamentally unsuited to a 'caretaker' role, such as those convicted of violent behaviour towards their children. Hutter and Williams point out that even in the early 1980s women detained in Broadmoor were still being assigned onto a rehabilitation programme with a domestic bias which included "such topics as 'Home Management',

\textsuperscript{37} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, p. 22.

'Conception', 'Birth' and 'Contraception' (even when the inmates were past child-rearing age). One of the key indicators of the inmate's recovery was officially listed as "Pride in one's feminine appearance and ability to fulfil a stereotype". The stereotype, customarily seen as a reductive and pejorative way of categorising people, is held up here as the example the female inmate should aim for, making clear how much prison, for women at least, is as much about fitting its subjects into acceptable social roles as it is with the punishing the crime.

In a way, prison is the perfect place for teaching women to be housewives, as Dahl and Snare explain,

What does it mean to be a prisoner? Deprivation of liberty signifies that one is declared incapable of managing one's own affairs and therefore robbed of the power of self-determination. Life in the public and private prison has many common institutional features: the official penal institution deprives the prisoners of their identity, prevents them from having 'their own places', degrades their personality, and takes them 'out of circulation'...Similarly it can be argued that women are segregated and locked in their own 'cells', the nuclear family, where they are hindered from having their own personal life due to a lack of mobility, cash and free time.

The comforts of home and the deprivation of prison hide a basic similarity in their design. Looked at in this light, prison is less of a distinct and unique place than simply

41 Hutter and Williams, 'Introduction', p. 21.
the last stop in a whole line of what Foucault calls "'carceral' mechanisms"\(^{43}\) for those who have not been adequately disciplined by the previous ones. Hence, one can see that \textit{The Weak and the Wicked} might be profitably read not simply as a film that deals with the freakish few women who happen to find themselves in prison but with the process by which \textit{all} women are made into good housewives. As Heidensohn points out, "only a few women are ever defined as criminal but the control system which subtly, and with their compliance, inhibits the rest affects most women."\(^{44}\)

Jean commences her flashback narration of past events by refuting Betty's claim that she must have been clever to commit fraud, stating "I wasn't smart, I was just weak", and the film goes on to demonstrate exactly how she was 'weak', beginning with a brief sketch of her relationship with Michael. He has just passed his medical exams and arrives at Jean's flat to tell her the news and take her out to celebrate. But she insists on attending a private gambling party instead and the couple begin to argue, Jean staring resolutely at her own reflection in her dressing table mirror as she gets ready to go out, refusing to face Michael, suggesting a communicatory impasse in their relationship. As the argument escalates, Michael tells Jean the relationship is over and storms out. All in all, a picture is painted of an ambivalent, troubled relationship and a wavering commitment that is less important to Jean than her love of gambling, which is detailed in the next part of the scene. Despite being the ruling passion in her life and the thing that gets her into debt then prison, this is the only part of the film, as Marcia Landy notes, that actually deals with Jean's gambling addiction.\(^{45}\) Its attractions are suggested on a subtextual level in elements like the opulence of the casino setting, Jean's costuming (a glamorous strapless evening gown with delicate stylish earrings, which were suggested by the pressbook as a possible area for promotional tie-ups with

\(^{43}\) Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, p. 308.
\(^{45}\) Landy, \textit{British Genres}, p. 454.
jewellers and the fact the croupier conducts all his business in French, adding an extra layer of exoticism to the act of gambling. Once the bets are placed, there is a sustained close up of Jean's anxious face as she waits for her number to come up on the roulette wheel and when it does not, the camera registers the change in her expression from anguish to barely concealed dejection. Jean's obsession has led her to bet more money than she actually has and her inability to honour her debt to the casino's sinister proprietor will lead to her eventual imprisonment. He offers her the opportunity to repay him with her gold cigarette case, but she is reluctant to give it up because her late father gave it to her (a indication of another unhealthy attachment which must be exorcised before Jean can switch her affections to a suitable male in the shape of Michael). The casino owner castigates her for her arrogant assumption that she will receive special dispensation by virtue of her social class ("you feel safe, don't you Miss Raymond?") and insists that he will get payment in kind, which he does by setting her up for insurance fraud centred upon a claim involving the oedipal object she denied him - her father's gold cigarette case. The rest of the flashback provides a brisk run down of exactly how the insurance scam worked, with the same scenes shown twice, the second time with the benefit of hindsight. In the first account, Jean's friend Pam looks like a kind woman who has come to her aid at a difficult time. In the second version, she is revealed to be the henchwoman who helps the casino owner exact his revenge. This double coverage of events might appear to be somewhat excessive but it makes a valuable point that will resonate throughout this film and others of Thompson's: that 46 "Take advantage of the current 'rage' for unusual earrings [...] Your tie-up copy could read, 'Like Glynis Johns, star of 'The Weak and the Wicked', complete your make-up with a pair of new earrings - Good features deserve attractive earrings." (The Weak and the Wicked pressbook). This is the first of many examples showing how publicity material for women-centred narratives, with its unabashed appeal to female consumers, can provide an alternative feminine discourse which often undermines the main thrust of the narrative. While the narrative tells us these women are making terrible mistakes, the clothes they wear while they are making those mistakes are offered as the makings of a desirable female image to be copied through the appropriate purchases. Or as Viv Chadder simply writes of one the characters of the The Flesh is Weak (1957), "As Marissa's career advances towards prostitution, she acquires a wardrobe to die for!" (Viv Chadder, 'The Higher Heel: Women and the Post-War British Crime Film', in Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (eds.), British Crime Cinema (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 77.)
events are seldom as clear cut as they seem on first appearance and how we interpret them depends entirely upon our point of view at a given moment. As Thompson will prove, in this and subsequent films, it is possible to sympathise with people who have committed terrible crimes if their story is presented from a particular angle.

After Jean and Betty's brief bonding and story swapping, the next important sequence in the film details their arrival at Blackdown and their initiation into the prison life. As Joan Henry notes, there is a bitter irony in the fact that this process is known as 'reception', a word associated with happy gatherings at weddings and parties\textsuperscript{47}, for the emphasis is on keeping the inmates isolated from each other at all times. Throughout the sequence, the emphasis is on keeping the inmates apart by moving them on, putting them in separate sub-chambers and not allowing them to communicate with each other. The scene is punctuated throughout by the frequent exhortations of the warders: "don't be long", "stop chattering", "get a move on", "be quiet", "don't be all day", "no talking", "line up here", "get in line", "hurry up", "get in single file". All of this illuminates the institution's anxiety about what Foucault memorably describes as "dangerous coagulation"\textsuperscript{48}, the manifold "mysterious associations"\textsuperscript{49} that might arise from gathering together all these deviant types in one place. In addition to the women's physical isolation from each other, they are also asked a series of rapid-fire questions about occupation, religion and next-of-kin and undergo a medical examination accompanied by further personal questions. For Foucault, this kind of questioning and examination is another part of the disciplinary procedure and its need to "extract unceasingly from the inmate a body of knowledge that will make it possible to transform the penal measure into a penitentiary operation, which will make of the penalty required by the offence a modification of the inmate that will be of use to society"\textsuperscript{50}. After being weighed, Jean is

\textsuperscript{47} Henry, \textit{Who Lie in Gaol}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{48} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 236.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 251.
moved to a chair and she sits motionless as the nurse examines her hair for nits and the doctor unbuttons her robe to measure her heartbeat with the stethoscope. The camera moves in on her passive, pliant body dressed in the institutional robe she has been ordered to change into, then onto the rather numb expression on her face, as she is surrounded by the activities of all those busy gathering information from her body, suggesting something of the depersonalising effects of relinquishing all control over yourself and being completely in the hands of the authorities. The pressure of this appears to hit Jean in the next scene where she has to take her first prison bath. The individual bathing compartments strongly recall Foucault's description of the latrines in the Ecole Militaire which "had been installed with half-doors, so that a supervisor on duty could see the head and legs of the pupils, and also with side walls sufficiently high that those inside cannot see one another". A panning shot follows the warder as she walks along a series of baths each partitioned off from each other but open to the passing supervisor, affording her a view of the woman's naked backs as they bathe. The scene closes with the warder leaning over the partition and telling Jean to hurry up before the camera offers us a close up of Jean's face, clearly suppressing her rising hysteria which will finally erupt at the very end of the reception sequence. The warder rattles off a long list of precise prison regulations (prisoners are allowed to write one letter every two weeks and receive two in return, allowed one 30 minute visit once a month, a bath once a week, and they will be locked up from 4pm to 6am every day) before we see the prisoners led away to their cells in single file. The isolation process is complete as we see Jean alone in her cell, the ultimate partitioning, and as the cell door slams, she begins to shake violently. The judge's voice reverberates in her head

51 Ibid., p. 173.

52 Steve Chibnall makes an interesting point about the film's grim mise-en-scene and its evocation of a world regulated by stringent discipline in the context of its time: "To modern viewers, Gil Taylor's shots of spartan cells, metal lockers, supervised ablutions and piles of regulation shoes seem chilling. The barked orders of the warders challenge a freedom of action and an independence the rest of us take for granted. To contemporary audiences inured to service life and privations of rationing, however, the prison regime might have seemed less threatening". (Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 69).
("you will go to prison for 12 months, for 12 months, 12 months, 12 months…") and the film's orchestral score strikes up again. At this point, the film breaks with the codes of realism it had hitherto employed in the sequence and blossoms into fulsome melodrama, seemingly the only way to suggest the extremity of Jean's emotional state.

_The Weak and the Wicked_ has given its viewer a thorough exploration of exactly how the 'penitentiary mechanism' works, how, in Foucault's words, it "separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units."53 However, what is particularly interesting is that it shows the process from the perspective of those on the receiving end. We see the characters of Jean and Betty put through the disciplinary process and moreover, we see how it works from their point of view, with which we are encouraged to identify. We not only see how prison discipline works but also how it might _feel_. This sense of identification is facilitated by the fact they are played by two popular British stars, but also by the crucial point that they are presented first as _women_, not as _prisoners_. We first encounter them wearing their own clothes, not their prison uniforms54, we have some idea of their character and how they got into this situation. So to see them transformed provides an insight into how a prison creates 'prisoners' out of the diverse people that arrive to serve a sentence.

Prison historian Patricia O'Brien asks if "[w]ith the rule of silence, the highly structured daily routine, and uniform garb, were not prisoners transformed into passive and depersonalised institutional beings?"55 She answers emphatically in the negative and argues that the equal and opposite reaction to penal discipline is the creation of

54 The enforcement of prison uniform was judged to be one of the harshest deprivations suffered by women in prison: "Women, like men, were to be further humbled by taking away their own items of clothing and by banning certain hairstyles [...] Undermining the prisoner's sense of dignity through the humiliation of the uniform was estimated to be harder on the female than the male prisoner and hence more beneficial". (O'Brien, _The Promise of Punishment_, p. 71). As the Hollywood women's prison film _Caged_ demonstrates, one way of divesting the female prisoner of both her _individuality_ and her femininity was by shaving her head, an archaic custom that is revived by one of the cruel warders in the film.
prison subculture, which is invented and owned by the subject, and which offers a means of resistance to the grim regimentation of prison life. We can see glimpses of this alternative culture in *The Weak and the Wicked*, although Joan Henry was able to chronicle it in much more (almost ethnographic) detail in her original book, free from the constrictions of film censorship. She describes Holloway's alternative economy, based on cigarettes (traditional prison money) but also the feminine currency of sanitary towels, 'ST's in prison argot, which "were among the most prized possessions of the inmates and were used for anything from powder puffs to cigarette lighters". She details recurrent prison phrases such as "it makes a break" (which features in the film several times) which act as a kind of mantra for the bored inmates. Henry also describes special vocabulary specific to prison, some of it obviously relating to life inside (like 'carpet', 'stretch' and 'handful' for different amounts of time in prison) and some of it less obviously (like the word 'smashing' as an adjective which Henry is warned against using on the outside by her friend Kate since it will identify her as a former prisoner to anyone in the know). Nicknames are very important to the subculture, a detail which is carried through into the film: a bigamist is called 'Henry the Eighth', the rather decrepit male gardener at the Grange is called 'Blue Eyes', two sweet old ladies who are confidence tricksters are called 'Arsenic and Old Lace' (in the book, they were a pair of abortionists). However, perhaps the most significant element of the prison subculture is its humour. In both book and film, the women are shown frequently making jokes, often evoking a bathetic juxtaposition between the deprivations of prison and the luxuries of the outside world. Betty says "What price Balmoral, Jeannie?" as Blackdown's grim façade looms into view, and jokingly refers to their remand cell as "home sweet home". She takes care to arrange the shapeless prison gown in a more flattering way and

57 Ibid., p. 60.
58 Ibid., p. 179.
remarks under her breath about being "queen of the May", which is greeted with a gruff "be quiet" from the warder. It is clear that banter is being used as a means of resistance here, but also a way of imagining an alternative fantasy existence where Betty is a beauty queen who lives in a castle and the cold prison baths are really "bubble baths", as she jokes with Jean. Sometimes the jokes allude to women's de-feminisation by the prison experience. One prisoner responds to the warder's cry of "all in" after exercise by joking to Jean "All in? What do they think we are - wrestlers?" Betty wisecracks that picking out clumpy prison issue shoes is like being a footballer for Tottenham Hotspur picking a pair of boots. Even the warder joins in, responding to the women's slowness in their choice of shoes by asking them if they think they're in Lilley and Skinner, the shoe shop. However, sometimes the prisoner's resistance to the system takes a less inventive and more desperate form. When Jean is changing into the prison gown in the tiny brick cubicle, the camera picks out the graffiti scratched on the walls, "get me out of here" and "I love you Bert" repeated over and over again. A futile gesture in some ways, but a gesture all the same, showing some signs of rebellious life pulsing beneath the strictures of the prison's rigorous discipline - a desire to escape, a desire to love and be loved, above all, a desire to communicate.

The area of the woman's prison subculture that the film has most difficulty dealing with is lesbianism - while Henry's book is able to discuss it frankly, the film is only able to imply its existence. Later women's prison drama, such as the exploitation film Caged Heat (1974), would place this element of prison life centre stage, and use its somewhat lascivious appeal to fascinated heterosexual audiences as the linchpin of its marketing campaign. Although The Weak and the Wicked uses the luridly suggestive tagline "Women - barred from men!", its depiction of lesbianism necessarily remains at the subtextual level. Nonetheless, the film is included in Stephen Bourne's history of
the representation of homosexuality in British films on the strength of its glancing suggestion of a lesbian love triangle. Prison officer Arnold (Joyce Heron) gazes longingly at a nervous sylphlike young inmate called Miriam (Josephine Griffin) during reception. Later, Miriam is befriended by Tina (Simone Sylva), the film's exotic, hot-blooded foreigner. As the two walk next to each other during exercise, Tina grasps Miriam's hand tightly and tells her about the three days she spent in the punishment cells at Arnold's behest that she intriguingly and euphemistically refers to as a time she "won't ever forget". At this point, Arnold arrives and breaks up the women's conversation, telling Miriam that she should find herself another friend. Her advice goes unheeded though, and later Arnold interrupts the pair as they tap out messages to each other on the wall of their adjacent cells, the clandestine activity filmed through the spyholes in the cell doors which makes it look more forbidden and illicit. Arnold's evident jealousy erupts into confrontation in a subsequent scene in the sewing room. She accuses Tina of not knowing how to sew a shirt properly and rips a newly sewn garment in front of Tina's face, warning her that if she fails to meet her quota she won't be paid (and "no pay, no cigarettes"). This goading proves too much and Tina grabs a pair of scissors to stab the warder, only to be stopped by Jean's intervention. It is interesting that after this scene, the three characters implicated in this lesbian scenario are never encountered again, and one might argue, as Anne Morey does of the roughly contemporary American women's prison film Girls in Prison (1956), that the issue of lesbianism is "raised and dismissed almost simultaneously". It is as though it has to be tackled in the name of realism but then it is prevented from colouring our view of the close relationship between Jean and Betty by being abjected onto three beyond-the-pale types, the volatile foreigner, the butch screw and the naive girl, and having it neatly tidied away in the first half of the film.

Jean is injured in the melee in the sewing room and is sent to the prison’s hospital wing, which is adjoined by the nursery wing, for inmates who give birth during their term of imprisonment. Jean expresses surprise at finding babies in prison and the film underlines how incongruous their vulnerable young presence is in the grim institutional world of the prison by contrasting their tiny white baskets with the dark grey cell walls as their mothers line up to the usual accompaniment of the warders’ admonitions to “come along”, “turn around”, “face the wall” and “stop talking”. A similar effect is achieved in a later shot, showing the babies in their baskets arranged on the lawn in an eerily symmetrical circular formation - too regular, too regimented and antithetical to infancy’s spontaneity. We learn that prisoners are allowed to care for their babies for up to six months but then they must be handed over, usually to be given up for adoption. After the bare facts, we are then presented with the emotional reality of the six-month ruling in a scene where we see a mother give up her baby. As one of the prisoners tells Jean, “we’re losing one of our little family today”, another example of the way prisoners relate structures within prison to the frameworks of feminine existence on the outside, however ill-fitting they may be. We first see the mother and the child in her arms framed in the doorway of her cell. Remembering the information about adoption given to us in the previous scene, we are aware that this will probably be their last ever time together and the mother will never see her child again. The mother is reluctant to relinquish her crying, struggling baby but is eventually persuaded by the warder, who removes the child from its mother’s arms and takes it away. Almost immediately, the barred door of her cellblock is slammed in the shot’s foreground, and provides a powerful physical evocation of the mother’s irrevocable separation from her child. She hangs onto the bars, hopelessly sobbing and crying out her child’s name, Johnny, before finally turning her back and walking to her cell alone, her figure gradually receding into the background of the shot. This scene was described as one of

Morey, "The Judge Called Me an Accessory", p. 86.
"tragedy and brutality" by Michael Bracewell, and Thompson’s emotive staging of the scene packs a punch entirely fitting for the agony of the woman’s situation. The scene is arguably all the more powerful because its ordeal is inflicted upon an anonymous prisoner rather than one of the film's central characters. The mother separated from her child becomes a kind of ‘everywoman’ figure, exemplifying the common experience of all women in prison, rather than its specificity to one unlucky individual.

However, women’s relationship to motherhood is explored most fully in the film not through its depiction of the nursery wing, or through the tribulations of Andy, the young expectant mother who goes into labour prematurely in hospital, but through the character of Babs (Jane Hylton). The story of the events that led to her imprisonment makes up the third of the film's four flashback sequences, as she confesses to Jean how she left her two children alone for just one night to go out dancing with her American boyfriend. Despite only intending to stay out for a few hours, she finally returns home the next morning only to find that her baby has died during the night. On the face of it, this sounds like the outline of a simple morality tale where a deviant, feckless woman is harshly punished for her transgression against the sanctity of motherhood. There is a grimly punitive logic about the baby’s death during the one night she is not at home, a single error of judgement having fatal consequences.

As Dahl and Snare note, female crime, in contrast to male, is often "explained in criminological textbooks in terms of sexual characteristics of a biological or psychological nature", frequently being connected with sexual laxity. Babs in The Weak and the Wicked fits perfectly into this tendency, using sex to explain her crime:

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62 Dahl and Snare, 'The Coercion of Privacy', p. 11. Carol Smart also concurs with the idea that female crime is inscribed onto the body: "Whereas men are considered to turn to crime for economic and social reasons or through poor socialisation, women are believed to become criminals because of their menstrual cycle or menopausal symptoms." (Carol Smart, Women, Crime and Criminology: A Feminist Critique (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 18).
"I'm no good really - I like men too much". Yet what is remarkable is how the film's flashback actually contradicts both Babs' self-image and the theory that her crime stems from any kind of insatiable nymphomania. Instead, it is presented more as a tragic consequence of Babs' enforced isolation as a single parent, and the concomitant loneliness and desperation of her state. Her husband has abandoned her to look after the children alone, and she admits that she "couldn't stand being alone night after night". When her new boyfriend pays her attention, buying her pretty jewellery, an oasis of glamour in a desert of dull dutifulness, and telling her that she should enjoy herself because "you're only young once, you know", she is quite understandably susceptible. Babs is offered the chance to be "something else besides a mother" for just one night and she takes it. What is remarkable about the presentation of Babs' story, and what, I think, makes it the most powerful and moving section of the film, is its eschewal of unequivocal blame. In the decade when hugely influential childcare experts like John Bowlby were asserting motherhood as the sole site of fulfilment for women and their proper role in life, and 'maternal deprivation' as the most heinous of crimes, The Weak and the Wicked dares to present the story of a woman who is actually responsible for her child's death in a sympathetic light, attempting to understand the pressures that led her to fatally neglect her baby, rather than simply condemning her. One might attribute this to Joan Henry's influence, since Who Lie in Gaol often tries to reconstruct an idea of the forces that lead an individual to commit a crime, most memorably in a story that did not make it into the film, about a woman called Annie, trying to care for her baby and keep house on very little money, who finally lashed out at her bullying aunt after taking years of abuse:

63 This way of understanding Babs' crime is reproduced without comment by Chibnall. See J. Lee Thompson, p. 66.
She was no hot-house bloom, and hers had been a hard life; and she suffered under a strong feeling of guilt. She knew that there were a great many years of putting up with Auntie behind that blow [...] and, in addition, the babies' cries in her ears, urgent and maddening like a dentist's drill on a raw nerve. I came to know Annie well and have often thought of her story.65

However, it is important to note that what finally convinces us more than anything else that Babs is worthy of sympathy rather than knee-jerk condemnation is not so much the basic story or the script but the way the sequence is directed by Thompson. While the film forcefully dramatises the anguish of the abandoned child who awakes to find her mother is not there and her baby brother is unable to play with her (witness her recurrent cries of "mummy, mummy, where are you?" and the shock of the loud bell that rings when she accidentally knocks an alarm clock onto the floor in her confusion), on the whole, Babs' point of view dominates the flashback sequence. We see the apparent infallibility of her little family tucked up in bed as she makes her fatal decision to nip out just one night, and just for a little while. We experience the excitement of the dance hall just as she does, with the dance band's frantic drummer shot from a low angle and the trumpets' bugle style fanfare blaring out (Babs' final 'wake-up' call before she makes a terrible mistake and prophetic of the alarm bell that will ring back at home). We see her growing intoxication represented by recurrent shots of her glass being refilled by her boyfriend and increasingly claustrophobic close shots of the couple on the busy dance floor. We ascend the stairs with her after her illicit night out and see the angry crowd outside her door just as she first spies them, and hear snatches of their

64 This is a line of dialogue from Stella Dallas (1937), adopted for the title of Linda Williams' article, "Something Else Besides a Mother": 'Stella Dallas' and the Maternal Melodrama' in Christine Gledhill (ed.), Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film (London: BFI, 1987).
65 Henry, Who Lie in Gaol, p. 140.
disapproving comments ("women like her deserve to be hanged") just as Babs does, as she pushes past them into her flat. We experience the terrible moment of truth at exactly the same time she does, as we see the tiny corpse covered up by the doctor called to the scene, and poor desperate Babs restrained by an attendant policewoman. When the flashback ends, Babs asks Jean if she thinks she is "dreadfully wicked" and Jean replies in the negative, telling her that she hopes she is able to regain custody of her other child upon her release. It is a remarkable conclusion to one of the most unusual and atypical sequences in the whole of fifties British cinema. What the film seems to be saying is that despite being responsible for the death of a child, Babs is not evil, she is not even really a bad mother—she just wanted a bit of company for a few hours and made a terrible mistake because of that quite understandable urge which was unable to find a socially acceptable outlet. By presenting the women like Babs who, for whatever reason, fall short of the period's feminine ideal not as monsters but as human beings worthy of sympathy, *The Weak and The Wicked* begins to point to the fact that some of the problems may not lie with the women themselves but rather with the difficulties inherent in the roles into which society forces them.

While *The Weak and the Wicked* generally adheres to the idea that women possess a natural maternal instinct, the exception to the rule is Pat (Rachel Roberts), another expectant mother in the hospital, who welcomes her pregnancy only because it "makes a break" and it means extra milk and egg rations for her: "bless its little heart", she intones sarcastically as she pats her stomach. Her cavalier attitude to motherhood brings her into conflict with the other women, particularly Babs, but it is more often her class antagonism that proves incendiary to them. Class might be regarded as the 'structuring absence' in the film's diegesis, "an issue, or even a set of facts or an argument, that a text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or avoids, thus
Jean disavows the importance of class in one of her few emotional outbursts in the film, as she defends herself to the governor, claiming kinship with her fellow prisoners on grounds of their shared gender: "Why do you think I'm any different from the others? I'm a woman too. Maybe I've had a softer life than some of them, but do you think that it makes it any easier for me? I tell you, there are no different prisoners, only those who are bright enough to know when they are beaten." However, Pat is one of the few prisoners to kick against this emphasis on the communality between women and to draw attention to the fact that Jean, as a 'lady', is quite different from the majority of women in prison. She uses Jean's early exit from dinner as an excuse to criticise her table manners and to compare their respective upbringings: "I talk and eat as I was brought up to do and none of your la-di-dah ways. All right, I was ruddy well dragged up like half of us in this stinking hole!" Class tension erupts again when Jean is told that she is to be transferred to the open prison, with Pat commenting that "of course, they only send blooming ladies to the Grange".

This accusation acts as an awkward (and possibly valid) sticking point in the film's general advocacy of open prisons (on what grounds are certain inmates transferred to a more liberal regime?) but the potential tension is diffused by what happens next. Pat continues: "I mean, I think you talk lovely but it don't get you anywhere if you end up here", and Jean replies with a joke at her own expense about her predicament (the grammatical lapse "no, it don't"). Pat responds warmly to her self-satirising with a cackling "You know something, I think I'll have to do you!" and a missile of a ball of wool aimed at Jean. Thus the questions raised by Pat's abrasive manner and awkward queries are safely curtailed. The final scene in hospital, when Jean departs for the Grange, even has Pat speaking kindly to Babs who had previously been her sworn enemy. Thus the character in the film who came closest to any kind of genuine 'wickedness' is softened, her demonic energy neutered. It is interesting to note that

Rachel Roberts, who plays Pat, was later to find greater fame as one of the few key female figures in the British New Wave with significant roles in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *This Sporting Life* (1963). In some ways, this film movement represented the full flowering of the tendency that we might see represented embryonically within a character like Pat in *The Weak and the Wicked*: the desire to reinstate the importance of class issues in a national cinema that too often preferred to ignore their very existence. However, while the films of the New Wave were distinguished by their new awareness of class, they were often reactionary in their treatment of gender issues. Although Roberts' performances in both *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *This Sporting Life* are remarkable and engaging, they show a version of femininity that emphasises a tight-lipped grim forbearance of the pain that inevitably arises from any kind of sensual pleasure. When *Saturday Night*'s Brenda falls pregnant, and an attempted abortion fails, she stoically accepts the consequences. By contrast, *The Weak and the Wicked* offers a more caustic version of the expectant mother, satirising maternal instinct and state provision as she laughingly strokes her swollen stomach – an anti-Madonna, and in some ways, a far more problematic female type than the roles Roberts would play in her later films.

Jean and Betty are reunited as they both wait for transfer to 'The Grange', based on the real 'prison without bars' where Joan Henry had been an inmate, Askham Grange in Yorkshire, opened in 1947 and the first of its kind for women in Britain. The film immediately establishes the differences between the old-fashioned prison Blackdown and the new type like the Grange. Earlier in the film, Blackdown had been introduced by a shot of its HM Prison sign and then a pan leftwards to reveal the imposing prison gate, accompanied by ominous music. This camera movement is repeated, with the same menacing music, over the sign for 'HM Prison The Grange'. However, the music then lightens in tone as the camera pans left to surprise us with a bucolic scene of a
country house situated in elegant grounds - hardly the prison we expected. Similarly, whereas all that had ever been shown of the governor of Blackdown was the back of her head and shoulders as she sat at her desk, the acme of 'faceless' officialdom, this is reversed in the very first scenes featuring the Grange's governor (Jean Taylor Smith), whose face is shown immediately, making her an instantaneously more sympathetic character. She is also shown to be a repository of wisdom, pronouncing astutely on Jean and Betty as they exit her office together: "They'll do. An ill-assorted pair on the face of it but they're probably valuable to each other". Her welcome to the new inmates segues into a montage sequence depicting life at the Grange, wherein we see documentary-style footage of prisoners, some of them real prisoners at Askham at the time, digging in the gardens, working in the sewing room (light and airy in contrast to Blackdown's dark chamber) and doing housework, as well as attending classes in dressmaking, rugmaking, leatherwork and knitting. The images are accompanied by the governor's explanatory voiceover, emphasising the rehabilitative powers of hard work and fresh air. The governor also impresses upon Jean and Betty the fact that a prison with "no locked doors, no barred windows and no cells" is an experiment that depends upon "mutual trust" and that "it's up to you to prove you can be trusted...if you fail us, you fail yourself". The shift that Foucault charts in Discipline and Punish from violent coercion to an internalised disciplinary mechanism has its parallel in The Weak and the Wicked in the move from the harsh system of confinement and observation at Blackdown to the 'prison without bars', The Grange, where self-observation should now work so well that bars are no longer necessary. The governor is truly exemplary of disciplinary power's success, no longer needing to rely on force to retain order. Instead she sits at the top of a benevolent hierarchy, her authority closer to that of a teacher or a mother than the traditionally authoritarian figure of the gaolkeeper, calling her charges 'child', to which they respond 'madam'. She continues her induction to the world of the
Grange: “There are three ways out of the grounds and there’s nothing to stop you walking through any of them” – nothing, that is, except the subject’s self-policing, something that we will see tested later in the film by Betty. She desperately wants to get back to London to see her straying boyfriend Norman, and almost runs away, but she finally resists the impulse. Although one might argue that the victory of Betty's loyalty to her friend over her desire to see her boyfriend is an important moment of female solidarity in the film, a more cynical Foucauldian reading would see it hardly as a conscious decision on Betty's part at all and more the final stage in her conversion to becoming a self-policing subject. She no longer needs the incarceration and surveillance of the traditional prison because she has internalised the process of surveillance and so can be relied upon to stay in the prison even when it no longer has physical bars.

The first inmate Jean and Betty encounter at the Grange is Millie (Athene Seyler), an elderly lady working on the farm, who swiftly launches into the story of her criminal career, providing the last of the film's flashback sequences. Millie had always been the closest of friends with Mabel (Sybil Thorndike) "inseparable ever since we were girls", until Mabel married Harry, a wealthy old bachelor of the parish. Upon marriage, Harry transforms from charming old chap to domestic tyrant, treating his spouse as a servant while he retreats to his bed "to enjoy", in Millie's words, "the best of bad health". However, the old friends cook up a plan to dispatch Harry (as Mabel reassuringly points out, "it would be a kindness really") by putting weedkiller in his tea ("and one for the pot" Mabel impishly remarks as she spoons in the poison). But when Harry dies before he has had a chance to sip the fatal brew, Mabel reneges on the agreement that she should share her inheritance with her best friend and an enraged Millie responds with a poison pen letter (nonetheless still signed off "Your friend, Millie"), threatening to tell the whole story to the police. Mabel calls Millie's bluff, secure in the knowledge that Harry died of natural causes, and Millie is sent to prison.
for blackmail. The overall tone of Millie's tale is light and comic, with its two elderly lady would-be poisoners recalling the genteel mayhem of *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1942), as well as *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) where inconvenient relatives are cheerfully bumped off. One might also see echoes of George Orwell's famous essay on 'The Decline of the English Murder' with this story's similar air of lower middle class suburban gentility masking rather more unsavoury impulses.

However, this section of the film, along with an earlier flashback sequence detailing the comical criminal exploits of Nelly Baden (Olive Sloane), a professional shoplifter who is caught out when the transistor radio she has stashed under her coat starts blasting out football commentary in the middle of a department store, earned the film the opprobrium of some critics. *Monthly Film Bulletin* disapproved of its more comic moments and regarded them as not only "in dubious taste in such a context" but also as unwelcome intrusions into what should be the proper business of the film: its representation of "two widely differing aspects of the penal system". *The Times* also had misgivings about what it saw as the film's "sudden somersaults from tragedy into farce". However, this same generic mix is exactly what the more populist film magazine *Picturegoer* 's reviewer identified as the film's asset: "Even in prison, there's comedy and romance and melodrama. Some of the characters are figures of tragedy; but others, equally, are figures of fun. That's life. And that is the film's strength". I do not want to privilege one view over another here, merely demonstrate that what excludes the film from a canon based on stricter adherence to the tenets of realism can also be seen as a positive value in the film's favour in a different critical context, the leavening of grim reality with sparkling fantasy. Perhaps, as Steve Chibnall argues, the mistake was to "compartmentalise the comedy and the drama instead of letting the one inform

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68 *The Times*, 8 February 1954.
69 *Picturegoer*, 27 February 1954.
the other in a more fluid and organic way". After all, as we have seen, the women's
gallows humour is an important part of how they steel themselves for the prison
experience, and not out of place in a realist depiction of prison life.

Nonetheless, one could argue that the film's comedic passages offer not only a
spot of light relief but also a way of hinting at some of the social issues left unexplored
by its more sombre passages. The idea of growing affluence in British society is only
really touched on in the story of the Baden family. In all other ways the cohesive and
caring model family, the Badens' only foible is that their conspicuous consumption
(smart new clothes, up-to-the-minute electronic goods, smart home furnishings) is
achieved by illegal means. The whole family sit down to breakfast together before all
cheerfully going off to work but the whole family also happen to be career shoplifters.
Shani D'Cruze describes how shoplifting, which saw a sudden increase in the 1950s,
can be understood in the context of cultural pressures towards consumption as "inchoate
but purposive tactical responses by individuals whose experience did not accord with
dominant norms." Looked at from this angle, one can argue that the Baden family's
pursuit of all the trappings of affluence is simply consumerism gone slightly awry.

Even in Millie's tale, one might detect a serious subtext lying beneath the droll comedy.
Mabel abandons her close friendship with Millie where they "used to share everything"
to marry Harry in order to get money whereas Harry marries Mabel effectively to get a
servant to tend to his every whim. Harry is only charming for as long as it is expedient
and though Mabel has been hoodwinked, she is powerless to do anything about it.
Harry's despotism and Mabel's acquiescence is a comic extrapolation of patriarchal
power in marriage and as Mabel points out, "it isn't marriage, it's martyrdom" - a
comment that runs against the grain of the film's dominant attitude, emphasising the
fulfilment to be found in marriage.

Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 68.
Ironically, not long after Millie has told her story of two friends falling out and its disastrous consequences, the film moves on to its most convincing statement of female solidarity and friendship: Jean and Betty's day out. As Jean gets nearer to her release date, the governor proposes a day in town to help her readjust to life outside ("traffic and the everyday bustle of life outside will seem very strange to you at first, probably quite frightening"), and suggests that Betty would benefit from the experience too. In *Who Lie in Gaol*, this episode takes up less than two pages and its events are described briskly and briefly by Henry. However, in the film, the women's day out is extended and developed into a fairly substantial scene that occupies a more central position in the narrative. Apart from the suspense created at the end of the scene (will Betty betray Jean's trust and run away?), not much happens - the two women do a spot of window shopping, have lunch in a café, go to the pictures and then onto the local funfair. However, the whole sequence is permeated by a feeling of affection and intimacy between the two women, a sense that these women really enjoy each other's company, largely connoted by the humour of their exchanges and the performances of the two actresses, particularly Diana Dors, whose ironic matiness is ideal for enlivening this kind of low-key scene. They indulge in some banter as they dare each other to ask a policeman the time, wondering if he can tell that they are jailbirds. They are conspiratorial about whipping fag-ends from the ashtray in the café they go to ("Jean, not here...I must say you've picked up some very nasty habits from somewhere" says Betty with a raised eyebrow), adopting an arch tone and calling each other 'Miss Raymond' and 'Miss Brown'. They joke about how much to tip the waitress (an exquisitely grumpy Irene Handl) and whether they should go to the pub or not, and share sardonic comments about an imposing door that reminds them of Blackdown's gate. All of this may sound quite inconsequential and banal but it is important to point

out that in the context of its time, a scene like this, which dwells at length, simply and
unsensationally, on how female friends behave when they are out for the day together,
is incredibly rare, if not unique. The impact of such a moment in the all-male world of
fifties British cinema might be profitably compared to the sudden shock that hit
Virginia Woolf as she read the sentence 'Chloe liked Olivia' in a novel by a young
woman writer, Mary Carmichael: "Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the
privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do
like women... And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked
Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature." Woolf goes on to explain that she read
on "to see how Mary Carmichael set to work to catch those unrecorded gestures, those
unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows
of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured
light of the other sex." This quiet and rather uneventful sequence from a half-forgotten
British film offers a revelatory moment equivalent to that sought by Woolf in
Carmichael's novel- a rare depiction of women relating to each other on their own
terms, not as appendages to their menfolk, and thus so seldom recorded or depicted.
Looking at a paradigmatic example of British film of the time, the huge success of the
previous year, Genevieve (1953), we can see the difference in The Weak and the
Wicked's representation of relationships between women: Genevieve's main female
characters, Wendy and Rosalind, are sparky and attractive and unfailingly cordial to
each other (and could potentially strike up a friendship, the film implies), but they are
never presented outside the bounds of their relationships to their respective male
partners and as Geraghty notes, "the film ends, good-humouredly, with the women
allied with their men, on male terms." By contrast, Jean and Betty, even as prisoners,
are allowed at least one day "out on the loose", as Jean describes it. It is interesting that

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73 Ibid., p. 84.
the title of the film the women go to see at the cinema is 'One Night of Love', implying a brief romantic idyll, fleetingly experienced but never to be forgotten. One might argue that Jean and Betty's day out in The Weak and the Wicked offers something just as utopian and unique in the overwhelmingly masculine world of fifties British cinema: 'one day of friendship' between two female characters.

The crux of the day out sequence comes when Betty is distracted by the ardour of the courting couples at the fair and tempted to run away to see her erring boyfriend. Earlier, Jean had sought assurance that Betty would not let her down, asking her who she cared about. "Only Norman", Betty states, before pausing and adding, "and you, of course." However, when Betty is pushed to choose between the two people she cares about, her desire to get Norman back is superseded by her sense of loyalty to Jean, her best friend. The idea of the women's friendship as nothing more than a 'halfway house' to help them cope while they are barred from men is belied by the evident strength of feeling between the women here. Unlike the prisoners in the US films analysed by Anne Morey who "have no use value for themselves or for other women [because] only men can appreciate them and only men can save them"\(^75\), the women in The Weak and the Wicked clearly do have use value for each other. Although Chibnall argues that prison precipitates a "loss of role" because the woman are denied the relationships to men that allow them to "make sense of themselves as women"\(^76\), I think he underestimates how far the film presents the tentative formation of different, modified roles for the women through their experiences in prison, most powerfully foregrounded in the bond between Jean and Betty. This is not an ephemeral allegiance to be ditched the second Jean is released but an important relationship, something indicated by the fact that Jean decides to break the prison's official embargo on giving out personal addresses to fellow prisoners, instead passing her address on to Betty with a promise to

\(^{74}\) Geraghty, British Cinema in the Fifties, p. 164.

\(^{75}\) Morey, "The Judge Called Me an Accessory", p. 80.
keep in touch "wherever I am or wherever you are". Whereas women's relationships in the outside world are shown to be fractious and unreliable (Pam's betrayal of Jean, Mabel's betrayal of Millie), they are shown to be largely supportive in prison, suggested by little details like Nelly's kindly explanation of the prison rules to a newly-incarcerated Jean, Babs' consolation to expectant mother Andy that the prison authorities will let her have her baby in a normal hospital and that she will be lent a pretty nightie so she won't look any different from the other new mothers, or Jean softly asking another prisoner if she would "stay with Bet, she's had some bad news", a request immediately attended to. Patricia O'Brien describes a love letter from a woman prisoner in 19th century France to her 'married' partner in the prison, in which she says that if she were rich she would "build a palace, rid it of all men, and allow only women married to each other to inhabit it", a fantasy which was, in effect, nothing more than "a more luxurious version of the prison in which she was confined". The Weak and the Wicked certainly stops well short of any kind of 20th century parallel to this desire for a utopian 'palace of women' but it does seem to suggest that the only place where women can truly be friends is in a state of all-female confinement. As Henry points out in Who Lie in Gaol, "having no background and no possessions; no men to show off to; wearing the same clothes every day...to each other, we were just ourselves, good, bad or indifferent". So while the women suffer 'loss of role' as Chibnall suggests, they are partially compensated by a new ability to relate to each other without the usual ethos of competition and rivalry: The Weak and the Wicked conveys the irony of a certain kind of liberation from having to answer to men and male ideals in, of all places, the prison, where liberty is meant to be denied as a punishment.

As the end of Jean's sentence finally arrives, the film also draws to a conclusion. Jean fulfils all her daily tasks for the last time and packs her things. There is a long and

76 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 65.
77 O'Brien, The Promise of Punishment, p. 106.
tender farewell scene between Jean and Betty where the two women embrace, their
closeness captured in an intimate two-shot. Betty begins to cry and Jean consoles her by
promising to send "postcards and things" and assuring her that "it won't be long" before
she will be free as well. Finally though, Jean has to leave and the camera remains on
Betty crying on the bed, alone and clearly devastated by the loss of her friend. Then,
after a final meeting with the governor, Jean walks away from the Grange waving
goodbye to her fellow prisoners gathered at the downstairs window, before waving
goodbye to Betty, on her own at a separate window (suggesting that Jean and Betty's
bond is separate and beyond the usual communal kinship of women in prison). Then
much to Jean's surprise, Michael, whom she thought had emigrated to Rhodesia, pulls
up in his car. This is the film's key liminal moment, where Jean stands between her old
life in a community of women and her new life as one man's wife. She climbs into the
car, he proposes marriage, and Jean agrees. After a spot of trouble with the ignition
(Shades of Gregson's starring role in Genevieve the previous year, perhaps), Michael
whisks her away from the Grange, triumphant music swelling as 'The End' appears on
the screen. For Marcia Landy, Michael's sudden reappearance into the film (he has
been absent for the whole section dealing with the Grange) is highly intrusive and
"blatantly calls attention to itself as an interruption, a purposeful form of self-
censorship, but also as a commentary on the interdiction of female relationships and
sexuality outside the heterosexual marital sphere". According to Landy, Jean's final
exit from prison into the welcoming arms of respectable domesticity is not quite the
joyous ending that it aims to be, because it seems false and inadequately motivated after
the long goodbye between Jean and Betty, whose relationship has been the most

78 Henry, Who Lie in Gaol, p. 78.
79 Although there is a similar farewell scene in Henry's book with her friend Kate, the film is more
forceful in its suggestion of Jean and Betty's close relationship, mainly because several characters that
were Joan Henry's friends in the book (Betty, Judy and Kate) are all amalgamated into Bet for the film.
80 It is also a significance deviation from Henry's book, where she is already married and instead the
book's climax comes with her reunion with her young daughter.
81 Landy, British Genres, p. 455.
tenderly portrayed in the film. However, Steve Chibnall has misgivings about Landy's reading of the film, arguing that it "prefers to side-step the unpalatable sexual and cultural politics of the film's conventional closure" in a manner which shows "an understandable degree of wishful thinking":

The elements of sisterhood which Landy celebrates are certainly present in *The Weak and the Wicked*, but ultimately, they are offered as moderating considerations in the recommendations of women's selfless and compassionate commitment to a stable heterosexual relationship. So Michael's return may be disappointing to anyone who holds dear the cause of female independence, but one has to read the film against the grain to find it 'gratuitous' and 'unmotivated'.

Nonetheless, this is belied by the fact that a sense of dissatisfaction with the film's ending is by no means the exclusive proclivity of idealistic feminists. In 1954, publications as diverse as *Picturegoer* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*, neither pushing any kind of feminist agenda, found fault with it: for *Monthly Film Bulletin*, it was a "facile...final glib compromise" while *Picturegoer* asserted that it was "trite" and "too pat for the picture's good". It is impossible to surmise exactly what their objections stemmed from but I would suggest that it has something to do with the sense that Michael's arrival feels like it has been unnecessarily tacked on as an 'extra ending'. At any rate, the final scenes of *The Weak and the Wicked* provide a textbook example of

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83 Ibid.
85 *Picturegoer*, 27 February 1954.
the kind of film Comolli and Narboni famously describe in their *Cahiers du Cinema* editorial, that they designate as 'category E':

The films we are talking about throw up obstacles in the way of the ideology, causing it to swerve and get off course [...] An internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams. If one reads the film obliquely, looking for symptoms; if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks: it is splitting under an internal tension which is simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film.66

Troublesome to contemporary critics of both high and middle brow mindsets as well as those later critics self-consciously 'reading against the grain', *The Weak and the Wicked*'s 'deus ex machina' ending unwittingly draws attention to its own absurdity, articulating an anxious need for a man to turn up at the end to round off the plot. One of the copylines for the film may announce it as an exploration of "a strange, unnatural life in the manless land of a woman's prison" but the film itself suggests that life without men is not really that strange or unnatural. It could be argued that the film creates a disquieting vision of women getting along quite well without men and that the sneaking sense of men's superfluity in the film is what the ending attempts to redress, and only partially manages to. It looks like the enforcement of what Adrienne Rich memorably described as "compulsory heterosexuality", which obliterates not just sexual relationships between women but all kinds of "women-identified experience" that Rich describes as being on a "lesbian continuum": "forms of primary intensity between and

67 *The Weak and the Wicked* pressbook.
among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical support.®

Nonetheless, it would not do to read the ending totally against the grain of its basic narrative meaning: that Jean has been successfully rehabilitated, with marriage to Michael as both proof of and reward for the change in her behaviour, as well as a fitting vindication of the benevolent regime at the open prison which helps affect such positive changes in its inmates. Jean has been recuperated as a 'docile body' of use to society, and in the context of 1950s Britain, that means a wife and (future) mother. But in the process of showing us that transformation, all kinds of things have been raised that cannot be adequately closed down by the film's ending, as will be the case with many of the subsequent films under discussion in this thesis. In spite of the restrictions of censorship, in spite of the social problem film's ethos of kindly containment and in spite of the overarching dominance of a particular idea of women's domestic destiny, The Weak and the Wicked offers occasional glimpses into an alternative world of women's lives, seldom presented on the screen at that time. In such moments as Jean's illicit thrills at the roulette table and Pat's shockingly recalcitrant attitude to impending motherhood, or the sympathetic understanding lent to the telling of Babs' story and the emotional impact of the anonymous vignette of a mother being separated from her child forever (a scene that led Michael Bracewell to ascribe to the film a underlying tone of "mute protest" against the "authorities' prejudice against working class girls' sexuality") or even just Betty and Jean sharing a fag and a joke together, one gets the sense of a 'subjugated knowledge' tentatively making itself heard for the first time.

Like 1968, 1956 is one of those years that have retrospectively acquired a mythic status as a watershed year in post war historiography. It has come to be regarded as the pivotal year of the fifties: the point when the old order began to give way to the new. The clear periodisation is assisted by the timing of the Suez crisis, which marked a decisive break in British history. What began as a confident old-style imperial venture cheered on by the popular press ended in a humiliating climbdown that dispelled any delusions Britain still harboured about its importance on the world stage. Suez made clear that Britain's relationship with the US was now one of dependence rather than equal partnership, and moreover, that the British establishment was fallible and did not merit automatic deference. Indeed Anthony Eden's attempt to play the steadfast Churchillian statesman had resulted in a performance closer, in Malcolm Muggeridge's eyes at least, to "a benzedrine Napoleon".¹ Not entirely unrelated to Suez (and much linked retrospectively) was 1956's cult of the 'Angry Young Man', a term which caught on as shorthand for a new type of anti-hero and his creator: provincial, working class, often red-brick university educated, and above all, incandescent with rage at society's unfairness and the hypocrisies of the British Establishment (hence the link to Suez). Although it was backdated to include earlier writers such as Kingsley Amis and John Wain, the term really came into its own to describe the lives and works (inextricably linked in the public consciousness) of two of 1956's literary discoveries, John Osborne and Colin Wilson. Within the space of a month, the first performance of Osborne's play Look Back in Anger (8 May) and the publication of Wilson's eclectic philosophical study The Outsider (28 May), along with a Times leader (26 May) which linked Osborne and
Amis as the creators of a new type, the "thoroughly cross young man"\(^2\), signalled the birth of this movement in English culture characterised by its mood of dissent. In retrospect, what is particularly interesting about the Angry Young Men is the extent to which they became media celebrities, whose fame was such that tales of their turbulent love lives were front page news in the popular press\(^3\) and whose ubiquity demanded that even the readers of *Good Housekeeping* magazine were provided with a handy guide to who was who in the Angry movement.\(^4\) Although less well known than Osborne today, Colin Wilson was the most famous of the Angry Young Men at the time, described variously as "the literary Elvis Presley" and "a kind of philosophical Tommy Steele".\(^5\)

His colourful life story (the autodidact coffee bar existentialist who slept rough on Hampstead Heath acclaimed as a young genius upon the publication of his first book) and his talent for self-promotion and grandiose proclamations (dismissed by Kingsley Amis as "pharisaical twittering about 'the state of our civilisation'"\(^6\)) proved irresistible to all sections of the press. The astonishing suddenness of his rise to fame was equalled only by the suddenness of his descent into ignominy, when the critics' delirious enthusiasm switched to harsh condemnation upon the publication of his second book, *Religion and the Rebel*, in 1957. Although his critics took him to task for his pretentious style and crypto-fascist leanings, it seems more plausible that his real crime was to have become better known as a media personality than as a literary intellectual. As Kenneth

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\(^4\) Allsop, *The Angry Decade*, p. 15.


\(^6\) Quoted in Morrison, *The Movement*, p. 246.
Allsop notes, "Wilson's had become a lurid name, like that of a literary Diana Dors", a comparison of particular relevance for this chapter.

Wilson's dramatic parabola from obscurity to fame and back to obscurity has meant that his status as the epitome of the Angry Young Man has been latterly eclipsed and superseded by John Osborne, and his fictional creation, Jimmy Porter, the central character of *Look Back in Anger*. Osborne describes Porter as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty" which gets across an idea of the character's contradictory nature: the university graduate who lives in a bedsit and runs a sweet stall, the working class man who hates the upper classes but has married one of its members. The play is most celebrated for Porter's venomous diatribes against phoneyness in all its forms, which, the legend goes, through the force of their rhetoric, single-handedly cut through all the conventional niceties of fifties British theatre and changed everything forever. 8 May 1956, the date of the play's first performance at the Royal Court theatre, has come to be seen as the crucial turning point not only in postwar British theatrical history but in the arts generally. Finally, youth had broken through and revolutionised a moribund cultural form, violent emotion would displace ironic understatement as the predominant mode of expression, and class would cease to be the great unmentionable and would instead become the subject of direct examination. Kenneth Allsop describes how the play, arriving at exactly the right moment, caught the hitherto unacknowledged mood of many in 1950s society: "It was as if the pin-table ball that many young people feel themselves to be today, ricocheting in

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7 Allsop, *The Angry Decade*, p. 149.
8 Osborne, 'Look Back in Anger' and Other Plays, p. 5.
lunatic movement, had hit the right peg. Lights flashed. Bells rang. Overnight 'angry' became the code word."

Allsop's evocative description of the historical moment of Look Back in Anger is particularly interesting not only for its apposite use of metaphor but also for its gender neutrality: it is not just the mood of young men that the play captured, he suggests, but instead "young people" more generally. This chimes with Kenneth Tynan's proclamation that with Look Back in Anger, Osborne had spoken for everybody in the country between 20 and 30. Both statements, by stressing the inclusive appeal of the play, suggest the intriguing possibility of a female analogue of the Angry Young Man, as alienated as her male counterpart, also finding herself in Jimmy Porter's insolent anti-establishment rhetoric. However, any search for the existence of an 'Angry Young Woman', real or fictional, seems doomed to end in failure and frustration. Looking for her in the canonical 'angry' texts yields little result. In Amis' Lucky Jim (1954) the women are either virginal trophy girlfriends or bluestocking caricatures, always subordinated to the hapless hero's adventures. John Braine's women in Room at the Top (1957) are polarised as nice girl and easy lay and used primarily to connote the hero's development, rather than having any separate narrative existence of their own, ditto Alan Sillitoe's in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958). Colin Wilson's litany of multifarious outsiders certainly has no place for women in it. Finally, in perhaps the most paradigmatic example of all, Look Back in Anger offers no angry young woman but instead the browbeaten, pallid figure of Jimmy's wife Alison, wearing his shirt, stuck behind the ironing board, belittled and abused for being posher than him and refusing to rise to his bait. Look Back in Anger stands as the best example of how the Angry Young Men so often conflate an attack on conformity with an attack on women. As Elizabeth Wilson puts it, the Angries "felt justified in letting rip at women as if this were in itself

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10 Allsop, The Angry Decade, p. 16.
11 Quoted in Ritchie, Success Stories, p. 127.
an attack on convention and bourgeois values". D E Cooper tries to explain that what the Angries are against is not individual women but rather 'effeminacy', which is used as a blanket term to represent the worst tendencies of modern society, "the sum of those qualities that are supposed traditionally [...] to exude from the worst in women: pettiness, snobbery, flippancy, voluptuousness, superficiality, materialism". Thus their social protest is inevitably articulated through anti-feminine discourse. However, on further examination, it is startling to note how frequently Jimmy Porter's tirades descend from pointed social critique into basic and only tangentially connected misogyny. Even Porter's most famous threnody in the play, on how the modern world has replaced "good, brave causes" with "the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you", is bookended by unrelated anti-female jibes which seem to lay the blame for the imminent collapse of Western civilisation on female acquisitiveness: "Why, why, why, why do we let these women bleed us to death?" and "No, there's nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women." As Lynne Segal suggests, according to the mindset of the Angry Young Man, "a stifling domesticity has killed the spirit and guts of men, and who is there to blame but women?" Any doubt that Jimmy Porter's sentiments are shared by the play's author is swiftly dispelled by Osborne's vitriolic public ruminations on femininity, which include an article for the Daily Mail entitled 'What's gone wrong with WOMEN?' in which female domination is proved to be the worm in the bud of modern life, and a review of Baby Doll that concludes "the female must come toppling down to where she should be - on her back". In retrospect, it becomes clear that Osborne's toughness and virility, so feted at the time, seem always to be bought at the expense of women's degradation. The Angries never consider the idea

12 Wilson, Only Halfway to Paradise, p. 153.
14 Osborne, 'Look Back in Anger' and Other Plays, p. 83.
15 Segal, 'Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifties', p. 82.
16 See Ritchie, Success Stories, p. 128.
17 Quoted in Allsop, The Angry Decade, pp. 128-129.
that women might feel the pressure of conformity as much as men might, possibly even more. Instead they were seen purely as the agents of entrapment and emasculation, their fecundity always a threat to male freedom, never their own. As Lorna Sage later reflected on growing up in the fifties: "It's galling to realise that you were a creature of mythology: girls were the enemy of promise, a trap for boys, although with hindsight you can see that the opposite was the case. In those seductive yarns about freedom girls' wants are foreknown"\(^{18}\) i.e. babies and a nice home. The Angries, though admirably radical in many other ways, never questioned the status quo on women and instead remained in thrall to a sour version of the eternal feminine.

While the Angry Young Men were busy holding women responsible for all of society's ills, women writers were conspicuous by their silence. Undoubtedly, this had something to do with a lack of interest in women writers rather than a lack of women writing, for as Harry Ritchie notes, the new women writers that did emerge in the fifties were largely overlooked and "received no acclaim comparable to that of their male colleagues.\(^{19}\) But the reasons for women's absence seem to run deeper than that. Lynne Segal states that among all the dissent and protest of the 1950s, there is one thing that is overwhelmingly absent: "public forms of rebellion - exhibitionist or not - from women.\(^{20}\) Even a revisionist social movement of the fifties like the New Left, while examining and interrogating many accepted social precepts, left questions of gender completely untouched. As Stuart Hall admits, the Left were "totally unconscious...totally entombed on that issue.\(^{21}\) With women having achieved virtually equal citizenship rights to men and the ideology of 'equal but different' reigning supreme, feminism was widely regarded as a spent force, an anachronism in the modern world and, for the left, a bourgeois triviality. Typical is Judith Hubback's 1957 statement that "reasonable

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\(^{19}\) Ritchie, *Success Stories*, p. 214.

\(^{20}\) Segal 'Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifties', p. 68.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 91.
feminism builds on the diversity of the sexes. It is not crudely egalitarian.” What is striking is how far this view was imbibed by women as much as by men, and would remain so until the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s. Then, women writers found plenty to be angry about, but looking for similar signs of anger in women writers of the fifties is a fruitless task. While some notables like Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing were briefly included in the ‘angry’ category, this was never a very convincing inclusion.

Certainly, if they were angry, it wasn’t about gender since their attitudes to women’s place, as Segal notes, "complemented rather than contradicted the perceptions of men at the time." On the subject of women's writing of the fifties, Alison Light notices this marked absence of any female equivalent to the Angry Young Man but argues that feminist literary historians should not desperately attempt to overturn this by searching for "Angry Young Women who will simply make a nonsense of any understanding of the 1950s in terms of middle class hegemony" but instead seek to understand why women writers were not expressing anger like their male counterparts at this time, how their stance differed because of gender. Despite Allsop and Tynan’s claims that the Angry phenomenon crossed gender boundaries, Light seems to confirm that, as its label suggested, the Angry Young Man phenomenon was irrefutably masculine and that being male was just as integral to its identity as being young and being angry. By implication, the elusive 'Angry Young Woman' is a canard, and any quest for her doomed to failure.

In June 1956, just a month after the first performance of Look Back in Anger and the explosion of the Angry Young Man into the public consciousness, Yield to the Night was released in cinemas across Britain. Although both texts share the same historical moment, their critical reputations could hardly be more different: while Osborne’s play is widely recognised as a key text of the fifties, Thompson’s film is dimly remembered

22 Hubback, Wives Who Went to College, p. 83.
24 Light, 'Writing Fictions: Femininity and the 1950s', p. 144.
as a Diana Dors vehicle or a film about Ruth Ellis, when it is remembered at all. Yet *Yield to the Night* was lauded at the time for being "daring...brave...to be saluted for a rare seriousness of intention" and "remarkable in its integrity, balance and grim refusal to alleviate its distresses to box-office tastes". Here was a film made in a mainstream British studio that dared to engage with the darker elements of contemporary society and to intervene in the current debate about the ethics of the death penalty. In the face of overwhelming public support for capital punishment, *Yield to the Night* attempted to make a case for hanging's abolition within the format of the popular mass-market film, and consciously to avoid manipulating the emotions of its audience by dramatising a miscarriage of justice, instead presenting the case of someone who is definitely guilty of her crime. Its attempt to break through public apathy and stir up feelings about the iniquities of the British establishment clearly provides a link to the better known angry texts of the time.

*Yield to the Night* even has its own recognisable Angry Young Man type who, like Amis' and Osborne's heroes, is called Jim (Michael Craig). Like Jimmy Porter, he lives in a bedsit, wears a checked shirt, does a dead-end job and consorts with women

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25 Joan Henry's novel, *Yield to the Night*, upon which her screenplay for the subsequent film was closely based, was actually published in 1954, a year before Ellis committed the murder for which she was hanged, and so the film's appearance in the aftermath of Ellis's execution was more a matter of coincidence than design. It is true that there are eerie correspondences between the real case of Ruth Ellis and the fictional case of Mary Hilton but these should perhaps be viewed as a sign of the prophetic power and verisimilitude of Joan Henry's novel rather than the cynical exploitative instincts of the film's makers. This is a case of life imitating art which has usually been seen as the reverse because of the timing of the film's release. For more details of the confusion between Ruth Ellis and the heroine of *Yield to the Night*, see Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, pp. 72-3. An indication of the continuing confusion is offered in the obituary for Thompson in *Guardian*, 4 September 2002, that states without equivocation that Diana Dors played "Ruth Ellis" in the film.

26 *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1956.

27 *Films and Filming*, July 1956.


29 Thompson subsequently compared his film with the later American film on a similar theme, *I Want to Live!* (1958), to state the reasons for this decision: "This was meant to be against capital punishment; so what did they do? They took somebody and tried to make out she was innocent. [...] For capital punishment you must take somebody who deserves to die, and then feel sorry for them and say this is wrong. We did that in *Yield to the Night*: we made it a ruthless, premeditated murder." (Thompson, 'The Still Small Voice of Truth', p. 5).

30 See still of stage production in John Montgomery, *The Fifties*, facing p. 256. The checked shirt, along with the scruffy jumper, becomes the uniform of the Angry Young Man, worn by Richard Burton as
of a higher social class than him. He has the same kind of educational and cultural 
capital (poetry books, musical talent) and is similarly nihilistic and cynical about what 
opportunities are open to him (he is asked the question eternally posed of the Angry 
Young Man: "Why do you always sound so bitter?"). He even describes marriage using 
a simile of suffocation worthy of Jimmy Porter: it is "like a coalmine - you don't need to 
go down it to know it's dark and dirty." One can confidently surmise that in most other 
texts of the same historical moment, Jim would be the main protagonist, his dilemmas 
the focus of our attention, his concerns the driving force behind the narrative. But 
instead, in Yield to the Night, he is not placed centre stage but subordinated to someone 
else's story, appearing only when he is summoned up in one of her flashbacks. Instead, 
the figure who dominates the film is Mary Hilton, the condemned woman awaiting 
execution for the crime of murder, and the film deals with her travails in the death cell, 
terspersed with flashback sequences which explain how she got there. Jim's 
significance in the film is to provide the impetus for her crime: Mary is hopelessly in 
love with him even though he is still seeing a wealthy socialite, Lucy. When Lucy jilts 
him, Jim commits suicide and Mary, heartbroken at his death, sets out to avenge it by 
killing the woman who drove him to take his own life.

Several critics drew attention to Mary's motivation for her crime as one of the 
weak points of the film. Peter John Dyer noted the "banality of the character's emotional 
fixation"31, while Isabel Quigly found it hard to believe in the murder because "Mary 
ever seemed single-minded enough to invite her own long-winded torture in return for 
the second's satisfaction (that was all it was) of seeing her rival suffer."32 Mary's 
obsession with Jim, which should assume the stature of an overwhelming grand passion 
which sweeps away all rationality, never quite convinces these critics that it would move

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31 Films and Filming, July 1956.
32 The Spectator, 22 June 1956.
her to commit murder in his name. The presentation of Jim as a callow and rather pallid personality (even in the flashbacks enunciated by Mary) serves to make Mary's obsession with him look all the more excessive. It leaves a question hanging over why Mary is so fixated upon Jim, and prompts us to look beyond him for the reasons for it. Marcia Landy reads Mary's attachment to Jim as "symptomatic of her desire to escape her class and domestic prison"\(^{33}\), that Jim is not loved so much for himself as for the world that he represents and offers a way into. Here we have a rare female example of the Angry Young Man's habit of "hypergamy"\(^{34}\), sexual attachment to a partner from a higher social class. Just as Room at the Top's Joe Lampton finds it difficult to disentangle the appeal of Susan and the appeal of her money, so Mary's attraction to Jim seems to be an intermingling of her love for the man and love for the aura of culture he possesses, his thwarted ambitions to be a composer, his bohemian lifestyle. Her thirst for the cerebral life is suggested by the way she reads and instantly commits to memory the poetry that Jim has discarded (indeed its words will come back to haunt her in prison).

Mary is a woman who is desperate for more from life but thwarted by the limited opportunities open to her. Her job in an upmarket beauty shop promises social mobility but actually results only in nothing more than dull nights out at the local drinking club and propositions from ageing roués. Mary can wear the same perfume as wealthy Lucy, Christmas Rose, but only because she can get free dabs of the expensive scent at work; she could never afford a bottle of it herself. No wonder the first thing she notices about her rival are her beautiful high heeled black suede shoes, redolent of the life of ease and luxury that Mary will never be entitled to, even if she worked and saved for years. She is, as Landy suggests, "a working-class woman, unhappily married, dissatisfied with the banality of her life and work"\(^{35}\) and it is worth pausing to consider how unusual that is

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\(^{33}\) Landy, *British Genres*, p. 456.

\(^{34}\) Phrase coined by sociologist Geoffrey Gorer in 'The Perils of Hypergamy', *New Statesman*, 4 May 1957.

\(^{35}\) Landy, *British Genres*, p. 456.
not only within British film culture of the time, but also in wider cultural representations of the time. The Angry Young Man's misogyny prevents him from seeing how women might not merely be the agents of conformity but might also be its victims. As Elisabeth Wilson points out, the post war consensus was the "achievement of a deceptive harmony out of a variety of noisy voices" that was dependent on all kinds of ambitions and desires being quashed, and among them were the desires and ambitions of women.

_Yield to the Night_, with its female protagonist who wants more out of life than respectable conjugality can offer, acts as a corrective to the notion that the Angry Young Men of 1956 had the monopoly on dissatisfaction with the life choices available to them. Landy sees the film as an extended metaphor for "the inevitable punishment of the female who seeks to escape the prison of her life [...] a broader allegory of society’s retaliation against female desire through all of its institutional channels" and if we follow her reading, we can see how, when women rebel against the conformity of fifties society, the stakes are clearly much higher. Where Jimmy Porter is stuck in the metaphorical prison of a cramped bedsit on a boring Sunday, waiting for the pubs to open, Mary Hilton's prison is all too real, listening to the same church bells that so enervate Porter, but for her, they act as a reminder of her impending execution. _Look Back in Anger_ concludes with the bittersweet whimsy of Jimmy and Alison's game of 'bears and squirrels' and the possibility of a second chance for their fractured marriage. By contrast, _Yield to the Night_ offers no second chances, no possibility of optimism, concluding with the bleakest and most final of endings: Mary's execution. Jimmy's search for "a little ordinary human enthusiasm" in his life has resulted in the surmountable problems of a rancid marriage and a squalid flat, but Mary's similar search for a meaningful life spirals into _amour fou_, prison and execution. Mary Hilton, in the end, is also more effective as an angry young man than Jimmy Porter. In the final

[^36]: Wilson, _Only Halfway to Paradise_, p. 3.
[^37]: Landy, _British Genres_, p. 457.
flashback that details Jim's suicide and Mary's decision to exact her revenge upon Lucy, Mary expresses the feeling of overwhelming anger that has come over her with Porter-esque vehemence: "I could feel the hate for Lucy welling up inside of me. I hated her. That her life could go on as though nothing had happened. I felt sick with hate." Mary imagines Lucy at the inquest as she reads about it in the paper, conjuring up an image of a manicured hand laden with bracelets, the fingernails drumming impatiently on the dock as she answers the questions in a bored dismissive tone of voice, denying her affair with Jim, implying that he was just an infatuated admirer. The caricature of the upper class bitch is not a million miles away from those verbally created by Jimmy Porter, the difference being that, while he impotently rages against the aristocracy's exploitation of its social inferiors, Mary actually does something about it. Jimmy wishes Alison's mother dead ("I said she's an old bitch and she should be dead!") but Mary picks up a gun and shoots Lucy for using Jim and then discarding him. Unlike Jimmy's class terrorism, Mary's is not restricted to verbal onslaughts and she pays the price for having the courage of her convictions when it comes to women like Lucy.

The fact that Mary Hilton is played by Diana Dors is of crucial importance for any understanding of exactly how the film works. Dors was the most notorious and flamboyant film personality in the staid world of fifties Britain, who dared to proclaim herself "the only sex symbol Britain has produced since Lady Godiva". She had been a precocious teenager who won a beauty competition at the age of 13 and made her first film appearance, as a spiv's mistress in The Shop at Sly Corner (1946), at the age of 15. By the time she appeared in Yield to the Night she had dropped out of the Rank charm school, been to court for non-payment of rent, bought herself a powder blue Cadillac,
been the subject of a question in the House of Commons, appeared in her own 3-D book of pin-ups, made herself into a limited company and, most famously, sailed a gondola down the Grand Canal in Venice wearing only a mink bikini. These exploits were reported in great detail by the press who were fascinated by her disregard for propriety when it came to the three shibboleths of British society: sex, money, and good taste. Pam Cook suggests that it was precisely her "public display of aspects of British culture that are usually swept under the carpet" that made her a national icon.

Christine Geraghty, in her essay on Dors, compared her to two other similarly alliterative fifties sex symbols, Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, arguing that all three share personae constructed around "the contradictory ideas of vulnerability and knowingness": "They may appear to use men through their sexuality, both in their films and their off-screen lives, but it is as if their sexuality is something that flows through them and is beyond their control". Of the three though, Dors seems to be the least vulnerable, the most self-aware and self-assured, closer to someone like Mae West than she is to her immediate blonde bombshell contemporaries. Even taking into account all her financial and matrimonial troubles, she exudes an aura of doughty grown-up practicality rather than melting tenderness, as evinced by Derek Hill's 1955 profile of the star which begins "Diana Dors, it is generally accepted, has her head firmly screwed on; and her other attributes are equally well assembled. The first thing one studies on seeing her in the flesh is the floor. It seems safest". Nonetheless, any possible intimidation that stemmed from Dors' stellar status was leavened by her "philosophical good humour...

41 Hansard, 28 October 1954, cc. 2125-2126. The question was on how much tax film stars should pay. Dors responded in the pages of Picturegoer with a precise account of her monthly incomings and outgoings and justification for her expenditure (Ernie Player, 'Where Does Your Money Go?', Picturegoer, 27 November 1954.
44 Derek Hill, 'A Window on Dors', Films and Filming, April 1955.
[and] a sense of self-mockery" and she was frequently characterised as a star who managed to combine her glitz with "a reassuringly home-grown air of down-to-earth matiness".46 As Brian McFarlane noted, Dors "always seemed obdurately working class in a cinema whose narratives reflected middle class values"47, and was recognised by popular audiences as 'one of us': "Our Di", as Durgnat puts it.48 She knows that the appeal of her 'attributes' is ephemeral and is determined to sell what she refers to as 'the merchandise' while she can: "I might as well cash in on my sex now while I've got it. It can't last forever, can it?".49 As such, she embodies the determination to 'live now and pay later' that characterised the move from austerity to affluence in postwar British society. Richard Whitehall describes her as "more neon-strip as opposed to clogs and shawl [...] the first completely urban star developed through the British cinema" before trenchantly observing "she has never been, one imagines, Richard Hoggart's favourite pin-up".50 Attitudes to this exotic creature veered from fear (suggested by Derek Hill's comments above) and loathing51 to a kind of chauvinistic pride in her as a national asset, our answer to Marilyn Monroe52, not a poor facsimile of an American ideal but a native sex symbol, one as "resolutely British as Shrove Tuesday and Brighton Rock."53 Despite appearing in prestige films for major directors like David Lean and Carol Reed, in the end she is less famous for the films that she made than for simply 'being a film star'.54 But this should not be taken as a sign of her marginality in British film culture of the

49 'Visible Export', Time, 10 October 1955. This vein of 'sic transit gloria mundi' persisted throughout her career. As she later joked, her old Madame Tussauds waxwork had been melted down "in favour of George Best. They must have had some wax left over" (Evening Standard, 28 June 1974).
51 An article entitled 'Close That Dors!' in the Daily Sketch, 20 July 1956, accuses her of tax dodging, shameless self-promotion and neglect of her British fans amongst other crimes. For other examples of the extreme press reaction to Dors, see Geraghty, 'Diana Dors', pp. 342-344.
52 The Daily Mirror conducted a front page 'Battle of the Blondes' on 17 July 1956. Dors won and the headline was 'Diana steals front page from Marilyn'.
period: rather, as Pam Cook argues, "during the 1950s, she was emblematic of
conflicting forces of social change in a way no other British star was able to achieve."55

Indeed the casting of Diana Dors in the role of Mary Hilton supports the reading
of the character as a kind of angry young woman manqué. Although never recognised by
the Angry Young Men and their highbrow champions, Diana Dors actually has a lot in
common with the likes of Colin Wilson and John Osborne. The fact that they are often
mentioned in the same breath (Colin Wilson described as a literary version of Dors, John
Osborne voted most controversial personality of 1956, alongside Liberace, Yul Brynner
and...Diana Dors56) seems to indicate some kind of kinship. All are pushing back the
boundaries of a society they find constrictive and torpid. Just as Osborne's Jimmy Porter
became a cause célèbre by saying what had hitherto been unsayable and breaking
through the bedrock of British hypocrisy, so too, according to Cook, it was Dors'
"straight-talking" that gave rise to "her challenge to the stuffy British establishment."57
For instance, Kenneth Tynan talks about how "the Porters of this world deplore the
tyranny of 'good taste'58, recognising how it is too often synonymous with good
breeding, not unlike Dors' assaults on good taste with her refusal to behave modestly
and her lavish expenditure on luxury items that announced their expense. Peter Lewis
describes how the Angry Young Men "symbolised the desire for a new, frankly
acknowledged sexual freedom among the under-thirties"59, again something akin to
Dors' open attitude to sex in the face of a nation that preferred not to acknowledge such
matters. As Cook suggests: "Her outspoken stand against hypocrisy and petit-bourgeois
morality also placed her with a progressive strand in British society that wished to
eradicate puritanism and narrow-minded intolerance"60, which would include among its

55 Ibid., pp. 174-175.
56 End of year poll in Evening Standard quoted in Ritchie, Success Stories, p. 34.
57 Cook, 'The Trouble with Sex', p. 173.
59 Ibid., p. 168.
60 Cook, 'The Trouble with Sex', pp. 174-175.
number the Angry Young Men. Most innovatively of all, they are not afraid to voice the fact that they are bored. What Mary McCarthy says of Jimmy Porter, that "to be actively, angrily, militantly bored is one of the few forms of social protest open to him," could also stand for Diana Dors and her relentless pursuit of excitement and her annoyance if it fails to materialise. If thwarted in her pursuit of pleasure, the result would not be classic British forbearance and the stiff upper lip, but barely disguised irritation and sullenness, and a sulky jutting lower lip. What links Diana Dors and the Angry Young Men, above all, is their refusal to know their place and be thankful. Instead, they demand that stuffy 1950s British society change to fit their needs rather than moulding themselves to fit in with it, and as such, they act as harbingers of a new age.

One does not need to delve much further into the paradoxical phenomenon of Diana Dors to guess that a star persona as remarkable and multifaceted as hers would not be easily co-opted into a dour social problem film. We have a case here of what Richard Dyer has described as "the powerfully, inescapably present, always-already-signifying nature of star images," threatening to rupture the narrative and outshine the ostensible aim of the film, a heartfelt plea for the abolition of hanging. *Kine Weekly*'s guidance on successful marketing of the film reveals the schism between *Yield to the Night* as social problem film and *Yield to the Night* as star vehicle. It suggests the staging of public debates on the "burning national issue" of capital punishment but at the same time, it also suggests holding contests to find "the girl who most resembled Miss Dors in face and figure. Prize: A washing machine" - an indication of the film's uneasy yoking of glamour and grimness.

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62 See Medhurst, 'Dirk Bogarde', p. 354. He links Dirk's sneer with Dors' pout as the twin signs of the other side of Englishness which rejects the stiff upper lip.
64 *Kine Weekly*, 13 December 1956.
However, it is important to bear in mind how far the film also manages to harness and use Dors' powerful extratextual image in the service of the film. On the simplest level, the film makes good use of its unusual casting to draw attention to the film. Diana Dors is the kind of star who creates a buzz, as Picture Post put it; she is "daring, desirable, uncompromising, non-conformist...the personality the public wants to see"\(^{65}\), and thus ideal casting for a film that vowed to "set the whole country talking".\(^{66}\) More fundamentally, the film's makers would use Dors' sexy image to pull the crowds into a film that might otherwise be regarded as unappealing in its seriousness and gloominess. For example, the most frequently used publicity poster for the film is dominated by a head-and-shoulders picture of Dors, apparently naked, with carefully styled platinum hair (unlike in the majority of the film) and a Monroe-esque open mouth and half-closed eyes. Although the directness of the question "would you hang Mary Hilton?" plays on the fact that this is a film about the issue of capital punishment, it is interesting that the only two things important enough to be picked out in red (itself a colour traditionally associated with illicit sexuality) on the black and white poster are the "cert X" mark, with its connotations of sexual explicitness, and the film's title which, along with its ostensible reference to preparing oneself for death, also has a subtext of sexual surrender.\(^{67}\) Not for the first time, sex was being used to sell the social problem picture: little wonder that the film was retitled 'Blonde Sinner' for its US release. However, the main object of fascination in pre-publicity and reviews of the film was the fact that in her role as a condemned murderer, Diana Dors would appear in a very different guise.\(^{68}\) Britain's blonde bombshell would be divested of her glamour, swapping mink and sequins for prison calico, make up for bare skin, and letting the dark

\(^{65}\) Picture Post, 22 January 1955.
\(^{66}\) Yield to the Night pressbook.
\(^{67}\) Dors reported that after the film's release "an enterprising beautician wanted to bring out a scent called 'Yield to the Night'"; an indication of how far the title could be interpreted in a romantic light. (Diana Dors, Swinging' Dors (London: WDL, 1960), p. 186).
roots of her immaculately platinum hair grow through. The film's pressbook suggests that cinemas make use of the contrast between the two Dianas to create interest in the film, displaying contrasting stills in cinema foyers: "on the right, glamorous, seductive, as she is in real life. On the left, shorn of her make-up as she appears in her dramatic role [...] Under the glamour still of the star have the words 'The Glamorous Diana Dors you all know' and under the character still from the film have 'Meet the new Diana Dors in the role of a condemned murderess'". This strategy for generating interest in the film was a resounding success, as is evident from these two press reviews, both from 'serious' publications, *The Times* and *The Spectator*, which suggest that this overwhelming concern with Dors' deglamorisation was not exclusive to the fan magazines:

Gone is the bright, platinum smartness and in its place there appear the face and figure of a square, stoutish woman, ravaged of feature, drab and unprepossessing.  

[...] she has no basic beauty once the warpaint is off and the rather rhomboid face, washed clean with tears, puffy with sleeplessness, crowned by a straggle of mouse-coloured hair darkening somehow shockingly at the roots, looks nakedly rubbery and plain.

As Steve Chibnall points out, it is possible to discern an element of "vindictive fantasy" in the desire to see the sex symbol 'get her comeuppance' by offering the spectator a chance to get to the heart of who she 'really' is when she is not dressed up to

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68 Of course, there had been a dry run for Dors' deglamorisation in her role in *The Weak and the Wicked*. But then she was allowed to retain her trademark platinum hair and her make-up, so it did not entail the same kind of intensified stripping back of the sex symbol to her bare essentials as *Yield to the Night*.

69 *Yield to the Night* pressbook.

70 *The Times*, 18 June 1956.


72 Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 78.
the nines. In some of the press pertaining to the film there does seem to be a real relish and enjoyment of the spectacle of the sex symbol stripped of all her usual glamorising accoutrements - one could draw a parallel with Hitchcock's sadistic punishment of beautiful blondes in his films. This does ignore the potential for Dors' own agency in her deglamorisation - from her early confession that she would love to "hide all this hair and play a nun"\(^{73}\), to her evident enjoyment at playing character roles "with not a glimmer of glamour"\(^{74}\), from Charlotte in Oliver Twist (1948) to her "evil gin-swigging old tart of 60" (her own words)\(^{75}\) in The Amazing Mr Blunden (1973). Nonetheless, the fact that her desire to be regarded as a serious actress is incompatible with an obvious sexual allure can clearly be seen as part of a misogynist tradition.\(^{76}\) Picturegoer's headline for their review of Yield to the Night, "YES - Dors CAN act without her mink"\(^{77}\) exemplifies (albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way) this sense of disbelief that the sexpot could take on a serious dramatic role successfully.

What all this makes clear is how far Yield to the Night is a film that hinges upon a fascination with its star's body: it is its star attraction, the means of marketing the film as well as the medium through which it tells its story and enacts its social critique. Diana Dors' transformation from sex symbol to dowdy is not just a way of whipping up interest in the film but it also is used to mirror and underscore her character's trajectory of "good time girl turned contemplative victim of love".\(^{78}\) Given the film's insistent focus on the body, it seems appropriate, to return to Foucault and Foucauldian theory, where the body also occupies a central position. Rather than the old humanist stable self, the Foucauldian body is a radically anti-essentialist unstable entity constructed by diverse

\(^{73}\) Hill, 'A Window on Dors', p. 10.
\(^{74}\) Ken Sherry, 'I Bet This Shook The Boys!', Picturegoer, 25 September 1954.
\(^{75}\) Braun, 'Diana Dors: In Her Own Terms', p. 28.
\(^{76}\) One that still continues to this day. For example, another double-initialled sex symbol, Sharon Stone, consolidated her desire to be regarded as a serious actor by letting her hair go mousy and taking the role of a woman on death row in the film Last Dance (1994), suggesting that the equation of dowdiness and serious acting is by no means exclusive to the past or to the traditionally anti-glamour British film industry.
\(^{77}\) Picturegoer, 30 June 1956.
systems of power and discipline. As such, historical investigation should be underpinned by "an examination of the way in which the body is arbitrarily and violently constructed in order to legitimise different regimes of domination". Of course, the ultimate exertion of disciplinary power upon the unruly body is punishment by death, the last resort when all other forms of discipline have failed. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* begins with a lengthy consideration of the meaning of capital punishment. In the two chapters entitled 'The Body of the Condemned' and 'The Spectacle of the Scaffold', he argues that these two terrifying entities are used to demonstrate the power of the ruling regime to the populace. The criminal's mutilated body acts as a powerful deterrent against committing crime, and the physical presence of the gallows underlines the threat. However, public execution entails many risks because "in punishment-as-spectacle, a confused horror spread from the scaffold; it enveloped both executioner and condemned; and, although it was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory, it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame". One could argue that a film like *Yield to the Night* is, in a sense, making execution public again, and banking on our ambiguous reaction to the horrific spectacle to create a sense of shame and disgust at its 'legal violence'. But where the film really stages its protest against the inhumanity of hanging is not through the spectacle of the scaffold but in its examination of the cruelties inherent in the process of waiting for the execution. In *Yield to the Night*, we get as clear a picture of how a body is 'arbitrarily and violently constructed' in the service of a regime of domination as has ever been committed to film. Foucault has said of the body that it is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" and this never seemed truer than when applied to the

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79 McNay, *Foucault and Feminism*, p. 16.
81 Ibid., p. 25.
predicament of Mary Hilton, a body that is alternately fed, clothed, counselled, drugged, bandaged, taught to play chess, and finally, led away to die.

In a suggestive recent essay, Patrick Fuery argues that the filmic discourse is fundamentally corporeal: with the exceptions of abstract or nature films, it always tells its stories through the human body. The medium of film has even created a new knowledge of the body, with the close up, which allows a spectator to have the same kind of intimate knowledge of the face of a stranger as s/he would previously only have had with the faces of partners and very close family. Fuery goes on to make a link between Foucault's discussion of 'the body of the condemned as spectacle', the "tortured, punished body held up for public display" and the cinema's similar recurrent use of the body as spectacle - the camera too close, the light too bright. He argues that the institution of the cinema offers a "continual outpouring of bodies that [...] are manipulated and exploited", and yet, he continues, through their public display, also have the power to "resist and subvert" - just as the spectacle of the scaffold could act as legitimisation of a regime and, conversely, a critique of it. The link that Fuery makes between the display of the body of the condemned and the cinematic apparatus is particularly apposite to an analysis of Yield to the Night, a film whose subject is 'the body of the condemned as spectacle'. Fuery mentions the tension in the cinematic body between its exploitation and its resistance. On an initial appraisal, it is much easier to see how Dors' body has been exploited in this film, stripped of its usual glamour, and presented as a spectacle, isolated for study by the curious spectator, almost like an insect specimen stuck on a pin, trapped in her cell, perpetually and harshly illuminated by the light that never goes out. But the film never simply caters to the prurience of its audience. Instead close scrutiny of the appearance of its heroine becomes a vital part of the way the film tells its story. As Marcia Landy puts it, "the woman's body becomes a

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83 Ibid.
site of conflicting images with which to read the nature of her motivation and responses to her impending death\textsuperscript{84}. Very often, words are inadequate to express Mary's desolation and instead her face and body, and the state that they are in, are left to express what cannot be expressed verbally. The fact that Dors' body is 'suffering' for her art, stripped of make up, harshly lit, mercilessly scrutinised, does not distract from her characterisation but instead only augments the sense of the suffering endured by the character she plays. Rather than finding themselves steamrollered by the formidable persona of their star, the makers of Yield to the Night are able to harness aspects of that persona and use them to their advantage. This begins with the pre-publicity to the film but it continues in the film itself which in the end can be read as not only about the horrors of the condemned cell but also about the nature of Diana Dors' stardom in fifties Britain. Dors later said that Yield to the Night "was to be the film of my life\textsuperscript{85}, meaning that it would be the one chance she got to give a performance worthy of her underused acting talent. But alternatively, one might read this statement as an admission that the film was a kind of oblique Diana Dors biopic, the 'film of her life'. Many writers have noted how strange it is that the most famous film of this notorious glamourpuss is the one where she appears divested of her characteristic glamour, but this is the one film that seeks to examine what it was for Dors to bear the burden of "literally embodying the aspirations and anxieties of a society in transition.\textsuperscript{86}

Yield to the Night's awareness and use of its star's body is in evidence from the film's opening moments. The pre-credit sequence emphasises its fragmentation, only allowing us to see a little of it at a time, rarely affording us a close look at its entirety, and deferring the revelatory close up until its final moments. Instead our first view of Mary Hilton is her high heels and raincoated back as she walks away from the camera. As the sequence progresses, we see her as a gloved hand or a flash of blonde hair or we

\textsuperscript{84} Landy, British Genres, p. 456.
\textsuperscript{85} Dors, Swingin' Dors, p. 140.
glimpse the shadow she casts on the pavement or her distorted reflection in a car's hubcap. The murder victim, Lucy Carpenter, is also presented not as a whole body but through the synecdoche of her expensive car, a blast of smooth music from the car radio, a pair of high heels, a fur trimmed coat, a pile of shopping parcels, and later her splayed legs and her manicured hand loaded with expensive jewellery that falls limply on the driveway's gravel after she is shot. The elaborate guessing game that the film plays with its audience (is it really her? when will we get to see her properly?) finally ceases when Mary pulls the gun out of her handbag and the camera pans up her body onto her face as she is about to fire the gun. Once the murder has been committed and Mary has contemptuously tossed the used murder weapon between her victim's legs in a sexually loaded action, there follows a reaction shot of a man who has witnessed the crime. Kneeling down by Lucy's body, he looks up and stares open-mouthed at the murderess, who has made no attempt to flee the scene of the crime.87 His look at her gives a cue for the first proper close up on her face. He, like us, is trying to fathom from her facial expression why she has done this terrible thing, what she is feeling, but her odd facial expression, which simultaneously suggests both horror and triumph, proves impossible to read. With this shot begins the process that will continue in all the film's subsequent close ups of Mary's suffering face and weary body, an attempt to understand the workings of the mind through scrutiny of the body. As the camera moves closer to her face, and the timpani on the soundtrack grow louder and more insistent, the close up finally blurs, an optical effect suggesting both Mary's clouded mental state and the moment's emotional import - it almost looks like we are viewing the scene through eyes swimming with tears. But it also suggests that our quest to understand Mary's mind through scrutiny of her body will not be easy. Here, the camera moves in on her face but

85 Cook, 'The Trouble with Sex', p. 168.
87 This differs from an earlier draft of the scene where she tries to evade capture: "As she tries to dash past the POLICEMAN grabs her. MARY fights back trying to break free...MARY beats against the POLICEMAN's chest with her fists." Script of Yield to the Night (S1698) dated 9 August 1955, p. 114.
it is unable to fathom the meaning of her look as she stands over the body of the woman she has murdered, and it almost seems to admit defeat by going out of focus and hurrying away to the credits. Some things are unfilmable.

*Yield to the Night*'s concentration on the body, studying it in a way that goes beyond merely establishing character, is something that is also important in Joan Henry’s original novel. Mary examines her warders in minute anthropological detail, as with this passage on Mason: "She is usually the most cheerful of my guards. Her hair is dark and very smooth, drawn back in a small neat bun. She always has a very high colour as though she had just come in from a long walk in wind and rain. Her quick bustling walk encourages this effect. When I come to think of it, she doesn't walk...she bounces like a large misshapen rubber ball. Her uniform sometimes looks as though she had slept in it and her tunic pockets invariably bulge with invisible objects." Mary's scrutiny of the warder's body is partly due to the sensory deprivation of her environment which makes her sensitive to every tiny detail and change, but it also suggests someone who is trying to read inner feelings from outward appearance. This is exactly what the spectator does to Mary when watching her in the film. This process of scrutinising Mary's body in order to understand her mental state intensifies as we move straight from the scene of the crime to prison, eschewing any dramatisation of her arrest, trial and sentencing. Immediately a sense of anticipation is created as the chaplain and a prison nurse have a brief discussion about the failure of Hilton's appeal as they meet on the threshold of her cell. Then the camera follows the chaplain over to Mary and we finally get a look at her. The most striking thing is undoubtedly the dramatic change in her appearance. In place of the neatly groomed, smartly dressed young woman of a few moments ago, the camera pans across to a profile shot of a dishevelled ravaged woman whose blonde hair has reverted to a dark mousy colour and is now scruffily tied back. All sense of caring for the self seems to have fallen away. The impression given is of
overwhelming numbness, with Mary slowly blinking and swallowing in blank incomprehension of the news she has just been told ("When will it be? I wasn't quite taking it in."). In a scene recalling Jean's stunned state as she is examined by a series of 'professionals' in *The Weak and the Wicked*, we see Mary visited by a chaplain, a lawyer, and a doctor, in quick succession. With each visitor, she stares ahead rather than meeting their eyes, signalling her disengagement from the people around her, and her retreat into herself.89 Just as we had shots detailing Mary's stiletto heels and seamed stockings in the pre-credit sequence, now the camera dips down to floor level as Mary undresses for bed only to find her in very different footwear, flat prison-issue shoes and woollen stockings which signal her desexualisation in captivity.90 The striking difference between Mary then (glamorous and purposeful) and Mary now (dowdy and distracted) is sealed by the dissolve into the film's first flashback sequence. Mary is out for her daily exercise and as she looks up at the bare boughs of a tree, her face is shot in close up, framed through the sparse, angular branches which evoke her desolate, splintered state of mind. It is at this point that the flashback begins and we dissolve to an absolutely contrasting image of Mary, lively, beautiful and blonde again, the prison yard giving way to the plush surroundings of the beauty shop. As Mary's appearance deteriorates further because of her ordeal, the contrast with 'flashback Mary' grows ever more striking. In her final flashback, we see Mary dressed up for a party in a tight white off-the-shoulder lace dress which, her voiceover informs us, was the most expensive one she had ever bought. It is the closest Mary Hilton comes in the film to resembling the familiar star image of Diana Dors. Therefore, the return to prison and to Mary at the end of her tether, looking truly

89 Chibnall notes that compositions where Mary's "profile on the left of the frame is contrasted with the full face of her conversational partner on the right" are common in the film. (Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 88).
90 This is part of a whole motif of shoes and feet in the film, used by Chadder as the starting point for her discussion of the film. She argues that divesting Mary of her high heels and putting her in flat clumpy shoes as well as, later, giving her a limp, act as an "oedipal castration" (Chadder, 'The Higher Heel', p. 74). Sue Harper goes even further in her argument that "shoes become the only site of expressivity in the
wretched, has all the more impact because of its shocking juxtaposition with the pristine image of a glamorous film star. Jane Gaines has argued that in cinema, it is often the case that "costume tells the woman's story," a statement that fits Mary Hilton in *Yield to the Night*. Much of the information about her character is conveyed not through narrative exegesis but through non-verbal discourses, like costume, which are centred on the body. It is not what she says so much as the state of her hair, the sallowness of her skin, her change of shoes, her refusal to meet anyone's gaze, that tell the real story.

However, to emphasise Mary as a numb and passive object of observation is to deny her the status of speaking subject, something which the film carefully avoids. Unusually for a film about a criminal female, she is given control of the voiceover narration and thus allowed to tell her own story, rather than have it told for her. Although at first the film presents her a numb observee, she finds her voice while walking in the yard. However, her first words are not her own but A.E. Housman's, as she recalls lines from *A Shropshire Lad* that she had first encountered while thumbing through Jim's books, but that have now become painfully relevant: "Since to look at things in bloom/ Fifty Springs is little room./ About the woodland I will go/ to see the cherry hung with snow". The poem seems deliberately to taunt her, her voice dwelling on and repeating the word 'hung', reminding her of the fate that awaits her. Mary appears to be a prisoner of masculine language, unable to find her own words to describe her ordeal, her memory colonised against her will by Housman's words. On the other hand, one might see Mary's recitation of Housman as an audacious appropriation of male discourse: taking his homoerotic meditations on the untimely deaths of beautiful young film, and on a subliminal level they symbolise all those fierce needs that are being punished - the desire for passion, adornment and revenge." (Harper, *Women in British Cinema*, p. 83).


92 As Kaja Silverman points out, this seldom occurs in narrative films, where a male voice is far more likely to have the enunciative authority, and to explain the female enigma to us through his eyes. The vocal position more often identified with women in films is "noise, babble, or the cry", exemplified by the 'scream queens' of horror films. As she puts it, "What is demanded from woman is involuntary sound, sound that escapes her own understanding." (Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, pp. 77-78).
men and daring to apply his words to her own predicament, claiming the same tragic status for herself. Later in the film, she is given a literary anthology by the prison Chaplain and is drawn to one particular passage which ends: "For the night is already at hand and it is well to yield to the night." Although never revealed in the film, these words are taken from Book VII of The Iliad when Aias and Hector agree to stop battle as night falls. These words, which give the film its title, seem to encapsulate the advice of all those around her who urge her to reconcile herself to death, here with all the weightiness of high culture and ancient tradition adding to their authority. Mary admits that she is drawn to the words but in the end she rejects their message: "Perhaps it is well, but I can't. I want to live. I want it more than ever." Despite the fact that the literature Mary is drawn to is emphatically 'male (laments for lost boys, classical epic), Mary applies it to herself, feminises it and thus uses the literary canon in a subversive way to speak for her, rather than be spoken by it.

Mary wrests control of her story through her possession of the voiceover but also through her enunciation of the film's flashback sequences. Although physically confined within the tiny bare cell and compelled to go through the motions of the daily routine, Mary has the power to manipulate time and place, able to return to the past and bring her memories alive for us. Throughout the film, there is a tension between prison time, demarcated by the recurrent shots of the big prison clock tower and the warders coming on and off their shifts at regular intervals, and Mary's time, which is much more fluid and oscillatory. This schism has much in common with Kristeva's notion of 'woman's time' which is subjective, cyclical, endlessly recurring, as opposed to "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding," implicitly male (Western) time. The

93 Hilton's fondness for 'doomed young men' poetry seems to be shared by the actress playing her. An article on Dors in the Sunday Express, 5 January 1958, describes her as "wearing a black sheath dress, and her blonde hair fell like spaniel's ears on either side of her face. She was reading a book of poems by Rupert Brooke."

competition between these two experiences of time is all the more vital for Mary: regular linear prison time is counting down to her execution while she still attempts to live 'women's time' moving freely between past and present, revisiting events in her mind. No wonder that Mary is so possessive about her calendar, arguing for her right to annotate it as she wishes ("it's mine and there's nothing in prison regulations to say I can't write on it"): control over time signifies control over life and death.

A focus on Mary's flashbacks emphasises the solitary side of her character, living in a private world in her head, but it is important to remember that Mary is not alone but accompanied at all times by her female warders. Mary's relationship with them is characterised by an odd mixture of intimacy and distance. She is both with the warders and apart from them; a tension emphasised by the film's mise-en-scène, which places Mary in the same shot as the warders but often at one remove, in the background while they are in the foreground or vice versa. Her part of the cell is distinctly demarcated from their part of the cell. Often the film juxtaposes them, using the warders as a kind of chorus or background to throw Mary's sufferings into relief. Mary is also visually differentiated from her guards; the only blonde among the dark haired warders, dressed in shapeless clothes with cloth ties, in contrast to their sharply tailored uniforms with neat buttons. Nonetheless, sometimes they chat and joke with each other, and Mary even covers up for one warder caught smoking on duty. But this atmosphere of companionship that comes to settle over the women's dealings is very often suddenly stripped away by a chance remark and then the real purpose of their relationship is revealed afresh. An example of this occurs early in the film where Mason (Molly Urquhart) and Maxwell (Mary Mackenzie) are gossiping about another officer, Hill (Olga Lindo) and her irritation at being told by the prison doctor that she must expect headaches at her 'time of life'. The warders deride women who lie about their age, but Mason qualifies her remarks by arguing that "it's all very well to talk if you've got
nothing to conceal". They attempt to involve Mary in their conversation, little realising how insensitive their chosen topic is; Hill will not see 50 again, but Hilton will almost certainly never see 50 at all and will never have to face the dilemma of having to lie about her age. Similarly, later in the film, Mary is in the bath having her fingernails clipped by Hill when Mason and Maxwell arrive to take over from her. As Mason clips the rest of Mary's nails, Maxwell talks about applying for a transfer to another prison in the near future. Mason is shocked at this news ("Oh, you wouldn't do that, would you, Pat?") and pauses in mid-clip. The moment sounds innocuous enough but the way the women forget that Mary is there and their almost aggressive flaunting of the fact that life goes on outside these prison walls, that friendships are forged and sustained, and plans are made for the future, seems cruelly inappropriate to be discussed in front of Mary, for whom any news of what might happen in the near future is desperately poignant. It is as though they have forgotten that the woman in front of them will die in a few weeks, and instead she has just become a set of nails to clip. The combined insensitivity and friendliness of the warders, and its deleterious effect on Mary, are deftly suggested in such moments. Sometimes there is embarrassment when one of them unwittingly says the wrong thing, like Barker's comment on the weather "there's a bitter East wind, you could catch your death". Brandon quickly tries to cover up the ensuing awkwardness by saying that she has not put enough sugar on Mary's breakfast porridge and tipping the entire contents of the sugar bowl on it, but no amount of sweetness can mitigate the basic cruelty of Mary's situation. Into their dull routine intrudes a sudden shocking realisation of why these women are gathered together in this place - one to be killed and the others to guard her until that killing takes place.

The only prison warder with whom Mary develops a more complex relationship is McFarlane (Yvonne Mitchell) and their rapport in the film is unusual enough to be

95 Joan Henry is able to express Mary's feelings more openly in the novel: "I envy anyone the narrowest of worlds...they still have their dull unbeautiful lives to live. Oh my God, how I envy them..." (Henry,
described by Janet Thumim as "a notable portrayal of a relationship between two women, rare in films of this time." McFarlane's first act in the film is to offer Mary a blindfold to block out the constant light in the cell, in spite of Hill's disapproval at this break in protocol. Throughout the film, McFarlane remains aloof from the other warders, one of whom describes how McFarlane "freezes you out" if you try to get close to her. When she goes to fetch Mary a drink of water, the camera follows her, which it has not done for any of the other warders, suggesting her exceptional status among them. It pauses on a closeup of her pensive face framed between the water pipes which resemble prison bars, suggesting that she, like Mary, is undergoing a form of imprisonment, an idea that will be developed later in the film. We discover that McFarlane's mother has been committed to an insane asylum and that McFarlane has forfeited her chance to get married and have children, partly to care for her mother but also, it is intimated, because the madness might be hereditary. McFarlane's mother dies while Mary is awaiting execution and Mary nervously broaches the subject when McFarlane returns to work after the funeral. There follows a strange scene which ends with both women pondering how they ended up in the place that they are. The scene culminates as they both lapse into silence and McFarlane deliberately knocks down the card house that she has been carefully building, its collapse seeming to suggest her feelings of hopelessness but also the collapse in prison hierarchy, as they are temporarily not prisoner and warder but two women equal in their mutual unhappiness.

Mary's relationship with her mother (Dandy Nichols) is marked by uneasiness and suspicion, making her visits strained occasions. She brings along Mary's younger brother Alan against Mary's wishes, and is evidently more concerned with how her social standing and health are affected by Mary's notoriety than by her daughter's imminent death. McFarlane's relationship with her mother, although it happens off Yield to the Night, p. 114).
screen, is characterised as compassionate, with one warder relating a story of how they saw McFarlane on the way to visit her mother at the asylum with a huge bouquet of beautiful flowers. Having already loved one woman forced into the margins of society by her madness, she is uniquely placed to understand that, despite being an inmate of a corrective institution, Mary is a human being as worthy of care and sympathy as anyone else. Although their bond is coloured by aspects of the maternal, that is not the only dimension to it. The suggestion of Mary's attraction towards McFarlane is more fully developed in Joan Henry's novel where Mary describes McFarlane's actions and appearance in sensuous detail ("She touched my shoulder with a firm pressure, and I smelt the fresh astringent scent of eau-de-cologne that I had come to associate with her presence."97) and looks forward to McFarlane's shifts ("If McFarlane is on tonight, she won't be in the morning. Perhaps that would be best; then I could say goodbye to her properly. Funny that I've only known her a few weeks - and only for six hours at a stretch - and yet she's the only one in the world that I'm sorry to leave. You've got to have somebody or something to look forward to...even when you're going to die."98). As we can see from the latter quotation, Mary's relationship with McFarlane even becomes her prime motivation for living, suggesting how powerful her feelings are for her. Obviously, the film cannot deal with this subject matter in the same way, but some intimation of this relationship still comes through. Even a small detail like McFarlane's androgynous, short dark hair might be read as a coded subtextual indicator of lesbianism, particularly when considered in tandem with her job as prison warder, an archetype of lesbian representation. Throughout the film the women share several long searching looks which culminate in an embrace on Mary's final night before her execution, when McFarlane comforts Mary after she has burst into tears, something

97 Henry, Yield to the Night, p. 19.
98 Ibid., p. 115.
none of the other warders do. She is also the only warder to use Mary's first name rather than just her surname (when she says her final goodbye on the morning of the execution) suggesting how their bond is separate and different from just the ordinary dynamic of prisoner and guard.

However, while McFarlane is presented as a class apart from the other warders, she is not an unproblematically good figure. At one point Mary turns on her and insists that she is “in league with the others” in wanting to kill her. The film plays with our shifting perceptions of her benevolence. In one scene, as she approaches Mary's bed to place the cloth over her eyes, we see her in a low angle shot from Mary's point of view, the light behind McFarlane's head endowing her with a halo. However her guarded facial expression and her stern entreaty to "lie down and try to get some sleep" is far from angelically kind. She, as much as her fellow warders, compels Mary to conform to the routine, to put up and shut up. When Mary is crying and screaming not to have to see her mother, it is McFarlane who subdues her and tells her not to be so selfish ("Can't you think of anyone but yourself even now?"). However, what all the warders are struggling with is the fact that this woman who they have befriended will die at the hands of a system that they play their part in upholding. They all have moments where the strain of the situation tells upon them too, and they go beyond a cold cool monitoring of the prisoner. The most notable example occurs when Barker barely suppresses tears upon learning that Mary's appeal has been unsuccessful, crouching at Mary's feet and confessing "I'm so sorry Hilton. I'm so dreadfully sorry". But the warder who finds squaring the demands of the impersonal system with an ethic of care most difficult is undoubtedly McFarlane. When Mary wakes from a nightmare, she asks McFarlane "Will you be with me when they do it?", forcing her to recognise her involvement in Mary's life and death, and the only answer McFarlane can offer is a glibly hopeful "There might still be a reprieve". In place of belief in the justice of the system, there is
instead a wish for the exercising of mercy within that system, even if it completely
contradicts its basic rule to punish the crime of murder with death. Steve Chibnall takes
issue with Marcia Landy's reading of Mary's ordeal as "an allegory of society's
retaliation against female desire through all its institutional channels," arguing that this
interpretation of the film is fatally compromised by its oversight of the fact that it is
women who oversee Mary's imprisonment and who finally "endorse her punishment."
Although it would be a mistake to see the film as a straightforward celebration of female
solidarity against patriarchal injustice, I think that this reading is in turn guilty of
ignoring the scenes in the film that show the terrible strain on the women as they guard
her—they are far from unscathed and sanguine about the experience, and 'endorse'
hardly seems the right word to describe their attitude to their work. The judge (male)
sentences her to death and the executioner (male) will carry out that sentence but it is
mostly women who have to carry out the 'dirty work' of looking after her in the
meantime.

What *Yield to the Night* illuminates is the deep contradiction at the heart of the
system's attitude to the condemned prisoner. On the one hand, the death penalty adheres
to an older system of retributive justice, a life for a life. But on the other hand, the prison
is also indebted to an idea of rehabilitation and reform, that through the right treatment
and care, the prisoner can be 'cured' and converted into a useful member of society. The
tension between an ethic of justice and an ethic of care is exemplified in the film by the
attention paid to Mary's foot infection. Ironically, Mary never got a blister from her high
heels but the flat prison-issue shoes have caused one, making her walk with a limp.
Upon noticing this, the warder tells Mary that she must report it to the doctor. In due
course, the doctor comes to examine it, applies a dressing, which has to be regularly
changed by the warders and examined by the prison nurse, who tells her that "it should

100 Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 94.
be better in a few days". The trope of Mary's blistered foot and the care lavished upon it eloquently captures the absurdity of the state's care for a body it will destroy in a matter of weeks. Mary's foot ailment is cured, but to what end? In order to send a healthy body to the gallows. Just as the film's opening sequence presented the women's bodies as a series of fragmented body parts, we can see that this is also true of the prison's attitude to its condemned prisoner who becomes, as Isabel Quigly writes, "simply a body to be kept in trim, whose blisters must be tended, nails cut, digestion watched, hysteria checked" even up to the point of that body's total destruction.

The absurdity and futility of any normal human activity in the face of oncoming death is really brought to the fore in the scene where Mary refuses to get up in the morning. The way the action is composed in the frame expresses Mary's feeling of stasis and hopelessness. She remains horizontal, still, expressionless and generally silent in her bed (her only words are a plaintive "what's the use?") facing the camera, while other characters approach her from behind the bed and talk to her. Hill begins with brisk exhortation ("If you're really not well, Hilton, that's a different matter, otherwise you must get up at once") before adopting a gentler tone. The camera moves in closer to the bed as Hill leans over Mary and confides "I've been a prison officer for 25 years and believe me I'm right when I tell you that if you accept your punishment, don't fight it, you'll find it far easier to bear". Her voice is softer and she even strokes Mary's hair gently. However, this entreaty does not convince Mary to get up and she continues to stare ahead blankly. Next the doctor comes to her bed. He tries a breezy demeanour ("Now Mrs Hilton, what's the problem, are you in pain?") and encourages her to get up and have breakfast ("Ah, you'll feel better once you're up and have had some breakfast

101 Spectator, 22 June 1956.
102 The absurdity of this is not lost on Mary who, in an earlier draft of the script, looks at the doctor's finger on her pulse with "a look of irony and grave observation." Script of Yield to the Night (S1698), p. 178.
103 Not unlike the warder's advice to Jean in The Weak and the Wicked as she goes up to the dock to receive her sentence: "Take it, whatever it is".
[...] a good strong cup of tea will do you good") and he lifts her arm to take her pulse and as he lets go, it drops lifelessly down on her body, as though she were already dead (like Lucy's arm in the pre-credit sequence). When cheerful encouragement fails, again, like Hill, he leans closer to Mary and adopts a more intimate tone as he gives her the following advice.

It's not easy, this waiting, for you, or any of us. But by forcing yourself to conform to the routine, however hard and futile it may seem, you'll find that when the time comes, if it does come, you'll be better prepared to meet it. The things that we most fear are seldom as terrible as we expect.

'Conform to the routine': this could stand as the alternative title for Yield to the Night. This piece of dialogue encapsulates the compulsion of all the authorities upon Mary to comply, as Landy argues "to subdue her rebelliousness [...] see her family, to accept her punishment and to embrace her own death." It will be echoed in the prison visitor Miss Bligh's counsel to Mary on the eve of her execution: "Your body will obey you automatically as it's been taught to do. Your mind will be far away, as if in a dream." As already noted, it is this facet of the film that prompted Landy to look beyond its surface narrative about one woman in the condemned cell and instead to see what Mary undergoes as a wider metaphor for "the inevitable punishment of the female who seeks to escape the prison of her life". For her, "the words of the prison authorities extend beyond the immediate concern to reconcile her to her impending death: they become a judgement on women's search for alternatives to marriage and family life"105, suggesting how Yield to the Night, like The Weak and the Wicked, might fruitfully be read not as a

104 Landy, British Genres, p. 457.
105 Ibid., p. 457.
film about one exceptional woman but all women whose lives are limited by the narrow options of 1950s society. The means of coercion are the same: the appeal to communality (it's not just you suffering you know, it's not easy for any of us), the encouragement just to get on with things even if they seem 'hard and futile' because it's best for you in the long run, the suggestion of an escape (the execution might not happen, after all) coupled with the idea that even if it does happen, it won't be as frightening as you expect it to be. Don't struggle against it, don't protest, just get on with things even though they're unbearable, even though you have nothing to do but await your own death, and all this washed down with a cup of tea, the drink so evocative of British strategies for coping with a surfeit of emotion. The film has been accused of retreating into "daddy-knows-best" conformism, and indeed, at the end of the doctor's lecture, Mary does decide to get up and get on with things. But her question "What's the use?" is one that nobody can offer a satisfactory answer to. Why bother to eat the fried eggs and the porridge placed in front of her? She might as well starve if she is going to die anyway. Of course the doctor is unable to cure the real pain that ails her, unless he can get her a reprieve. 'What's the use?' has been temporarily sidestepped but it will continue to unsettle the atmosphere of calm consensus right up to the film's final moments.

As we have seen earlier, in the discussion of The Weak and the Wicked, the social problem film hinges on a dynamic of rehabilitation and cure, but while Yield to the Night shares elements of the social problem film's style (liberal crusading on a social issue, style informed by elements of realism and melodrama), it cannot rely on rehabilitation into society for its happy ending. Unlike Jean and Betty, Mary Hilton has gone too far and can only be dealt with by being destroyed. Therefore the 'kindly social worker/liberal professional' figure who so often crops up in this genre of films is slightly differently inflected in Yield to the Night. Miss Bligh (Athene Seyler), the prison visitor

106 Sight and Sound, Summer 1956.
(and lecturer and writer on prison reform) cannot help Mary onto the path to a new life. Instead she urges Mary to think about whether she is sorry for what she has done and reconcile her to her imminent death. Thus she becomes an inadvertent apologist for the system, even while she is a penal reformer, and we never actually hear her opinion on whether capital punishment should be revoked. On the one hand, Miss Bligh is appreciated because her 'batty old lady' persona is a welcome change from the professionalism of the warders. She also talks to Mary like a normal person, realising that she can still derive pleasure from simple things like the posy of violets she gives her, as well as acting as a valuable confidante in her final hours. But at the same time, there is a note of stridency in her exchanges with Mary. Talking about the horticultural exhibition she has just visited, she asks Mary if she likes flowers, not pausing for the answer or even looking at Mary before continuing with a sweeping "everybody loves flowers, don't they?" This is less a dialogue than a series of statements which Miss Bligh assumes have Mary's tacit agreement, and despite the fact that its generalisation is a fairly accurate one, it is indicative of a larger climate of conformity (everybody does this, don't they? we all agree, don't we?) within which a professional like Miss Bligh operates. As Foucault argues, what endows the social sciences with such authority is their "power of normalisation."107 A later scene with Mary and the prison governor has a similar feeling of subtle coercion. The governor sits down as Mary is having her breakfast and begins with a friendly rejoinder that she likes lots of sugar on her porridge too. She reminds Mary that her mother wants to visit her. At this point the camera switches to a low angle shot of the governor which makes her appear to loom over Mary and gives her advice ("But don't you think your mother has a right to see you? Don't make a decision you may regret, Hilton") a sinister, threatening edge. This is quite different from the presentation of the governor of Askham in The Weak and the Wicked, who is much less ambiguously characterised. Instead, moments like this suggest that this

107 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 308.
may be feminised friendly authority, but it is still invested with the power of life and
death.

The consolations of religion are also offered to Mary as a palliative for her
forthcoming execution. Several scenes feature Mary's discussion of religious faith with
the Chaplain, McFarlane and Miss Bligh, and with each, the promise of an existence
beyond death mitigates the terrible finality of the punishment. Miss Bligh prays that
when Mary wakes from her dream she will be "in God's keeping" and the Chaplain cites
Christ's words to the criminal crucified beside him ("This day thou shalt be with me in
paradise") as the most beautiful words in the Bible. Try as its practitioners might though,
Christianity and the death cell are ultimately shown to be incompatible. This
incompatibility is expressed visually, when the camera pans along a dark bare stone
prison wall to chance suddenly upon a Church service taking place within these
unforgiving walls. The feel of the visual presentation is voyeuristic, glimpsing the back
of the prisoner kneeling to pray through a doorway, as though we should not be
watching this. The incongruity is also suggested through the religious paraphernalia
which has to be brought into prison by the chaplain in a carry case. It gives the
impression of the chaplain looking like a spiv, packing his cross and candles into a
makeshift suitcase when he is finished. The suggestion is not of awe but of
impermanence and triviality, a makeshift portable god-kit that can be mobilised to suit
the situation - here to endorse the institutionalised violence of the state, when it should
really be opposing the state's violation of the first commandment, 'thou shalt not kill'. At
the end of the service, as the chaplain packs up, Mary ventures "You hate it too, don't
you?" and the chaplain is unable to answer, suggesting that Mary has guessed his
feelings accurately. These scenes that detail the church's function in prison actually fit
into a whole pattern of religious imagery in the film. One frequent feature of the mise-
en-scene of Mary's cell are the cruciform shadows on the wall cast by the bars. They
culminate in the imposing shadow cast by the Chaplain's wooden cross at the final service on the morning of her execution. Chibnall notes the suggestion of a pieta in Barker's stance at Mary's feet when she is told that there will be no reprieve. The image of Mary clad in white robes might even provoke the subversive reading of her as female Christ figure. Her murderous career begins because of a chance meeting engendered by a bottle of perfume called Christmas Rose and ends with her imagination haunted by a poem about death at Eastertide. Chibnall argues that Mary's execution acts as "a vital expiation of guilt" that must be undergone before society changes; therefore we can see how Mary, like Christ, 'dies for our sins'. Cook describes Dors as the literal embodiment of the anxieties of the age, which here takes on the dimension of the scapegoat - the body that must be ritually destroyed for the good of the wider community. At one point, Mary even compares herself to the Christmas turkey, fattened up and ritually slaughtered.

In the majority of the film, the depiction of Mary Hilton stresses her passive forbearance as she undergoes the rigours of life in a death cell. However, occasionally she chafes against the calm procedural manner of her keepers and angrily refuses to comply with their wishes. Her mutinous outbursts are relatively few, and are always quickly quashed, but they are startling in their sudden passion, illuminating the film with flashes of sullen anger that are difficult to recuperate within the film's ostensible framework of social protest against a specific social ill. In fact, at times, it appears as though the film is mocking the reformatory project of the social problem film, including Thompson's own plea for open prisons in the Weak and the Wicked. Slow incremental change is simply not possible with this particular social issue - you either kill prisoners or you do not. Discussing Miss Bligh with McFarlane, Mary cynically enquires if prison

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108 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 93.
109 Ibid., p. 95.
110 Christine Geraghty discerns something similar in the final scenes of Violette Szabo's torture and execution in Carve Her Name with Pride. (Geraghty, British Cinema in the Fifties, p. 174).
reform actually does any good. When McFarlane tells her that if she had been in prison fifty years ago she would notice the difference, Mary seems to lose her patience with McFarlane's patronising homilies. "I expect the ones like me found it much the same", she wearily says and when told she is only "a small part in the life of this prison" (that patronising documentary-style exposition, not unlike the one used by the governor of The Grange in *The Weak and the Wicked*) she sardonically notes that this makes sense since they "bump off" the ones like her. When McFarlane tries for a final time to explain that not all murderers are sentenced to death and that some are given life sentences, Mary finally cracks and turns on her: "I don't know and I don't want to know, not when you're all so smug about everything". The stress that Dors places on the word 'smug' here, spitting it out, is remarkable, as if smugness is the most heinous crime you could accuse anybody of. The sudden violence of her reaction also gets to the heart of the horror and powerlessness of her situation - they not only want her to suppress her hysteria at her imminent death but to listen patiently and attentively to a lecture on how a prison works, and even hear about those other fortunate prisoners who have been spared the death penalty. But even this provokes no response from Mary's warders, just an order to get undressed and ready herself for evening cocoa. Still angry, Mary limps to the windowsill, annoyed that it is too narrow to put her little jar of violets upon, the institution of prison thwarting any attempts to humanise it or introduce the natural world. Even the cat in the exercise yard must be shooed away. But in the end, the mounting tension is diffused by Brandon (when asked what she's knitting, she replies "a nosebag for my old man"). Mary smiles ruefully. The terrible thing is that even now, only a week away from the date of her execution, she can smile at a daft joke. The women's common humanity gets the better of her in the end and she calms down again.

111 A revolt against smugness is also evident in Henry's novel: "That's what gets me down...their calmness...their smugness...like nurses guarding a lunatic. I wanted to scream at her: wouldn't your hand shake? If...so what?...You'd shake...God...how you'd shake if you were in my shoes...But when I looked into her steady eyes, I could say nothing." (Henry, *Yield to the Night*, p. 90).
As the days count down and Mary's chance of a reprieve grows less likely, the film style subtly alters to suggest a sense of mounting panic and hysteria. Whereas the keynote of the film's style had been our observation of Mary in her agony, now it seeks to put us in her place, undergoing the same giddying distortions in perception as someone awaiting death. As the film's editor Dick Best notes, the film was predominantly constructed from "single planned master shots [...] it was nearly all cut or fade or dissolve from this master shot to that master shot"\(^{112}\), a technical approach ideal for suggesting the slow, sombre unfolding of time. However, the film begins to use more cutting in some of its sequences as time begins to run out. For instance, the horror of Mary's prison routine, the mundane performed in the face of death, is conveyed in a highly stylised montage sequence. The sequence begins with Mary asking McFarlane how she is supposed to cope when the door with no handle at the foot of her bed, the door which leads to the place of execution, is a constant reminder of imminent death. The camera tracks towards the door and the film's score starts up with timpani, the instrument associated with death from the film's first sequence. There follow shots of the calendar and the clock, both measurers of the passing days and hours, along with shots of Mary being bathed, weighed on the scales, having her blood pressure and her temperature taken, the body being checked and monitored, and all these measurements and procedures being entered into the prison ledger, another recurring shot. These are interspersed with shots of Mary in bed, turning restlessly, trying and failing to get some sleep. Amid all this there is one nightmarish shot of Mary holding out the skirts of her prison nightdress and smiling at an unseen presence, like a little girl proudly showing off a new party dress or a debutante about to curtsey to the queen. But then she seems to remember where she is and her smile vanishes, leaving only a look of absolute desolation. The shot only lasts a few seconds but is unforgettable in its evocation of disintegrating female consciousness: desperately trying to turn back time and be a good

\(^{112}\) Quoted in Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 91.
little girl again, as though this could save her from the gallows. The other two images that keep returning throughout the montage are those which haunt her sleepless hours, the ominous door at the foot of the bed, and the light on the ceiling which is never switched off, on which the montage closes. Our attention is drawn to this light throughout the film (whole sequences often begin or end on it) and Mary frequently pleads with the guards to put it out. It becomes a symbol of the cruelty of the regime where the comfort of darkness is denied her. Instead Mary's cell must remain illuminated at all times so she can be monitored by the warders, recalling Foucault's description of panoptical incarceration: "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre toward which all gazes would be turned"113, an apt description of the light on Mary's ceiling. Foucault concludes that "full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap"114, something the film expresses through Mary's dialogue (she says that she feels like an animal at the zoo) as well as through Gil Taylor's clever lighting scheme dominated by the ceiling light: "the incessant high key, augmented by ceiling reflectors, creating a nagging claustrophobic presence."115

In Mary's fearful state, even a banal object like a lightbulb can assume the portentous weight of an omen. Her hypersensitivity to everything around her is explored in a scene where she describes how she feels as though she has taken a drug "which slows down time but heightens sensation". She describes how the banal details of her surroundings have become "sharp and larger than life" and as she tells us about the odd little things she sees in such hallucinatory clarity, we are given extreme close ups of them: the pattern on the back of the playing cards, the bitten end of Brandon's pencil, the

113 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 173.
114 Ibid., p. 200.
metal studs on the soles of Hill's flat sensible shoes. The break with the style used in the majority of the film, replacing the long takes with rapid intercutting between the objects and Mary's face, both shot in claustrophobic extreme close up, emphasises how strange and ominous the everyday world has become to her. The film's impulse to make us see through Mary's eyes and understand her state of mind is also in evidence in a scene where Mary hears footsteps in the corridor that she recognises as the governor's, the sound of them dominate the soundtrack, suggesting Mary's development of ultrasensitive hearing in the sensual deprivation of the bare cell. When the governor enters the room tapping a letter in her hand that could be Mary's longed-for reprieve, Mary is transfixed by the piece of paper, shot in close up. When it becomes clear that this is not so, and this is just a piece of random mail with which the governor is toying with such unwitting cruelty, and she has only come to tell Mary that some magazines have arrived for her, we understand something of the harrowing sensitivity of Mary's situation where every tiny detail is potentially significant and might bring news of life or death. The terrible strain of this little casual carelessness on the part of the governor is shown on Mary's face, seen in medium shot as she sinks down onto the bed and struggles to light her cigarette because her hands are trembling, details that go unnoticed by the warders.

On the morning she is finally to find out whether she will live or die, the sequence opens with a shot dominated by a huge mug of tea. The warders wake up Mary, telling her "it's Tuesday" and the feeling that precious time is rushing past is suggested by the echoing and almost mocking voices of the warders that Mary hears in her head, reiterating the details of the routine: "Doctor to see you...your cigarettes...newspaper...Chaplain...exercise, fetch your cloak...lunch is ready Hilton...tea". The routine takes on the dimensions of a strange inescapable nightmare. Suddenly Mary hears the real sound of footsteps, again those of the governor. She

knows that this means the final news on the commutation of her sentence and the pressure upon her is intense, with Mary indicating in her voiceover a Janus-faced desire both to hasten and postpone the moment ("I'll know in a minute [...] No, I don't want to know"). Shots of the governor advancing along the corridor are intercut with emotive close ups of Mary's distraught face. Then the camera switches to a more removed position to observe the inevitable entrance of the governor into the cell, with the dark ominous swinging cell door and the feet of the governor in the immediate foreground, Mary in the distance. An over-the-shoulder shot of Mary gives us a sense of Mary's distorted perspective as she hears the most terrible news of her life - that her appeal has not been granted and the execution will take place on Thursday. The sequence cuts between an eerily distant composition of the governor and her warders and close ups of Mary's face, blank with incomprehension and fear. As the governor exits, the camera again takes position behind the cell door and as it swings, it obliterates Mary's figure briefly, foretelling her permanent disappearance. She slowly sinks down on the bed and Barker approaches her to give her the mug of tea with which the sequence began. She places it in Mary's hands, closes her fingers around it and moves it up to her mouth, before tearfully telling Mary "I'm so dreadfully sorry". Mary's silent staring state is contrasted with the encouragement of the warder to keep acting normally, moving the cup up to her lips until she almost involuntarily drinks from it. Tea, used earlier as the motivation for Mary to get out of bed, here takes on a more sinister edge, almost assuming the status of a poisoned chalice, symbolic of all the ideological forces in prison and in society that urge women's conformity and 'making do with what you've got', reconciling women to their fate, however grim. The feeling of estrangement from reality, the almost hallucinatory state induced by blind terror, the disjointed experience

116 This haunting image is uncannily similar to one used by Sylvia Plath in her poem 'The Rat Catcher': "I felt a still busyness, an intent./ I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt./ Ringing the white china." Since Plath has latterly come to represent the epitome of creative woman thwarted by the impossible strictures
of time; all of these are evoked in the scenes that relate Mary's last remaining days. The scene of Fred's final visit is notable in its manipulation of effects to create a feeling of alienation and menace. The naturalistic background of the visiting room where we had seen Fred on his previous visit has been replaced by a subjective view of events, with Fred appearing out of a non-diegetic black featureless background, and attempting to talk to Mary but his voice sounds as though it is coming from far away. The camera tracks back slightly and then pans disorientatingly into complete blackness before finding Mary again, this time framed behind bars with McFarlane standing behind her. In these scenes, time and space are suggested to be fluid rather than regular and linear, with even the emblem of regularity, the clock, deployed as an expressionistic device. The camera actually is positioned behind it, and frames Mary through its mechanism as she struggles to come to terms with her final hours on earth. The pendulum intermittently swings across and blocks her out, obliterating her body but also acting as a memento mori, a foreshadowing of her hanging body. The sense of time's fragmentation accelerates in the scenes depicting Mary's final night, with a shot from 10 p.m (where we see, from Mary's point of view, the doctor looming over the bed administering her with an injection to make her sleep) cuts directly to a shot from 12.30 when Mary awakes again to find McFarlane alongside her, thus making us share Mary's odd experience of time.

Although we are privy to Mary's state of mind, the warders are not and Mary grows frustrated at their inability to understand what she is suffering. She is told by one warder that she should be pleased that her ex-husband has taken the trouble to visit her, to which she replies "it doesn't matter what I think", expressing her lack of control over her own life. McFarlane picks up on this, peevishly telling Mary "No, of course, it doesn't in your present state of mind" which Mary furiously lashes out at her for: "What

of femininity in the fifties, one of those for whom feminism came too late, it is interesting to note this correspondence between her work and Yield to the Night.
do you know about the state of my mind? You know nothing, nothing. You're none of you human, none of you." McFarlane attempts to diffuse Mary's anger with an offer of a game of chess ("Would you like to play? It's all arranged.") only seems to incense Mary even more ("I'm sick of everything being arranged. I don't understand this game and I never will!"). McFarlane's final counsel that "it's easy to learn if you want" is refused by Mary who furiously declares "I don't WANT to learn!" as she sweeps her arm across the carefully arranged chess pieces, launching them into the air. If I had to isolate one moment from Yield to the Night that encapsulated the power of the film, it would be this one. I feel something similar about this moment to the feeling described by Andy Medhurst about the scene in Victim (1961) in which Farr (Dirk Bogarde) confesses to his wife that he stopped seeing a man "because I wanted him." Medhurst confesses that "its power as one of the most electrifying moments in British cinema history has grown and deepened for me over the years (I'm still awash with goose-pimplies even after seeing it a thousand times)" and concludes by affirming its status as a moment of "shattering intensity [and] radical import"117 where a whole new discourse of male homosexual desire (and, one could argue, desire of any kind in British cinema) makes itself heard for the first time. When Mary Hilton/Diana Dors lashes out at her captors here, one can sense all the careful pieties of women's depiction in British fifties cinema being overturned, leaving only the image of an un-pretty, un-pleasing, recalcitrant woman refusing to learn to play the game that has been pre-arranged for her. The "all powerful but inchoate and directionless energy"118 that John Mander sees in Jimmy Porter has always been historicised as a masculine trait, but one look at this moment in Yield to the Night tells us that this feeling of enormous directionless rage is not an

exclusively male preserve. Perhaps Alison Light called off the search for the Angry Young Woman too soon.

This moment also gains its resonance because it is part of a sustained pattern of imagery built up in the rest of the film. Like the care for her foot ailment, Mary's chess lessons have been one of the recurrent tropes of the film, and like the dressing of Mary's blister, they condense the absurdity of Mary's situation and the warders' attitude to her, the utter futility of teaching her a new skill in the shadow of the gallows. The fact that chess is the game that Mary does not understand and never will deepens the impact of the moment. Playing chess has been used variously as a symbol of bourgeois despair (T.S. Eliot's 'A Game of Chess' in *The Waste Land*), hurt masculine pride (Rick in *Casablanca*) as well as the epitome of the crushing of the human spirit by the totalitarian state (the replacement for sex in Orwell’s *1984*). But perhaps the secret of the game's symbolic resonance lies in the obscure and mysterious aristocratic symbolism of the chess pieces - kings, queens, knights, bishops. Chess, which endows players with a feeling of god-like omnipotence as they control the fates of entire kingdoms, must surely mock the absolute impotence of a character like Mary Hilton, who feels more like a pawn in someone else's game, moved around the board at the will of a higher power than her own, wondering if the Home Secretary will see fit to grant her a reprieve. After Mary has swiped the pieces off the board and sent them flying across the room, the camera again drops to floor level to take a strangely distanciated view of the ensuing events. We see Mary's slipper clad feet march to the back of the cell in frustration and McFarlane bend down to pick up the pieces and put them back in the box, and the scene ends on a note of quiet acquiescence as Mary silently relents and joins her in this task. In the end, resistance is futile and can change nothing.

The film's final scenes chronicle the morning of the execution, beginning with the warders filling in the final entry in the ledger before they wake up Mary. It reads
"Prisoner slept well, no change in condition. Woke at 8 o clock.", and the film lingers over this, allowing us to take in the words, and forcing us to think about the complete contrast between the bland language of official record and the reality of situation which the film has shown to us. The ledger only tells us the barest of facts, nothing about what the prisoner thought or felt. The entry is then blotted, emphasising the scene's sense of finality: Mary's story is over, the record is complete and ready to be filed with the rest. The camera pans up to the light on the ceiling, symbol of Mary's torments in the cell, and we finally see it go dim, but not out of kindness but because its job is over. True to the iconography of the condemned prisoner, one of Mary's final acts is to have a smoke, and the half-smoked cigarette still burning in the ashtray after Mary's death will provide the final image of the film. It is the modesty and the mundanity of this image of Mary sitting at the table, sipping tea and smoking, that makes it so affecting, her simple actions taking on a tragic grandeur in the face of death. The camera moves into a close shot of the texture of the skin on her throat as she swallows the tea, and her lips enclosing the final cigarette. Thomas Sutcliffe has described the close up as a device that is "exceptionally good at restoring the lustre of the world, otherwise dimmed by our inattention"120, and this rings very true of this shot which seems to be deliberately placed to show us that this is a body which is still (defiantly) alive and functioning - all we can do is watch the body closely with a sense of awe, drink in its final moments of life before its power to move and feel and smoke and drink is extinguished forever. This final tableau might be seen as the cinematic equivalent of George Orwell's famous essay on witnessing a hanging, where it is only when he sees the condemned man do something as simple as walk around a puddle to avoid getting his feet wet, a tiny futile gesture of self-preservation, that he is struck by the horror of what is about to happen,

119 Something shared with the playing cards that Mary and the warders also use to pass the time.
It is curious, but till that moment I had never realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working - bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming - all toiling away in solemn foolery.

After Mary's last smoke, the Chaplain inaugurates the final prayer. The film avoids any transcendent notions of Mary going onto a better place, by a sickening tracking shot toward Mary's exposed bowed neck (her hair is tied up ready for the noose) as she kneels to pray, reminding us of the physical reality of the horrible death that awaits her. As prayers finish, we hear the offscreen sound of the door at the foot of the bed finally opening and Mary rises and turns to walk toward it. We never see what is in that adjoining room, its horror remains a mystery. Instead our attention is on Mary's face, wide eyed and terror-stricken, shot in close up as she advances towards the scaffold and towards the camera. Just as our very first close up of Mary, after she had just killed Lucy, had placed us in the spectatorial position of trying to fathom her feelings at a moment of heightened emotion by studying her face, our very last close up of her does the same. However, both looks remain inscrutable. Perhaps the aim was to create something similar to the famous ending of Queen Christina (1936), with Garbo's expressionless face functioning as a blank canvas onto which audiences could project

122 Gil Taylor's lighting scheme also plays its part in ensuring that we concentrate on Mary alone: "High contrast is introduced only at the end with the background brought right down into shadow, focussing maximum attention on the final emotions of a woman about to face the executioner's rope." (Petrie, The British Cinematographer, p. 144).
their own feelings. However, the crucial difference here is that this is a look direct to camera, thus flouting one of the rules of screen acting. As Ian Christie says: "the injunction 'don't look at the camera' is axiomatic to conventional screen acting [...] These taboos are often justified in terms of preserving the illusion, but it not clear which illusion is being maintained. Could it be the security of not being looked at?" 123 In this context, it is not too far fetched to interpret Mary's final look at the camera as a gaze back at all of those in the audience who had been invited to judge her by the publicity poster's question 'Would you hang Mary Hilton?' and she gets the chance to look back at those who would judge her and judge them instead. Raymond Durgnat described the film as evoking "a horrified, fascinated awe very near the classical definition of the tragic feeling - an identification involving pity, terror and shared guilt" 124 and perhaps 'shared guilt' (as Miss Bligh tells Mary, her sins will be transferred from her to those who have to go about their business after her death) is being animated in order to reinforce film's protest against capital punishment, almost as though Mary, looking back at us, is challenging us to do something about her fate, take on responsibility, change the law. Also, in this most 'star-crossed' of films, it is impossible not to see Dors as well as Hilton, looking out at us, perhaps urging us to endorse her transformation into serious actress, or perhaps staring back defiantly at all those who thought she could not do it, a look back in anger. Although all of these interpretations fit to some degree, the look cannot be reduced to any of them. Stanley Cavell once said of Dreyer's Passion of St Joan that the film "above all declares at once the power of the camera to interrogate its subjects and, for all its capacity for pitilessness, its final impotence to penetrate the mystery of the individual human face" 125, something that works equally well to describe the dynamic of Yield to the Night's final shot of its heroine's face which is both

revelation and riddle. In the end, her look, like her fate, is unfathomable. As Mary's face advances into deep shadow and finally vanishes as she enters the place of execution, the film cuts to her last cigarette, still smouldering in the ashtray. We are left only with the undiminished memory of her final gaze into the abyss. It is a superbly moving and important moment for both Thompson and Dors, and for women in British cinema in general. The Angry Young Man has monopolised our understanding of mid-fifties discontent, but a film like Yield to the Night acts as a crucial corrective to that masculine hegemony, and as such, I would argue, is just as important a text for understanding the mood of that period as the much better known Look Back in Anger.
J. Lee Thompson's frothy comedy *For Better, For Worse* (1954) contains a comic set-piece centred on a young housewife attempting to organise an impressive dinner party while all her careful preparations go awry. As she attempts to cook the meal, she has to contend with a grumpy plumber under the kitchen sink hammering on the pipes and singing tunelessly, a garrulous charlady stirring up trouble, a nosy neighbour who has come to use the phone (and wangle an invitation to dinner), a jazz trombonist practising loudly in the flat next door, and water beginning to drip from the ceiling - all in a tiny one room flat where there is hardly any space to move. In the end, of course, everything comes good, the dinner is a success and the young wife is toasted by her guests for her "courage and determination". Such scenes of domestic frenzy would be returned to in Thompson's later film *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, in which another wife in a cramped flat prepares for the arrival of important guests, but with much less success than her predecessor. The shift in mood seems to fit the change in genre, for whereas *For Better, For Worse* is a breezy middle class comedy in the mould of *Genevieve*, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is a small-scale realist drama in the mould of the Oscar winning US film *Marty* (1955). But the change from domestic triumph to domestic travesty also seems to reflect the cruelties of the passage of time, as the optimistic newlywed couple of the former film (bright eyed and bushy tailed Dirk Bogarde and Susan Stephen) are replaced by a middle aged couple weighed down with long term problems and teetering on the brink of divorce. The husband, Jim (Anthony Quayle), is having an affair with his young secretary (Sylvia Syms) and the wife, Amy (Yvonne Mitchell), never seems to be able to get her housework done and is always clad in her scruffy dressing gown (hence the film's title). The family group is completed by the couple's teenage son Brian (Andrew Ray).
Woman in a Dressing Gown was the first of the two collaborations between J. Lee Thompson and the writer Ted Willis, who together with producer Frank Godwin, formed an independent production company somewhat unimaginatively named Godwin-Willis-Lee Thompson. Thompson hailed independent production as an emancipatory opportunity for the filmmaker to "make the pictures he really wants to make...in the way he wants to make them" and for Godwin-Willis-Lee Thompson, this meant a focus on "the problems of ordinary, working class people" - a formula which led to their description as "the team that reflects life through the steam on the kitchen mirror." As mentioned earlier, their guiding light was the huge success of Marty (1955) a film about a homely Bronx butcher falling in love, adapted by Paddy Chayefsky from his own TV play, to which Woman in a Dressing Gown was frequently compared on its release. Thompson described how the American productions "borne of independence and not a little daring" (among them Marty and Wedding Breakfast, another Chayefsky script) inspired him to try and follow suit. The influence of Chayefsky's work upon Ted Willis was even more marked. Upon reading an article by Chayefsky about his aim to articulate "the marvellous world of the ordinary" in his TV plays, Willis recognised his own longing to write the same kind of small-scale realist TV drama. Willis describes the moment as an important watershed for him ("this was as though someone had kicked open a door. Chayefsky crystallised my own thinking, and suddenly threw this huge and confusing TV monster into perspective") and even over 30 years later, he still characterised it as a revelatory and joyous moment in his life: "It is difficult to describe the glow of enthusiasm in which I sat down to write my first post-Chayefsky television play." In fact, his first post-Chayefsky play turned out to be Woman

3 For example, see reviews in Daily Express, 19 July 1957, Sight and Sound, Autumn 1957; Picturegoer, 19 October 1957 (review entitled 'At Last - Marty-Style Realism').
4 Thompson, 'The Time for Courage and Experiment', p. 87.
6 Ibid.
in a Dressing Gown, a deliberately and self-consciously "small story" about "ordinary, typical people": no heroes or villains, just "a group of human beings in the grip of a recognisable situation and their ordinary human reactions to that situation."8 The play was broadcast on Associated-Rediffusion (commercial television in the London area) in July 1956 to considerable acclaim, and like Marty, made the subsequent transition from small screen to large screen.

Willis' preference for a particular kind of pared-down humanist realism is evident from his description of his own dramatic aims, peppered with words like plain, ordinary, typical, simple, direct. This ethos is also evident in his advice for directors approaching his work, who should "serve the script faithfully, avoiding tricks and devices which draw attention to his own contribution; his work, when completed, will be so unobtrusive that it can (and very often will) pass unnoticed."9 In a production note for his stage adaptation of Woman in a Dressing Gown, he argues that "the keynote in any production of the play must be reality. Everything that happens on the stage must appear to be true and real and possible: the audience must be able to identify with the characters. A single jarring note of unreality can disturb the whole balance of the production."10 And again in his autobiography, he pleads the case for "a simple uncluttered approach" to drama when "[T]here is a danger of overusing modern techniques. The most telling shot...is still a close-up of a human face."11

By contrast, J. Lee Thompson's direction of Woman in a Dressing Gown could hardly differ more from the sobriety and modesty of Willis' prescriptions. The film's direction, far from being "unobtrusive" or a "simple uncluttered approach", is instead dominated by complex camera movements and elaborate shot compositions that, by their very intricacy, draw attention to themselves. At the time, several critics were disquieted by the baroque flourishes of Thompson's direction. Derek Hill, always Thompson's nemesis, complains

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8 Willis, 'Woman in a Dressing Gown' and Other TV Plays, p. 8.
9 Ibid., p. 17.
11 Willis, Evening All, p. 138.
that "[I]nstead of letting us have the story neat, he makes the script an excuse for a non-stop series of camera tricks. We seldom get a straight, honest look at what is going on - we're too busy gliding up and down the larder shelves, through the banister rails, in and out the bookcase."\(^{12}\) John Gillett's review for *Sight and Sound* shares the same antipathy towards overt stylisation, concluding that "realism is sometimes obscured by a veil of artifice."\(^{13}\) As we can see, in Hill's, Gillett's and also Willis' writing, there exists an underlying bias towards realistic modes underpinned by the belief that realism offers an unmediated, undiluted ("neat") presentation of reality: that such a thing as Hill's "straight, honest look" is possible. For them, realism is the simple and direct demonstration of truth, and thus Gillett can say that 'artifice' is a veil that obscures the realistic object that lies behind, rather than recognising, as even an advocate of realism like Andre Bazin does, that "realism in art can only be achieved in one way - through artifice."\(^{14}\) It is significant that Hill uses the word 'honest' four times in his review in connection with realism, which paints it as not only an artistic, but also a moral, obligation. This implies, by contrast, that any other mode than realism is somehow dishonest and decadent.\(^{15}\) However, the kind of straightforward, common sense understanding of realism espoused by this critical school, a kind of boiled-down Bazin, has since come under increasing attack from critics working under the Brechtian banner, for whom realism is not the unproblematic presentation of truth but a mode with unsavoury political implications of passivity and thought control. Raymond

\(^{12}\) Derek Hill, *Tribune*, 18 October 1957.


\(^{15}\) This critical preference has an important national dimension to it, as John Ellis demonstrates in his work on British film culture of the 1940s. He shows how critics' adherence to an ethos of realism and restraint, and their conceptualisation of 'the real' as "an absolute, the correlative of mankind" as well as "a moral imperative" swayed their judgement of what was acceptable British filmmaking and what was beyond the pale, like Gainsborough melodrama and Powell and Pressburger's more lurid moments. See John Ellis, 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 79. It provides a clear demonstration of the tendency Andrew Higson describes whereby "the dominant discourse of British film criticism 'writes' British cinema into film cultural memory as a realist cinema, thus effectively blocking off other ways of conceptualising the institution", a notion that has much relevance in a discussion of J. Lee Thompson's British career. See Andrew Higson, 'Critical Theory and British Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 24, No. 4-5 (July-Oct 1983), p. 81.
Williams sums up the Brechtian credo thus: "What is being basically attacked [...] is the central naturalist thesis of the 'illusion of reality', in which an action is created that is so life-like that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both audience and dramatist. What Brecht seized upon was the exclusion, by particular conventions of verisimilitude, of all direct commentary, alternative consciousness, alternative points of view." This finds its echo in Colin MacCabe's complaint that the 'classic realist text' forsweares its claim to being progressive because "it cannot deal with the real as contradictory." Presentation of an action in a realist mode suggests the inevitability of that situation: the audience's capacity to think and question and act is neutered because the play persuades us 'that's just the way it is'. What it cannot do is produce "a contradiction which remains unsolved and is thus left for the reader (i.e. spectator) to resolve and act out." Brecht's method of opposing the political slumber encouraged by realism is 'Verfremdung' (making strange or alienation): estranging the audience from what they are seeing and refusing them the easy pleasures of empathy and catharsis by never letting them forget that they are watching a play. Rather than aiming for a smooth seamless 'imitation of life', the keynote of a performance should be "distance and demonstration", with what happens on the stage "not so much lived as shown." Contradiction, the thing that previous artists would be keen to iron out, is now prized above all else as a sign of the text's resistance to the dominant ideology. One thing is clear - there has obviously been a sea change in critical sympathies if John Hill, writing in 1986, can claim that the "dissonance between subject-matter and style" in Woman in a Dressing Gown, the same "barrier between audience and subject" that Derek Hill complained about in 1957, is no longer the film's central flaw but its saving grace. Thomas Elsaesser's claim that British cinema has hardly ever produced "a film where

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16 Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), p. 278.
19 Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht, p. 279.
20 Hill, Sex, Class and Realism, p. 98.
the subject is undercut by the style, and the story subverted by the point of view from
which it is narrated is belied by the existence of a film like *Woman in a Dressing Gown*
where such a dislocation between form and content is evident.

John Hill goes on to make an intriguing comparison between *Woman in a Dressing
Gown* and the 1950s Hollywood melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk, such as *All That
filmmakers, he says, employ a "dialectic of involvement and alienation...drawing the
audience into identification with characters while maintaining a critical distance." Sirk,
who had directed Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* on stage in Berlin before his move to
Hollywood, was one of the beneficiaries of the kind of critical paradigm shift described
above. His initial reputation as a hack director of lurid, over-the-top weepies was
overturned by his academic champions in the 1970s, who reinvented him as an arch-
Marxist, trenchantly subverting the bourgeois melodrama from within through his
manipulation of the genre's stylistic excesses. His films were not trash but rather, as J.
Hoberman wittily put it, "meta-trash" and were understood to function within a complex
system of Brechtian 'distanciation' which Paul Willemen, along with other critics, tried to
decode. Willemen breaks down the Sirkian system into five points, two of which are of
particular interest here. The first is Sirk's "[I]ronic use of camera positioning and framing"
and one of the examples Willemen gives is the irony achieved in *All That Heaven Allows,*
"in the film's first scenes within the close-knit Scott family by framing Cary Scott in such a

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22 Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 98.
23 J. Hoberman quoted in Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of
24 One could speculate that the main reason for the rehabilitation of Sirk's films was not the evidence of
the films themselves but the eloquence of their director. As Fred Camper suggests "no critic has been as
perceptive as Sirk himself in articulating some of (his) themes." (Quoted in Klinger, *Melodrama and
Meaning*, p. 17). We can certainly see the stranglehold of the intentional fallacy in Paul Willemen's early
writing on Sirk: "Douglas Sirk himself spent a great deal of time and energy answering questions and
helping critics and students in the arduous but rewarding task they had set themselves: to try and
understand how a Sirk film works." (Paul Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System', *Screen,*
way that she always remains separated from her two children"²⁵. The second trait is "[I]rony in the function of camera-movement". Willemen continues,

Sirk's camera, as a rule, remains at some distance from the actors. The space in the diegesis, although rigorously circumscribed, is vast and solidly established. Long-shots and mid-shots predominate. The camera, however, is almost continuously in motion. This mobility of the camera is designed to implicate the viewer on an emotional level...while the distance from the characters suggests detachment.²⁶

Both these stylistic traits, intrinsic to the Sirkian system, are used frequently throughout Woman in a Dressing Gown, and to similar effect. The way that Thompson frequently shoots the action through intermediary objects, or from oblique angles, strongly recalls the kind of distance and irony Willemen discerns in Sirk's mise en scene. Similarly the mobile camera style that Willemen evokes resembles Derek Hill's description of Thompson's camera "gliding up and down the larder shelves, through the banister rails, in and out the book case". Frequently, Thompson's film makes use of 'impossible' camera positions, where we view the action from behind a cooker or inside the larder. The position of the camera in classical cinema is usually dictated by the identification of the camera with the point of view of an observer capable of moving about the room²⁷. In Woman in a Dressing Gown, the camera is positioned in a place where a human observer cannot possibly be, which has two effects. First, if we notice that something quite artful is happening, then this acts as a forceful reminder of the signs of production that realist modes usually seek to disguise or contain. Second, and leading on from the first point, it also raises questions

²⁵ Ibid., p. 131.
²⁶ Ibid.

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about our position as observer of the scene. To quote Stephen Heath, it can reveal "the normality of the third person objective basis as itself a construction"\textsuperscript{28}. Even in terms of this one element of Thompson's style of direction, we can see how this can have the Brechtian 'Verfremdung' effect of breaking down the suspension of disbelief so "both the consciousness of the audience, and the distance between that audience and the deliberately played action, are made central to the style"\textsuperscript{29}, rather than effaced in the manner of the realist text. However, to a certain extent, the film's use of distanciating techniques serve to back up its underlying moralism, rather than make strange the very basis of that morality, which is the more Brechtian aim. John Hill gives the example of the presentation of Jim's illicit Sunday lunch at Georgie's where we watch the pair through a barred window before the camera pans completely away, down onto the brick wall below. The soundtrack during this sequence is also interesting, switching from church bells (an obvious reference to their transgression against Christian morality) to the sound of rain; we are not allowed to hear their dialogue at all. The effect of all this, as Hill notes, is to "disrupt our identification with the situation and establish, in so doing, the ultimate emptiness of the relationship between the two characters"\textsuperscript{30}. But what makes the use of this technique more problematic and interesting is that it occurs throughout the whole film, including scenes where the action centres on the film's more obviously sympathetic characters, Amy and her son Brian. Rather than merely refusing us identification with the 'immoral' characters, the film problematises identification with any of the characters, thus suggesting the difficulty of being able to know anybody from the position of observer. The distance between the spectator and the characters hints at the fallacy of identification on the part of the audience. We can never really know and understand these people (who, of course, are not people but characters anyway): the human face, that Willis sees as the most telling thing you can show

\textsuperscript{27} Stephen Heath, 'Narrative Space', \textit{Screen}, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Autumn 1976), p. 95.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 112.
\textsuperscript{29} Williams, \textit{Drama from Ibsen to Brecht}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{30} Hill, \textit{Sex, Class and Realism}, p. 99.
on the screen, is actually an enigma and not the revelation of a truth, something that Thompson implies by frequently obscuring our view of it.

While some critics stress the importance of the formal intricacies of Sirk's films, others have paid more attention to his subject matter. In Sirk's depiction of America in terms of shallow country club life, neurotic oil-rich dynasties, and endemic racial prejudice, he is offering a critique of a country, in his own words, "feeling safe and sure of herself, a society primly sheltering its comfortable achievements and institutions." Laura Mulvey emphasises the relevance of Sirk's melodramas, particularly those with a female protagonist, for feminism. A film like All That Heaven Allows, for instance, not only offers a critique of mid century American bourgeois values, but also provides an arena for working through the problems faced by women in patriarchal society, through the character of Cary Scott, who wants more from life than respectable widowhood and finds it in a romance with her young gardener Ron Kirby. Mulvey suggests that this kind of melodrama is not so much subversive social critique, as Sirk's Marxist champions might suggest, than a form of "safety valve", a safe, socially-sanctioned space for the contradictions of patriarchy to be temporarily aired before they are buried once more. Their power comes from the fact that for women deprived of any public voice, "the simple fact of recognition has aesthetic importance; there is a dizzy satisfaction in witnessing the way that sexual difference under patriarchy is fraught, explosive, and erupts dramatically into violence within its own stomping ground, the family." Mulvey still acknowledges how mise en scene is crucial to the meaning of melodrama, contributing "a transcendent, wordless commentary, giving abstract emotion spectacular form" but she pays particular attention to how that mise en scene might be pressed into the service of a kind of proto-feminist discourse. One example from All That Heaven Allows would be the cold marble chimney breast that dominates

33 Ibid., 41.
Cary's living room which suggests a mausoleum - the widow metaphorically walled up in her dead husband's tomb.

Just as *Woman in a Dressing Gown*’s mise en scene can be read in terms of a Sirkian distanciation from characters and events, it can also be read in the manner of Mulvey, as a way of articulating specifically feminine concerns. The most notable aspect of the film’s mise en scene is the almost gothic clutter of the family's flat; dressers and shelves crowded with unrelated household objects (a postcard under a teapot next to a toy yacht, for example), the sink full of dirty dishes, drying washing suspended from the ceiling, tables piled high with unfinished mending and jumble, even the telling little detail like an empty coathanger hanging from a picture frame. This sense of clutter is further emphasised by often shooting the action through it (the aforementioned shot from behind the cooker or the introductory shot of Amy through a messy shelving unit) or having one of the domestic objects (like a toast rack or a pile of ironing) dominating the foreground of the frame. On one hand, this provides clearly condemnatory visual evidence of Amy's poor housekeeping skills. However, when we see Amy's figure dwarfed by the 'housewifiana' that surrounds her and her movement intercepted by dangling washing and cupboard doors, what is also evoked is a sense of claustrophobia. Thomas Elsaesser has described how the protagonists of film melodrama feel an intense pressure "generated by things crowding in on them and life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them”34, a perfect description of how objects seem to impinge on Amy's existence. John Hill even suggests that in showing Amy constantly trapped behind washing, cookers, cupboards and beds, the film suggests her state as one of "domestic imprisonment"35. This indicates an interesting link with Thompson's previous films about women in prison, and in fact, at one point, Amy is filmed behind the rails of her bedstead in exactly the same way as Mary Hilton in *Yield to the Night*. That

both women appear 'behind bars' suggests a parity between the two women's situations, on the face of it so different: one a real prisoner in the bare condemned cell, and the other a metaphorical prisoner in her own home.

However, in the 1950s, the idea of the housewife as a 'domestic prisoner' ran counter to generally accepted constructions of femininity which emphasised the primacy of woman's role as wife and mother. In fifties culture, messages about domesticity being women's natural state are everywhere, from the popular commercial worlds of advertising and women's magazines, which enjoyed their highest ever circulation figures at this time, to the academic disciplines of psychology and sociology. The stay-at-home wife and mother formed the cornerstone of the Beveridge plan and the subsequent welfare state. John Newsom's 1948 advocacy of a separate school curriculum for girls which would fit them for their 'home-making mission' in life filtered into fifties educational thinking. Despite the fact that women's employment rates were actually rising throughout the decade, and had been since the war, life as a housewife is offered as the sole means of self-actualisation for women. This is brilliantly evoked by this excerpt from a BBC broadcast by D. W. Winnicott, the clinical psychiatrist and childcare expert:

Talk about women not wanting to be housewives seems to me to ignore one thing, that nowhere else but in her own home is a woman in such command. Only in her own home is she free, if she has courage, to spread herself, to find her whole self. 37

35 Hill, Sex, Class and Realism, p. 99.
37 D.W. Winnicott, The Child, the Family, and the Outside World, (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964), p. 120. It would not do simply to demonise Winnicott though- his notion of the 'good enough' mother, who can raise a happy, healthy child without having to be a paragon of maternal excellence, is one that many women undoubtedly found empowering. The childcare gurus of the fifties like Winnicott and Bowlby (with his influential theory of 'maternal deprivation') have been taken to task by second wave feminists for confining women to 'kinder, kirche, kuche' but as Elisabeth Wilson points out, "their appeal was not so much in terms of the return of women to the home [...] but of the flowering of love for children in a
For Winnicott, women's liberation begins at home, depicted as a site of boundless freedom and endless possibility, which are just waiting to be discovered by the woman who has 'courage' enough to accept her domestic destiny. The fact that his is a voice from the heart of the establishment, the BBC, along with his medical expertise, give his benign updating of the old adage 'a woman's place is in the home' real authority. This broadcast was first made available in print in 1957, the year of *Woman in a Dressing Gown*'s release and the contrast between the two texts' depictions of domesticity could hardly be more marked. In *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, woman is certainly not free and in command of her home: in fact, it is firmly in command of her as she dashes about trying to get on top of the housework but never managing it. The most obvious way to read this is to suggest that Amy is to blame, that she is one of the women who have not 'courage' enough to find herself in housewifery. The plot synopsis of the film in its pressbook suggests how far it might be read as a cautionary tale which pits one kind of woman against another, for while Amy is "scatter-brained, disorganised" and "her slatternly ways do not make for domestic bliss", at Jim's office, Georgie's "calm, orderly mind and quiet beauty soothe his jarred nerves, and force an inevitable comparison with his wife." The initial scenes which depict the relationship between Jim and Amy stress how annoying she is, chomping loudly on her toast, prattling away, invading his personal space to sew a button back onto his shirt.

With her peculiarly feminine brand of disorder, the character of Amy could be usefully examined in the context of theories about the 'monstrous-feminine' and what Camille Paglia calls the 'chthonian' realm. Chthonian is a term Paglia borrows from anthropologist Jane Harrison meaning 'of the earth', and Paglia uses it to explain (and, in her case, validate) the connection often made between women and nature. Women's war-torn world" and their indictment of elitist upper-class forms of child-rearing too (Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise*, p. 189).

38 *Woman in a Dressing Gown* pressbook.
reproductive capabilities mean that she is always closer to nature and to the primeval ooze that first gave rise to life:

Neumann notes the linguistic connection in German between Mutter, mother; Moder, bog; Moor, fen; Marsch, marsh; and Meer, ocean. A chthonian miasma hangs over woman...The miasma is woman's procreative fate, linking her to the primeval. Artemis is woman on the run, breaking out of her cloud into Apollonian sunlight. Artemis' radiance is a militant self-hardening, a refusal of menarche. Dionysus, endorsing woman, also keeps her in the chthonian swamp. Sartre speaks of the mucoid or slimy, le visqueux, "a substance in between two states", "a moist and feminine sucking", "a liquid seen in a nightmare", Sartre's slime is Dionysus' swamp, the fleshy muck of the generative matrix.39

Although unacknowledged by Paglia, this is remarkably similar to Julia Kristeva's categorisation of the Abject, that which "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules"40, the side of life which must be repudiated in order to construct a unified self. It is overwhelmingly connected with the feminine, and more specifically, the maternal, and as such is both a site of desire (a wish to re-merge with the mother's lost, mourned-for body) and horror (a fear of one's own identity "sinking irrevocably into the mother"41).

Paglia's chthonian realm and Kristeva's maternal abject provide an interesting perspective on the characterisation of Amy in Woman in a Dressing Gown. Amy is messy,

41 Ibid., p. 64.
noisy and chaotic, 'all over the place', a human whirlwind who seems to engender noise (the radio, the pub singsong) and disaster (burnt breakfasts, bad weather, collapsing tables) wherever she is. Amy does not 'respect borders', dropping sticks of firewood around the house, leaving bits of thread on shirts, overfilling teacups, spilling beer. She is associated with instability and excess. Even her undone housework might be seen as her unstable housewifely self spreading out and filling the flat. Jim feels himself 'bogged down' and 'swamped' by Amy's 'sloppiness', terms which suggest a parallel between Amy and Paglia's chthonian swamp. The opposing force to the chthonian is the Apollonian force which Paglia aligns to masculinity (the Kristevan analogue would be the symbolic, the masculine realm of order and stability versus the semiotic, the feminine realm of fluidity and precariousness). It fabricates and conceptualises and creates in order to rival nature's procreative power. It is the Apollonian impulse, says Paglia, that is behind all human construction from pyramids to suspension bridges. We can see this Apollonian impulse, albeit in miniature, in Jim's desire to leave Amy. He even works in a timber yard, and timber, a building material is a direct link to the Apollonian cult of construction. Jim seeks to disentangle himself from being sucked into the "fleshy muck of the generative matrix" by aligning himself with Georgie, a young woman whose coolness, tidiness and determination suggest the "militant self-hardening" of Paglia's Artemis, the "woman on the run" from the chthonian forces that threaten to engulf her. Read in this light, Amy comes to resemble one of the examples of the 'monstrous-feminine' discussed by Barbara Creed in her study of the same name, threatening to drag Jim under into her lair of unstable femininity. This would in turn suggest that *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is a film that, like

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42 As a chthonian drama, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* has much in common with a film seemingly worlds apart, Nicolas Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980). Milena in Roeg's film, like Amy, is seen as a force of nature who carries with her what is portrayed as a specifically feminine aura of chaos and disorder. Milena's messy flat has much in common with Amy's similar milieu and the scene in *Bad Timing* where Milena tidies the flat and performs a masquerade of the ideal housewife, with grotesquely parodic make-up and clothing, is a subversive twist on the happy home façade Amy wishes to create for Jim.

Psycho and Alien, "speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity."\(^{44}\)

However, any reading of the film as simply an indictment of Amy as a 'horrific' housewife, an updated expression of an ancient patriarchal fear, is thrown off balance by the fact that Amy is the character we get to know best and with whom we spend the most time. The film concentrates, as Marcia Landy notes, on the "sights and sounds of Amy's life" and "the visualisation of her milieu"\(^{45}\) enunciated from her point of view. Woman in a Dressing Gown, as its title suggests, is a film about her, not Jim or Georgie or Brian, something that Ted Willis makes clear: "the main character is Amy. Her husband, the other woman, the son are all tremendously important too, but only in so far as they relate to Amy and her problem" and even in the transition to film, when the hour long TV script was fleshed out with more scenes featuring Jim and Georgie's romance, "it remained, in essence, the story of Amy".\(^{46}\) Also she is a character to whom we are obviously meant to warm: alongside the descriptions of her slatternly ways, the pressbook also emphasises what a sympathetic character she is, describing her as "tender", "warm-hearted" and "loveable". One of the film's advertising taglines is particularly revealing of the way that the spectator is implicated in Amy's plight: "What a woman! You'll love her, despair of her, suffer with her, and find she's set you talking."\(^{47}\) Although Amy is clearly meant to exasperate the viewer, she is also meant to endear herself and ultimately provide a point of identification. Simply by giving screen space to a housewife who does not seem in command and free in her home, the film is articulating an alternative experience of housewifery that contrasts sharply with other representations of that state in contemporary popular culture. In this sense, any kind of visibility is progressive - once a state is recognised to exist, in this case, the less-than-perfect housewife, it can be the subject of

\(^{44}\)Ibid., p. 7.
\(^{45}\)Landy, British Genres, p. 235.
\(^{46}\)Willis, Woman in a Dressing Gown and Other Television Plays, pp. 11-12.
\(^{47}\)Woman in a Dressing Gown pressbook.
discussion (something implied by the tagline's suggestion that Amy will 'set you talking'). But more than that, Amy is our point of orientation in the film. We are not so much encouraged to metaphorically point and stare at the grotesque figure of fun (although the film does tread a very fine line) as to enter her world and empathise with her. It is in this dynamic of empathy for a 'bad' housewife that the subversive potential of the film lies.

*Woman in a Dressing Gown* appears to be another example of Comolli and Narboni's category of unwittingly progressive films, that "while being completely integrated into the system and the ideology end up partially dismantling the system from within"48 because of their internal contradictions. On the surface, a film about a woman who almost loses her husband because she is a hopeless housewife looks fairly reactionary, but the film also reveals the gap between the feminine role and at least one woman's ability to fulfil it successfully. It was precisely this disparity between the happy housewife image and the sense of malaise underlying it that provided the subject of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, the groundbreaking book that is generally credited with reanimating the feminist movement. While many feminist writers had mapped out the problems of women's confinement in the domestic realm before, Friedan's book offered a timely reminder that the 'woman question' had not gone away, merely mutated into a different form which Friedan called 'the problem that has no name'. Women, counselled from birth that their happiness lay in love, marriage, homemaking and children, were following the path laid out for them but finding that it did not make them happy, as promised. Instead they found themselves lying awake at night, asking themselves 'is that all there is?' and then feeling guilty for thinking the unthinkable. As Dale Spender notes, "in the absence of any public and legitimated knowledge about the widespread phenomenon of female disillusionment, even despair, women in their isolation resorted to blaming themselves for their inadequacies. If they possessed everything society decreed necessary for their happiness and did not feel happy, then there must be something wrong with
Because of shame and fear of ostracism, a widespread feeling of unhappiness among women lacks the means of public and collective articulation, and does not even possess that most primary means of identification, a name. Ironically, by gathering together women's testimonies under the banner of 'the problem that has no name', Friedan finally gives it a name and asserts that it does exist. It may seem slightly perverse or wrong-headed to draw a parallel between an American feminist tract written by a woman in 1963 and a commercial British film directed, photographed, scripted and produced by men in 1957, and I would certainly agree that the use of Betty Friedan as a critical tool for looking at Woman in a Dressing Gown is not without its problems. Friedan is writing about Eisenhower-era American society and moreover, the majority of her work is concerned with the dissatisfactions of college-educated women living in the suburbs not working class wives in tower blocks. But despite these different national and class contexts, there is still a great deal of common ground between the two. Both texts deal centrally with the housewife's lot and there is an uncanny resemblance between the problems with housewifery that Betty Friedan would analyse at length in The Feminine Mystique and the ones that are hinted at five years earlier in Woman in a Dressing Gown.

In Friedan's preface, she explains that she had first been put on the scent of 'the problem with no name' when she gradually came to notice "a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique". It is exactly this discrepancy between image and reality that we see dramatised in the opening scene of Woman in a Dressing Gown, the first of its many set pieces that deal with Amy's domestic ineptitude, and that led Raymond Durgnat to dub the film "a rhapsody of bad housekeeping". Amy's culinary incompetence is particularly damning in an age when the kitchen, "rather than the boudoir

48 Comolli and Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', p. 27.
or the drawing room, was the heart of the feminine. While she is attempting to prepare a cooked breakfast for Jim, she burns the toast and has to scrape off the charred bits, while the neglected bacon and eggs in the saucepan blacken. We see her arrange the food artfully on a plate and the camera lingers on its disgusting appearance. To complete the meal, she pours Jim a cup of tea but overfills the teacup on the tray. Throughout the scene, her struggle and ultimate failure to make a good meal are juxtaposed with music on the radio, a smooth, lilting, string-laden piece of easy listening (suggesting 'housewives choice') that dominates the film's soundtrack. The calm serenity of the music provides an ironic counterpoint to Amy's frenzied activity and the quick cutting in this scene: the effect is that of a John Bratby canvas accompanied by the music of Mantovani.

However, the problem with the happy housewife has deeper roots than this alone. Friedan suggests that one of the central problems in American society is the increasingly young age at which women get married and have children. She argues that women's construction of an individual identity is bypassed by moving straight from being a daughter to being a wife and mother, without having had any kind of independent life. This 'arrested development' results in severe immaturity, reinforced by the housewife's confinement in the domestic realm and exacerbated by the resulting lack of contact with the rough and tumble of the outside world. This immaturity is certainly something that is present in the character of Amy. Amy is presented as a childlike figure who calls her husband Jimbo, a childish corruption of Jim. Amy's childlike character is also implied in Yvonne Mitchell's style of performance with the widened eyes, the gesture of the finger rested on the mouth when concentrating and a slightly too loud voice typical of an over-excited child. Good examples of this occur when she greets Jim's modest offer of an evening out with an inappropriately enthusiastic exclamation of "Lovely!" and when she explains her dream of shaking competition prize money all over Jim "like confetti or snow", spilling the drink in her hand through her enactment of the gesture. It is interesting that this is the point in the film where

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Jim's gloomy indifference turns to anger, and he shouts at Amy about the state of the flat. Many popular images of film femininity in the 1950s hinge on a mixture of the childlike and the mature - the personae of Marilyn Monroe, Brigitte Bardot and Debbie Reynolds are all informed by this combination albeit in different forms. But the mixture loses its attraction for men and becomes instead something repulsive if the woman is approaching middle age - one needs only to think of the wilfulness and petulance of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, a middle-aged woman attempting to play the *ingénue*. The same thing is at work in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* - Amy's childish exuberance and untidiness, which might have been charming when she was young, are inappropriate for a grown woman, and they make Jim lose his patience.

According to Friedan, the result of the housewife's life being confined to the home is that her interest in the outside world has to be satisfied by proxy, by vicariously living through her husband, and later, her children. The result is an almost suffocating attachment to the husband and an appropriation of his identity, in the absence of her own certain self. We can see this appropriation of another's identity in Amy's assertions that she knows 'Jimbo' better than he knows himself; if Georgie knows a thousand things about him, his wife knows "a million". But while Amy claims to know Jim well, the film often contradicts her knowledge. She claims that "Jimbo loves a singsong" when in the previous scene we had been told that he hates music. It is also worth noting that the Prestons' marital crisis occurs when their son is on the brink of adulthood, seeing a regular girlfriend, talking about his imminent National Service and, as he proudly tells his dad, shaving every day. The feminine mystique encourages girls to think no further than marriage and children, so when the children grow up and move away, the question 'who am I?' that was smoothly bypassed by marriage and maternity returns with a vengeance. In *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, the identity crisis is more Jim's than Amy's at first but it precipitates Amy's own questioning of
what she is to do with the rest of her life, and the problems raised by this cannot quite be
closed down by the film's ending which reunites the couple.

However, the notion of Friedan's that is most pertinent to *Woman in a Dressing
Gown*, is her idea that 'housewifery expands to fill the time available', that despite the
invention of labour-saving devices the American housewife was spending the same amount
of time, if not longer, on housework. In her research, Friedan noticed how the full-time
housewives that she interviewed always seemed to be incredibly busy, rushed off their feet
in comparison with the women who held full or part time professions. She also discovered
that when these "frantically busy housewives" started working or studying or developed
some other serious interest outside the house, "they could polish off in one hour the
housework that used to take them six - and was still undone at dinnertime". How to
explain this phenomenon? Friedan asserts that this illogical sixfold expansion of worktime
is due to the central role that the doing of housework plays in the feminine mystique. She
unambiguously puts it thus,

1. The more a woman is deprived of function in society at the level
of her own ability, the more her housework, mother-work, wife-
work, will expand - and the more she will resist finishing her
housework or mother-work, and being without any function at all.
(Evidently human nature also abhors a vacuum, even in women.)

2. The time required to do the housework for any given woman
varies inversely with the challenge of the other work to which she
is committed. Without any outside interests, a woman is virtually
forced to devote her every moment to the trivia of keeping house.

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54 Ibid., p. 239.
Viewed with this in mind, Amy's relationship to her housework takes on a whole new meaning. As Brian tells her in the film's initial breakfast scene, she does "a bit of this, a bit of that... but nothing's ever finished". Amy's inability to finish anything is perhaps less an inability and, if we believe Friedan, more a strategy for covering up the emptiness at her life. Amy's goal of finally tidying up the house once and for all that is reiterated throughout the film must never actually come to fruition and the home must remain in a state of flux because "after all, with no other purpose in her life, if the housework were done in an hour, and the children off to school, the bright, energetic housewife would find the emptiness of her days unbearable". And yet, the fact that her work could be done in half the time places the housewife in a guilty, defensive position. We certainly see evidence of this in Amy who repeatedly says things like "Well, anybody would think I never did anything - I've been up since seven" and when Brian says he doesn't know what she does all day, she tells him again that she's been on her feet since seven and that she'd like to see him try to do better. Amy tries to trump the working hours of the men by repeating how she gets up before them at seven or even earlier, and also attempts to make a claim for housekeeping as a kind of specialist career and area of personal expertise that Brian would not be able to do as well as she can. A similar reaction to Amy's was recorded by Friedan when a Minneapolis schoolteacher, a man, wrote a letter to newspaper saying that the housewife's long working week was unnecessary and that "any woman who puts in that many hours is awfully slow, a poor budgeter of time or just plain inefficient" and the paper was inundated by letters from "scores of irate housewives" who dared him to prove it.

The concept of creativity is perhaps the important element in housewives' approach to the housework. Creativity acts as a way of covering up the essential monotony of household chores by suggesting that the housewife has some kind of individual, specialist career.
input into the work, and thus the menial worker is transformed into a 'professional'. As Friedan quotes from a study carried out by the advertising industry,

Creativeness is the modern woman's dialectical answer to the problem of her changed position in the household. Thesis: I'm a housewife. Antithesis: I hate drudgery. Synthesis: I'm creative! [...] The Feeling of creativeness also serves another purpose: it is an outlet for the liberated talents, the better taste, the freer imagination, the greater initiative of the modern woman. It permits her to use at home all the faculties that she would display in an outside career. 57

Creative housekeeping tries to act as a compensation and a substitute for a paid career by taking on the appearance and the attributes of a profession. One of the creative ways the housewife raises her prestige is through the careful choice of specialised products for specialised tasks. Quoting again from the same survey, "When she uses one product for washing clothes, a second for dishes, a third for walls, a fourth for floors, a fifth for venetian blinds, etc., rather than an all-purpose cleaner, she feels less like an unskilled laborer, more like an engineer, an expert." But the second of the survey's two findings on housewives' creativity is even more interesting and relevant to Woman in a Dressing Gown. The survey states that the "second way of raising her own stature is to 'do things my way' - to establish an expert's role for herself by creating her own 'tricks of the trade'." 58 All this comes together in one of the most interesting scenes in Woman in a Dressing Gown, interesting in terms of its portrayal of housewifery because it hints at an edge of melancholy and dissatisfaction in Amy's character that is not as a result of Jim's possible

58 Ibid., p. 215.
desertion. At this point of the film, she has no idea about Jim's affair - everything is normal - and yet, this scene suggests, already all is not well in Amy's world.

Amy has prepared a special meal for Jim including apple pie and cream and a bottle of beer, and when he comes home from work, she sits him in the armchair in front of the fireplace and presents him with the meal on a tray. She then sits at his feet and watches expectantly as he eats the meal. The camera shoots the scene from a low angle with Amy in the foreground as she describes one of her 'tricks of the trade' exactly like one of Friedan's housewives; "I tried a new way with the chips. Cook 'em for a minute or so, then take 'em out. Leave 'em for another minute then put 'em back...It makes 'em crisp. Don't you think it makes 'em crisp?". What is particularly interesting about this little monologue is the way it is performed and presented on film. Throughout the speech, Amy does not look at Jim but gazes straight ahead of her into the fireplace and her face is shot in profile. The words are intoned very slowly with pauses between each of the sentences, and this combined with the vacant expression on her face give the feeling of a recital by a somnambulant or a 'zombie'. When she gets to "It makes 'em crisp", the intonation of the word 'crisp' is disconcertingly perky, like a bit of 'ad-speak' has inadvertently slipped into her speech. Then she slips out of this reverie and asks Jim quickly and anxiously "Don't you think it makes 'em crisp?" - he is the audience for her 'creative' cookery, and only his approval can validate her efforts and no amount of congratulations can assuage the self-reproach that must always follow from being totally dependent on another's approval for one's sense of achievement. The pronunciation of these last two sentences is brittle and (onomatopoeically) crisp which suggests an edge of hysteria. All through this scene, the radio has been playing Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique* Symphony (echoes of the use of Rachmaninov on the radio in the hearthside scene in *Brief Encounter*) and at this point the music swells. The film switches from the medium shot of Amy in profile with Jim in the background to an unobstructed close up of Amy's face alone, as her thoughts shift from home, husband and hearth to
herself and her feelings about the music; "This Tchaikovsky, it makes me want to cry it's so sad". Music is used throughout the film in Amy's scenes but it is usually popular music, and it tends to be used as an ironic counterpoint to her action. This is one of the few times classical music is used and it seems to be here specifically to suggest deep and sincere feeling. Amy is able to name the composer indicating, albeit briefly, an appreciation and knowledge of the world of high culture which is not in evidence anywhere else in the film. Earlier in the film, Amy's intellectual capacities had been satirised when Brian reads her the title of the debate he is chairing and she swiftly changes the subject because she does not understand, but here in this later scene the tone is different, and far from mocking. This consciously quiet moment in an otherwise hectic film, together with the bathetic juxtaposition of Tchaikovsky and chips, high art and household drudgery, suggests a strong feeling of human potential gone to waste, creative energy channelled entirely into the trivialities of housework, being frittered away on devising pointless complicated methods for cooking chips. The sadness of that waste is evoked by Amy's wistful comment on the music, and most of all, by the music itself, which suggests the depth of feeling that cannot be expressed by the emotionally inarticulate characters.

This impulse towards 'creativity' can be manipulated into what Friedan calls the 'sexual sell'. If we think of the previous example of the housewife who uses five different cleaning products, when one would probably do, in order to give herself a patina of professionalism, it is clear that the person who really profits from her choice is not her, but the manufacturer of all those cleaning products. Friedan explains the basis of it thus: "...the really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house." Domestic work alone, despite the attempts at 'creativity', as we have seen above, does not make full use of a person's mental capacities and the result is the "underused,

59 The topic up for discussion is whether a scientist's greatest loyalty is to his country or to humanity, which incidentally is the central theme of Thompson's later film I Aim at the Stars (1960).
60 Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, p. 206.
nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives\(^{61}\) which must find an outlet somewhere; and manufacturers, naturally enough, seek to channel this into the purchase of consumer goods. In addition to this excess energy and lack of purpose, there is also the added factor of the housewife's feelings of a lack of identity, detailed earlier, which makes her more vulnerable to certain kinds of selling techniques. Friedan quotes an insider in the advertising business on the subject; "Properly manipulated ('if you are not afraid of that word', he said), American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack - by the buying of things."\(^{62}\) As Mary Grieve, the editor of *Woman* magazine, told an advertising conference in 1957: "In her function as consumer an immense amount of a woman's personality is engaged. Success here is as vitalising to her as success in his chosen sphere to a man.\(^{63}\)

'The buying of things' is exactly what Amy does to bolster her identity when her status as housewife is under threat. When Jim announces that he wants a divorce, her actions, as John Gillett astutely noted at the time, "painfully reflect an almost pathological determination to retrieve the situation in the only way she understands"\(^{64}\) which is to renovate her image in order to present herself as the perfect modern housewife, and in this age of affluence, this is achieved through spending money and buying things. The need for the cash to carry out the necessary purchases is so vital that Amy borrows money from her son and even pawns her engagement ring so she has enough to spend.\(^{65}\) The first arena where the sexual sell works is to buy things for the home. We have seen this at work in the rest of the film where Amy stretches her housekeeping budget to buy little extras to create the happy hearth and home, such as the cream for the apple pie or the cold meat for Jim's tea or the bottle of beer as a treat. In this instance, Amy buys a bottle of whisky and a bottle

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 207.  
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 208.  
\(^{64}\) *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1957.  
\(^{65}\) This is not the only point of the film that demonstrates the housewife's economic dependency on her husband. When Amy buys Jim a beer from the housekeeping money, he assumes that it is because she wants to borrow some extra money from him.
of soda water, which seems to be an attempt, through the purchase of products with certain associations, to recreate herself as a worldly, mature woman who copes with the marital crisis like an 'adult'. She also promises Jim that she will have "everything shining, real tidy, you'll see" which seems to point towards the conspicuous consumption of multiple cleaning products that we saw above. The second important arena of female consumption is to buy things for the self, but not for personal pleasure, rather to construct an image of the glamorous housewife to be enjoyed by others. This is an important element of the feminine mystique - it is not enough to do the housework, one must be glamorous too. When Amy is put on the back foot by the threat from another woman, she not only resolves to overhaul her home, but also herself, again by spending money and getting her hair done professionally at a salon. In fact, Amy gets so involved in the process of getting ready to present herself as the 'happy housewife heroine' with a new hairdo and smart dress, laying the table and tidying the house, that she actually forgets why she is doing this - because Jim wants to divorce her and she wants to win him back. It is only a subconscious reminder, the lyric "I'd like to see him with his new sweetheart" in the song she is humming as she is lost in her work, that brings home to her the purpose behind her activity.

Amy's attempts to beautify herself during this part of the film are particularly notable because they are the exception. For the majority of the film, Amy's hair is unkempt, she wears no make-up and is hardly ever seen without her scruffy dressing gown, which, as the pressbook puts it, becomes "a symbol of her life". On being asked what was the first sexy British film he could remember, the film director Stephen Frears replied without hesitation that it was Woman in a Dressing Gown before explaining "Actually, I don't think I ever saw Woman in a Dressing Gown, but its title, it always gave me a powerful

66 For instance, there is an uncanny parallel between Amy's words and the rhetoric of the housewives interviewed by Friedan; "When I have some new kind of cleaning material - like when Glass Wax first came out or those silicone furniture polishes - I got a real kick out of it, and I went through the house shining everything. I like to see the things shine." (Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, p. 218).
67 Woman in a Dressing Gown pressbook. However, it also features stills of Yvonne Mitchell modelling a series of glamorous modern dressing gowns, to be used for merchandising tie-ups.
erotic... This seems laughably inappropriate to anyone who has seen the film but Frears has highlighted one of the ambiguities of the film's title and particularly the associations with dressing gowns. The dressing gown is a liminal garment - it means its wearer is on the threshold between being undressed and dressed, but not one thing or the other, which can have obvious sexual implications of the kind Frears noted. The dressing gown can connote a libidinous, 'deshabille' state and as such it is often worn in films by molls, mistresses and seductresses. In Woman in a Dressing Gown its connotations are almost exactly the opposite of this. It is the film's prime example of how Amy has grown careless because she does not even bother to get dressed and seems closer to being a garment of convalescence, a sign of Amy's 'sickness'. Although at the end of the film she resolves to throw it away and turn over a new leaf, it could also be seen as an honest admission of her status as housewife. Rather than being a sign of her evasion of reality, it is a truthful accommodation to her role as a woman who stays indoors, and therefore has no need to dress. Friedan points out that there is something ridiculous and pointless about the idea of the glamorous housewife who vacuums in full eye make up or the real-life Texan housewife honoured by Ladies Home Journal who "even at this hour of the morning (it is barely nine-o'clock)... is wearing rouge, powder and lipstick, and her cotton dress is immaculately fresh". Amy's dressing gown articulates the same conflict described by Friedan; "Why does 'occupation: housewife' require such insistent glamorization? The strained glamour is in itself a question mark: the lady doth protest too much.

I have shown above how Friedan's work can provide a critical context for the film's characterisation, but it can also illuminate certain stylistic features of the film too. In Derek Hill's review of the film, he singles out for opprobrium its use of extreme close up and loud noises (the aural equivalent of close-up):

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69 Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, p. 63.
Monstrous close-ups of burnt toast and tea-cups fill the screen. Every speck of lather on Anthony Quayle’s face is blown up to twenty times its size. China bangs, a radio blares, and a plate smashes with a crash that nearly bursts the loud speaker.71

Friedan devotes one of her chapters to an examination of women’s magazines, and certain elements of this chapter suggest a fascinating interpretation of these ‘overblown’ images and sounds that occur throughout the film. One of the things she notices in the articles in women’s magazines is an obsessive attention to the minutiae of women’s lives; "a richness of honest, objective, concrete, realistic domestic detail - the color of walls or lipstick, the exact temperature of the oven."72 It is the same story with the magazines’ visuals; "Whole pages of women’s magazines are filled with gargantuan vegetables: beets, cucumbers, green peppers, potatoes..."73 Friedan asks if the "richness and realism of the detail, the careful description of small events, mask the lack of dreams, the vacuum of ideas, the terrible boredom that has settled over the American housewife".74 If we return now to Thompson’s film with this in mind, different meanings are generated by the frequent close ups of mundane objects such as squirting taps and button boxes, other than empty style for style’s sake. As we have already seen in Thomas Elsaesser’s essay on family melodrama, characters in these films feel the pressure of things crowding in on them and almost usurping their identity. He notes how the peculiarly vivid visuals of melodrama can portray the characters’ sublimated "fetishistic fixations"75 and he gives the example of Kyle Hadley

70 Ibid., p. 65.
71 Tribune, 18 October 1957.
72 Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, p. 56.
73 Ibid, p.65.
74 Ibid., p. 56. It is interesting that this is a tendency also noted by Richard Hoggart in the British popular press of the time: "Today new sensations by the dozens have to be found daily. So there has to be a continuous straining, a vast amount of sleight-of-hand to pass off what is really thin tack as strong and meaty stuff, and endless inflation and distortion of angle so that the tiny shall appear immense; mice are photographed from below and their huge shadows passed off as genuine horrors." (Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, p. 203).
75 Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 56.
in Sirk's *Written on the Wind* who is accompanied by shots emphasising oil derricks, fast cars and bottles of alcohol, all symbolic reminders of his sexual impotence and the ways he tries to compensate for it.\(^{76}\) In exactly the same way, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* reveals the 'fetishistic fascinations' of Amy - toast and teacups. Amy's identity as housewife is dependent on the successful execution of her household duties and that is why burning the toast or dropping a plate is treated in the extreme manner that Derek Hill describes above - for Amy, these *are* important things. "Life is more than burnt toast" is the title of Hill's review and indeed this is the truth; it is Amy's tragedy that her world has narrowed into the trivial and the domestic where burnt toast is her major concern. Coincidentally, Friedan constructs a sentence almost exactly the same as Hill's, but substitutes another mundane object for the toast. Complaining that "[W]ithin the confines of what is now accepted as woman's world, an editor may no longer be able to think of anything big to do except blow up a baked potato, or describe a kitchen as if it were a Hall of Mirrors\(^{77}\), Friedan concludes that no matter how big it is blown up on the page "a baked potato is not as big as the world."\(^{78}\) When John Gillett, in his review of the film, complains that the film's "stylistic exaggerations too often stress trivial details at the expense of the significant"\(^{79}\), he unwittingly makes exactly the same point as Friedan - that the mind of the housewife, Amy's mind, is colonised and consumed by triviality; if significant events have been effaced from the film it is because they have been effaced from the life of the housewife. The film's use of close ups provides an insight into the mental geography of the character of Amy, where trivial things have assumed a huge and inappropriate importance, perhaps, if we follow Friedan's line of thinking, in order to cover up a fundamental void.

Similarly, we can see the same attempt to simulate the character's mental geography in the film's mobile camera and fast cutting, particularly during the film's housekeeping set.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., p. 65.
\(^{77}\) Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 65.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., p. 67.
\(^{79}\) *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1957.
pieces'. Hill describes it as "cut with pointless and distracting speed," an opinion shared by Jean-Luc Godard in his devastating review of the film:

*It is putting it mildly to say that his style is as maddening as his heroine's behaviour. From beginning to end the film is an incredible debauch of camera movements as complex as they are silly and meaningless, and of cuts and changes in rhythm on cupboards closing and doors opening such as even Bardem would be ashamed of nowadays.*

While Godard is right to make the link between the film's style of direction and its heroine, both "maddening", I think he is wrong to cite this link as one of the film's drawbacks. To employ a smooth style in filming Amy's world would detract from the complete realisation of that world from within. The "cuts and changes in rhythm" Godard complains about are entirely appropriate for giving an idea of the bitty, piecemeal, having-several-things-on-the-go-at-once nature of housework. As Friedan says of the typical housewife: "her day is fragmented as she rushes from dishwasher to washing machine to telephone to dryer...she can never spend more than 15 minutes on any one thing; she has no time to read books, only magazines; even if she had time, she has lost the power to concentrate".82 The choppiness of Thompson's style goes some way towards communicating the idea of the housewife's fragmented day and also, in her attempt to stay on top of it all, "the frenzy", as Raymond Durgnat notes, that is "so often a regular part of an apparently mediocre existence".83

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80 *Tribune*, 18 October 1957.
81 Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, translated by Tom Milne (*London*: Secker and Warburg, 1972), p. 86. The Bardem referred to is the Spanish director whose filmic style made much use of sudden cutting.
Friedan concludes *The Feminine Mystique* with a chapter called 'A New Life Plan For Women' and here she demonstrates the significance of a working life as the solution to 'the problem that has no name'. She states that "the only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own." It is the means of making contact with the larger world outside the home, and not having to live vicariously through husband or children. The idea of Amy undertaking paid work is raised in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* when it looks as though Jim really will leave Amy and her character faces the possibility of paid employment with the following declaration of independence: "I don't need you anymore Jimbo. I can work...Maybe this is the best thing that could happen to me. For years, I haven't thought of myself, only you. Now it's changed. You go tonight." Jim is firmly against the idea ("You don't want to work, Amy"), and in the way he phrases this grievance as a statement in the imperative and not a question, he voices the terms on which he expects their relationship to continue. For a woman to work seems to be a blot on the character of the husband and his status as provider, despite the fact that not to work would reduce Amy to the status of domestic chattel to be maintained by Jim even after his absence. Amy protests against this: "Yes, I do. I don't want to sit down and weep for the rest of my life". Her face as she says these lines is shot in clear, unobstructed close up and is brightly lit, which all suggest that this is a moment of clarity and self-realisation. As Amy herself says: "I see so many things now." At this point of the film, her character has a poise that is denied her in much of the film, with the emphasis on her pitiable inadequacy. As John Gillett muses in his review, "it is interesting to speculate what would have happened to Amy if Jim had in fact gone away with Georgie" and at this point, the film almost seems to suggest that work would indeed be the best thing for Amy. However, the radical suggestion that Amy might be better on her

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84 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 344. This is undoubtedly one of the points in Friedan's analysis that betrays the middle-class bias of her mores. Finding creative, fulfilling work is arguably a luxury only open to the few, be they men or women.

85 *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1957.
own and that her emotional dependence is fostered by her economic dependence is curtailed by Jim's return to Amy at the end of the film.

Drawing a parallel between a sociological polemic and a fictional narrative film will get us so far, but what it neglects is the specifically cinematic ways of producing meaning that are integral to that text. One of these is casting. Whereas Joan Miller had played Amy in the TV version as a stouter, more obviously middle-aged woman, Yvonne Mitchell was "small and delicately made; bird-boned and fine-skinned" and only 32 when she made the film. The degree of dissonance between actress and role fascinated Isabel Quigly, who noted how interesting it was "to see someone of her highly-strung intelligence, someone so almost intimidatingly civilised, playing a woman of endearing, exuberant vulgarity" and relished "the oafishness of gesture over the exquisite bone-structure." Despite her dignified public image, Mitchell made clear that she strongly identified with Amy's inability to behave in appropriately feminine ways: "I had at last found something that fitted me. I could never be glamorous, even in Rep, never do drawing-room ladies. I played Eliza Doolittle three times and each time I could do the beginning but wasn't very good at the end." One profile of her describes how she "seems to express some sort of subconscious attitude to the conventional actressy business of dressing up for parties, by invariably spilling something or other on a new dress the first time she wears it." Although Derek Hill claims that Mitchell is hamstrung by playing a character outside her own experience and surmises that she is "clearly incapable of feeling any sympathy for the character," it appears that in fact, the classy actress and the scatter-brained character are

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87 Spectator, 11 October 1957.
88 'Wearing the archetypal dressing gown', Guardian, 27 April 1970.
90 Tribune, 18 October 1957.
sisters under the skin. Certainly, it appears that the public had no trouble accepting Mitchell in the role of Amy and she would be associated with it throughout her career.

While Mitchell's performance in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* garnered popular and critical acclaim (she won the Silver Bear for best actress at the Berlin Film Festival), some critics expressed their reservations. Lindsay Anderson scathingly compared Mitchell's performance to "Hermione Baddeley in one of her turns in an Ambassador's review." Jean-Luc Godard's complaints about the film's direction were matched only by his denunciation of Mitchell's "'Look at Me!' performance as a virago half-way between an ostrich and Donald Duck." Although ostensibly critiquing the theatricality of the film's central performance, the excessive manner in which their criticisms are voiced seems to point to a real antipathy toward the feminine. Godard goes on to suggest that the film's situation "should at least have been handled with humour. Alas! Alas! Alas! Cukor is not English," but one might pause to consider why the possible abandonment and unhappiness of a middle aged housewife is an inherently funny subject. Instead *Woman in a Dressing Gown* both in its style and the locus of its drama sympathetically attempts enter the world of a woman described disparagingly by Godard as a "shrew" and "virago". Both Godard and Anderson criticise Mitchell's performance for being like a theatrical 'turn', for saying 'look at me!', without recognising how well it fits her character. The more taciturn and neglectful Jim is, the more Amy must, in her own phrase, "make a scene or create", which

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91 The role seems to have spilled over into Mitchell's private life: "My husband kept on saying when I broke things at home while cooking or washing up, 'You're not rehearsing now, you know.'" (Yvonne Mitchell, 'Awards? They've never done me much good', *Daily Mail*, 24 January 1958).
92 Almost every article on Mitchell during her subsequent career mentions how she is imprinted on the public consciousness as Amy in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*. One article begins "Even now people stop Yvonne Mitchell in the street, not remembering her name, but saying 'You're the woman in a dressing gown, aren't you?'" (*Sunday Telegraph*, 22 April 1973). A later article also alludes to this public recognition: "For almost 20 years, during which she played dozens of parts, she still kept on being identified, both by critics and by people in the street, as 'The Woman in a Dressing Gown' which she filmed in the Fifties." (*Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 1976). News of her death in the *Sunday Mirror*, 25 March 1979, was headlined "'Dressing Gown' star dies".
94 Godard, *Godard on Godard*, p. 86.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid. Although of course, we have to allow for the licence of the translator.
suggests the performative nature of the character's life ('femininity as masquerade' in psychoanalyst Joan Riviere's words), and her desperate need for some attention.

The best example of this is the scene of the morning after Jim has announced that he wants a divorce. Despite the cataclysmic events of the night before, Jim hurries off to work and refuses to talk to Amy, leaving her running after him and trying to talk to him before finally calling his name down the stairway, the desperation in her voice turning it into a shriek. This scene implies what Jim later admits, that "perhaps she's what she is because I'm what I am." The criticism of over-acting levelled at Mitchell can also be interpreted in terms of her character's psychology. Discussing Charcot's infamous photographs of the female hysterics in the lunatic asylum at Salpetriere, Mary Russo finds "in attitude and gesture, in grimaces and leaps, a model of performance not unlike the fashionable histrionics of the great Romantic actresses and circus artists of the late nineteenth century."

97 Hysteria is itself a form of acting, a way of expressing with the body what cannot be said out loud, and most often considered a female malady, perhaps because historically women have had so much more they have had to repress. But as Peter Brooks suggests, "whoever is denied the capacity to talk will convert affect into somatic form and speak by way of the expressionist body." 98 Amy's histrionic behaviour, embodied in Mitchell's unrestrained performance, could be considered in the light of this notion as a symptom of a larger malaise - perhaps her physical disorganisation and sloppy appearance are a mute protest against the state of housewifery, something that cannot be verbally expressed in the fifties. Dianne Hunter makes an interesting point when she argues that in essence, "feminism is transformed hysteria, or more precisely, that hysteria is feminism lacking a social network

in the outer world⁹⁹ and looked at with this in mind, making links between *The Feminine Mystique* and *Woman in a Dressing Gown* seems all the more apposite.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes that the psychopathology of hysteria wherein "the energy attached to an idea that has been repressed returns converted into a bodily symptom"¹⁰⁰ is strikingly similar to the notion of 'excess' in melodrama, where unspeakable things are siphoned into expressive mise-en-scene, music etc., which brings the discussion full circle, back to Elsaesser's notion of objects charged with meaning pressing down on the unlucky protagonist. But of course, melodrama's excess can also be generated in terms of plot as well as mise en scene - one only needs to think of the catalogue of woes suffered by Victorian melodrama's virtuous heroines or Pearl White's multiple misadventures in the silent film serials. Melodrama often hinges on an excessive piling on of misfortune, to a degree that stretches credulity and comfort. As Peter Brooks puts it, in melodrama "we are in the realm of the excruciating"¹⁰¹, uncannily similar to Raymond Durgnat's praise of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* for having "the considerable and un-British merit of being embarrassingly moving".¹⁰² *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is almost awkward to watch at times, and there is no better example of this than the scenes where Amy's preparations for Georgie's visit go disastrously awry. The prolonged agony of this sequence begins with her shopping trip which is the one scene where she ventures beyond the flat (apart from her brief visit to the pub earlier) and it seems to suggest why she does not do it often, at least within the confines of the film. Amy is shy and unused to dealing with people, as her awkward interactions with the brusque staff in the pawnbrokers, off-licence and


hairdressers make clear.\textsuperscript{103} The outside world is a very hostile and inhospitable place where Amy's attempts to beautify herself are ruined first by the rain and then exacerbated by the everyday cruelty and indifference of ordinary people. When the bus she gets on is full up and she has to get off, she is told by a woman to get to the back of the queue. When she tries to take shelter in a doorway, she is jostled back into the rain. She tries to catch a taxi but someone else jumps in front of her and as the taxi pulls away, she is splashed with water from the gutter. She attempts to explain her situation to a man with an umbrella but he ignores her and refuses to let her take shelter. Eventually she has to walk home as the rain continues to pour down. We next see her back at the flat, soaked to the skin and her hair completely ruined, and the relentless laying on of pathos has a brief respite as Amy perks up, roughly dries her hair with a towel and gets her best dress down from on top of the wardrobe, blowing the dust off the box. But then, as she struggles to get into it and zip it up at the back, the fabric rips and the dress is completely ruined. At this point, Amy's friend and neighbour Hilda (Carole Lesley) calls round and seeing Amy in a state of distress and undress helps her back into her old dressing gown. Thus it is signalled that Amy's attempt to recreate herself as 'mature' serene housewife has failed and she is back to her old self.

Amy's friend Hilda, although not occupying much screen time, presents an interesting alternative to the pitting of woman against woman that we see in the conflict between Amy and Georgie.\textsuperscript{104} Hilda encourages Amy to have a nip of the whisky bought for Jim ("Drink it, he doesn't deserve it") and the women share it out between them. Hilda

\textsuperscript{103} These scenes were singled out for praise in the reviews in \textit{Sight and Sound} ("[Mitchell] often attains a genuine pathos, notably in quieter episodes such as the visit to the hairdresser") and \textit{The Times}, 7 October 1957 ("It is significant that in this film some of the most moving scenes are those which, in themselves, seem to possess no dramatic content. There is a moment, for example, when Amy goes to pawn her ring, and blurts out a few shy, trite comments to the brusque indifferent man behind the counter, that casts a sudden shaft of light upon the sweet, almost childish simplicity of her soul.").

\textsuperscript{104} Although it is only a cameo, Olga Lindo's portrayal of the manageress of the hairdressing salon provides another significant moment of female empathy in the film. Although she is initially short with Amy, she softens on realising how important it is to Amy to get her hair styled and insists that Amy is fitted in and given the best treatment. Lindo beautifully suggests the character's sensitivity and her
tells Amy about what happened when her dad left her mum: the mother was so desolate that she lost a stone in a week, but she soon pulled herself together and decided to scrub out the house from top to bottom. From that point on she started putting the weight back on.  

This story is quite inconsequential to the plot in some ways but one might view it in the same way as the story told by Joyce Carey's character, and overheard by Celia Johnson's, in Brief Encounter in which she recounts how she left her unreasonable husband, moved in with her sister and built a new life for herself. What the stories in both films have in common is that they provide evidence that there can be life after a failed marriage, representing a kind of submerged history of female independence that perhaps Amy takes courage from when she tells Jim that she can cope without him. As Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutti strikes up on the wireless, Hilda argues that it is men who are the feckless and faithless sex, for whom marriage is like buying goods on the never-never: "they think they've paid after the first instalment", a striking image fusing sex and money. Amy begins to show another side of herself in Hilda's company, quite different from how she is with Jim, much less pathetic and much more astute and aware of the problems in her marriage than hitherto suggested: "Jimbo loves me, but he's in love with her. There's a world of difference.

However, this discussion swiftly comes to a close when Amy realises that time is short and Jim and Georgie will be arriving soon. She sends Hilda home and commences one of her frenzied moments of housekeeping, decanting what is left of the whisky back into the bottle, and tipsily singing 'Oh Antonio' but substituting its words with the item she is looking for, "Oh oh the tablecloth, he's gone away". When she locates it in a drawer, she absurdly tries to put it on the table without removing all the objects on the table first, instead shifting them haphazardly around and straightening out the cloth beneath them, a perfect demonstration of Amy's pathologically poor organisational skills. As described

intuitive knowledge of Amy's situation without having to ask any questions, perhaps borne of personal experience.
above, it is at this point that the line in her song "I'd like to see him with his new sweetheart" reminds her of her unfortunate situation. She sits down at the table in a state of despair and then we reach the excruciating crescendo of the scene as the wing of the table Amy is leaning on collapses and she falls to the floor, bringing down the tablecloth and everything on the table with her. Even a comfort as minor as being able to sit at a table to weep is denied her. A warped pianola version of the song plays over a shot of the domestic detritus on the floor, shot from Amy's point of view, its blurriness and giddy movement suggesting her increasing intoxication. Clearly, looking at the run of scenes like those described above, Woman in a Dressing Gown is a film which does not shy away from laying on the pathos to a degree that makes the film very uncomfortable, almost impossible, to watch. But what keeps us watching is its element of suspense - will Amy manage to succeed in her attempt to tidy the house and smarten herself up? We suspect that it will all go wrong in the end but the film offers glimmers of hope, like Amy's successful acquisition of a pretty new hairdo. Moments of temporary triumph like that prevent us from viewing Jim's desertion as a fait accompli and instead makes us see the conclusion of this domestic drama as something which could go either way. These sequences are even directed in the manner of high suspense at times, as with the quick cutting of the shots of Amy's twisting body as she struggles to do up her dress. Thompson films the scene as suspensefully as a car chase or a shoot out, aiming to grip the audience with the dramatisation of an ostensibly trivial situation, but here whether a middle aged woman will fit into her best dress is presented as a matter of life and death. It is also the suspenseful direction, and the identification with the character it promotes, that holds the film on the right side of the fine line between pathos and bathos. Gillett says that "the audience is invited to laugh at her vain attempts to prettify herself" but I think that the film actually eschews what could

103 One might view this either as finding solace in the traditional domestic role, even in spite of losing the husband, or view it more subversively as a therapeutic exorcism of the man from the house, like Nelly Forbush in South Pacific washing that man right out of her hair.

105 Sight and Sound, Autumn 1957.
easily be played for laughs, in the manner advised by Godard. We are too implicated in
Amy's situation to be able to stand back and laugh at her.

Just as Sirk was seen by his contemporary critics as a failed realist rather than an
intense fabulist, J. Lee Thompson's films start to make a lot more sense if we look at
them as melodrama. Despite working within a framework of social realism and naturalism
laid out by Ted Willis, this cannot contain the excess of Thompson's baroque direction and
Mitchell's theatrical performance, both of which drag the film away from its naturalism,
and towards full-blooded melodrama instead. For instance, the sequence in *Woman in a
Dressing Gown* described above, where absolutely everything goes wrong for Amy looks
ridiculously overdone in a context of restraint and realism in cinema, but if we consider it
within the context of melodrama, the scene has its own logic. One could say that it may not
convey the objective sociological truth (itself a problematic concept) aimed at by realism,
but the 'more true truth', the emotional, subjective truth of the abandoned heroine's state of
mind, where it feels as if everything in her life has gone wrong. Similarly, the first half of
the film carefully builds up to its emotional crescendo where Amy finds out that Jim is
having an affair and wants a divorce. The pathos is pushed to almost unbearable limits
through the film's deployment of dramatic irony in Amy's optimistic statements about how
content she is with her good husband when we have just seen him with his mistress, and her
misunderstanding of Jim's unhappiness, attributing it to stress at work, and not the state of
their marriage. The cumulative build up in portraying Amy's innocence adds to the intensity
of her 'fall from grace' when she does find out what is really going on. Just after Jim has
told Amy he wants a divorce and the couple are beginning to talk over the situation, their
son Brian arrives home with his girlfriend Christine. The scene, which up until then had
been a muted discussion over the dinner table, becomes much more fraught. Jim
immediately adopts his persona of jolly father as though nothing has happened, and
welcomes the pair in to play their new record, seemingly unaware of the awkward position
this puts Amy in, forcing her to go along with the pretence at normality, and play the
perfect mother when Brian demands food. There seems to me to be something inherently
melodramatic about this scene where the mother has to play a role rather than divulge the
truth to her son, similar to the mother-son dynamic in the archetypal Victorian melodrama
East Lynne, where the heroine must pretend she is the governess and not the mother. What
makes these scenes such an important feature of melodrama, and what makes them moving,
has something to do with the postponement of emotion - the temporary containment of an
uncontainable feeling, that must find an outlet but not here, not yet. In melodrama, music
(the 'melo' part of melodrama) often connotes what cannot be expressed and in this scene, it
is the loud trad jazz record that Brian is playing that expresses the mental confusion and
bewilderment that Amy cannot verbalise. After accidentally smashing a plate and suffering
a dizzy spell, deliriously filmed with lots of distorted and unsteady subjective camera (like
Friedan's 'kitchen as Hall of Mirrors'), she rushes off to the bathroom and finally breaks
down by the sink. As she doubles up in pain, her face and gradually her whole body move
deeper into dark shadow, until only part of her shoulder is visible and the rest of the screen
is black. Discussing Sirk's Imitation of Life, Michael Selig argues that critics are mistaken
when they see the film's social critique purely in terms of Sirkian distanciation rather than
acknowledging how "the emotional contours of the film are far more likely than the
Brechttian subtext to raise the viewer's awareness of the difficult position of women within
patriarchy." We can see exactly that dynamic in this scene in Woman in a Dressing
Gown. Jim has not tried to create a diversion (found a way to dissuade Brian from inviting
Christine in), allowing Amy to escape. Instead he warmly invites them in, and at this point,
the camera position suddenly switches to an oblique angle which seems to suggest some
idea of Amy's subjectivity, her feeling of dislocation and estrangement at Jim's heartless
masquerade of happiness when he has just announced divorce plans. We see her stranded

107 Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning, p. 76.
108 Ibid., p. 30.
and forced to comply with the pretence. Brian, as he has done frequently throughout the film, makes demands of his mother ("What about some food mum, we're starving...come on mum, stop daydreaming") but Amy's numb emotional state means that these remarks are not laughed along with but hang in the air without a reply as Amy wanders off to the kitchen in a trance-like state to comply. What this scene seems to imply is that these are the bare bones of patriarchy and Amy's position within it - her husband has the power to let her slip away but instead leaves her floundering in an awful situation and her son does not notice her obvious anguish and just sends her off to the kitchen to fetch food like a drudge. Our intense empathy with Amy's emotional situation allows us to hear just how callow and demanding her son can be, and how he treats her like a skivvy. Jim and Brian are the two people to whom Amy has devoted her life's work and here we see them treat her like a 'nobody'. It is appropriate then that at the moment of her extreme anguish, she should actually physically disappear and melt into blackness - her ego is dependent on the approval of the two men in her life, and when she is denied this reciprocity, her sense of identity is destroyed, and the scene by the sink acts as a powerful visual correlative for her 'ego death'.

The later scene where wife and mistress finally confront each other also makes vivid use of the conventions of melodrama. The two women finally appear together in shot, with Georgie's cool and elegant profile on the right of the frame contrasting absolutely with Amy's unruly ravaged appearance as presented on the left of the frame. As so often in melodrama, the physical geography of the characters provides a powerful expression of their relationship to each other, because here, as Dick Best points out, while Georgie "sits like an iceberg, the mother jumps around and Anthony Quayle is pacing in the background." Amy finally gets her chance to speak her mind to Jim and Georgie. While it is true that this sudden burst of eloquence after years of inarticulacy is a travesty of realism, using instead what Gillett refers to as the "conventional formulas of the West End
stage\textsuperscript{110}, its writer Ted Willis defends his use of what he calls the "magnified phrase" which, although not used in real speech, acts "with the force of a sudden close-up [...] to concentrate and give added power to the scene."\textsuperscript{111} It is true that there is something deeply satisfying about seeing the character harness the power of rhetoric to express herself. A scene like this fits beautifully with Peter Brooks' description of the fundamental appeal of melodrama: its "desire to express all." He continues,

Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatise through their heightened and polarised words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship.\textsuperscript{112}

Amy scornfully tells Georgie she was "ready to go on my knees to you", calls her a "cold fish" who wants to take her husband as casually as borrowing a cup of sugar, tells her that she "doesn't know the meaning of the word 'love'" and warns her that she too might lose her pretty figure if she has children. Amy's "you look at me and you feel so efficient" sums up the relationship between the two women and the way Mitchell vituperatively half spits out the final word makes it an insult rather than a compliment. The film's earlier emphasis on how Amy's behaviour grates on Jim is overturned as she turns the tables and gets the chance to voice what sound like long-suppressed feelings of resentment towards the husband who snores, loses his temper when his paper is creased, cannot sit out in the sun in Summer, gets rheumatism in Winter, and covers everything she cooks in sauce. The sudden revelation that the couple had a daughter, June, who died in infancy ("she only lived half an hour - it's a terrible thing when you think of it") adds to the atmosphere of long-submerged

\textsuperscript{109} Quoted in Chibnall, \textit{J. Lee Thompson}, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Sight and Sound}, Autumn 1957.
\textsuperscript{111} Willis, \textit{'Woman in a Dressing Gown' and other Television Plays}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{112} Brooks, \textit{The Melodramatic Imagination}, p. 4.
feelings finally coming to the surface, and suggests another reason for Amy's muddleheadedness - residual, barely acknowledged grief over that death. Finally, she sends Jim away, refusing to accept his attempts at apology ("too soft, sentimental, won't go down well with her") and insisting that, as in the song, she will survive: "I don't need you anymore Jimbo. I can work...Maybe this is the best thing that could happen to me. For years I haven't thought of myself, only you. Now it's changed." Even if all Amy's attacks are made in a spirit of bitterness, they are still remarkable for their clarity and eloquence of expression, imbuing a character who had previously seemed so pathetic with the dignity of being able to express her feelings.

Of course, as we have already seen, the ending closes down the possibilities raised by all of this. Although Jim packs his bags to leave with Georgie, his severance from the family home is short-lived, lasting only a few minutes. Halfway down the street he has a change of heart because "it's been too long" between him and Amy. He returns to the flat and is accepted back into his family, his teacup restored to its rightful place on the tray. This endorsement of the reconstitution of the family seems fitting for a film made in the wake of the 1956 Royal Commission on Divorce, which had been deeply conservative in its recommendations in spite of increasing calls for greater liberalisation of the divorce laws. As Jane Lewis points out, it "refused to contemplate any further reform to allow the idea of 'breakdown' rather than 'fault' as a ground for divorce." By contrast, as Steve Chibnall points out, Woman in a Dressing Gown asserts that "people can't help their feelings" and refuses to "ascribe blame to individuals" so while it ends with a resumption of the nuclear family, it is one that is far from untroubled. What we have in the film's closing moments is something that is far away, and intentionally so I think, from the conventional closure of a marital drama that set out to unambiguously endorse the status quo of 1950s marriage. In some ways the deeply conservative final tableau is almost parodic in its

excessive inscription of traditional gender roles, father and son in the foreground pondering intellectual matters (Brian's speech to the debating society), Amy silent and in the background making a pot of tea. But, of course, the fact that this scene occurs only minutes after we have seen the same family on the very brink of collapse adds an air of unreality to proceedings and serves as an implicit criticism of the situation. If this version of the family is improvisatory at this point, how real is it the rest of the time? John Hill notes how the film cuts away to view the family group from outside the flat window before finally panning swiftly away to the curtains and the brick wall, which Hill suggests "would seem to imply enclosure, even internment, with the audience critically distanced from the film's apparently 'happy ending' by the deployment of a device already saturated with negative connotations (as in the treatment of Georgie and Jim)." Even the music on the radio (Amy's knee-jerk reaction to turn on the wireless has not gone away, suggesting that perhaps everybody in the family will revert to type and nothing will change) seems to deprive the scene of any gravitas with its overly jolly marching-band brassiness. At one point, Jim looks up from Brian's papers and seems to slip into a reverie, undoubtedly thinking about the possibility for a new life that he has abandoned and Georgie, the representative of that missed opportunity, probably still on her way home. The film suggests at this moment exactly how much he has sacrificed to return to his family. There is no equivalent sense of Amy having given up any future possibilities, she just accepts Jim back and slips back into the role of wife as comfortably as her old dressing gown, despite her proclamations to the contrary only a few moments earlier. But, as Laura Mulvey points out, "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along

114 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 159.
115 Hill, Sex, Class and Realism, p. 100. Hill interprets this as Thompson's stylistic subversion of Willis's stodgy reactionary script but actually Willis, at least by the time of his 1964 stage adaptation, seems to endorse ambiguity as the right mood for the story's conclusion: "Audiences tend to put their own interpretation on the ending of the play and this is how it should be. Some see it as a resolved and happy ending, with the family reunited. Others feel that nothing has been changed and that many problems remain. My only comment is that the producer should not put the answer there for them. At the final curtain we should see a family which has been shaken to its foundations and which still has to work out its salvation, if that be possible." (Willis, Woman in a Dressing Gown: A Play in Two Acts, p. 6)
the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes."116

The considerable popularity of Woman in a Dressing Gown, which as well as enjoying significant critical acclaim, including thirteen international film prizes, was also a success at the box office, provides the strongest evidence that it hit some kind of raw nerve in the public psyche.117 This achievement is all the more remarkable for a 'woman's picture'118 in an era of rapidly declining female cinema attendance119, suggesting an interesting dynamic: women who are not getting out of the house very often do go out to see a film primarily about a woman who doesn't get out of the house very often. The advertising campaign for the film made extensive use of a silhouette of Amy, posed with hand on hip and finger to mouth, suggesting that the feminine type she represented would be instantly recognisable to audiences even in outline, with only the barest of distinguishing features. The ability to recognise Amy's type instantly is also the thing that Ted Willis identifies as the cornerstone of the story's popularity. He explains how the character of Amy has meant something to women all over the world,

I have seen this play performed in many countries and several languages and I have never stopped being surprised at its universal appeal. Argentinean, German, Swedish, Dutch and British women have told me that they "know Amy", that a woman like this lives "next door" or "along the road".120

116 Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', p. 40.
117 According to Willis, the film had cost about £99,000 to make and on its first release it grossed £450,000. It continued to earn significant returns in other markets and when it had run its course the total figure was near £1,000,000. See Willis, Evening All, p. 141. For more information on the film's popularity, see the introductory chapter of this thesis.
118 Although Thompson himself denies this categorisation of the film (see Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 171), the film's pressbook emphasises exploitation of the film's feminine appeal: "SELL the great human story to women patrons - get to them through the editor of the women's section of your local newspaper."
However, the women's recognition of Amy is not personal identification but outward identification - she is not like them but instead someone who lives down the road. If we compare this to the reaction to Friedan's book, the difference is startling; "I've got tears in my eyes with sheer relief that my inner turmoil is shared with other women', a young Connecticut mother wrote me when I first began to put this problem into words."\footnote{121} In the openly feminist text, collective recognition and self-admission of the housewife problem is the first step in doing something about the problem. In *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, the trouble with housewifery is projected onto a character who is depicted as a misfit, albeit a likeable one. Nonetheless, a fictional film like *Woman in a Dressing Gown* offers a space for articulating some of the problems about women's relationship to housewifery when those problems have not yet been generally recognised or named, and before theorists like Betty Friedan are able to dissect them in more depth. Although the film certainly cannot be considered as a straightforwardly feminist text, the 'dust' raised by its contradictions is richly suggestive.

In a later consideration of the 'classic realist text', Colin MacCabe pauses to consider the critical status of Tolstoy in Russia after the revolution, and particularly Lenin's attempts to reappraise Tolstoy. MacCabe summarises the intellectual context of Lenin's articles on Tolstoy:

They are written to combat two prevailing views of Tolstoy - opposed but complementary. On the one hand, Lenin wishes to wrest Tolstoy from those reactionary critics who want to clasp the religious Tolstoy to their bosom and thus present him as fundamentally in favour of the status quo. On the other hand, Lenin is concerned to correct those on the left like Plekhanov who see no

\footnote{120} Willis, *Woman in a Dressing Gown: A Play in Two Acts*, p. 6.
\footnote{121} Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 33.
more in Tolstoy than a religious mystic and thus reject his work as of no value.\textsuperscript{122}

Lenin wishes to emphasise that Tolstoy is essentially a contradictory artist torn between "a bitter and undying enmity for the social system which has brought about the social conditions in Russia" and the opposite impulse of "the most reactionary mystical and religious ideology".\textsuperscript{123} When Paul Willemann wanted to make a case for Douglas Sirk that did not depend upon the twin visions of Sirk as either Marxist critic of Eisenhower America or greatest exponent of the bourgeois weepy, he drew this same parallel between Sirk's position in the history of American cinema and Tolstoy's position in the history of Soviet literature:

Lenin considered Tolstoy to be a unique and extremely valuable artist because he dramatised and presented the contradictions within Russian society at the turn of the century, a time when Tsarism wasn't strong enough to prevent a revolution while the revolution did not yet have enough strength to defeat Tsarism. Sirk performed a similar function in the American cinema in the fifties: he depicted a society which appeared strong and healthy, but which in fact was exhausted and torn apart by collective neuroses.\textsuperscript{124}

Without wishing to make inflated claims for the artistic calibre of either Thompson or Willis, I think it is possible to discern a clear parallel between what is said of Tolstoy and then applied to Sirk and what occurs in \textit{Woman in a Dressing Gown}, as well as in

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Willemen, 'Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System', p. 133
Thompson's other films about women's lives. They provide a popular colloquy for looking at some of the ambiguities and paradoxes of femininity in the fifties before they could be recognised in more officially sanctioned discourses, and before any kind of coherent feminist critique of those conditions could be articulated, when women were still, in Brandon French's phrase, 'on the verge of revolt'. Looked at with hindsight, Woman in a Dressing Gown anticipates what would happen in nascent British feminism over the next few years. By the early sixties, the potential frustration and loneliness of the housewife role was beginning to be publicly acknowledged. In 1961, a radio programme on the subject of lonely wives was inundated with letters from women who voiced the following complaints about their lot: "Being at home all day is terribly boring, frustrating and to my mind, very inferior", "Bored? I'm just fed up", "I am haunted by a sense of wasted time", "Men get the best out of life, for no-one asks them to turn into house-husbands when they get married". In 1962, a newspaper article written by a young wife on the same topic received thousands of letters in response, which this time led to the formation of the National Housewives' Register, in an attempt to combat the isolation suffered by many wives and mothers at home and without many social contacts. In 1963, the same year as The Feminine Mystique was published in America, Katherine Whitehorn caused a stir by writing an article in praise of sluttishness that began conspiratorially with a dedication to all the women who had ever brushed their hair with someone else's nailbrush, safety pinned a hem or taken anything back out of the dirty clothes basket "because it had become relatively the cleaner thing." Rather than being seen as a blight on one's character, not to have the housework under control became a badge of honour, a sign that you were a real person. In the brave new world of honest sluttery, Amy might be held up as a pioneer heroine. Whitehorn characterised the reaction to her 'slut' piece as one of enormous relief

125 Quoted in Gavron, The Captive Wife, p. 111. These women's complaints are confirmed by Gavron's own research which found that all the mothers in the sample said they were often bored at home and a quarter complained of being lonely as well.
126 Wilson, Only Halfway to Paradise, p. 183.
on the part of women because "before that any advice given to women was telling them to be perfect." As Lowry points out, "Suddenly she among others was saying, it's not like that really, let's come dirty about it."\textsuperscript{128} It is impossible to rule out the significance of \textit{Woman in a Dressing Gown} in providing an intermediary stage where sluttishness could be publicly aired before it could be actively celebrated by Whitehorn and others. Did the film provide a lead into looking at housewifery in a different way? There is possible evidence of this in Ann Oakley's study \textit{Housewife} where one of the wives interviewed is groping for the name of the feminist she has seen on TV and plucks out 'Yvonne Mitchell' when, as the footnote informs us, she means Juliet Mitchell.\textsuperscript{129} It would not do to be too facetious about it, but this confusion in at least one woman's mind between one of the most public exponents of second wave feminism and the star of \textit{Woman in a Dressing Gown} suggests that the two were not entirely unrelated.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 52.
Ice Cold in Alex (1958)

Of the six films discussed in detail in this thesis, *Ice Cold in Alex* is indubitably the misfit among them. Firstly, it is much easier to categorise in terms of genre. While the others each combine varying elements of thriller, melodrama, social problem film and woman's picture to create generically hybrid films, *Ice Cold in Alex* is unambiguously 'a war film', one of the best known examples of the genre's flowering in British cinema of the 1950s. Secondly, and this is closely connected to the first point, the woman in its narrative occupies a far less central position than she does in the other films. While the dramatic action of *The Weak and the Wicked*, *Yield to the Night* and *Woman in a Dressing Gown* revolves around a central female protagonist, and *No Trees in the Street* and *Tiger Bay* are weighted in favour of their heroines due to the charismatic performances of the female leads, the character played by Sylvia Syms in *Ice Cold in Alex*, nursing sister Diana Murdoch, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be seen as the central character of the film. That honour goes to John Mills playing the burnt-out alcoholic Captain Anson, with strong competition from Anthony Quayle as Van Der Poel, the cocksure South African who is later revealed to be a German spy. Along with Harry Andrews' salt-of-the-earth NCO Tom, Diana makes up the other half of the quartet travelling through the desert in a clapped-out ambulance, trying to evade capture and make it to Alexandria, spurred on by the incentive of an ice cold beer as soon as they get there. The main incentive for including this film in the thesis is its enduring popularity - it would be very strange to write at length about Thompson's fifties career and miss out his most famous film of this period. *Ice Cold in Alex* has become one of the best loved of British films, even earning the accolade of 'the
ultimate British war film' when it was screened as part of a recent season of war films. On that occasion, John Keane, the official artist of the Gulf war, introduced the film as a British icon, one that had been "absorbed into the collective bloodstream, the [collective] subconscious", something which Carlsberg recognised and consolidated when they made use of the film's final scene in the bar for their 1980s commercials.

Ironically Ice Cold in Alex's central place in the war film pantheon disguises the fact that it was a film that consciously sought to reverse many of the genre's already (by 1957) familiar conventions - by having a leader on the brink of cracking up, by having a German character who is sympathetic, and by having a woman play a central role in the film. While it is true that Diana is not the main focus of attention, the fact that she is there at all is quite a change from the majority of British war films of the fifties.

Overwhelmingly in the war film, we are presented with a wholly masculine world founded upon close male companionship, where any female presence has either been expunged or, as Medhurst notes, is used only for "brief heterosexual scenes that are deeply unsatisfactory" and which break the flow of the main story. The women-centred home front films made during the war, such as Millions Like Us (1943) and The Gentle Sex (1943) found no equivalent in the 50s. The opening narration of The Cruel Sea (1953) might stand as a credo for the fifties war film: "This is a story of the Battle of the Atlantic...The men are the heroes. The heroines are the ships." However, it would be wrong to say that women were completely written out of wartime history. In fact, one of the two war films that made it into Kine Weekly's top ten of 1950, thus heralding a resurgence of interest in war-based narratives, was Odette (1950), starring Anna Neagle

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1 TX, 28 August 1999. Another sign of the film's popular recognition was its appearance in Empire magazine's 1998 list of the best British war films ever made (See Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 8). Frequent screenings of the film on TV have undoubtedly been the reason for its continuing popularity and cultural currency, a factor recognised by John Ramsden who asserts that TV allowed films like Ice Cold in Alex to acquire "a permanent life after death" and thus shape "the central view of the Second World War for the next two generations in their approximately annual re-screenings." (John Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War": British War Films of the 1950s', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1998), p. 38).
as the real life SOE agent Odette Churchill. Virginia McKenna, who made a brief appearance in the 'heroine-less' *The Cruel Sea* as a competent young Wren, took a starring role in another SOE story *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) as Violette Szabo. Two years earlier she had also appeared in *A Town like Alice* (1956), about women trapped in Malaya after the Japanese invasion. In a neat inversion of the male POW films, which deal with the men trying to get out of their camps, the women in this film are forced to wander the country looking for a prison camp that will let them in. McKenna is the female star who, more than any other, proved the exception to the rule that the war film was an exclusively masculine sphere and instead benefited from the fifties boom in war stories.

However, it is important not to overplay women's share in the 1950s war film boom on the evidence of a single career. Far more characteristic of the period is Michael Balcon's letter to director Leslie Norman in which he noted with approval the fact that *Dunkirk* (1958) had "no women characters of any importance." Looking at the three British war films that were the most popular during the decade, the ones that topped *Kine Weekly*'s annual box office ratings, *The Dam Busters* in 1955, *Reach For The Sky* in 1956, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* in 1958, we can see how marginal a role women were generally given to play in British cinema's retelling of the war. *The Dam Busters* has one significant female role in Mrs Wallis, played sympathetically by Ursula Jeans, but, as John Ramsden notes, she makes her last appearance with 100 minutes of

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3 *Kine Weekly*, 14 Dec 1950. The other film in the top ten was the POW escape drama *The Wooden Horse*.
4 See McKenna in McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 382: "I was lucky because at the beginning of the 50s, they started to make those wonderful war stories[...] I just happened to arrive at the right moment." For a further examination of McKenna's war roles, see Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties*, pp 167-174.
8 *Kine Weekly*, 18 December 1958. One could argue that this is not really a British film because it is financed by Columbia Studios, but in terms of the nationality of the director and the majority of the cast and its central theme, there is also a valid case to be made for considering it a British film at heart.
the film still to go and "the only women's voices from now on will be anonymous WRAFs offering bacon and eggs or cups of cocoa."9 Guy Gibson's lack of interest in women is even a source of humour, when his colleague thinks he is ogling a showgirl and he is actually studying the spotlight that illuminates her, a potential solution to one of the mission's technical problems. Sexual attraction has little or no place in the 1950s British war film and, as Christine Geraghty remarks, the films' heroes tend to "abandon the private sphere of sexuality to those who are too weak to resist it."10 Perhaps because it is a biopic as well as a war film, women make slightly more of an appearance in Reach for the Sky, in the customary form of helpmeets, nurse Brace (Dorothy Alison) who helps Bader to walk again after his accident and wife Thelma (Muriel Pavlow). But celebrating Bader's indomitable determination, boisterous character and ultimate triumph is undoubtedly the film's central concern. Andy Medhurst's description of the unsatisfactory and superfluous 'brief heteroerosexual scene' might have been formulated with The Bridge on the River Kwai in mind. There is no better example of the unmotivated insertion of a female character to provide 'love interest' than the nurse played by Ann Sears in Kwai, shoehorned into the film at a late stage because Columbia were concerned that the only women in the film were non-white women with non-speaking parts. Under duress, Lean agreed to add a love scene ("Of course I gave in and shot it. It's bloody awful. What else can one do?"") and the result is a brief interlude that lasts little over a minute and adds nothing to the main story in which Sears' character does scarcely more than appear, kiss William Holden and disappear again.

While Ice Cold in Alex shares with Kwai the factor of a nurse who provides the love interest, there the similarity between the two films ends. Ice Cold in Alex's Diana

10 Christine Geraghty, 'Masculinity' in Geoff Hurd (ed.), National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television (London: BFI, 1984), p. 66. Andy Medhurst discerns a similar link between courage and sexual purity in Angels One Five (1952) in which the fighter pilots "must be very young, and possess what borders on a virginal purity, free of any taints of sexual involvement." (Medhurst, '1950s War Films', p. 36). They become almost like latter-day Sir Galahads, their virginity boosting and beatifying their heroism.
does not briefly appear and then vanish promptly the moment her kissing is done but is in the film throughout, firmly integrated into the group of four as they labour to cross the desert under the most arduous of physical and mental conditions. Although Robert Murphy plays down the possibility of the war film as a vehicle for "the thematic obsessions and personal idiosyncrasies of directors"\footnote{Kevin Brownlow, \\emph{David Lean} (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 363.\footnote{Robert Murphy, \\emph{British Cinema and the Second World War} (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 210.\footnote{Ice Cold in Alex pressbook.\footnote{Durgnat, \\emph{A Mirror for England}, p. 103.}}}, I think it is interesting that J. Lee Thompson is the only British director of the 1950s (to my knowledge) who places a woman in the midst of the tight-knit group of comrades struggling for survival in the theatre of war: "a girl alone in a man's world", as the film's pressbook puts it.\footnote{Ice Cold in Alex pressbook.} While acknowledging that the generic conventions of the war film determine most of the film's shape and ethos, I wish to examine \\emph{Ice Cold in Alex} not purely in the context of the war film but also in the light of other films directed by Thompson, especially those concerned primarily with female protagonists. It is true that Thompson's war film is remarkable for having a woman in it at all, but how is the representation of a female character affected or even determined by the constraints of the generic form, especially in a genre as masculine as the war film? It is undeniably true that \\emph{Ice Cold in Alex} is primarily concerned with the theme of troubled masculinity intertwined with wounded national pride. As Raymond Durgnat says, the film offers striking evidence of a British inferiority complex, with a capability ranking that runs "Germans or colonial top: loyal NCO next: English officer last."\footnote{Durgnat, \\emph{A Mirror for England}, p. 103.} Diana's presence in the otherwise all-male group alters the usual sexual dynamic of the genre. Instead of being a study of masculinity in isolation, men in the company of other men in the all-male spheres of the POW camp, the ship and the briefing room, \\emph{Ice Cold in Alex} introduces women back into the masculinity equation and causes all kinds of problems as a result. Because of Diana's presence in the group, Geraghty notes, "male/female relationships become a central
rather than a peripheral issue" and "questions about sexual and emotional relationships, which the war film normally blocks off" are instead pushed to the forefront of the text. However, this only suggests how the character of Diana is important because of what she can add to the film's discussion of masculinity. What ought to be recognised also is how, through Diana, the film invokes a debate on femininity that runs parallel to and complements the much more recognisable debate on masculinity. Geraghty suggests a precedent for this in her analysis of Virginia McKenna's two war films, *A Town like Alice* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*. She reads them less as excursions into the wartime past and more as investigations into contemporary femininity, smuggled in under the guise of a wartime setting. In the same vein, Syms' Diana in *Ice Cold in Alex* is clearly not just a heroine of the past but also a depiction of the modern young woman of the fifties.

Diana is a nurse, and before moving into any close analysis of the film, it is worth considering the implications of this simple fact about her character. The nurse was an iconic figure in the fifties, the meritocratic heroine of the newly created NHS and, as Philips and Heywood suggest, perceived as "a modern and professionally skilled young woman[...] among the best and brightest of her generation". The fascination with the nurse persona was evident in British films of the time such as *The Feminine Touch* (1956) and *No Time For Tears* (1957) which featured Syms as a young nurse, and which dealt with the travails of young women training to be nurses and their life on the wards. The titles of these two films are brilliantly indicative of the conflicting elements required of the perfect nurse: while she is required to bring her 'feminine touch' to the potentially impersonal world of mass healthcare, she must also remember that there is 'no time for tears' - she must not become a quivering mass of 'feminine' affect. By the end of the decade, the cultural fascination with young nurses would find a bawdier

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outlet in *Carry On Nurse* (1959) but the hugely popular hospital-set romantic fiction published by Mills and Boon would provide a more wholesome counterweight. In fact, the latter field of cultural production points towards one of the reasons why the nurse persona had such resonance in the fifties. The typical hospital romance novel sees the young nurse heroine married off to a handsome doctor at the end, where the skills learnt in her career can be smoothly carried through into her new career as wife and mother. While in some ways, the nurse's attachment to her professional career is troubling as it pulls against the lure of domesticity, the nurse can be redeemed as a good woman because her skills, involving care and nurture, are perceived as "a kind of professionalised femaleness". The potency of the nurse figure in 1950s culture comes from her ability to bridge old and new ideas of women's role, able to use advanced medical technology confidently but also to fulfill an older conception of women as inherently maternal and selflessly dedicated to the welfare of others. She was, as Philips and Haywood suggest, "a figure around whom a whole contemporary set of discourses concerning femininity could coalesce" and where the conflicts and contradictions between those discourses could be magically resolved.

Although *Ice Cold in Alex* is dealing with the situation of nurses during World War Two, discussing it in the context of fifties nursing is not so strange. Like the later civilian nurses, wartime nurses were also perceived as a potent combination of different femininities, functioning for the injured serviceman as "mother, wife and sister in one female image." There was a clear lineage and continuity from wartime nursing to peacetime nursing. The structure of the postwar National Health Service was inherited from the reorganisation of healthcare provision during the war, and as Brenda McBryde

points out, the NHS was staffed by many nurses who had had their first taste of the job as Voluntary Aid Detachments during the war and "found so much satisfaction in their chosen war effort that they went on to undertake full training." Nonetheless, much had changed in the shift from war to peacetime nursing and one of the most important iconographic differences was the change in the uniforms worn by nurses. The fifties nurse's dress, apron and headgear, whilst reasonably practical, are nonetheless attuned to reminding us that the wearer is female, whereas the wartime nurse, like Diana in Ice Cold in Alex, wears plain masculine clothes very close to the male army uniform of khaki shirt and trousers. On one level, this elision of difference in male and female dress suppresses her femininity: she looks more like 'one of the boys'. But on another level, it makes her femininity all the more apparent. She is dressed similarly to the men but is clearly not the same as them.  

Ice Cold in Alex opens in the customary manner of the fifties war film, with an emphasis on verisimilitude. The brief contextualising introductory sequence superimposes real battle footage over movement across a map of North Africa. The voiceover narration sets the scene for what will follow, isolating one story from the multitude that could be told, intoning that there are "two million men - two million stories". Although the narration, reminiscent of that used in The Cruel Sea, implies an all male world, the first of the film's four principal players we see is actually Syms. Her character Diana and another nurse, Denise (Diana Clare), are under bombardment and

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22One important difference is that they can take off more clothes than she can. The Diana of Christopher Landon's original book draws attention to this inequality in her narration: "There was just one feeling now - that of a great resentment, they had all stripped off to the waist, they were cool. She felt the wet heavy weight of her shirt, the sweat trickling between her breasts. It wasn't fair...she'd show them...if he [Anson] spoke to her like that again, she'd take it off." (Christopher Landon, Ice Cold in Alex (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 226).
running to take cover. The women's panicky mobility contrasts with the subsequent scenes that show men under bombardment, apparently calm and unruffled, although this will be revealed as illusory on the part of Anson at least. But ironically, women's feminine difference is the reason that they are there at all. As the Brigadier (Liam Redmond) explains to Anson, "I never wanted nurses here anyway. Army insisted. Said it needed a woman's touch to make the poor devils feel they were on the first stage of the road home." He explains to Anson that he wants him to escort the two nurses to Alexandria, so they can rejoin their unit from which they were isolated during the bombing raid. Thus women, who at first sight appear marginal to what is shaping up to be a story of male courage and bravery, actually occupy a central position and the twists and turns of the narrative are dependent upon their actions. In fact, the presence of women in the theatre of war is what actually precipitates the epic journey that drives the film's narrative. Women also appear to provide the means by which the group avoid capture by the Germans: the first time because they pretend a nurse is only wounded when she is already dead so that they will be released in order to seek medical care; the second because the Germans disapprove of their bringing a woman into the battle area and let them go with a caution. Even the ambulance that gets them to Alex has a woman's name, Katy. Raymond Bellour, discussing the Western, argues that women's apparent insignificance in the genre is belied by their covert importance as "a whole organised circuit of feminine representations (the young heroine, the mother, the saloon girl, the wife etc.) without which the film cannot function."²³ Like other classic narrative texts, the figure of woman functions as the necessary disruption that instigates the story and fires the trajectory of male desire that is ideally resolved with the formation of the heterosexual couple. Women, as Annette Kuhn succinctly put it, act as "the trouble in

the text" the factor that sets the whole narrative trajectory going, an idea that finds its echo in Diana's first line of dialogue, on meeting her escorts: "We're a bit of a problem, aren't we?" Without the 'problem' of getting Diana and Denise to Alex, there would be no story. But the presence of two women in the centre of the story, not just at its periphery as symbolic figures, will instigate other more complicated problems as the narrative develops.

The scene which introduces us to the two nurses emphasises the difference in their dispositions. Where Diana's lines are short and delivered in a clear, brisk tone of voice, Denise's longer, slightly muddled speech about losing her nerve in the bombing raid and glazed vacant expression seem to foretell her later hysterical outburst. She is concerned over the small detail of her kitbag being on the ship without her, while for pragmatic Diana, that is "the least of our worries". Thus even in the first scene, the contrast between the hysterical woman and the sensible woman is sharply drawn. But for Anson, all women are the same and are equated with potential danger. "Dames and mines - a pretty party" he remarks sardonically as the ambulance reaches the threshold of a minefield, drawing a parallel between the threat that lies outside the vehicle and the threat that is contained within, suggesting that the two are equally troubling and potentially explosive.

While the two women are both situated in the back of the ambulance, the men are in the cab at the front, providing a vivid sense of how space is gender-segregated. All Diana's communication with the men is conducted through a small connecting door through to the front and unsurprisingly she expresses a desire to come to the front because she "can't see anything through those small windows", suggesting the

24 Title of Chapter 5 of Kuhn, Women's Pictures.
25 Thompson's later war film The Guns of Navarone (1961) which also finds space for women in a predominantly male group, is even more marked by the notion of woman as 'trouble'. Gia Scala creates trouble as the traitor who betrays the group and trouble in Gregory Peck's conscience as he tries to square his affection for her with the need to execute the mole. Luckily he is saved from having to kill her by the other woman in the group, Irene Papas, who does the job for him, so perhaps all in all, bad treacherous
limitations of being cloistered in the back. Although the main interest of the film at this point is the arrival of Van Der Poel and the progress through the minefield, there is a parallel story of how Diana is struggling to sedate hysterical Denise to which the film sporadically cuts. In one key scene we see Diana trying to stand up and get some bandages to tend to her wounded colleague while the ambulance speeds over bumpy ground in an attempt to escape the enemy. We see how futile her efforts are as repeatedly she tries to open a cupboard only for it to fall open and then spill its contents onto the floor. She is pitched and tossed around and the camera moves in for a medium close up when she slams her back into the side of the vehicle, the constricted space proving awkward and hazardous. She is at the mercy of the men in the driving seat. However, it also provides a certain amount of protection too, as we can see in the scene where Diana ventures out from the back of the van to ask for bandages after Denise has been shot. She moves from her small realm into the huge desert and into the gaze of the German soldiers surrounding the ambulance. The shock of this moment is registered in Syms' performance: she delivers her lines quietly and hesitantly, walking over to Captain Anson with her arms folded across her body and nervously biting her nails.

Because the back of the ambulance is designated as female space, it is unsurprising that the men are reluctant to spend any time there. It becomes the place where people let down their guard, sleeping and recovering from injury. Anson only goes into the back of the van after he has caused Denise's death through his fecklessness. Even after holding the weight of the whole van on his back, Van Der Poel refuses to go in the back to rest, as though this would suggest some kind of weakness and emasculation. The only man who willingly ventures into the back is Tom, to help out when Denise first becomes hysterical. It is interesting that the first real bond in the film is made between Tom and Diana: we get an idea here of the first stirrings of a woman is cancelled out by good, honourable woman in the film's logic. It should be noted that the female partisans were entirely the invention of the film, and were not present in McLean's original novel.
comradeship between the two characters who are, in one sense, sidelined by the central drama of the battle for supremacy between Anson and Van Der Poel. This contact is actually initiated by Diana when she offers him a nip of her brandy but Tom’s response (“You first, miss”) indicates that this camaraderie still exists within a framework of chivalry. Nonetheless, the relationship between Tom and Diana is one of closeness and reciprocal help. They share with each other their doubts about Van Der Poel’s sincerity, he confides in her about Anson’s drink problem and she is able to perform the role of diplomatic mediator, persuading Anson not to drink before he guides them through the minefield. The way this scene of reasoning and persuasion is shot is also quite revealing. It consists of a medium close up shot/reverse shot sequence between Anson on his own and, interestingly, a shot with both Diana and Van Der Poel in the frame, although Van Der Poel is not speaking at the time. This unconventional two shot contrasts the difference in appearance of the two characters (Diana pale and reasonable, Van Der Poel dark and sardonic) and almost presents them as the good and bad sides of Anson’s conscience.

Perhaps the most significant factors in the characterisation of Diana at this point in the film are her unsentimental honesty and, conversely, her ability to lie. Nothing quite prepares us for the plain pragmatism of “She’ll be dead within an hour”, Diana’s diagnosis of the other nurse’s condition after being shot. The other aspects of Syms’ performance while she says this line are also worthy of note: the lines are spoken softly (suggesting compassion) but without dramatic or emotional emphasis; she keeps busy and carries on bandaging, not even stopping to look at Tom, to whom these words are addressed. Tom, by comparison, is much more taken aback by this revelation, unable even to say the word “dead”, instead leaving a gap in his sentences. When he asks if there is anything that he can do to help, she replies “There’s nothing anyone can do. I know.” (my italics). This affirmation of her knowledge seems to suggest that Diana is
claiming a field of expertise and capability of her own. Her stoicism and mastery of the emotions are further underlined in her ability to lie to the enemy about the nurse’s condition, saying to Tom “she’s dead” one second and then saying to a German soldier “she’s asleep” the next. It is interesting that these scenes do not conform to usual film iconography of the untruthful character being thrown into shadow, but instead Syms is lit most luminously when she is telling lies. The best example of this comes when Anson asks her how the other nurse is, having seen the bullet holes in the side of the truck. Knowing that he feels responsible and is on the edge, we cut to one of the most luminous close ups in the film of Syms as she lies that “she’ll be alright”. It would appear that her lies here, shot in bright light to emphasise her pale colouring, really are “white lies”.

At this point, it is a cigarette that provides the first moment of significant contact between Anson and Diana. A common trope in romantic films (the final scene of Now, Voyager is the most celebrated example), the sharing of cigarettes gains an extra resonance in war films. Their powerful function is suggested by Richard Klein:

Cigarettes free the soldier by momentarily masking the cruelty of his condition; their effect is less that of producing a narcotic sensation than of permitting an intellectual stance detached from reality - one that, Janus-like, invites the return of nostalgia or speculates in dreamy anticipation. 26

Diana is the character most frequently seen smoking in the film, probably for the reasons described by Klein above: after all, she is a girl who has been "flung into a desert nightmare". 27 However, the cigarette (as Klein suggests in his later reference to

26 Klein, Cigarettes Are Sublime, p. 139.
27 Ice Cold in Alex pressbook.
classic war texts such as *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *All Quiet On The Western Front* and *The Naked And The Dead*) is also notable for being primarily a male token of exchange and tool of forgetting. Therefore, to see the woman manipulate and offer it (when the German guard travels on the ambulance, she is the one who offers round the cigarettes) suggests an appropriation of that male currency. Diana’s manipulation of cigarettes is just one part of her trajectory into the midst of the film’s action. Perhaps the most definitive moment of her newly collaborative presence in the film’s action occurs when Anson is organising a watch and she contradicts his (factually incorrect) statement that “there’s three of us” with an assertion of her membership of the group: “no, four”. As Sue Harper points out, Diana "expects to take an equal part in the struggle." Her move into full participation in the group is also implied in the film’s mise-en-scene. Whereas formerly the film had to cross-cut from the main action to what the women were up to in the back of the van, from now until the film’s end the predominant shot switches to a group shot of the main characters, including Diana. We can see this use of the group shot most forcefully and movingly with the low angle tableau of the four characters standing at the grave of the other nurse, Tom reciting the Lord's prayer as the wind whistles past. Of course, it is Denise's death that has enabled Diana to come to the front of the van and join the men. Denise, the spectre of bad femininity, in all its hysteria, silliness and flirtatiousness, has to be dispelled before Diana can achieve a sense of parity with the group and join them. Read in this way, the burial of Denise takes on an extra symbolic significance as the burial of a whole set of feminine behaviours from which Diana must dissociate herself to join the men. But at what cost to herself? Diana mourns Denise's death very deeply, even though she did not like her very much ("she was rather a silly little thing, terrible flirt, not even a very good nurse"). On the night before the burial she cannot bear to see Denise's face covered up and confesses to

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28 One might link this back to the scenes of women smoking in *The Weak and the Wicked* and *Yield to the Night* discussed earlier.
Anson that she feels worse about her death than anything that has ever happened to her before. Clearly, repudiating that side of her femininity is not without its trauma. It is symptomatic that she has to use her lipstick for writing the name of her colleague on the makeshift cross that marks her burial spot. There will be no room for any feminine frippery on this journey.

As the film progresses and the band of four face a series of testing physical trials, the portrayal of Diana emphasises her capability, pragmatism and complete lack of hysteria, in sharp contrast to the officer in charge. For example, in one of the film's most gripping dramatic sequences, the rescue of Van Der Poel from the quicksand, Diana plays her part with aplomb, reversing the ambulance to pull Van Der Poel out of the dangerous quagmire. Although the task she has to fulfil is simple enough and she is well instructed in it, she carries it out successfully. Her success in operating the ambulance when she has never driven any vehicle before is also worthy of note, especially in the light of the problems that the truck will cause for her later. However, this point actually represents the apex of the film's demonstration of Diana's confident capability. After this point, its portrayal of her character changes, seemingly initiated by her reversion to type as the only woman in a war film when she becomes the 'love interest'. Significantly, this is where the film deviates from its source novel in which working class Tom Pugh had been the object of Diana's affection. The shift in the film from Tom to Anson is indicative of John Mills' greater star power than Harry Andrews, but it is also another example of the excision of working class characters from the centre of war stories in 1950s war films, interpreted by Neil Rattigan as an attempt to displace the notion of a people's war by reinstating middle class hegemony and asserting that the war was won by the officer class on our behalf.  

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romantic choice is being used to reassert the appeal of beleaguered middle class British masculinity. Although Anson is not obviously heroic - ravaged as he is by alcoholism and given to frequent fits of simpering wounded pride - Diana's attachment to him endorses his brand of masculinity over the other masculine types on offer even though they are more obviously physically impressive than small puny Anson. There seems to be a certain kind of wish fulfilment at work here.

Although much less common in fifties war films, what Antonia Lant describes as the "precipitously formed romance" is a frequent occurrence in films made during the war, reflecting wartime reality. A Mass Observation report of 1940 observed that "the breaking up of families, the new mingling of population, while temporarily dislocating individual branches will undoubtedly produce a compensation of new life and new functions" and one of the most significant elements of that new life is its romantic opportunities, however fleeting. The ever-present danger of life during wartime also provoked a carpe diem mentality which led to the liberalising of old moral strictures, neatly summed up by this dialogue from the hugely popular British wartime romance *Love Story* (1944): "Happiness such as we can have is worth grasping even if it's only for a day, an hour [...] we're all living dangerously, there isn't any certainty anymore. Just today and the hope of tomorrow." *Ice Cold in Alex* follows in the tradition of these wartime films by having Anson and Diana hook up together with very little obvious preamble. Although Diana's very presence has altered the all-male group dynamic of the usual 1950s war film - introducing the possibility of heterosexual romantic entanglement - that possibility has actually been studiously avoided up till this point and therefore Diana's approach to Anson seems to come from nowhere. It is Van Der Poel's mention that their group will soon disband that triggers her decision. We get

a close up of Syms' face as she leans against the back of the truck, resting from the heat. Her eyes move very slowly sideways towards the offscreen space where we know Captain Anson is. In the next shot we see her propel her body, leading with the chin, from its position in repose and walk slowly after Anson. The style of performance here, its leisurely pace and masculine gestures suggest confidence and resolve. She is portrayed as the figure of agency and decision here and Anson takes on the traditionally feminine role of the pursued rather than the pursuer. Although the situation is permissible because it is set in wartime, rather than the present day, the vastly differing situation condoning the suddenness of the encounter, this is still a remarkable display of sexual agency for a female character in a fifties British film, especially one played by an actress usually typed as a 'nice girl'.

At this point in her career, Sylvia Syms had played a teenage rebel of the most genteel kind in the Anna Neagle vehicle *My Teenage Daughter* (1956), a sensible young woman who hardly fits the stereotype of 'the other woman' in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, a nurse in *No Time for Tears* (1957), and a middle class wife whose world is turned upside down when her husband is sent to prison in *The Birthday Present* (1957). Syms' subsequent roles would be more varied and would often use her 'English Rose' good looks in subversive ways, casting her as stripper in *Expresso Bongo* (1959), schoolteacher in love with her black colleague in *Flame in the Streets* (1961), naive wife of a closet homosexual in *Victim* (1961) and lesbian in *The World Ten Times Over* (1963). But even in the early stages of her career, Syms' extra-filmic persona and particularly her refusal to comply with the film industry's need for ballyhoo (no pin-up pictures) suggested a more combative side to her character than her film roles might have indicated. As Margaret Hiniman recounts in an emblematic anecdote: "When she first won her Associated British contract, a publicist went round to her tiny South Kensington flat with a photographer for the usual starlet-at-home picture layout."
Normally any young actress at this stage of her career would have been delighted. Not Sylvia. 'You needn't think you're taking any silly pictures here' she said firmly. She can be cuttingly witty, blunt to the point of brusqueness."33 If she was an English Rose, Syms later contested, then she was one who still had her thorns intact.34 However, in 1958, on the screen at least, she still appeared to be quite a straightforward incarnation of what Sarah Street identifies as the predominant female type in fifties British cinema, the "non-threatening, nice middle-class girl"35 typified by her roles as undergraduate girlfriend in Bachelor of Hearts and (in a historical version of the same type) as seventeenth century maiden in The Moonraker. However, Street's description of Syms as "not very sexual" is a simplification. Although she is not a blonde bombshell in the mould of Diana Dors, a sex appeal of a more subtle kind is definitely in evidence in her performance in Ice Cold in Alex. In fact, Diana's seduction of Anson and the sudden eruption of a passion which had not made its presence felt before is strongly reminiscent of the sophisticated blondes in Hitchcock's films who appear icily cool and dispassionate but who are actually positively volcanic in their sexual feelings when roused. The quality described decorously by Francois Truffaut as "the paradox between the inner fire and the cool surface" is explained in earthier terms by Hitchcock himself: "We're after the drawing room type, the real ladies, who become whores once they're in the bedroom." The difference is that Anson, unlike Cary Grant tangling with Grace Kelly or Eva Marie-Saint, seems unequal to the challenge. Although his submission to Diana, simply lying supine while she kisses him, could suggest a kind of erotic abandonment, it actually feels closer to frigid paralysis in the way it is performed and

33 Margaret Hinxman, 'Who Is Sylvia?', Picturegoer, 31 October 1959. Obviously, Syms' arm had been twisted by the time of Ice Cold in Alex because the pressbook features her beaming with delight as she uses Starline paint to decorate her flat, in one of the film's advertising tie-ups, along with Austin Motors, Hurseal heaters and, unsurprisingly, Carlsberg lager.
35 Street, British National Cinema, p. 138.
36 Ibid.
presented. Anson's stasis throughout the scene suggests exactly that quality of emotional reserve identified by Geraghty as the hallmark of the fifties war film hero: "Unable to admit to feelings, [they] can scarcely articulate emotion, let alone act on it, and what pleasure they have seems to come from their skill with and control over machines"38, a description that John Mills himself echoes in his summary of his pre-Alex war films as "[making] love to virtually nothing but submarines and destroyers".39

Rather perversely, the chief topic of discussion as they lie together in the sand is Anson's love triangle with his colleague Paul and Ariadne, the woman who might be waiting for him in Alex. Diana gently chides Anson for not understanding women (as Geraghty points out, "a characteristic trait of war heroes but not one that is usually articulated so clearly"40) and lays out the situation in logical parallelism: “If it’s you she wants, I think you’d know by now. If it’s Paul she wants, nothing you do will make any difference.” Anson replies that her advice sounds “like a judge’s summing up... logical, cold as hell, probably right”, dialogue very far from the conventional sweet nothings whispered in love scenes. It is also quite ironic that Anson accuses Diana of being 'cold as hell' when his behaviour towards her has been markedly frosty. It is also a quite contradictory simile - hell is supposed to be hot after all. And coldness, in the overwhelming heat of the desert, is a quality to be desired, not censured - it is what makes the beer in Alex 'worth waiting for'. Again, one could read this dialogue in terms of a Hitchcockian counterpoint between the intensity of the passion and the banality of the couple's conversation (the main love scene in Notorious is the best example), making the scene more erotic, but in Ice Cold in Alex, the passion seems too one-sided to override the content of Anson's critique of Diana's coldness. Of course, it is important to remember that the scene was heavily cut and so we do not see it in the form originally intended by its makers. Although the BBFC took issue with Van Der Poel's

38 Geraghty, 'Masculinity', p. 66.
frequent swearing and visible blood in the scene where the nurse is shot,\(^{41}\) their main problem with the film was the explicit nature of the love scene between Mills and Syms. It was rumoured that Syms' exposed breast could be seen at one point, something refuted by the actress: "In fact, all John did was to undo some buttons and I know I still had a bra on."\(^{42}\) The version we see fades on a clinch and the scene switches to the next morning, but in the original version, there was more dialogue about their uncertain future followed by a further 14 seconds of the couple embracing\(^{43}\), and in those extra seconds we might have seen Anson become less passive and thus return the film to the conventional gender politics of love scenes. As it is, Syms' Diana remains firmly in charge of the seduction. This seems to transmit itself to the film's mise en scene where, until the final shot and the fadeout, most of the scene is filmed not only disconcertingly on the diagonal but also from slightly from above. This camera angle almost mimics Syms' position in that it constructs Mills as the object of the gaze. Mills is still low lit in the traditional manner of male stars, to show up the contours of his face and to make it look dark and Syms is lit to emphasise her paleness and blondeness. Other than this though, this scene is different from the norm and this reversal of several aspects of the traditional love scene cannot, I think, be accidental. This is a scene that begins with a woman making a snap decision to make sexual advances to a man she has only known for a few days, and confidently pursuing her quarry despite his apparent reticence and the unconventional presentation of it fits.

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\(^{42}\) McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 550. Editor Dick Best attributed the clamour for cutting the film's love scene to the hype created by some sexy publicity pictures used to promote it. See Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 198.

\(^{43}\) Release script of *Ice Cold in Alex* (undated). The missing dialogue ran as follows:

DIANA - What's going to happen to us tomorrow?

ANSON - Tomorrow? Oh tomorrow, you'll go back to your unit, Tom and I'll go back to ours.

D - And in a few days you'll have forgotten we ever met.

A - I won't forget.

D - If we say goodbye tomorrow like two people just thrown together for a few days, you'll forget...you won't be able to help it.
The next morning, the group must undergo one last trial before they reach Alexandria. The only way to get the ambulance onto the main road to Alex is to push it up a steep sandy incline. Anson decides that they should try to push it up the slope as Tom steers in the cab, despite Tom's misgivings about the efficacy of this method. Their massed efforts are not enough and the van sinks into the sand, and the failure of his plan pushes Anson to the brink of hysteria. He attacks all three of his fellow travellers, but saves his most scathing remarks for Diana. He tells her to "stop grinning about your love life" and tells her "never mind your bloody make-up" when she falls in the sand pushing the truck. And, as if in support of his abuse, it is after this tirade that the film unleashes its cruellest blow to Sylvia Syms' character, reneging on its hitherto positive representation of a capable young woman, by having her make the mistake that imperils the whole group. It is true that her mistake does not actually result in anyone's death (unlike Anson's decision to drive on when under fire) but because of the way it is presented on film, it is made to feel much worse. Tom hits upon the idea that it might be possible to crank the van slowly backwards up the hill using the starter handle, an idea proved correct by a few preliminary experiments. Anson, meanwhile, is sulking on the sidelines and Diana, again playing the role of diplomat, attempts to bring him back into the group by boosting his confidence in asking him to explain to her how the hand-cranking works ("I've no idea what they're doing - they tried to explain... "). Anson rejoins the group and what follows is a lengthy montage of low angle shots that show the three men straining and sweating as they turn the starting handle which moves the van up the slope inch by painstaking inch. Nearly at the summit, they stop for a quick break. Diana is told to hold the handle for a few seconds but she absentmindedly lets it go and as a result the van plummets to the bottom of the incline, hours of arduous work wasted by one moment of carelessness. The unstoppable descent of the truck is intercut first with their attempt at pursuit and then, when they realise they cannot possibly catch
it, with their distraught faces watching it roll further downhill and into the distance. The careful construction of the sequence's parabola of strenuous effort, almost-triumph, then frustration compels the audience to, in Chibnall's words, "share the despair and abjection at achievement squandered." The film then gives us a medium shot of Diana, desolate and beginning to sob. This is in fact the first time in the film that we see her character cry. Despite all the hardships endured prior to this event, Diana retains a control over her emotions that only cracks at this point. One could argue that this is one of the reasons for having her make this mistake: to soften her and reveal her to be a 'real woman' rather than the cold and judicial figure that Anson accuses her of being. The camera stays on her for some time as we are prompted to wonder what the reaction of the others will be. Eventually we see Tom's hand enter the frame to clasp her shoulder reassuringly. There is a pause as we now anticipate what Anson's reaction will be, and the surprise and relief when he says "Shall we take some exercise?" are palpable, since we had been prepared for a very different reaction from him after his earlier outbursts. Her mistake acts as a narrative excuse to bring out the men's 'Dunkirk spirit' (even the German can become an honorary Brit) and to celebrate their ability to soldier on in the face of adversity. But their show of heroism and solidarity can only be bought at the cost of her capability.

Although the film initially constructs Syms' character as capable and self-sufficient, it is almost as though the film has become afraid of the logic of its own argument. And since her big mistake comes immediately after the love scene, it is difficult not to make a connection between the two and read her fallibility here as, in some way, a punishment for her demonstration of autonomy and determination there. It is crucial to note that this incident is absent from Landon's novel and is thus entirely the invention of the film. So how are we meant to read this moment, not just in this film but in the context of a thesis which has argued for the sympathetic understanding of J. Lee

44 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 191.
Thompson's female representation? It is a pointed addition which appears to deal in the worst kind of gender stereotyping - the woman as the weak link in the team who lets everyone down because of her lack of concentration. One could argue that the demands of the genre prove too much, and trying to fit a female character into its male structure exerts pressure on the text that has to be let off somewhere. To have a female character who is a capable team member is fair enough but to have one who is more capable than the team leader, and more sexually confident, is perhaps a challenge to fifties masculinity too far. Diana's culpability for the truck rolling down the hill helps level things out and make Anson look less like the weak link. One thing is clear: Diana is a site of struggle and debate over female identity, her professional capability and sexual agency suggesting one form of new womanhood but compromised and brought back to the inevitability of her inferiority by a feminine moment of weakness. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to see the scene as symbolic of Thompson himself and his status as a 'woman's director': he is strenuously advancing the strength, importance and complexity of the 'feminine' (in the symbolic form of the ambulance Katy) up the steep incline of 1950s British patriarchy and nearly getting to the top, but then, in one lapse of concentration, letting the whole thing slide and imperilling the whole project. Just for a moment, confidence is dented, but the situation, as it turns out, is not irrecoverable. Diana's carelessness with the starter handle is not the film's final word on femininity.

*Ice Cold in Alex* does not end on a note of feminine difference but group solidarity. The iconic final scene of the film shows the four travellers drinking together in the bar, affirming "the bonds that the terrible journey has made between them”, bonds that traverse the separations of nationality, class and gender. The film resists the possibility of using Diana and Anson’s burgeoning relationship as a means of narrative closure and in that way, it is very different from Landon's source novel which does exactly that, concluding with Diana clasping Tom's hand and the pair making marriage
plans: "She said 'I do want it to be quick, darling. And then I want a baby as soon as we can - so that I can get out of this, and home, and start things up - for you to come back to.'"45 Instead, the film is closer to the tendency that Lant discerns in wartime films, of avoiding "conventional narrative chains of cause and effect, those which would usually result in the classical ending of lovers fading out in a 'happily ever after' embrace" and as a result "exposing the inadequacy of romantic liaison for narrative resolution, and thus tending, retrospectively, to unmask the ideological function of such endings in 'normal' peacetime cinema."46 Anson makes clear the impossibility of their romance continuing and Diana seems to accept this without any great show of regret, and the focus of the drama swings swiftly back to the group dilemma of what to do with Van Der Poel, who will be shot as a spy if he keeps up his pretence that he is South African.

In fact, one might argue that the film's real love scene is the one between Anson and his ice-cold beer: he seems to show a greater degree of amorous interaction with his drink than he does with Diana. The beer is the true cold object of desire, "worth waiting for", and is shot in mouth-watering detail, as lovingly and fetishistically as the archetypal movie goddess. Anson bends close to the glass to caress the cold dew that has formed upon it, the beer's white froth contrasting with his dark grizzled face and complementing his pale sun-bleached hair, before the love affair is finally consummated as he knocks back the whole glass in a single draught. It is easy to see this as yet another indication of the emotional underdevelopment of the fifties war hero, happier with an inanimate glass of beer than with a real live woman who might require some degree of reciprocity from him. However, this neglects the fact that Anson is not in an exclusive relationship with the object of his desire. All four of the group have a glass of the same ice cold lager in front of them, and just as they have suffered their ordeals together, they also take their reward together. This includes Diana who is drinking the

same as the men, a tacit recognition of her parity with them, her equal claims for the reward at the end of the journey. The fact that their communal act is a drink in the same bar also has a particular resonance for Diana. One of the key indicators of the social changes wrought by war had been the increased presence of women in public houses, whether alone or with friends, something that had been much rarer before the war. Women drinking in pubs became a highly visible sign of their changing role in society precipitated by the war, their move from the private to the public sphere. Diana is not the sweetheart waiting at home, or even the girlfriend waiting in a hotel room (like the absent Ariadne) but is in the bar with her comrades, *enjoying her reward*, rather than *being the reward*. According to Laura Mulvey, in cinema "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator" but I would argue that in this scene from *Ice Cold in Alex* the erotic emphasis has shifted from the woman to the glass of beer. It is the reward at the end of the arduous journey, not the love of a good woman and thus, the traditional forms of narrative closure are eschewed. Although the film does not close with 'marriage' as "the final closing social ritual", neither does it play the opposite option where the hero rejects the woman totally and rides off into the sunset alone, disavowing the lure of 'society' and instead "celebrating resistance to social demands and responsibilities". Anson is not the lone hero but is emphatically part of a group whose solidarity has been key to its survival; as Van Der Poel remarks, "all together against the greater enemy - the desert". Diana is part of that group.

51 Ibid.
For a supposedly dull cycle of filmmaking, the 1950s war film has been the object of much critical debate. Roy Armes' scathing description of them as "archaic memories of a self-deluding era's retreat into a cosy never-never land" was anticipated by Lindsay Anderson's savage satire of the trend for returning to World War Two, written while the trend was still in full flow: "Back there, chasing the Graf Spee again in the Battle of the River Plate, tapping our feet to the March of the Dam Busters, we can make believe that our issues are simple ones - it's Great Britain again!" The fifties war film has a reputation for being inherently reactionary, a reputation that wasn't helped by the MOD's use of The Dam Busters march, hugely amplified on loud speakers, "to drown out the discordant sound of chanting around its airbases". More recently however, Robert Murphy has offered a more sympathetic reading of the war film's domination over 1950s British cinema, seeing it not as a sad harping after old glories and yearning for old hierarchies, but as a quite understandable attempt to come to terms with the previous decade's monumental historical events: "It would be odd if a series of events as cataclysmic as the Second World War did not reverberate long after they were over. The danger, excitement, sadness, death and horror of the war had either to be deeply repressed or to find appropriate outlets. Seen from this perspective, this cycle of films could be viewed as 'national therapy' for the British public, allowing them to revisit the site of trauma in an attempt to understand it and move beyond it. Of course, the appeal of the war film was not limited to those who had fought in it: the events recounted also exerted their fascination on those cinemagoers too young to remember

52 James Chapman offers a good summary of objections raised against the British war film (at the time and since) in 'Our Finest Hour Revisited: the Second World War in British Feature Films since 1945', Journal of Popular British Cinema, 1 (1998). In it, he uses Ice Cold in Alex as the basis for his defence of the genre: "How can a critical conception of the war film as grey and insipid possibly take account, for example, of the psychological intensity and latent eroticism of a film such as the much-underrated Ice Cold in Alex?" (Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', p. 66). It would appear that academic attention is finally catching up with popular acclaim.


the war, but surrounded by its legacy of family stories and bombed out buildings. It is worth bearing in mind too that for young men during this period facing the prospect of their National Service (or even active service in the Korean War), militaristic narratives would not be of purely historic interest. It is perhaps no accident that the war film's period of greatest popularity coincides quite closely with the era of conscription (1949-1960) when the genre would have an extra pertinence for a large sector of its audience.

But only for the men. There is little or no attempt to understand what the huge social upheaval of war might have meant specifically for women, or to allow young women to use the war as a liminal space to think about their possibilities, in the same way as young men were able to. Total war is unique in the way it implicates all its citizens in the experience of warfare, including women, and despite its terrible costs, its huge social changes also throw up emancipatory opportunities. The wartime mobilisation of women played its part in making women feel more like active participants in public life, rather than passive onlookers. Being an essential part of the national war effort was a boost to many women's confidence, as one woman worker for the Ministry of Labour later recounted: "I watched a whole lot of women bloom when they found out that they could do all these things that they had been told they couldn't do, and they enjoyed the feeling that they could learn and put their hands to anything that turned up." This is certainly true of the front line army nurses interviewed by Eric Taylor who described

55 Ramsden, The Dam Busters, p. 101. Andy Medhurst also recalls how the same piece of music was used by right wing groups to disrupt CND rallies in the 1980s. (Medhurst, '1950s War Films', p. 35).
56 Murphy, British Cinema and the Second World War, p. 235.
57 Arthur Marwick's thesis on the link between total war and modernisation (including the emancipation of women) is elucidated in War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century (London: Macmillan, 1974). His views are strongly refuted by Harold L. Smith in 'The Effect of the War on the Status of Women', in Harold L. Smith (ed.), War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986). In it, he argues that wartime employment had very little lasting effect on women's status and most women were longing to return to pre-war patterns of behaviour. Penny Summerfield provides a synthesis of the two approaches in her 'Women, War and Social Change: Women in Britain in World War II', in Arthur Marwick (ed.), Total War and Social Change (London: Macmillan, 1988). Marwick has probably overestimated the contribution of the war towards sexual equality, she argues, but Smith has underestimated how much women felt themselves changed by their war experiences and how many wished to stay in paid employment or lead a fuller life outside the home than rather than return to their pre-war way of life.
58 Quoted in Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change', p. 96.
the war as a time "when they discovered a greatness in themselves they had never before experienced [...] when they knew for sure what they were doing was the most satisfying and right thing for them." Along with the experiences of having a pay packet and workmates of your own, paid work often provided a salutary rise in status and self-esteem for women. Of course, it is important not to overstate the liberatory possibilities of the war's upheavals: for many women, war connoted not freedom but fear for one's own life, bereavement (or at the very least, the constant worry over the threat of it), family disruption, bombardment, rationing and shortages, endless queuing, having one's movement impeded by the blackout and poor transport and countless other demoralising everyday difficulties. Many women were not eager but reluctant mobilees, especially those who had to combine their war work with running a home and keeping a family. Nonetheless, one woman's description of her wartime work as being let "out of the cage" resonates as an example of how the war provided new opportunities for women and a liberation from domestic confinement. Once women had been let out of the cage, it would be difficult to put them back into it willingly. Old arguments about women's inherent inferiority and weakness could not hold water once they had done men's jobs for five years or at the very least, coped on their own. The compulsion to return women to the home after the war has become one of the rallying points of feminist historiography, a clear example of a U-turn in gender ideology, when women's ability to do skilled work outside the home was no longer expedient to the national interest and was therefore unceremoniously dropped. In the 1970s, Pauline Long

60 Braybon and Summerfield use this as the title of their study of women's experiences in both World Wars, Out of the Cage.
61 Later accounts have emphasised how the encouragement from the government to return women home was far from monolithic and riddled with contradictory messages. For instance, Denise Riley points out that as the Ministry of Health was closing down day nurseries, the Ministry of Labour was urging more married women to enter the workforce to solve the 'manpower' shortage. For a fuller discussion of these kind of policy inconsistencies, see Denise Riley, War in the Nursery (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 109-138.
reflected on her traumatic experience of being forcibly shifted back to the home, in this bitter and passionate tirade:

Come 1945: a letter in the post one Friday morning: 'This nursery shuts today (for good) at 6 pm. Please remove all your belongings with your child this evening'. And I was a single parent; no more nurseries. The Government needed jobs for the returning heroes; women had to make their homes and beautify them with feminine charm (up the birthrate). Came Macmillan and we'd never had it so good. Came Bowlby who told us that it was all our fault if anything went wrong with our children's lives if we left them for any time at all. Came demand feeding, babies inseparable from mothers on slings around our backs and fronts; came television, washing machines, and durable goods to make us feel wanted in the home. Came Do It Yourself. Came guilt - never think of yourself as a person, never have sex outside marriage, never never never leave your child, be content with Uncle Government's lovely domestic hardware; never breathe a word of the orgiastic nights on the gun site (or the warmth of the all-women's residential Nissen huts and officer's buildings, not a man for miles). Just remember, everything is always your fault. You don't have rights. The children are always right. You are always wrong. Just get on and do the washing and bake a cake. Don't speak. Be silent. You are no-one (except a machine to spend money). 62

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62 Quoted in Braybon and Summerfield, Out of the Cage, p. 280.
What Long elucidates is how far the femininity of the fifties depended upon an enforced forgetting of what had happened in the forties, including 'orgiastic nights on the gun site'. Nowadays, women's experiences in World War II are a staple of popular culture, and contemporary British films like *Land Girls* (1996) and *Charlotte Gray* (2000) make use of the war as a site of pleasurable identification for young women. As Dorothy Sheridan observes,

> The enthusiasm for reclaiming women's lost or 'hidden' history has led us to look to the war period for images with which to identify. We can be Rosie the Riveter with our spanner, turban and dungarees. We can be in the Resistance, cycling round France in our summer frocks with our clandestine wireless sets strapped inside our rucksacks. We can defy social taboos by dancing the jitterbug with GIs in provincial dance halls.™

By contrast, fifties British cinema is characterised by its almost deafening silence on women's wartime lives. Collective remembrance of the war is everywhere in fifties British culture and yet there is a huge and contradictory lacuna when it comes to remembering what women did in the war. If, as Penny Summerfield contends, the war "constituted an experience of major personal importance for many women, which has been largely hidden and forgotten since"™, then the fifties is the period of greatest amnesia, probably because its remembrance would cause too many problems. While the war is constantly remembered and reanimated in the fifties as a way not only of coming to terms with the past but also of working out the present, its focus hardly ever swerves from its central concern with "how challenges to male strength, endurance and courage

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64 Summerfield, 'Women, War and Social Change', p. 114.
might be worked through and resolved. The fifties war film presents a whole gallery of British male types, varying from Kenneth More's dogged cheerfulness to Jack Hawkins' gruff stoicism to Dirk Bogarde's epicene diffidence, all presenting different ways to 'be a man' within the safe space of past events. By comparison, the only woman who might make it into that gallery is Virginia McKenna. And perhaps Sylvia Syms on the strength of her role in Ice Cold in Alex. For all the equivocations and ambiguities that go into her characterisation, Syms' Diana offers a rare 1950s depiction of a woman in wartime, facing challenges and hardships with equanimity, ultimately enjoying something approaching equal footing with her male comrades, sexual without being completely reduced to her sexuality. The fact that she is all of this at the very heart of the genre, in 'the ultimate war film', is all the more remarkable.

Geraghty, British Cinema in the Fifties, p. 175.
No Trees in the Street (1959)

For a production team whose self-confessed aim was "to examine problems in Britain as they exist today"¹, a film about slum life in the 1930s appears to be a strange choice of project. According to Willis, Godwin-Willis-Lee Thompson's decision to make No Trees in the Street was instigated by Thompson, who wanted to follow up the success of the team's first film, Woman in a Dressing Gown, as quickly as possible.² No Trees in the Street had the advantage of already being a proven success. The original stage play written by Ted Willis in the late 1940s had been slated by West End critics for being overly vulgar but had done very well in a subsequent tour of provincial theatres.³ The popularity of the play was such that even though the film version came ten years later, it could still make use of the original version's notoriety, its publicity posters emblazoned with the tagline "based on the sensational Ted Willis stage play that shocked millions". However, it is a mistake to attribute the decision to reanimate a thirties period piece to simple expediency. The 1930s seemed to have a peculiar kind of topicality in the 1950s, particularly in the world of British cinema. Jeffrey Richards notes that fifties films "returned to the themes and ethos of the thirties"⁴ with remakes of hits like The Four Feathers (remade as Storm over the Nile in 1955), The Thirty Nine Steps (1959), Will Hay's Good Morning Boys (remade with Ronald Shiner in 1953), Jack Hulbert's Jack Ahoy (remade, again with Shiner, as Up to his Neck in 1954) and, of course, J. Lee Thompson's 1957 version of The Good Companions, first filmed in

¹ 'Personalities of the Month: Lee Thompson, Godwin, Willis', Films and Filming, February 1959.
² Willis, Evening All, p. 141.
³ Ibid., pp. 75-92.
1933. But these cinematic trips into the thirties were more than just a filmmaking fad: they were the symptoms of a larger cultural trend. Christine Geraghty cites a sense of dislocation at postwar modernity, a slippery grasp on "the newness of things", as one of the defining features of fifties society, and one can see how this might precipitate a look backwards, to see how far we had come since the thirties, the last peacetime decade; the distance we had travelled over the intervening twenty years.

The ideological deployment of 'the thirties' was certainly nothing new, since from their final months onwards, they had been continually mythologised as the worst of times: 'a low dishonest decade', 'the hungry thirties', 'the wasted years', 'the devil's decade'. In fact, John Baxendale and Chris Pawling note how one of the key ideological themes of the World War Two was that "the nation was not just fighting for King and Country, or even to repel Hitler, but to build a better life than the Thirties had offered." However, this tendency to hark back to the thirties became both more strident and more contested in the fifties. In the 'Never Again' rhetoric of the post-war Labour landslide victory, the 1930s were constructed as the bad old days that would return if the Conservative party returned to office, and this continued into the fifties, exemplified by Labour's 1951 election campaign slogan "Ask your dad!" and its posters featuring hunger marchers. However, this failed to convince the electorate and the Conservatives were returned to power. By the time the subsequent re-election of the Conservatives had not resulted in mass unemployment (and Labour had their own bad old days of post-war austerity and the economic crisis of 1947 to defend themselves against), this rhetorical device of 'remember the thirties' was becoming ever more strained. By the end of the fifties, the old left felt somewhat stranded in the face of full employment and rising living standards and any attempt to invoke the politics of class was derided as waving

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5 Ibid. Richards also describes Thompson's *North West Frontier* (1959) as one of the examples of the 1950s revival of the Korda-style imperial epic of the 1930s.
the cloth cap and harking back to a long vanished historical period. As Isabel Quigly noticed with a "mental jolt" watching No Trees in the Street, "what a long twenty years it has been since the end of the Thirties, and how barnacled a period it already looks." The impulse to fathom the distance between then and now also animates one of the most important texts of the 1950s, Richard Hoggart's The Uses of Literacy (1957). Hoggart feels that the possibility for 'the rich full life' in working class culture has been irretrievably lost over that period, usurped by a 'candyfloss world' of brash contemporary popular culture, summed up by the dissipation of the coffee bar with its blaring jukebox: "spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk." In addition to Hoggart's book suggesting the cultural losses between the thirties and the fifties, Arnold Wesker's play Chicken Soup with Barley (1958) suggests the political losses of dwindling class-consciousness and political activism. Ironically, in such texts, the "devil's decade" comes to stand for "an age of authenticity and commitment, as against the shallowness, apathy and materialism of the Fifties." 

No Trees in the Street has an interesting and contradictory relationship to this tendency to romanticise the 1930s. Ostensibly, it wants to emphasise its horrors and the social problems bred by its deprivations. This is made explicit by the film's contemporary framing narrative, in which a juvenile delinquent carrying a flick knife is apprehended by neighbourhood policeman Frank (Ronald Howard). When Frank discovers that the boy lives in one of the new housing developments built over the slum area that he used to patrol, he tells him about life there twenty years ago, the moral being that the boy should stop causing trouble and count his blessings. He has no

8 Spectator, 13 March 1959.
9 Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, p. 248.
10 Baxendale and Pawling, Narrating the Thirties, p. 161.
11 Durgnat is more acerbic in his summary of the scene's ethos; "You should be happy, orderly, grateful, and always ask the nice policeman to help you across the road of life to the pension at the other side. Think it over, son, and be a good lad, I'm sure you will." (Durgnat, A Mirror for England, p. 59). As
excuse for his anti-social behaviour, unlike his counterpart in the 1930s, who had to contend with real poverty and deprivation. Thompson stated during the making of the film that its core message was "stop your silly whining, look at what it used to be like." However, this emphasis on the thirties as the bad old days is contradicted by the film's vivid presentation of Kennedy Street and the characters who live there. As John Hill observes, this slum "vibrates with human activity, shot in cluttered compositions and rich lighting contrasts." There may be no trees in Kennedy Street but there are plenty of people, lots of action and an abundance of noise and music. As Durgnat argues, "friendly old Ted [Willis] sets up a degrading environment, but can't bear to think that the solid decent Briton could ever be degraded". Steve Chibnall goes further in his assertion that the film's desire for an authentic recreation of the Thirties slum milieu slides into "heritage theme park" territory, with its choir of unemployed Welsh miners, pro and anti Mosley graffiti as well as "barrel organs, pawnbrokers, Jewish delis, music hall songs, cockroaches" and a multitude of other signifiers of 'thirties-ness'. The film's air of simulacra is not helped by its being filmed on a specially created studio set, rather than on location, as would shortly become common in the British New Wave's depiction of working class landscapes. The idea of the film as a cosy 'heritage' recreation of the past is certainly supported by the astonishing description of its premiere when the Empire, Leicester Square, was transformed into an East End street market for the night, where "real costermongers and market vendors manned stalls and barrows, and dispensed jellied eels, cockles, whelks, mussels, fruit and vegetables to the guests, while suitable background music was supplied by a pub piano and a barrel organ playing the popular tunes of the 30's." The film may not have been intended as a

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Durgnat suggests, it irresistibly recalls the well-meaning homilies of Ted Willis' most famous creation, *Dixon of Dock Green*.

15 Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 162.
nostalgic wallow by its makers, but its premiere certainly suggests that it was being marketed as such. Nonetheless, the publicity material in the film's pressbook also emphasises how life has improved since the 30s, suggesting tie-ups with "domestic commodities that have helped to make life easier such as There were No Trees in the Street and no washing machines in Kennedy Street. That was in 1938 - now all can benefit from modern appliances." Local newspapers are encouraged to print "photographs of old streets in the town as they existed before Town planning introduced improvements" along with such questions as "Do you remember 1938?", "Do you remember this street?", "Do you remember those days?" It is clear that the film is being constructed as an act of collective remembrance of the Thirties, with the inevitable contradictions about the meaning of the decade that entails, positive memories jostling for position along with negative ones.

Perhaps this tendency to emphasise the Kennedy Street setting is inevitable given that the film wishes to assert the overpowering influence it has upon the people who live in it. It cannot be allowed to pale into insignificance as a mere backdrop but has to intrude onto the action just as it intrudes into the characters' lives. One of the central themes that No Trees in the Street addresses is the influence of environment upon character, albeit in a very confused, uncertain manner (as Chibnall, John Hill and Durgnat all agree). The film's constant commentary on the negative effect of a poor environment on character is upheld by some aspects of the film, contradicted by others. A senior policeman asks Frank: "Do you think this lot would be any better if they lived in decent houses?" (the old 'coal in the bath' argument) and argues that they live in the slum because they "haven't the guts to get out". Frank refutes this, as does the mise en scene: while the policeman makes his cruel comments, a ragged mother nurses her half clothed baby on the left of the frame. But Frank himself provides evidence to the contrary. He and the film's villainous bookmaker Wilkie (Herbert Lom) shared a school

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17 No Trees in the Street pressbook.
and still share a common environment but have ended up on opposite sides of the law, introducing a degree of personal responsibility for one's fate into the equation. 18

Similarly, brother and sister, Hetty and Tommy Martin (Sylvia Syms and Melvyn Hayes) have had exactly the same upbringing but while Hetty tends towards respectability, Tommy veers towards deviance. And this cannot be explained either by some kind of crude gender bias in the family: Hetty's mother Jess (Joan Miller) is one of the 'unrespectable poor', a drinker and a gambler, willing to prostitute her daughter to get out of the slums. Perhaps it is more fitting to discuss the film's treatment of the topic of character and environment in the context of a wider discussion of how social conditions and large historical movements impinge upon the private realm of family.

The film's family saga is interwoven with the larger sociopolitical events of the day, in a similar manner to Noel Coward and David Lean's *This Happy Breed* (1944), but eschewing that film's conservative vision of the cohesive family beleaguered and battered but not broken by the progress of history. By contrast, *No Trees in the Street* presents a family of a lower social class than Coward's who are ripped apart by the pressures of living in a slum. Personal destiny and public events are inextricably linked in the film. At its violent denouement, Kipper, the friendly bookie's runner (Stanley Holloway) pronounces that "the whole world's gone bloody mad", and we dissolve to a shot of the news vendor in the street with the headline 'Hitler warns Czechs' on his placard, and a group of men arguing that the only cure for unemployment is "a war, a bloody great flare up". The whole world is on the brink of the same kind of 'flare-up' experienced by the Martin family - their tragedy becomes a symptom and a microcosm of a larger malaise. Raymond Durgnat had serious reservations about the film but he

18 The James Cagney/Pat O'Brien relationship in *Angels with Dirty Faces* is the paradigm for this 'same neighbourhood/different paths' motif and the fact that *No Trees* uses it virtually unaltered is probably what prompted *Variety* to call the film "old-hat", (Variety, 11 March 1959). However the thirties film to which *No Trees* bears the greatest resemblance is William Wyler's 1937 film of slum life *Dead End*, with which it shares characters called Collins and Martin, and a respectable elder sister desperate to protect her teenage brother called Tommy from criminal influences. However, the police are depicted in a less benign
admired the scale of its ambition in attempting to intertwine public and private history through the life of one family: "Flawed in every direction and on every layer, this passionately interesting film has at least the immense merit of suggesting what it fails to be: an epic of the English working-classes, a cross between The Grapes of Wrath and Gervaise, and its beauty of intention shines through."\textsuperscript{19}

Willis' original play was "a tour de force for the mother [...] a harpy of the pre-war London East End, who gambled away the family income, drank away any winnings, bullied her undernourished son, and (having got her intoxicated) sold her high-minded daughter to the local spiv for twenty nicker"\textsuperscript{20}, but in the translation to film, the focus has clearly moved from her to her two children, Hetty and Tommy. This shift of emphasis onto the two youngest members of the family enables the film to examine the effects of a slum upbringing while it is still taking place, while their destinies are still uncertain. However, this is somewhat displaced by the film's confused attitude to the effects of environment on character, as discussed above, and Melvyn Hayes's maniacally over-the-top performance as Tommy, the boy who falls into a life of crime. As Raymond Durgnat acerbically commented, because of this, the film fails to prove that 'poverty breeds crime' or that 'crime does not pay' but only "that hysterical nitwits should choose some less exacting profession."\textsuperscript{21} Because of its direct comparison with the framing narrative about the modern-day delinquent, Tommy's situation has tended to receive more attention in critical accounts of the film (see John Hill's and Durgnat's analyses), but as Steve Chibnall points out, it is Hetty's moral struggle that "provides a more effective dynamo for drama than Tommy's ill-fated criminal career and histrionic posturing."\textsuperscript{22} Hetty is desperate to leave the slums and is

\footnotesize{way here as in the scene where the sister (Sylvia Sidney) lifts her hat to a policeman to show him the huge bruise she got from being hit by one of his colleagues on a picket line.}

\textsuperscript{19} Durgnat, A Mirror for England, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{20} Films and Filming, March 1959.

\textsuperscript{21} Durgnat, A Mirror for England, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{22} Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 165.
caught between two men who offer different ways out, one respectable, one not. She is also the character in the film who best fits into what Chibnall describes as J. Lee Thompson's "obsessional themes of entrapment and the yearning for escape". She is another woman in a prison, this time the prison of class and gender, addressed more directly in this film because of the leeway of its 'historical' setting. One might also consider Hetty as the film's central character on more practical grounds. Although the film is clearly an ensemble piece, if any actor is the star of it, then it is Sylvia Syms. She receives top billing on all the film's publicity material (above the unknown Hayes but also above experienced and well-known performers like Herbert Lom and Stanley Holloway) and the film's main poster is dominated by a highly sexualised image of Syms, indicating how far she figured as the film's main attraction both in terms of star charisma and sexual magnetism.

When No Trees in the Street failed to be the critical or commercial success that its makers had hoped for, Ted Willis concluded that the problem was that "the melodramatic faults which were present in my stage original seemed to be even more obvious on the screen." Reviewing the film, Anthony Carthew agreed: "Intended as a piece of social realism, it emerges as a heavy-handed, thick-eared melodrama". Both Willis and Carthew use 'melodrama/tic' in its most common pejorative form as "a synonym for cheap and nasty thrills" but as discussed above in the chapter on Woman in a Dressing Gown, its meaning has shifted in cultural criticism since the 1970s. Rather than being seen as the site of crude sentimentality and overwrought performance, melodrama has been rehabilitated as a legitimate means of expression with its own unique power. Its excesses were no longer a cause for criticism but were recognised as constituting the very foundations of the form. Melodrama was also notable for being a

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23 Ibid., p. 163.
24 Willis, Evening All, p. 142.
25 Quoted in Hill, Sex, Class and Realism, p. 194.
genuinely 'popular' drama. In James L. Smith's words: "There is no other form of theatre which speaks so simply and directly to the people as a whole."\(^{27}\) This has much to do with melodrama's creation of a dream world, parallel to the real world, where wrongs are righted, the virtuous are rewarded, and evildoers are punished. As Michael Booth points out, melodrama offers "audiences the fulfilment and satisfaction found only in dreams. An idealisation and simplification of the world of reality, it is in fact the world its audiences want but cannot get."\(^{28}\) But there is more to melodrama than simple wish-fulfilment and it has often been the form adopted by those wishing to champion social reform, "to stimulate awareness, question established values, expose injustice".\(^{29}\) Melodrama's conception of good and evil as real and palpable forces abroad in the world, easily recognisable when confronted, has an obvious appeal for anyone seeking to construct a powerful and cogent polemic. Various social reformers have used the emotional high pitch of melodrama to help persuade the public of the rightness of their cause, from the abolition of slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to prison reform in Charles Reade's *It's Never Too Late to Mend.* Also, Daniel Gerould points out, because it is "the most effective means of conveying revolutionary sentiments to mass audiences"\(^{30}\), melodrama has also been a form often taken up by the Left as a means of (hopefully) enlisting grassroots support.\(^{31}\) It is this tradition of using melodrama for the aims of social protest into which Durgnat slots J. Lee Thompson,

Lee-Thompson uses melodrama, not gratuitously, but in determination to ram right into the complacent spectator the full pain and terror of the emotional extremes against which moral

\(^{27}\) Ibid., p. 77.
\(^{29}\) Smith, *Melodrama*, p. 72.
principles must assert themselves [...] He deals, and validly, with massive blocks of brute emotion, rather than nuances of thought, thus relating to the common British practice of responding to moral issues in a fundamental way, rather than with a more intricate and rationalist type of moral analysis. He is a melodramatist because he is a fundamentalist. 32

However, unlike a film like *Yield to the Night* with a clear and urgent social case to make, *No Trees in the Street* has only a confused set of arguments about character and environment to posit, all blunted by being set safely in the past rather than the problematic present. Despite his admiration for the film, Durgnat points out that all it can suggest is "an inert aimless contentment and gratitude for what the older generation did" and concludes his analysis by wishing that the film had "looked around in anger - not simply back." 33 The film attempts to compensate for its lack of purpose and certainty with a bombastic approach to the material, perhaps in the hope of covering up its inconsistencies and fissures. The result is a floundering fundamentalism that, as Isabel Quigly suggests, is always sincerely meant but is "not quite on the nail" indulging too much in "caricature, inflation, over-emphasis, a kind of passionate volubility that makes him say things twice and let his actors say them three times". 34 One of the worst offenders in that respect is the character of old blind Bill who acts as a dramatic chorus, punctuating the action with his wise comments and elegiac harmonica tunes, and who teeters on the brink of parody as he sits there "sad and acute, like everybody's conscience, or better self, as if they needed one". 35

31 A good example of this is Clifford Odets' play *Waiting for Lefty* which, incidentally, was first performed in Britain by the socialist theatre group Unity, Ted Willis' dramatic alma mater with whom he was still involved when he wrote *No Trees in the Street*.
33 Ibid., pp. 59-60.
34 *Spectator*, 13 March 1959.
Clearly, as a vision of the 1930s, as a cogent social critique, as a prescription for the future, *No Trees in the Street* is indeed 'flawed in every direction and on every layer', as Durgnat indicates. But for him, what saves the film from being aesthetically irredeemable is its sudden and spasmodic surges of "emotional current", providing moments when "the film which should have been crystallizes, miraculously, in our hearts and even in our eyes", such as the encounter between Hetty and "a grubby ragged little girl, scabs round her mouth, [sitting] on the tenements steps, nursing a dolly on her lap". She shushes Hetty, who asks "Is she asleep?" - "No, she's dead" is the girl's telling reply.\(^{36}\) Another example cited by Durgnat is the moment when "Sylvia Syms, trapped by the collective ideal, and its guilts, settles down to stay in the slum, her middle-class hopes gone, and wearily getting herself as drunk as her mother."\(^{37}\) It is interesting that both these emotive moments, enlisted by Durgnat as the grounds for the film's redemption, both involve Hetty. Christine Gledhill notes how the melodramatic heroine is "often of more significance to the drama than the hero in her capacity to evoke and legitimate emotion."\(^{38}\) We suffer with her as she suffers the most terrible hardship and torment. This usually takes on a sexual character, as the innocent young maiden is pursued by the wicked village squire. There is an obvious degree of prurience here, as Gledhill suggests, with "the obverse side of idealisation" of the pure young heroine being a sense of "fascinated horror at the prospect of [her] fall and subsequent degradation".\(^{39}\) But one might also see this ritual enactment of the story of a virtuous poor girl done wrong by a villainous aristocrat as Elsaesser does, as a "metaphorical interpretation of class conflict as sexual exploitation and rape"\(^{40}\), an apposite metaphor for economic exploitation of the proletariat. However, it would not do to see this narrative trope purely in terms of class, and to reduce the seduced girl to "a cipher in

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', p. 34.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
conflicts between men, rather than a heroine struggling to control her own destiny.\textsuperscript{41} The typical melodramatic plot functions as a literal exploration of the plight of women in patriarchal society and the dynamics of sexual exploitation through molestation and prostitution. Moreover, class oppression often finds a specifically sexual outlet for women in a way that it does not for men, and we can see this in No Trees - Hetty's dilemma is to do with sex as a means of escape, not crime, like her brother Tommy.

Despite being a woman of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, No Trees's Hetty is in many ways the typical 19\textsuperscript{th} century melodramatic heroine, beautiful and pure, poor but virtuous. She looks after her put-upon fellow 'orphan of the storm' brother and is ruthlessly preyed upon by the wicked village squire, or his modern equivalent, and subsequently betrayed by him. She fits Smith's description of the 'melodramatic heroine': "The bright effulgence of her beauty, which brings strong men to their knees, is equalled only by the unsullied purity of her mind."\textsuperscript{42} Although other of J. Lee Thompson's films contain elements of the 'melodramatic', as with Woman in a Dressing Gown and its similarities to the family melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk in the fifties, No Trees in the Street is the film that comes closest to the full-blooded emotive excess of 19\textsuperscript{th} century stage melodrama, and that is due in itself to the presence and prominence of Hetty. She is the character who guides the film away from any pretensions towards contemporary relevance and reunites the film with its origins as maternal melodrama. But whereas the traditional heroine of melodrama is more of a martyr, sacrificed on the altar of cruel male desire, but pure and lacking in sexual desire herself, Hetty is an altogether more ambiguous figure. She is not the drugged, raped victim of Willis' original play but is strongly attracted to her seducer. Her difficult choice between two men seems to represent the film's ambiguity towards sexuality and the overall uncertainty of its ideological project.

\textsuperscript{40} Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 46.
\textsuperscript{42} Smith, Melodrama, p. 19.
Frank, the policeman, who longs for the new Jerusalem of post-war town planning, is steady, respectful and decent but he is overshadowed by Wilkie, the criminal who lives off the carrion of Kennedy Street, who is cruel and insecure but more passionate and charismatic than his counterpart on the right side of the law.

Charles Hatton's novelisation of *No Trees in the Street* can make it clear how exceptional Hetty is within the degradation of Kennedy Street, that "her pale good looks shone like a rare gem in a rubbish pile"\(^{43}\), that she can make her Woolworths uniform look like Paris couture\(^{44}\), that, as Wilkie later observes, "she could have been a model or a showgirl or even a society debutante [...] She was in another class altogether."\(^{45}\) The film, on the other hand, has to imply all of this but the casting of Syms goes a long way to suggest Hetty's 'classiness'. The initial scenes where we first encounter Hetty establish that she is firmly enmeshed in her environment, as she makes her progress through the street, passing the brewer's dray and the shrimp barrow, stopping to talk to her neighbours on the way (briefly captured before she enters the house in a two shot with a woman nursing her baby, perhaps a sly implication of Hetty's maternal potential), but also that she is 'special' and distinct from the mass, which is suggested by cutting in shots of Wilkie watching her from the vantage point of his 1\(^{st}\) floor office, singling her out from the crowd. Indeed Hetty's slight removal from those around her is underlined throughout the film, as in a later scene where Jess and Kipper are tipsily singing and dancing along to one of Kipper's old music-hall number. While they perform in the foreground of the shot, Hetty is in the rear of the shot gathering and folding washing and although she does not participate, she still smiles at the action from a distance, repudiating any sense of snootiness about her family or resentment at her lot.

The character she confides in and to whom she is closest is her brother Tommy. In some ways, she occupies the maternal role eschewed by his real mother as she helps

\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 26.
Tommy into his clean shirt (after she has ironed it and sewn the button back on) and suffers his boisterous jokes with tolerant good humour. Her domestic and maternal aptitude is only emphasised by the contrast with the next scene where we see Tommy interact in a very different way with mother Jess, who confronts him over a bag of stolen tools (angry not because he has stolen them but because he wants to keep the profits to himself) and goads him in an almost sexual manner ("c'mon, Tommy boy") before sadistically slapping him to the floor. The close bond between brother and sister is depicted as a means of mutual protection against this kind of bullying, as is made explicit later when Hetty recalls how they used to hide under the blankets together when "mum was having one of her fits". Frank Godwin, the film's producer, described it as "a modern 'babes in the wood' parable". Hefty takes responsibility for her brother and tries to dissuade him from a life of crime, sitting next to him as he sulks on the doorstep outside the house. She tells him "I brought you up, I took a lot for you, I've a right to say something now" and tries to remind him of their childhood trips up to Finsbury to look at the big houses with gardens, that one day they hoped to live in. Her dream of a new life is collective, not individualist, and as she tells him, she can only fight for it "for both of us". The scene is reprised at the end of the film when Tommy's fate is sealed, and poverty has got the better of both of them. Hetty and Tommy again sit huddled close to each other crouching on the floor, just like on the doorstep, their reduced stature reminding us of their shared past as children. They reminisce again about their childhood, their picnics at the bandstand at Victoria Park, sharing a bottle of liquorice water, and Tommy tells Hetty how he used to like snuggling up against her "warm like a coal fire", but this time their desperate desire to recapture childhood happiness takes on a tragic dimension. Durgnat observed that although Melvyn Hayes and Sylvia Syms were a mismatched pair, seeming at times "to exist on completely different
"wavelengths", the scenes between the two, the "primly correct sister and infantile brother" were strangely moving, and had a "poignancy of desperate maladjustment, a perverse heroism".

As they sit together in both scenes, tightly framed in shot as a visual emphasis of their close bond, the pathos of their plight is undoubtedly increased by the introduction of Laurie Johnson's elegiac main theme. There is an abundance of music in *No Trees in the Street* (from its orchestral score to a variety of diegetic music such as Kipper's music hall songs, old Bill's harmonica, the barrel organ on the street outside, the dance band music on the radio, the Welsh miner's choir and a singalong to 'The Lambeth Walk') to such a degree that it seems to go beyond merely creating a sense of period and instead constitutes a vital part of the film's texture. The etymology of the word melodrama reveals its indebtedness to music: the 'melo' part comes from 'melos' - the Greek for music. Melodrama, musical-drama, was originally a popular eighteenth century synonym for opera, but its current accepted meaning was forged in the 19th century non-patent theatres where speeches were not allowed, and musical items were obligatory. As a result of these legal restrictions, a new form of drama began to develop and flourish, one that depended on non-verbal elements to tell its stories, especially music, and its popularity was such that its conventions continued long after the repeal of the patent laws in 1843. The 19th century melodramatic aesthetic was reinvigorated by the birth of the silent cinema which also required ways of articulating meaning that did not rely on the verbal, such as mime, gesture, lighting and of course, music. This again was a relationship that endured longer than the restrictions that created it, as the archetypal accompaniment of a silent love scene with 'Hearts and Flowers' on the violin developed into the full swelling tones of a Max Steiner orchestral score in the sound era. Music becomes an indispensable part of film melodrama, where it forms what Elsaesser

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describes as "a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to the storyline, by orchestrating the emotional ups and downs of the intrigue." However, it is particularly crucial to the melodramatic project of casting off all restraints and refusing repression. When melodrama comes up against insurmountable linguistic and physical restraints, it resorts to music to articulate the inarticulable, because of its unique ability to give the impression "of bypassing or even of preceding language". Within music, the utopian impulses of the film's narrative can be expressed: as Dyer notes, it has the power to gesture towards "something better", a utopia out of the grasp of the characters in the diegesis but evident to the audience. Caryl Flinn relates film music to Freud's essay on 'Mourning and Melancholia', where he describes melancholy as something that stems "from a constellation of revolt", a form of inchoate protest against the unfairness of things. Flinn links this to the melancholy of the music used to accompany scenes of high emotion in the cinema, and argues that they too are informed by a spirit of revolt. All of this work on film music is germane to a discussion of its role in Thompson's films. It chimes with the scene from Woman in a Dressing Gown which uses Tchaikovsky to suggest Amy's hidden depths, or Yield to the Night's use of 'The Very Thought of You' to express Mary's growing obsession with Jim, as well as the original score composed for No Trees in the Street, particularly its use to accompany the scenes between brother and sister. On one level, the music acts as an expression of deep feelings and desires between characters that they cannot adequately express verbally, in this case Hetty and Tommy's bond and their yearning for escape, albeit by different methods. But the music's sad and elegiac tone also suggests the unfairness of their situation too and introduces that 'constellation of revolt' described by Freud, in this case social revolt against their life choices being

49 Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 50.
severely narrowed by poverty. Just as their dialogue gestures towards 'something better' (their snatched moments of childhood happiness, picnics in the park, dreams of living in big grand houses), so the melancholy music elaborates upon and intensifies those feelings.

Despite her best efforts, Hetty fails in her attempts to dissuade Tommy from a life of crime. But just as we see him yield to environmental pressures, so we also see how they are bearing down on Hetty, the more steadfast of the two. The initial sequences that introduced Hetty and her environment emphasised its proletarian vigour and local colour, and although this is continued in later scenes (a group of children gathered round an ice-cream cart, the Jewish deli with its signs for salt beef and schmaltz in the window), the jolly picture begins to turn more sour. Hetty pauses on her front step to talk to the aforementioned little girl with her dead dolly, a detail which gives credence to Bill's description of Kennedy Street as a "death trap". On the stairs, she passes a neighbour pleading desperately with her husband not to pawn their clock again. As she enters the flat, the mood lifts as we see Kipper triumphantly finishing his monologue to the cheers of Bill, Jess and their neighbour Marge, all getting drunk on brown ale, telling stories and singing songs. But suddenly the bonhomie is interrupted by the arrival of Reg, Marge's husband, furious at her for "lazing about all day" while he slaves at work, throwing her over his shoulder and dragging her away while she grasps frantically onto the door lintel screaming that he never gives her enough money anyway. When she finally gets taken off for "another bout of beating, rape and copulation"53, Jess shuts the door, casually chuckling "see you later Marge", suggesting the un-noteworthy regularity of this kind of domestic brutality. Thus the film posits a combination of money worries, sexual brutality and child mortality so commonplace that it has even been incorporated into children's games as the unhappy paradigm for family life and

52 Flinn, 'Music and the Melodramatic Past of New German Cinema', p. 108.
male/female relationships in Kennedy Street. It gives extra force to Hetty's desire to escape and resist the advances of Wilkie, who will appear shortly after this scene to press his suit upon her.

A different, more forthright side of Hetty's character is revealed in her dealings with Wilkie. When he arrives at the flat, she ignores him and busies herself with the ironing, a dramatic trope familiar from that founding text of the fifties, *Look Back in Anger*, where it also functions as a symbol of feminine stoicism in the face of male attack. Only Hetty is more violent than that and fends off Wilkie's advances with a threat to "ram this iron right into your face". Wilkie asks Hetty "Am I...tell me...tell me, am I poison or what?" and when she still refuses to pay him attention, he retorts with a statement of intent: "One day I'll wipe that look from your eyes. I've made plenty of people sit up. When I was 14 I made a list of things I was going to get. Well, I ticked them off one by one. Everything I wanted I got. You are on the list now. The last item". At this point, Hetty finally looks up. She is alerted to her status as a commodity, an item on a shopping list, the trophy girlfriend to prove the immigrant has finally 'arrived'. Wilkie's ethnicity, although never specified, is an important element of his characterisation. He speaks of the experience of being an immigrant, "nothing with an accent", and it is clear that this has left his mark on him as much as the violence of his upbringing. If he is Jewish, then the pro-Mosley graffiti which connotes a rising tide of anti-Semitism in Kennedy Street suggests another reason for his character's insecurity. The casting of Herbert Lom as Wilkie brings his "suave villain image" to bear on the role, but also his tendency to play characters with a degree of weakness, like his emasculated thug in *The Ladykillers* (1955), his cuckolded Italian in *Hell Drivers* (1957), his insecure Anglo-Indian terrorist in *North West Frontier* (1959) as well as his famous later role as Inspector Clouseau's unhinged megalomaniac boss in the *Pink Panther* films. Here he is using his economic power to put Hetty in her place. For
Marxist feminists, the notion of woman as property is "the ultimate patriarchal capitalist privilege" and it signals the point of convergence of two systems of power that work in tandem to oppress women, patriarchy and capitalism. It is little wonder that melodrama, a form that as Elsaesser points out "seems capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation in a given society", is frequently drawn to the scenario of the rich villain who wishes to 'possess' the poor heroine: it is a story that deals with two kinds of exploitation, via sex and via class, intimately enmeshed. Hetty's mother counsels pragmatic acceptance of Wilkie's advances ("Can't you see this is the chance of a lifetime?") and asks her daughter in disbelief if she is waiting for "a duke" to make her an offer. Not only is this a way for Hetty to help herself (she could be "filing her nails" instead of slaving in a shop) but it could also provide a means of support for her family. It is interesting that this is where No Trees in the Street diverges from a text it otherwise strongly resembles, Love on the Dole written by Walter Greenwood in 1933 and adapted for the screen in 1941. The heroine Sally Hardcastle defiantly becomes the bookmaker's mistress because she knows that selling herself is the only way to save her family, and hypocritical morality be damned. By contrast, No Trees's Hetty refuses to sell herself despite the pressure upon her and eventually gives herself away for reasons other than economic ones. Hetty begins to soften toward Wilkie after he has told her about the brutality perpetuated against him by his father when he was a boy. He tells her he can sympathise with Tommy even after the boy has just threatened him with a gun. He adds that he knows how Hetty feels too, and this time she agrees with him. As if sensing the slackening of her moral resolve, she follows this with a reassertion of her need to escape, a short speech emphasised by Syms' urgent performance: "...but I can't fight it anymore. I must get away from here. Oh, I've said it a dozen times, I know, but this time I really mean


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it." However, her rhetoric of escape is somewhat undercut by the fact that she then retreats further into the house, fleeing to her room rather than leaving the flat altogether. It is clear that Hetty, despite her protestations, is destined to stay in Kennedy Street, and this will be demonstrated in the film's next major scene.

Hetty, suitcase in hand, is persuaded to stop for just one drink ("the last one" Bill pronounces ominously) before she leaves home. To the accompaniment of Bill playing Molly Malone (another beautiful poor girl who meets a tragic fate) on the harmonica, Jess talks to her daughter about Tommy and laments how he has grown up as a gun toting delinquent. Hetty asks why her mother did not take them away from Kennedy Street, but Jess replies that she could not and confides that she has not been able to cry for years, all the tears swallowed down inside her, until today. At this show of apparently genuine remorse and sadness, Hetty confesses that she suddenly feels close to her mother again and says "let's get drunk, who cares?", gulping down the whisky before coughing at the surprise of its strength. Jess implores Hetty to reconsider Wilkie and the life that he could offer, not just to Hetty, but to the whole family (particularly Tommy), because, as Jess pleads, "I don't want your life to be like mine", but Hetty resists with a shudder. At this point Bill switches to another tune, one that Jess recognises as a song that Hetty used to sing at school. Hetty joins in with the final few lines, ending on 'Good night and God bless you, God bless you, my dear', the final line barely whispered. In a tight close up (a shift from the two shots of mother and daughter in the rest of the sequence), we see Hetty slowly bow her head and close her eyes as one tear runs slowly down her cheek while Bill finishes the tune.

This scene acts as an apotheosis of No Trees' melodrama: the distraught heroine's pale and lovely face ("so cool and so white", like the lilies in the song that she sings) communicating emotion through gesture and music rather than speech. This archetypal melodramatic tableau is followed by an interesting reaction shot of Jess. She

56 Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 64.
appears not sad but strangely satisfied at seeing her daughter bowed and broken, and having checked she has done her job, she gets up from her chair to slip away quietly. Has this whole show of sadness been cleverly orchestrated in order to achieve this effect and to ready Hetty for Wilkie's approach? Is Bill in on it too, playing the right tune at exactly the right moment? The whole scene has an air of fakery and unreality to it, exemplified by the fact that Jess has a ready-made lachrymose musical accompaniment for her sad speeches. Here, it seems the powerful tools of melodrama are being used against Hetty, conspiring to make her stay and it is easy to see this as a condemnation of the mother, willing to sell her daughter to save herself. However, it is also possible to interpret this moment in a more ambiguous sense; Jess' love for Hetty and her resolution to fix her up with Wilkie are not diametrically opposed but intermingled. She really believes this is the best thing for her daughter. Here the film offers the sad spectacle of a mother indoctrinating her daughter into the cruelties and compromises of adult life, perpetuating the patriarchal traffic in women because she can see no way out of it. As Jess leads Bill away to the pub, Bill guesses that Hetty's escape plans have collapsed. "You're not going away Hetty?" he half-asks, half-confirms and she replies "No, I'm not going". The mise-en-scene as she says this is very telling. Hetty, the dominant figure in the previous close and medium shots of her, is tiny in the middle of the frame. The camera observes her from a distance and we see that she is dwarfed and overpowered by her environment - the grimy peeling wallpaper behind her, the huge table covered in beer bottles and empty glasses, the half-woven wreath to the left of the frame, and bottle of whisky in front of her. As she caves in to the inevitable and pours herself another drink, it is evident that the constantly-referred-to pressures of life in Kennedy Street have claimed another victim. An orchestral reprise of the song that Hetty sang plays, the means of her final entrapment returning to haunt her/comfort her. She gropes her way to bed and undresses, abandoned by her mother but unaware that she is not alone.
In Willis' original play, the rape of the daughter, who has been drugged and sold against her will, unsurprisingly took place offstage. The equivalent scene in the film strikes a different note, with the unequivocally injured innocent of the source play transformed into a more ambiguous figure. What begins as a 'rape' scene develops into a love scene, shot in a slow, lingering and 'involving' way. This is not to disregard the connotations of coercion and molestation that the scene undoubtedly has. Nor is it a simple matter of using the euphemism 'seduction' in place of rape, as Tania Modleski accuses Raymond Durgnat of, in his analysis of Hitchcock's Blackmail. Rather it is a necessary awareness of how this scene suggests a greater degree of female sexual agency than other films might, but still within the ultimate confines of a logic of male desire and control. Nonetheless, because of this change, Wilkie becomes something other than the Victorian villain destroying the innocent heroine's virtue, instead achieving the status of an ambiguous hero, capable of kindness as well as cruelty, and as much of a victim of the street as any other character in the film. However, the scene certainly begins with a tone of threat, as we see Wilkie slowly and deliberately ascend the stairs and enter the flat. The camera dwells on the empty glasses and half-empty bottle of whisky on the table and we see Wilkie from behind them as he registers their presence and their significance. Next, there is a shot of Hetty's room with the door open and its occupant asleep on the bed, before changing to a shot positioned from behind Hetty's bed, showing her supine and vulnerable, captured behind the bars of the bedstead as Wilkie approaches her from the shadowy doorway. When she awakes, she seems unsurprised by his presence at first ("Oh, it's you") before realising why he has come and shouting at him to get out. He refuses and embraces her as she tries to fight him off. Wilkie insists that the time for protest has passed ("you can't go on fighting the

57 Willis, Evening All, p. 75.
whole world") and Hetty finally stops struggling as she passes out. The next part of the sequence oscillates dizzily between menace and dreamy sensuality, as befits a scene that wants to suggest the perspective of someone only semi-awake and semi-aware. Wilkie is still kissing Hetty when she has passed out, almost as if he is essaying the role of Prince Charming trying to awaken her, but with no success. He lays her down on the bed and there is an unsettling shot of his figure looming over hers on the bed, followed by a close up of her face as she begins to half open her eyes, but still remains silent. Close ups of Wilkie's pensive face are intercut with partially lit close ups of Hetty, the lighting and photography contributing to a mood of languid sensuality, dwelling on the planes and contours of Syms' face, particularly in the final shots of the sequence where her head stirs on the pillow and moves from a profile shot to full face as she slips in and out of consciousness. The musical score contributes to this eerie mood with its mixture of mysterious harp and tense strings.

The dissolve to the next part of the sequence is appropriately disorientating, suggesting Hetty's distorted perception. The camera begins on Wilkie's back and moves diagonally upwards and right onto Hetty in bed beginning to stir as a distant clock strikes, the camera's odd movement echoing her gradual awakening. She is unsure, just as we are, of how long this ellipsis in consciousness has lasted and what has occurred in the meantime. She asks Wilkie, whose back is still to the camera, what time it is and he replies that it is 10 o'clock and explains that she has been unconscious from the drink for about an hour. When he tells her that he has spent "the whole time just looking at you", she is surprised by his quiet vigil. He resignedly tells her this is the reason he is the laughing stock of the street "because I had a fever, didn't you know?" As he gets up

59 This scene fits into a very long tradition of the seduction scene in melodrama, as is clear from a comparison with its equivalent in the early melodrama Adelmorn the Outlaw (1801) quoted in Smith, Melodrama, p. 23: "BRENNO: Hold! You fly not! That passion burns in my veins, which if you refuse to satisfy, force shall compel/ INNOGEN: Force! BRENNO: Think on your situation -/ INNOGEN: Unhand me -/ BRENNO: You are alone -/ INNOGEN: Monster! -/ BRENNO: Your cries will be unheard -/ INNOGEN: Oh, Heavens! -/ BRENNO: Nay, this struggling -"
to leave, he continues, "Sure you knew. I thought I could get anything I wanted. The
great Wilkie, well, I know better now. You live and learn." His admission of his failure
to be able to buy her and his inability to rape her finally allow Hetty a degree of agency.
She calls him back and his barbed reply is "what do you want?" He is to the left of the
frame in deep shadow while she is to the far right of the frame brightly lit and dressed in
white, the chiaroscuro of the mise-en-scene suggesting the manichean world of the
melodrama. But here the polar opposites meet. Hetty extends her hand to Wilkie and he
returns to grasp it, after initially hesitating in disbelief, and the pair kiss passionately as
the film's score recommences. They move onto the bed and the film cuts to a close up as
Hetty's head reclines onto the pillow and the couple continue to kiss. It cuts again to
view the embrace from a slight distance and from behind a diaphanous curtain that
partially obscures our view. After a few seconds, the camera pans right and the screen
finally fades to black.

Since the camera only pans away at the very last moment, anticipating what was
to become the kitchen sink cliché of "two people just up to the moment of sexual
intercourse", it is difficult to see how this film managed to keep its 'A' certificate,
even within the thawing climate of late fifties censorship. It is interesting to note that
No Trees was released in March 1959, two months after Room at the Top went on
general release, a film that wore its sexual explicitness and 'X' certificate like a badge
of honour. Although what the two films actually show is remarkably similar, Room at
the Top was widely praised for its sexual frankness while No Trees was not. This
perhaps has something to do with Room at the Top selling its sexuality as scorching and

60 John Krish quoted in Andrew Higson, 'Space, Place and Spectacle', in Andrew Higson (ed.), Dissolving
61 Although the final certificate granted to the film is uncertain. Antony Aldgate says it was an X because
the film's showing of a young boy handling firearms could not be resolved to the censor's satisfaction.
Chibnall points out, it is advertised as an A, perhaps because the addition of the contemporary framing
narrative placated the censors, perhaps because John Trevelyan, the recently appointed secretary of the
BBFC, wanted to make peace with the board's most vociferous critic. (Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, pp.
174-175).
frank and above all contemporary (despite the fact that its story is set just after the war), while *No Trees in the Street*’s publicity still seems to work within an old framework of sneaky lasciviousness - the idea that a glimpse of Sylvia Syms in her nightgown is incidental to a searing exploration of social problems in the thirties, as though the film has adopted the mores of its period setting. By comparison, *Room at the Top* admits that the exploration of sexual relationships is the main subject of the plot, not an incidental extra. However, the pressbook for *No Trees* does mention the film’s "startling uninhibited love scenes" and it is striking how sexually passionate a film *No Trees in the Street* is, seeming to pick up where the aborted love scene in *Ice Cold in Alex* left off. The scenes which chart the growth of Hetty and Wilkie’s romance are notable in their combination of passion and realism, something noted by Isabel Quigly,

> Mr Lee Thompson is one of the few British directors who can make a love scene seem at once tender and credibly passionate, and (which matters) keep the actors appearing like people, like themselves, behaving in love as you can believe they would behave - that is, quite differently from the way they behave out of it, but with the right difference, the credible difference. 

Once again, Thompson is praised for his atypicality in British cinema, this time in his depiction of love. I think it is the scene between the couple in Wilkie's office that Quigly has in mind here. Wilkie is initially in ebullient mood, duly noted by his runner Jackie and his former moll Lova who complain that he is ignoring his work and prefers to "moon around with that Martin piece". Lova goads him about his giddy lovestruck state, predicting "confetti and wedding bells" and pressure from Hetty to set up a little

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62 *No Trees in the Street* pressbook.  
63 *Spectator*, 13 March 1959.
sweet shop together, until he angrily lashes out at her hints at his emasculation. At this point, Hetty arrives in a new dress that Wilkie has paid for, her earlier misgivings about him buying her clothes apparently vanished. He is initially frosty towards her, haunted by the accusations that he "can't see straight" because he's in love, but Hetty disarms him with a kiss. At this point, the camera switches to a tight close up that frames the couple together and suggests their total absorption in each other. Wilkie traces the side of Hetty's face with his thumb and Hetty's eyes flit from detail to detail of her lover's face, as if trying to memorise it. Jackie later complains that Wilkie has Hetty's lipstick smeared all over his face - a sign that she has left an indelible mark upon him. In addition to these telling little gestures, indicative of the quality of the principals' performances, the dialogue speaks of the passion between the pair. Wilkie professes "You made me sweat. God, you made me sweat, it was like a fever. I was moonstruck like a schoolkid". His remarks about sweat and fever are part of a pattern of metaphors centred on heat throughout the film. Hetty threatens Wilkie with a hot iron. Kipper describes the night he played Camberwell Palace in terms of overwhelming heat: "Even me insides were sweating. Great light shining in me eyes, hot, blazing hot". Wilkie warns Tommy about his temper by telling him "you're so hot you can't think things out" and the siege takes place during a heat wave when the house is "as hot as an oven". Even the coming war is referred to as "a great big flare up". These constant references to intense heat help to create the sense of a dramatic tension, in the manner of a Tennessee Williams or Somerset Maugham. One might also draw a useful parallel with Thompson's previous film *Ice Cold in Alex*, whose "psychological intensity and latent eroticism"⁶⁴ is due in no small part to its powerful evocation of the burning hot desert and the characters' desperate desire for something ice cold to quench their thirst. But *No Trees in the Street's* evocation of heat goes further than that in the way it adds to the film's overall mood of melodramatic excess. Peter Brooks has noted the 'bodiliness' of

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⁶⁴ See chapter on *Ice Cold in Alex*.
melodrama\textsuperscript{65}, how a sense of physicality is immensely important to it, either through the contortion of the body to express meaning through tableau, mime and gesticulation, or because of the profound and inarticulable bodily desires felt by its protagonists. Film is able to deal with sight and sound but it cannot convey a sense of heat or cold, but nonetheless \textit{No Trees in the Street} seems to be struggling against the very edges of its medium's capabilities, aiming to cater for all the senses and refusing any kind of corporeal restriction.

Where Hetty's exchanges with Wilkie emphasise sensuality and passion, the ones with Frank focus on the importance of sober responsibility for oneself and others. Just as she is about to turn her long-treasured dream of going to Cornwall into a reality (Wilkie tells Hetty to throw away her picture torn from a brochure and pinned up on the wall - he will show her the real thing), Frank comes round to ask her about the whereabouts of fugitive Tommy. Frank warns Hetty about Tommy's criminal career escalating, saying "The gun's loaded Hetty, don't you see? It will go off sometime", which works equally well as a description of Hetty's sexuality as it does of Tommy's criminality. Frank defines Hetty in terms of her relation to men, telling her that she is responsible for her brother's welfare, and that she will be tainted by her relationship with Wilkie because "everything he touches turns rotten", but she counters this with a statement of self-interest: "I'm taking something for myself for a change". However, Hetty's delusion of free-will and independence is about to be shattered. Wilkie, jealous at Hetty's friendship with Frank, has decided to demonstrate his power over her by humiliating her in front of Frank. As Wilkie resolves to do this, the film's score strikes a decisive note and Wilkie glances down at his keys and grasps them, making explicit the link between his ownership of property and his ownership of Hetty. When he arrives at the flat to take her on holiday he asks Frank sarcastically what he earns "What is it these days Frank? Six quid a week?" before ordering Hetty to change out of her new dress

into something else (and to "be quick about it"). Economic power is displayed by power
over women, summed up by Wilkie's assertion that "what I say goes, that's the motto
with all my girls". Hetty acquiesces, confused at his change of attitude, and shots of her
struggling hurriedly out of one dress and into another in her bedroom are intercut with
Wilkie's boastful posturing in the living room. She returns in the correct dress, stepping
forward nervously for Wilkie to okay her appearance cursorily. But then he stands aside
to reveal Lova behind him, and cruelly informs Hetty that the trip to Cornwall is off.

The film builds on a basic similarity between the two women in Wilkie's life (short
blonde wavy hair, slim build) to emphasise the difference in their morals, exemplified
by their difference in appearance: Lova's hair blonder, her dress more gaudy, her make
up more obvious than Hetty's. Hetty's reaction to Wilkie's use of her as a pawn in his
homo-social competition is to run to her room, to shut the door behind her, to ignore her
mother's ministrations and, above all, to blame herself for allowing herself to believe in
a feeling she had earlier described as "like a dream": "I'm so angry with myself, so
ashamed...don't pity me, mum". Frank's reaction to Wilkie's cruelty is more visceral: he
twists the perpetrator's arm behind his back (filmed from a low angle to emphasise
Wilkie's powerlessness), wallops him and then tells him to get up, just as Wilkie had
done to Tommy earlier, a repetition of a physical masculine pattern of dominance that
seems to be the only effective means of gaining supremacy in this profoundly 'bodily'
environment where might is right. But shortly afterwards, Wilkie's exertion of power is
suggested to be a cover-up and a perverted expression of love for Hetty. As Lova tends
to Wilkie's wounds, she tells him that he is clearly in love with Hetty and quietly repeats
"you haven't time for anyone else". The film cuts from her downcast face to a close up
of Hetty, ironing the clothes she has unpacked from her suitcase and pondering her
mistake, again juxtaposing but also aligning the two women. At this point, the film
fades to black before coming back to a shot of a cash register in the middle of the frame,
an apposite suggestion of Hetty's frame of mind and, as Sue Harper suggests, "a bleak perspective on how it feels to be bought and sold."\textsuperscript{66} The scene has shifted to a pawnbrokers where Tommy tries to pawn his suit and ends up threatening the old lady owner and finally shooting her. The interesting detail here is the camera movement that is used during the murder, a slow sideways pan eventually moving behind an obscuring curtain: exactly the same as the camera movement that drew to a close Hetty and Wilkie's love scene. This sets up a parallel between the two actions and perhaps suggests that Hetty's decision to acquiesce to Wilkie is as disastrous a decision for her as Tommy's decision to murder the old woman is for him. As Tommy later tells Hetty, "you're good but it got you too", the film giving us a close up of her horrified face, it is clear that the film equates sex with crime as another malign force in the lives of young people. The tendency that John Hill sees in the Dearden and Relph social problem films of "running criminality and sexuality together"\textsuperscript{67} also appears to be present in \textit{No Trees in the Street} and while Hill might put that down to the writing of Ted Willis, whose 'marvellous world of the ordinary' "apparently finds no place for the 'extraordinary' impulses of 'lust' and sexual desire"\textsuperscript{68}, it is crucial to recognise that here the parallel between sex and crime is expressed via J. Lee Thompson's camera rather than Willis' script.

\textit{No Trees in the Street} concludes with a siege, as Tommy, now wanted by the police for murder, returns home and walls up in the flat. The film's theatrical tendencies come to the fore as the final gathering of all the characters is staged, the camera very often observing the action from a distance from the 'fourth wall', giving the impression of watching a filmed stage play. One might discern an indication of ironic distance from the tropes of melodrama when the street falls eerily silent during the siege and old Bill strikes up on the harmonica with his poignant rendition of Molly Malone, before having

\textsuperscript{66} Harper, \textit{Women in British Cinema}, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{67} Hill, \textit{Sex, Class and Realism}, p. 77.
it knocked out of his mouth by Tommy, screaming at him to put it away, and perhaps echoing the wishes of a sizeable contingent of the audience. In spite of this, most of the film's denouement is played as the purest and gutsiest of melodrama, and the cumulative exchanges between Jess and Tommy are good examples of this. "She never left me alone once in her life. Look at her, she's my mother and I don't feel anything" is proclaimed by Tommy as he stands in the doorway with sunken eyes and dishevelled shirt. "You blame me for everything, don't you? I've done what I could for both of you. I never left you. I fed you. I kept you. I know I was hard with you sometimes but what could I do?" pleads Jess, one hand on hip, turning her head away before returning her gaze to her son. The scene corresponds with one of the chief attractions of melodrama: what Peter Brooks describes beautifully as the "naked pugilism" of its exchanges, carried out by "antagonists stripped for battle". It is true that moments such as these are inflated and unreal but they get to the heart of the mother/son relationship and, as Brooks points out, "the measure of crudity involved in such representations is the necessary price of delivering the essential."

In the siege scenes, Ted Willis also uses Tommy as a mouthpiece for his direct social commentary against an uncaring pre-welfare state Britain, where, as Tommy pointed out earlier, the last square meal most of the Kennedy Street kids had was at the coronation tea party ("Pass the cake please and God save the King" as Tommy intones sarcastically) and where there are 100 men going for one job at the Labour exchange. His question, "what chance is there for people like us?", is answered by his own decline and fall into criminality. As the police surround the building and the net tightens, Tommy posits a case of corporate manslaughter for the "toffs who sit on the board" of the company that leases Kennedy Street, who sit around listening to stories of slum crime on their radiograms saying "how terrible it is, pass the biscuits please". Tommy

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68 Ibid., p. 100.
angrily asks "will they [the police] come after them like they come after me?" Although this could be an effective piece of socialist rhetoric, it is somewhat blunted by coming from a character who is depicted less as a political firebrand than a self-pitying delinquent. Hetty, by comparison, is never given these kind of speeches in the film and instead acts as a pacifying, conciliatory influence, the slum girl with petit bourgeois aspirations of owning a small business. She sees her weaknesses (her decision to sleep with Wilkie) as personally rather than politically motivated, again demonstrating the split loyalties of the film between personal responsibility and environmental pressure.

However, she does have one scene where she is allowed to express real anger. The part of the film where Hetty turns on Wilkie after Tommy's death and accuses him of murder is remarkable in its affective power. It provides convincing evidence that the real power of the film does not lie in its obvious social commentary but in the very thing that Willis thought was its downfall, its mastery of melodramatic modes. The moments of the film that are the most powerful and moving are those that do not try to resist the impulse towards melodrama but instead use it to its full capacity, as here. Hetty's outburst does not put forward a particularly compelling case for Wilkie as the author of all their ills, forgetting as it does the film's earlier argument about the landlord being the real killer on Kennedy Street and, of course, our knowledge of Wilkie's own brutalisation at the hands of his father. It begins with a confused apportioning of blame (moving straight from "we're all to blame, all of us" to "you killed him") before crystallising into unhaltable fury ("you murderer, murderer, murderer...") which has more to do with her own feelings of culpability since she had the gun in her hand when it went off. But in the end, the point seems not to be the fairness of Hetty's accusations but the force and anger with which they are expressed, the 'massive blocks of brute emotion' that Durgnat discerned as the hallmark of Thompson's work. The sudden expression of rage is all the more shocking for coming after a moment of subdued

70Ibid.
shock: Hetty's desperate whispered apologies to Tommy, now lying dead in her arms ("I didn't mean it, I didn't mean to do it, Oh God, God forgive me..."). When Frank enters the scene, Wilkie explains that Tommy's shooting was accidental and that nobody is to blame. Hetty, hand to her cheek, suddenly turns on him: "You can stand there and say that. You said you wanted to help him. You never helped anyone in the whole of your rotten life. You're greedy and wicked, you're a devil". The film cuts briefly to Wilkie's reaction, before cutting back to Hetty, now in medium close-up as she continues to vilify him, "yes, a devil to boys like Tommy, with your smart suits, your slick talk and your easy money". Now Hetty hesitates as she moves from talking about Tommy to talking about herself, "you fooled me once, you blinded me" before pausing, turning her head away and continuing "there must be some good in the world, there must be some place you can live and breathe, there must be somewhere", closing her eyes as she says the words, as if imagining this place. The speech changes from being shot in medium close-up to being shot over Wilkie's shoulder, as the scene had begun, making the impact of Hetty's advance forward to attack him all the more powerful. It is important too to draw attention to the skill of Syms' performance of the speech, her intonation of its words suggesting the character's escalating fury, supported by her gestures of narrowing her eyes and speaking through clenched teeth. She accuses Wilkie of murder again, "I used to blame the street but it's you and people like you who're the real killers" and as she does so, she moves towards him. She continues, "It's you who ought to be dead, not 'im (nodding over to Tommy's body). If there is a God and you have a conscience, you'll pay for this for the rest of your life. You'll live and die with it and there'll be no peace for you, no pity, you murderer, murderer...". The scene cuts to Wilkie, who is slowly backing away from Hetty into the shadows as she continues to scream "murderer", before it returns to Hetty, shot in extreme close up, her fists raised
to her contorted face, still screaming just one word, over and over again, "murderer", until the scene finally fades.

The next scene offers no emotional respite. As Tommy's body is brought out, Jess fights her way through the crowd, seeing a glimpse of her son's body between the ambulance doors before she is shut out. In medium close up, we see her pressed up against the doors, clawing desperately at the handle and screaming his name, but the ambulance drives away. She hangs onto the door before falling to the ground and falling silent and the camera films her from behind as she lies in the road as the ambulance drives away. She is helped up by the crowd and the camera tracks forward into a close up of her distraught face as the full weight of what has happened hits her. The film deals here with the melodramatic archetypes of misrecognition and separation. Tommy mistakenly believes that his mother ran out to alert the police when she was actually fetching Wilkie to help him and goes to his death still believing that his mother betrayed him. Early in the film when Jess crushes a cockroach with her foot, Kipper laments "dead and never called me mother", quoting the most famous line from *East Lynne*, the apotheosis of Victorian melodrama. The line is a beautiful example of the melodramatic 'voix du sang', where true identity can be repressed no longer and blood ties are revealed, in this case the heartfelt declaration of a boy's estranged mother who is posing as his governess to be close to him. Ironically Kipper's throwaway line comes to represent Jess's dilemma at the end of the film - her son is dead and she is never able to tell him that she did not betray him, that she did behave like a loving mother.

Jane Shattuc, writing about academic approaches to melodrama, argues that the one thing its theorists have trouble with is "the affective power of the melodramatic text" and that melodrama's power to evoke powerful emotional feelings is ignored in
favour of "more intellectual or modernist concepts of excess and contradiction"\textsuperscript{71}. The correct viewing position is defined by its ironic distance, rather than emotional involvement, two opposing stances that are clearly gendered, as masculine and feminine respectively. Christine Gledhill confirms this in her description of the two audiences for Sirk's melodramas, "one which is implicated, identifies and weeps, and one which, seeing through such involvement, distances itself, noting that "the first is likely to be female and the other male".\textsuperscript{72} Melodrama, can only be reclaimed for respectable criticism by reading it against the grain, by constituting "a heathen underclass of tasteless consumers to serve as radical aesthetic Other"\textsuperscript{73}, and above all, by avoiding its affective claims on the viewer and masculinising it. The tears that melodrama brings forth are unfortunate signs of enthrallment and as Mary Ann Doane suggests, indicate a viewer who is overcome, rendered helpless and "feminised by pathos".\textsuperscript{74} Even the naming of melodramatic texts as 'tearjerkers' suggests their manipulative and even masturbatory qualities as emotional pornography\textsuperscript{75}, all of which adds up to a pervasive misogyny in the common critical approach to melodrama. Rather than continue with this way of reading melodrama, Shattuc asks the important question, "what happens if we read these melodramas 'straight' - the way they were intended to be read?"\textsuperscript{76}, not emphasising contradiction but affect instead. She asserts the possibility of such a thing as having 'a good cry', not as a self-indulgent complacent apolitical wallow in sentimentality but a recognition of "the Utopian moment, the authentic kernel, from which they [melodramas] draw their emotional power"\textsuperscript{77}, concluding,


\textsuperscript{72} Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Introduction', p. 12.

\textsuperscript{73} Klinger, \textit{Melodrama and Meaning}, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{74} Doane, \textit{The Desire to Desire}, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{75} Something noted by Molly Haskell who describes the 'woman's picture' as "soft-core emotional pornography for the frustrated housewife" in \textit{From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 154.

\textsuperscript{76} Shattuc, 'Having a Good Cry over The Color Purple', p. 148.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 152.
In the end, tears are not a sign of feminine weakness, as the patriarchy would have it, but they are more than the manifestation of physical pleasure or Barthes' *jouissance*. Having a good cry represents the potential for the disempowered to negotiate the difficult terrain between resistance and involvement.  

The rehabilitation of affect is essential for an appreciation of *No Trees in the Street* because what other critics have overlooked in their writing on the film is precisely that which gives the film its power: these two scenes, the young woman railing against her seducer and the mother destroyed by the death of her son, express extreme and atavistic emotional states, and their appeal has nothing to do with plot or character or moral rectitude but seems to lie rather in the sound and fury of the moment. Excess in melodrama is commonly seen as a displaced something; it is, as Tom Gunning notes, tamed by being defined as expressive, rather than just being seen as thrill, sensation or spectacle. The impact of such moments as Hetty's attack and Jess's collapse may have more to do with their visceral power on the viewer, a primal reaction to the women's screams, than anything else with a more clearly ascribed meaning. Tom Sutcliffe suggests that "we haven't properly begun to account for the ways in which films can affect us", concluding that "some of the cinema's most powerful moments enlist our unconscious perceptual prejudices - including those vestigial impulses that were framed for very different conditions of life", a useful framework in which to examine such scenes.

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78 Ibid., p. 154.
No Trees in the Street's final conclusion was described approvingly by *Kine Weekly* as a "'comfy' curtain"\(^{81}\) but it is also a curiously flat ending to a film which was described in its press material as "a story of passion".\(^{82}\) One moment we are witnessing scenes of extreme emotional anguish, performed and filmed with great intensity, and the next, we are back from the noisy, tumultuous past into the quiet, depopulated present. Frank has finished telling his story and the young delinquent is free to go, having had his injured hand bandaged by Hetty, who is now Frank's wife. As the youth makes his way home he passes a tree, and this provides the final shot of the film, accompanied by the film's main musical motif that had been used to suggest the thwarted aspirations of the young Hetty and Tommy. Now at last, the film seems to imply, there are trees growing in the street and the new Jerusalem has been achieved. However, John Hill cites this shot as evidence of the film's "absence of conviction in its presentation of the desirability of the present"\(^{83}\). The tree, supposedly symbolic of the film's optimism, is a scrawny specimen, isolated and encased in wire fencing, and for Hill it unwittingly "evokes this irony nicely"\(^{84}\). While Hill is convinced that any irony is unintentional, it seems equally possible that the ambiguous presentation of the present day environment is intended. The tree on which the film ends is, I think, meant to be fragile and weak and solitary, rather than sturdy and leafy, to symbolise a tentative optimism and hope for the future. The framing narrative, for all its blustering moralism, holds back from certainty and smugness. Despite all he has heard from Frank, the young delinquent does not undergo a Damascene conversion but still has the cheek to ask for his flick knife back at the end. Frank has to keep anxiously repeating "I know this is better", as if trying to convince himself as much as the teenager. Of course, watching the film in 2003, it is impossible not to look at its conclusion through the lens of heartbreaking irony - the

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\(^{81}\) *Kine Weekly*, 5 March 1959.  
\(^{82}\) *No Trees in the Street* pressbook.  
\(^{83}\) Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 101.  
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
new housing estates that were supposed to allow their residents to 'live and breathe' have largely proved to have as deleterious an effect on their inhabitants as the pre-war slums they replaced.

Despite its best intentions, it would seem that *No Trees in the Street* presents another version of Hoggart's and Wesker's narratives of loss between the thirties and the fifties. The gain is clear - no longer having to live in a slum - but the loss is palpable. There is no room in the present for the large feelings of anger and passion that the events of the past inspired. Frank's companionate relationship to Hetty contains none of the fervour of Wilkie's declaration to Hetty, "I must have you back, I must. If I don't, I don't know what I'll do". We never find out what became of him, or Jess, Kipper, Bill, and all the other vivid characters that crowded for attention in the thirties section of the film - it would seem that the present simply cannot accommodate them. If we compare the Hetty of the past with the Hetty of the present, the difference is startling. This can obviously be read as a sign of the continuing trauma of her brother's death, an indication that the marks of a slum upbringing are not easily shrugged off, but it was a transformation in character striking enough for Frank Jackson in *Reynold's News* to remark that at the end "we find a sadder, wiser, mouse-like Sylvia Syms, all the revolt crushed out of her, washing dishes for a dull policeman." In comparison with her passionate tirade against Wilkie just a few moments previously in the film (although it actually took place twenty years ago), she says only one word, 'no', in the whole of the final sequence. This is in answer to Frank's question to her about whether the flick knife would be any use to her in the kitchen. When she says no, he suggests it might be useful for pruning, just at the point the film cuts to the tree outside. The instrument of violence can be turned into a useful tool of cultivation and control, but it also cuts away any wayward natural growth. Although trees in the street are a good thing, they must be kept to a minimum and not allowed to get out of hand because, in Frank's words, we don't
want "a ruddy jungle". No Trees in the Street tries to say that life was a trap then, but that it isn't anymore. But, for Hetty at least, chastened and almost silent in her modern flat, all passion evacuated, it looks more like one kind of entrapment has simply been exchanged for another.

85 Quoted in Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 175.
Tiger Bay (1959)

The fact that the child lead in Tiger Bay is a girl owes as much to chance as to deliberate design. The film was first envisaged with a boy as its child lead, following its source text, Noel Calef's *Rudolphe et le Revolver*, and appears to have been an attempt on the part of producers Julian Wintle and Leslie Parkyn to emulate their earlier success, *Hunted* (1952), starring Dirk Bogarde as a fugitive who bonds with the young boy he has kidnapped. Thompson had been picked to direct (on loan from ABPC to Rank, a sign of his growing stature in the industry) and during preparation for the film went to visit his friend John Mills. It was when he saw John Mills' daughter Hayley playing at the end of the garden that he had a brainwave. Thompson recalls that "suddenly I thought My God! How much better it would be if the part was played by a girl."¹ John Mills later recalled Thompson's explanation for this: "There was something important he wanted to discuss. 'Listen, this may seem quite mad to you, but I've got a terrific hunch. I want to make a switch and change the little boy into a little girl...The whole story will be much more touching and moving in every way.'"² Hayley Mills' performance as Gillie, the young tomboy who forms a firm allegiance with the man she has seen committing murder, more than lived up to Thompson's expectations. In her screen debut, she earned the very rare accolade of spontaneous applause at a press screening and Tiger Bay's subsequent success acted as a springboard for a contract with the Disney organisation and her starring roles in films such as *Pollyanna* (1960) and *The Parent Trap* (1961). This chapter will explore the precise ramifications of this switch with its introduction of 'gender trouble' into the film and exactly why this

¹ Chibnall, *J. Lee Thompson*, p. 235.
decision would have the power to make the film 'much more touching and moving in every way'.

*Tiger Bay* is enriched in possibility not only by the introduction of some 'gender trouble' via the switch from boy to girl, but also because of the fact that the character is at the pivotal age of 11, or as Isabel Quigly put it, "on the shambling, charming edge of adolescence". This was the precise age that the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir picked as the last time when boyishness is acceptable in girls: "up to the age of twelve the little girl is as strong as her brothers, and she shows the same mental powers; there is no field where she is debarred from engaging in rivalry with them". After this, the paths of girls and boys diverge. Freud memorably posited that "the little girl is a little man", and Gillie's boyish haircut and clothes seem to concur, acting as mute protest against being 'ladylike'. *Tiger Bay* becomes a text that does not just deal with childhood or womanhood but rather deals precisely with how one state gives way to the other and some of the difficulties of that transition. This process was the source of great fascination for Freud and in his infamous lecture on "the riddle of the nature of femininity", he attempts to describe the process by which the girl in her bisexual phallic active phase (little girl as little man) becomes the mature passive feminine woman. It seems to depend upon the acceptance at puberty of a "wave of passivity...which opens the way to the turn towards femininity" and the repudiation of all that has gone before. Indeed, as Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester argue,

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3 *Spectator*, 3 April 1959. In this matter, the comparison with Wintle and Parkyn's earlier film *Hunted* is instructive. The fact that the boy in this film is much younger than Gillie means that the central relationship has a different (and less complex, I would argue) inflection.


6 Ibid., p. 113.

7 Ibid., p. 130.
"repudiation seems at times to be the very essence of what femininity is"\(^8\), and Freud admits that this process is far from smooth:

> ...the development of femininity remains exposed to disturbances by the residual phenomenon of the early masculine period. Regressions to the pre-Oedipus phase very frequently occur; in the course of some women's lives there is a repeated alternation between periods in which femininity and masculinity gain the upper hand.\(^9\)

Laura Mulvey's essay 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)' uses this as the starting point for understanding the psychology of the female spectator. In addressing some of the complaints against her original essay, particularly her conceptualisation of the spectator position as inevitably masculine, she uses Freud's idea of the female subject sporadically regressing back to her active phallic phase as a way of explaining women's enjoyment of films that force her to identify with a male point of view. For Mulvey, these regressions are a "fantasy of masculinisation at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes."\(^10\) *Duel in the Sun* is her exemplary text, a melodrama/western "in which a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity".\(^11\) Pearl Chavez is faced with alternative paths of development exemplified by the two men in her life: Jesse, the man of the law, who "signposts the 'correct' path for Pearl, towards learning a passive sexuality, learning to 'be a lady', above all

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sublimation into a concept of the feminine that is socially viable", and Lewt the outlaw, whose attributes Mulvey lists as "guns, horses, skills with horses, Western get-up" who offers Pearl "sexual passion, not based on maturity but on a regressive, boy/girl mixture of rivalry and play" and with whom Pearl "can be a tomboy (riding, swimming, shooting)".12

It is striking how far Mulvey's description of the heroine's dilemma in Duel in the Sun is applicable to the situation of Gillie in Tiger Bay. She too is faced with a choice between aligning herself with one of two men, either Superintendent Graham, the representative of the law, who wants Gillie to be a good girl, trust him and tell him the truth, or Korchinsky, the charismatic outlaw who (up to a point) indulges her tomboyish activity, takes her riding and calls her 'gaucho'. In fact, the struggle between these two different sets of behaviour seems all the more pronounced in Gillie precisely because she is on the cusp of adulthood, not yet an adult. In Duel in the Sun, Pearl's tomboyish tendencies represent the intrusion of her already repressed masculine side into her current attempt at mature femininity, whereas Gillie's masculine side has the upper hand at this point in her life. As a film with an eleven year old protagonist who undergoes a life-changing experience, Tiger Bay cannot help but address the process by which little girls become grown-up women, a process that is not merely biological but also psychic. The cost for those who cannot achieve full 'mature' femininity is demonstrated by Pearl's fate in Duel in the Sun - unable to reconcile the warring sides of her nature, she dies in a shoot out, her impossible love for Lewt finally consummated.

What makes Tiger Bay a different, and perhaps more optimistic text, is that it does not have to rely upon the female protagonist's death to provide its narrative closure. Instead, we leave Gillie on the brink of adolescence, the gateway into adulthood, and more significantly womanhood. The film seems to be animated by the character's liminal

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11 Ibid., p. 30.
12 Ibid.
state, described by Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers as the "'betwixt and between' nature of having outgrown one's position as a child without having yet attained one's footing as an adult."¹³ Tiger Bay may suggest that feminine repudiation lies ahead but it holds back from actually enacting it for us, leaving the ending and the character's future open. Even at the close of the narrative, she is still a child. As her future is not yet decided, she offers the possibility of envisaging new and different ways of being a woman beyond the confines of the text. Thompson's other female-centred films have dealt with women in their various 'prisons', and although our first shot of Gillie shows her behind bars, setting up a link between her plight and those of Thompson's previous heroines, this is a film about a little girl on the run, not in prison, suggesting a crucial difference from her predecessors.

We first meet Gillie behind bars, gazing mournfully through railings at the game of Cowboys and Indians (cleverly shot to look like a grown-up Hollywood Western, like Duel in the Sun) that she is not allowed to join. The reason for her exclusion is that she does not possess the requisite toy gun. Gillie's lack of a gun and her desire to get one (which motivates the first part of the film's plot) has been interpreted by Steve Chibnall in Freudian terms as "a pretty obvious case of penis envy".¹⁴ Sue Harper concurs, describing Tiger Bay as a film "about a little girl's desire to acquire a gun (with all its phallic connotations)."¹⁵ The desire to interpret the film in this framework is overwhelming, especially given the details of her exclusion from the game. In this brief scene, there is a shot/reverse shot pattern of Gillie behind bars, in close up, followed by a shot of one of the boy's guns, also in close up, and then another closer shot of Gillie's discontented face in profile, making it clear what the object of her desire is. Later in the scene, this sense of yearning is compounded by a lengthy close up of Gillie's rapt face

¹⁴ Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 240.
¹⁵ Harper, Women in British Cinema, p. 84.
gazing at a gleaming gun being reloaded in the immediate foreground. It provides a striking analogue to Freud's forcefully simple formulation of penis envy: "she has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it." Penis envy has always been a contested notion, criticised as "phallocentric one-sidedness and bigotry" ever since the moment of its inception. Even Freud admitted that people might see it as a possible obsession on his part: "If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a penis on the configuration as an idee fixe, I am of course defenceless." Many have argued that the envy is not motivated by the desire for the object itself but by the fact that it is a distinguishing feature of maleness, which commands an enviable degree of power, prestige and freedom that being female cannot offer, so that penis envy is rather "a veiled expression of envy of the male's social privileges." But there is a further advantage to possessing the penis, a visible, touchable organ. Karen Horney argues that penis envy stems from the "advantage the boy has in the visual pleasures associated with his visual genitals" and Simone de Beauvoir argues that it enables the boy to project "the mystery of his body, its threats, outside of himself, which enables him to keep them at a distance". Compare this with what she describes as "the diffuse apprehension felt by the little girl in regard to her 'insides'...She is extremely concerned about everything that happens inside her, she is from the start much more opaque to her own eyes, more profoundly immersed in the obscure mystery of life, than is the male". This suggests an interesting reading of the title of Tiger Bay. As well as being the area of Cardiff in which the story is set, with its combination of bay, the concave 'feminine' inlet, and tiger, the ferocious wild animal, it

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16 It is tempting to make the link back to The Yellow Balloon where another child gets into trouble because of his desire for a particular plaything.
18 Appignanesi and Forrester, Freud's Women, p. 466.
19 Freud, 'Femininity', p. 132.
20 Appignanesi and Forrester, Freud's Women, p. 458.
21 Ibid., p. 434.
suggests on a symbolic level some of the fears about what lurks within the female body that de Beauvoir describes as characteristic of girls' psychological development. Gillie may not have a gun but she does have a bomb, which she will later use to terrorise the inhabitants of her tenement block. However, its womblike enclosed weaponry (hidden danger again, like the 'bay' with the 'tiger' in it) is not acceptable to the boys as the equal of a gun. Neither does Gillie have a pretty cowgirl outfit, like Gwyneth, which would convert her into an acceptable feminine type and let her be included in the game (despite the fact that Gwyneth's gun is not a proper gun but "just a bit of wood"). The closest Gillie gets to possessing the phallus is the packet of sausages she fetches for her auntie, and even these get taken away from her in a scuffle. She has just retrieved one of the sausages and is cleaning it on her jumper when she first encounters Korchinsky, asking directions to his girlfriend's new flat. He is shot from below to suggest a child's eye view but also to emphasise his imposing masculinity (unlike his presentation up until now in the film which has tended to emphasise his boyishness). This is a forceful dramatisation of what Freud describes as the defining moment in the de-masculinisation of girls - the realisation that they cannot compete in phallic terms with men - with Gillie crouched on the floor with her small sullied phallic substitute held close to her chest, dwarfed by the real thing, the imposing tall young man who she looks up to. She shows him the way to the address he is looking for and is rewarded by being thanked and called 'mademoiselle'. The angry protest against her peers calling her a lady has vanished and Gillie looks pleased at this new form of address.

Immediately after the film's first brief introduction to Gillie, our attention switches to Korchinsky's relationship with Tiger Bay's other prominent female character, Anya (Yvonne Mitchell). Unlike Gillie, Anya does have a gun, which will prove to be her undoing, just as it was for Mary Hilton in Yield to the Night. Being

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22 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, pp. 305-306.
armed and dangerous seems to imply being a danger to oneself as well as others with Thompson's female leads, and this is no less true of Anya, who will end up shot with her own weapon. When Gillie's Auntie predicts that if she carries on with her boyish ways, wanting guns and behaving like a gangster, she will end up in jail, a prediction repeated by her neighbour Mr Williams, it is tempting to make the link between Gillie and Mary Hilton, who suffers exactly that fate.

Quite aside from possessing a gun, what Anya possesses is the pertinent feature of the first part of the sequence in which Korchinsky arrives at her new flat. After an awkward embrace, Korchinsky's eyes are drawn to Anya's new possessions: a TV, shot at an oblique angle, the camera then panning through to a shiny brass bedstead, followed by a high angle shot of a neatly laid table with new linen and modern crockery. Here are all the accoutrements of fifties domestic affluence, the "our home" that Korchinsky confided to the landlord was his ideal, but they are presented in such a way as to make them unsettling and evidence of Anya's unfaithfulness. Money is shown to be of stealthy significance in Tiger Bay's opening scenes: in Korchinsky's exchanges with the landlord and Christine over payment of rent, Auntie's enumerations over the price of sausages and Gillie's lies about how much change she got. This all leads up to this point where the desire for the good things that money can buy has caused the breakdown of a relationship. Indeed, money is what first sparks off the violent argument between the couple when Korchinsky insists that he sent money home regularly and Anya spits back "Regular. Ah yes, regular, like you pay a cook". He is angry at her ingratitude and she explodes "Thank you, thank you, thank you...is that grateful enough?" Here we seem to have one of the few explicit protests in Thompson's films against women's financial dependence, and the casting of Yvonne Mitchell invites comparison with similar scenes in Woman in a Dressing Gown. Furthermore, another link is made back to Thompson's prison films when Anya compares her existence to a
state of imprisonment, calling it a "life sentence" and alluding briefly to a past incarceration: "I'd rather be back in that bloody camp...than always waiting". Her remarkable declaration of independence ("I'm not an animal for a little boy to keep in a cage. I'm a woman, a woman with a heart and a body that is my own to give how I like to who I like") is expressive beyond the strict needs of plot, begging the question of why it is there at all. One could read it in a reactionary way, making Korchinsky's crime all the more understandable, when faced with a woman "whose bitchiness more or less drives him to it", in the words of the Hollywood Reporter. But Anya's confused face and soft exclamation of "Bronig" when he shoots her seem designed to elicit sympathy rather than antipathy, and make the scene's sympathies more complex. Having the murder victim justify her infidelity so eloquently and forcefully, albeit briefly, helps rebalance the weighting of sympathies in the film. Unlike in Yield to the Night, in Tiger Bay the sympathetic murderer is not bought at the cost of the silent and thoroughly unsympathetic victim. Anya is the way she is because of her troubled past and a squalid lonely life in borderline poverty. Bronig does what he does in a flash of anger not because he is an evil man. The film suggests that both are culpable but both are victims.

The scenes of the couple's reunion are initially interspersed with Gillie's antics in a different part of the tenement building, creating a sense of her stifling home environment, which makes her attraction to the criminal Korchinsky more plausible. More specifically, a notion is created of what grown-up femininity holds in store, which is certainly not "playing with guns and bombs and dressing up like gangsters". It is there in the detail of Auntie at the ironing board throughout her conversation with Gillie, but it is also there more obliquely in the film's tiny details. Auntie takes in

24 It is important, I think, that her taunts about his sexual prowess and immaturity are what tip him over the edge. Continuing to look at the film in a psychoanalytic framework, one might interpret Anya as
mending to make a living and there is a headless dressmaker's dummy in the room. Auntie warns Gillie "Don't touch that. It's Mrs Potter". It is an inconsequential figure of speech but the equation of a faceless clotheshorse with the mature, married woman is illuminating. Similarly, when Gillie constructs the first of her many lies, about losing the change from buying the sausages, she says that "a great big lady with a basket bumped me". As Neil Sinyard notes, "the form a child's escapism takes might be revealing about the world in which the child habitually lives"\textsuperscript{25}, and this little thoughtless fabrication suggests a vision of grown-up womanhood that is adversarial and formidable, its onset not to be welcomed. It is very close to the pattern described by Simone de Beauvoir: "Her spontaneous surge towards life, her enjoyment of playing, laughing, adventure, lead the little girl to view the maternal sphere as narrow and stifling."\textsuperscript{26}

Gillie's characterisation as bringer of "somewhat defiant mischief"\textsuperscript{27} is furthered when she deliberately drops her bomb down the stairway, scaring Mr Williams into cutting himself shaving, news which Gillie greets with an unsympathetic "Cut himself bad, has he? Cut his bleedin' head off?" It also alerts her to the argument in the top floor flat. Gillie is frequently shown hanging around on the staircase, emphasising her exclusion, but it is significant too that Gillie is attracted to what is happening at the top of the building. Climbing and ascension accrue a symbolic importance for little girls who, as de Beauvoir notes, "suffer under the rule forbidding them to climb trees and ladders and go on roofs". Using the work of Adler as a template, she continues,

\begin{quote}
the notions of high and low have great importance, the idea of elevation in space implying a spiritual superiority, as may be seen
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex}, p. 321.
in various heroic myths; to attain a summit, a peak, is to stand out beyond the common world of fact as sovereign subject (ego); among boys, climbing is frequently a basis for challenge. The little girl, to whom such exploits are forbidden and who, seated at the foot of a tree or cliff, sees the triumphant boys high above her, must feel that she is, body and soul, their inferior.  

Gillie's ascension to the top of the building has more to do with curiosity perhaps but, given her competition with the boys and revolt against girlishness, this desire for height might also have this extra resonance, especially when thinking back to her first craven meeting with Korchinsky. Gillie, who is often dwarfed in the mise-en-scene by adults, especially the police inspector, has a child's instinct for wanting to have a higher vantage point, even if only temporarily.

The scenes where we see Gillie witness the quarrel and murder are among the best in *Tiger Bay*, combining imaginative placing of the camera and taut editing with the powerful performances of the three principal players. The film switches from presenting the adults wrapped up in their argument, with the camera situated in the flat, before reminding us that Gillie is witnessing events and shooting the action from her point of view at key moments in the sequence. When Korchinsky first slaps Anya, when the gun is first produced from the drawer, and when Anya slumps to the floor after the shooting, after each event, we are given a close up of Gillie's large luminous eyes watching through the letterbox. This alternation between a hidden, wide eyed child observer and a strange frightening struggle conducted by an adult couple (rendered all the more unfathomable and 'foreign' to Gillie by being mostly conducted in Polish) has a strong flavour of a 'primal scene'. In Freudian terms, this refers to the child's first

27 *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1960.
vision of the sexual act, a traumatic event which the child represses, only for it to return in the form of hysteria or neurosis in adulthood. As Sinyard notes, this "crucial formative experience" has been at the crux of dramas from *The Go-Between* (1970) to *The Singing Detective* (1986), although rarely with a female observer. What is striking about this version is how this scene has little apparent impact on Gillie, apart from an initial shock when the gun is fired. Although *Tiger Bay*'s pressbook suggests that Gillie is "appalled at the killing", the evidence of the film does not really bear this out. She runs to hide in the meter cupboard but her fear is far outweighed by desire when Korchinsky hides the murder weapon there, and she sees a way of acquiring for herself a longed-for gun. Her attachment to the gun, and later the man who wielded it, suggests that viewing this primal scene has had a different effect on her than it has on the male observer, which has much more to do with attraction than the customary sense of repulsion. It seems to resemble Freud's largely discredited Electra complex, the female analogue of the Oedipus complex, based upon the masculine pattern. Like the little boy, the little girl begins with a mother fixation, but then her developmental career follows a different path. The girl identifies with the father but when she discovers the anatomical difference between men and women, she concludes that she has been castrated and sorrowfully relinquishes her masculine pretensions, identifying with her mother and seeking to seduce the father. As Appignanesi and Forrester argue, as children grow up they imagine a version of the primal scene and imagine "themselves in the scene, destined to play one or other of the parts". If this is the case for Gillie then it has disastrous consequences for her future development, having to imagine herself in the place of a murder victim.

Although Gillie later ceases to care about her gun (interestingly, once she has formed a relationship with Korchinsky, her ersatz father/lover), at this stage of the

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narrative, she has got her gun and she will do anything to keep it. This seems to eradicate any fear or angst that she might feel as witness to a murder and instead Gillie is a picture of blithe amorality, blowing bubbles with the soapy water in the sink before carefully stashing the gun underneath it. She is temporarily cowed by the arrival of the police inspector (John Mills), and we see her freeze at the sink in the foreground of the frame when the door opens in the background and he enters, but she soon recovers her composure. Despite the power dynamic implied by the high angle/low angle pattern of the camerawork during the questioning scene (big policeman, little girl), Hayley Mills' performance at this point, casually chewing gum, looking blank and rocking in the chair while lying outrageously, makes the scene mean exactly the opposite. As a reaction to authority, it could hardly be more different from Frankie's fear and trembling in Thompson's earlier film The Yellow Balloon. After the questioning, Gillie has to rush off to the church where she is a chorister and the camera follows her during her journey, recalling similar hurried trips through town by the young male heroes of British New Wave films. John Hill picks up on this trope in his discussion of Rita, Sue and Bob Too, describing how the working class girls in this film take over public urban space from the men31, but the way Gillie is filmed here anticipates this female takeover. It exemplifies her confident movement through her world, even when a murderer is on the loose and she has lied to the police about him. Her prophetic ebullience echoes Liz Heron's intriguing description of the growing confidence of young girls growing up under the aegis of the welfare state of the fifties: "Along with the orange juice and the cod-liver oil, the malt supplement and the free school milk, we may also have absorbed a certain sense of our own worth and the sense of a future that would get better and

better, as if history were on our side [...] as little girls we had a stronger sense of our possibilities than the myths about the fifties allow.\textsuperscript{32}

Gillie's amorality is shown up even more by juxtaposition to the religious surroundings of the church she sings at, encapsulated by the subversive image of her struggling into her chorister's robes but checking that her gun is still in her pocket.\textsuperscript{33} Reworking a scene from \textit{The Yellow Balloon} where Frankie grows increasingly distressed during a Sunday school sermon on Cain and Abel and the singing of \textit{All Things Bright and Beautiful}, Gillie ignores the words of the sermon on Adam and Eve and the purpose of marriage and during the singing of \textit{The Lord Is My Shepherd}, she shows the choirboy next to her the gun and one of its bullets. The exchange of looks between the pair is particularly interesting. There is a close up of the boy's captivated looks, alternately up at Gillie's face and down to her hidden cache of arms, followed by a close up of the bullet in the palm of Gillie's hand. We see his hand reach for it and Gillie snatch it away, the camera cutting away to her grinning face. He offers to make a swap to get the bullet and Gillie accepts. The sexual subtext of this scene is, as Chibnall suggests, hard to ignore, and he reads the sequence as evidence that "she is beginning to discover her sexuality and is already aware of its inchoate power."\textsuperscript{34} Gillie learns that she has something about her person that will make the boys take her seriously and she can bargain with it, using it as an object of exchange. That her private rite of passage occurs in parallel with the public rite of passage of the wedding gives the moment extra dramatic force. She has witnessed two very different scenes of heterosexual coupling in the space of one day, the beginning of one relationship (in marriage) and the ending of


\textsuperscript{33}Although, ironically enough, it was the film of the month for \textit{Annunciation: The Official Catholic Magazine for Television, Radio and Cinema} in May 1959. The review is even illustrated with a still from this part of the film and captioned "An angel with a revolver!"

\textsuperscript{34}Chibnall, \textit{J. Lee Thompson}, p. 242.
another (in murder), laying an unusual foundation for her understanding of what love means.

Gillie halts in the middle of her solo at the shock of seeing Korchinsky at the back of the church. He waits for her outside and pursues her up to the belfry in a noir-inflected sequence. When she is finally caught, Gillie points her gun at her pursuer and tries movie-style stick-em-up lines before threatening him with the authority of an absent father who will come looking for her if she does not come home. Gillie's appeal to a non-existent paternal figure suggests the lack in her life that Korchinsky is shortly to displace and it is in this sequence that their relationship first develops from mutual suspicion to what Norman C. Moser called "a strange tenderness and understanding". Gillie admits that she witnessed the murder but covered it up because she wanted the gun. She goes on to ask him why he killed Anya and in listening to his replies, shows both a child's view of the world combined with a precocious understanding of adult behaviour (Anya's lover "had more cash, I suppose"). She sings her solo again ("and though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear no ill"), this time managing to finish it. Korchinsky, his back to Gillie, praying fervently to a Madonna in the corner, is moved to tears, covering up by joking about her terrible voice, and the bond between the pair is forged. They have much in common, both are outsiders and on the margins of society, she as a child and a Londoner in Cardiff and he as a foreigner and an outlaw.

Korchinsky is often depicted as childlike himself, as in the opening sequence of the film where he joins the children in the playpark and in Anya's admonishments ("little sailor boy" and the insult that pushes him over the edge, "Ty smarkaczul!" - 'you silly kid' in Polish). The other thing they share is a love of the sea. Gillie confesses her desire to run away to sea when Korchinsky tells her of his escape plans. He vaguely promises to take her with him, clearly intending to shake her off at a later stage. The pair then move

35 Film Quarterly, Summer 1960.
36 Script for Tiger Bay dated 1 May 1959.
from the church to the docks, encountering a wedding celebration en route. This signals the beginning of one of several key sequences in the film that showcase the 'local colour' (an ironically apposite phrase) of the Tiger Bay setting, here a Caribbean wedding celebration. Despite Thompson's consistent interest in marginalised outsiders, this is the first film of his which encompasses the fertile subject area of Britain's ethnic minority population. As Chibnall claims, Thompson's presentation of the multiracial community in Cardiff's Tiger Bay area was meant "to depict racial togetherness in a matter of fact way, implying that ethnic diversity was not in itself a problem". 37 However, one subsequent complaint was that Thompson fudged the issues raised by setting his drama in a multiracial location and then focussing on two white outsiders. As Raymond Durgnat argues, the heroine of the film is not someone like Shirley Bassey, "but, almost pointedly, a white, underage, well-spoken choir-girl." 38 It is difficult to disagree with the fact that the unconventionality of the setting is used as little more than an expressive background to echo the unconventional alliance of the two main characters. However, the fact that the increasing racial diversity of Britain's population could be presented in any way other than a 'social problem' so soon after the furore surrounding the 1958 Notting Hill riots is in itself rather laudable.

The depiction of the newly formed pair of fugitive and child is interesting, centred on a complex interplay of looks and reactions. The film cuts between the wedding party, with the black bride and groom hoisted on shoulders while calypso music plays, and Gillie and Korchinsky's reactions to the scene. At first the pair are shown in a two shot with Gillie jigging to the music, Korchinsky still. It cuts back to the wedding as the words of the song begin; "If you want to be happy and lead a good life, never make a pretty woman your wife". Then we go to a close up of Korchinsky's

37 Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 240. Chibnall also details the misgivings of several Cardiff residents and the city council who did not like the representation of their community as a place of "loose morals" (p. 255) and attempted to persuade Rank to change the film's title.

38 Durgnat, A Mirror for England, p. 66.
reaction to the stingingly relevant lyrics before returning to the wedding party, but shot from a greater distance than before, suggesting Korchinsky's alienation from this union that he had previously idealised. Next, we return to the two shot of Korchinsky and Gillie, Gillie still jigging and smiling when he looks down at her and smiles weakly. She tentatively returns the smile. A couple breaks away from the party and runs towards the camera, throwing confetti. Some stray pieces fall on Gillie and Korchinsky, and the next four close ups focus on their reactions to this and to each other.

Korchinsky, still smiling down at Gillie, then turns away, appearing to undergo a delayed reaction to the painful symbolism of the confetti (he thought he would be getting married to Anya) and becoming pensive again. Gillie is still looking up to Korchinsky, enthusiastic and enjoying the music, when we return to his face, heartbroken by this reminder of his never-achieved marriage. When we cut back to Gillie she seems to have realised the symbolic import of the moment and her smile up at Korchinsky becomes the look of a child trying to fathom an adult's unhappiness. The sequence ends with a final two-shot of the pair from behind, still hand in hand and looking at the wedding from a distance. In this short wordless sequence, a huge amount has been suggested about the pair with great economy. The recurrent two-shots suggest their growing closeness, but at the same time the gulf between the child and adult is strongly evoked by their separate close ups and the actors' reactions to each other when they occupy the same frame. We get a real idea of two people struggling to understand each other. Whereas the shower of confetti acts as an ominous reminder of Korchinsky's dashed hopes of marrying Anya, it also acts as a confirmation of the bond between Gillie and him, who are, as Chibnall suggests, "joined in a strange non-carnal

39 Stuart Hall's recent dissection of calypso is relevant here. He describes it as a topical song associated with carnival "a period of licensed expression, when for a time, the normal rules of everyday life are suspended, the world is turned upside-down, and the people of 'the below' are granted the freedom both to revel in public and to comment on and satirise the actions and behaviour of those in authority." (Stuart Hall, 'Calypso Kings', Guardian (Friday Review) 28 June 2002). As music for "the people of 'the below'" for those whose world has been turned upside down, it seems the ideal soundtrack for Gillie and Korchinsky.
union". The confetti is also used in the subsequent scene in which Korchinsky resists the temptation to dispatch Gillie easily as she plays precariously on the dockside and almost falls in the water. After he decides to pull her away from the edge rather than push her, he gently picks a piece of horseshoe (his luck is about to run out) shaped confetti from her hair and blows it away. There is a glowing close up of her smile up at him and then a cut to a point of view shot from the perspective of a boxer out for the count, a switch to the boxing match at which Barclay, Anya's other lover, is commentating. As well as an economic way of switching to another locale, it also provides a neat metaphor for Korchinsky's state - totally knocked out by his creeping affection for this girl. His inability to act selfishly and get rid of the only witness to his crime will seal his fate, and as Barclay's commentary has it: "Walters was beaten in the fifth round by a terrific blow over the heart which seemed to paralyse him [...] Too late...wrapped up together."

The shifting dynamic of the relationship between Gillie and Korchinsky is one of Tiger Bay's most interesting elements. While the non-carnality of their relationship is emphasised by Chibnall, he also recognises that while Korchinsky is "a substitute for the father Gillie has lost", he is also "an anticipation of the lovers she has yet to meet"\(^41\), suggesting a much more complex relationship. At times, Gillie appears to be a surrogate daughter and Korchinsky one of the new breed of "benevolent, friendly and brotherly" fathers that the sociologist Stefan Zweig picked out as one of the emergent social trends of the 1950s.\(^42\) Of course, he also provides an interesting contrast with the authoritarian police inspector played by Hayley Mills' real father. Although it would be a mistake to overemphasise this aspect of the film, it is undeniable that Gillie sometimes functions in the same way as a conventional love interest for Korchinsky, and vice versa. For instance, during the scene where he leaves her on the mountains and goes off to evade

\(^{40}\) Chibnall, J. Lee Thompson, p. 244.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 243.
capture, the film's main romantic theme plays and the couple's dialogue could be lifted verbatim from a more traditional romantic scene of parting and renunciation:

- Go on then, go. I don't want you. You're not coming back, are you? You're not, are you?
- No. Sorry Gillie.
- Shan't I ever see you again?
- Maybe someday...

So that Gillie will know when it is safe for her to return home, Korchinsky gives her his watch, engraved with his name. He teaches her how to pronounce it properly - a lesson in Polish, the language used earlier to signify the strangeness of the adult world, suggesting a kind of induction into adulthood for Gillie. The sequence ends with tearful farewells as Gillie disappears into the distant fields, and radiant alternate close ups of the two principal players.

A French film released just two years after Tiger Bay, Sundays and Cybele (1961), also deals with a relationship between a young man and a girl, but its sexual subtext is much nearer the surface. A shellshocked pilot (Hardy Kruger, another German leading man like Buchholz) develops a friendship with a girl (Patricia Gozzi) who has been abandoned at boarding school by her father. What begins as innocent surrogate parenting for a fatherless child develops into a relationship with more than a vague suggestion of mutual romantic interest. Gozzi's character discusses the age gap between them (she is 12 and he is 30) and even talks about the possibility of a future marriage. We are not far from Lolita territory here, the role that Hayley Mills herself might have played in Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film, if Disney had not thought it would

42 Quoted in Geraghty, British Cinema in the Fifties, p. 139.
43 He first endears himself to her by calling her 'mademoiselle' too.
be bad for her image. 44 Where Sundays and Cybele, the art film, can openly acknowledge the possible ramifications of its unconventional alliance, Tiger Bay, the commercial entertainment film, must remain silent. Nonetheless, some of this still remains at the level of subtext, and this is particularly true of the part of the film in which we see Gillie and Korchinsky escape to the countryside. Their rural idyll is crosscut with Superintendent Graham's interview with Barclay, the main murder suspect. Although geographically distant from each other, the world of adults and the world of childhood are shown to exist in close proximity, sometimes encroaching upon each other, through the way they are edited together.

The sequence begins with a shot of a fast-running stream, another example of the film's recurrent focus on water at important junctures of Gillie and Korchinsky's relationship (his decision to refrain from pushing her into the docks comes after she has told him an endearing story about losing her Wellington boot in the stream on a school trip). They share a love of the sea and later, he will complete the circle of the story by jumping into the sea to save her when she falls overboard. From the shot of the stream, the camera pans up to Korchinsky gathering firewood before he returns to the ruin where Gillie is still sleeping. He wakes her up with imitations of birdsong and softly spoken Polish and the film suggests the growing closeness of the pair by the use of tightly framed, intimate close ups. We then cut to the police station where Christine, the mixed race prostitute whom Korchinsky had encountered earlier, is arguing with the desk sergeant. He tells her to save her lies "for the paying customers" and to "push off" while she is indignant at being called a "bloody thief". Superintendent Graham is about to question Barclay and just before Barclay enters the room there is a very interesting shot of Graham, from behind the desk, as he steels himself for this meeting. This brief

44 See Fiona Macdonald Hull, 'The Long Lost', News of the World, 29 April 1979. Although she never played the role, the Lolita association still followed her: her relationship with Roy Boulting, 33 years her senior, is described in terms of Lolita and Humbert Humbert in 'How Hayley left Alice for Lolita', Evening Standard, 27 October 1969.
moment is the key to his character because it suggests that his stillness and composure are bought at the cost of his humanity, thus comparing unfavourably to Korchinsky, much more humanly fallible but also more capable of love too. Barclay is presented as a seedy but basically sympathetic character, worried that his affair with Anya will get in the papers and ruin his marriage and his career. The gun that killed Anya was licensed to Barclay for the purpose of "amateur theatrical productions", a detail that Graham archly emphasises as a kind of shorthand for suburban loucheness. The overall feeling is of a morally bankrupt society where love is debased but the only alternative is frozen restraint. The editing emphasises this too, cutting from Barclay's admission of his affair and Graham's "we are aware of the situation" straight to Korchinsky in the middle of telling Gillie a story, providing unwitting commentary on the barbarity of average adult behaviour.

- ...black naked savages with knives in their mouths!
- Cannibals?
- Maneaters!

Korchinsky continues his animated tale of a General Gordon-style stand against native hordes, fascinating and amusing Gillie and proving himself an ideal surrogate father. However, the links between the fictional tale he has created and his own flash of murderous anger during his 'last stand' with Anya become more obvious as his story progresses: "I saw the river run red with blood and then I don't remember no more". This culminates in Gillie looking for a fictional battle scar on Korchinsky's arm and

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45 One might make the link to another film of 1959, Room at the Top, in which Joe Lampton meets both of his future lovers through 'Am Dram'. Of course, in Tiger Bay it will be an 'amateur theatrical production' that will help to incriminate Korchinsky; Gillie's enthusiastic recreation of Anya's murder.

46 This reference to the old Imperial stereotype of the 'black naked savage/cannibal' contrasts with the film's generally benign view of racial harmony in a modern multiracial city. It acts as a reminder of the polysemy of black representation at the time, with new and more positive images juxtaposed with older ideas about the Imperial foe, popularised by comics and films.
instead uncovering a tattoo of a heart with 'Anya' in the middle. The mood of the scene changes at this point. The pair, previously face to face, now turn away from each other and sit back to back, and Korchinsky launches into his most heartfelt speech to Gillie in the film, and one that casts the shadow of adult experience, previously confined to the shady dealings in the police station, over the world of childhood innocence in the countryside,

Gillie, soon, in a few years, you'll be grown up, beautiful, someone will love you, want to marry you and then you have all the power in the world for good or bad, just with your little finger, a few words, to make happy or unhappy. Well, before you say those few words, think. Be sure what you say is true. Take a long time. Take a long, long time.

Korchinsky predicts Gillie's future as an adult woman in terms of her potential power over men, drawing an obvious analogy with Anya, and warns her to use her power wisely. De Beauvoir argued that the young girl's maturity is predicated by "a full abdication of the subject, consenting to become object in submission and adoration" and fittingly Korchinsky's speech has exactly that feeling of a rite of initiation into another world, achieved by acknowledging oneself as the passive object of contemplation, love and desire, exercising power only by being a cruel 'belle dame sans merci'. Gillie's alliance with Korchinsky has marked the beginning of her transition into an adult, culminating in this speech.

It is significant that as soon as the speech ends, the film cuts back to Graham, in close up, asking Barclay "Now about the gun?". Gillie's desperate desire to get her gun has been completely forgotten, and instead now her affections have shifted onto a more
suitable love object, Korchinsky, the man who has introduced her to the way that she will be seen and the way that she must conduct herself as a fully grown woman. Here the nuances of Korchinsky's relation to Gillie as alternately father, brother and lover are all collapsed into the one symbolic figure of the kind described by de Beauvoir as the 'sovereign father', the defining influence on the young girl's sexual development and the template of her future relationships with men:

If the father shows affection for his daughter, she feels that her existence is magnificently justified [...] she is fulfilled and deified. All her life she may longingly seek that lost state of plenitude and peace [...] Moreover, it is not alone the father who holds the keys to the world: men in general share normally in the prestige of manhood; there is no occasion for regarding them as 'father substitutes'. It is directly, as men, that grandfathers, older brothers, uncles, playmates, fathers, family friends, teachers, priests, doctors, fascinate the little girl.48

The sequence consists of one final cut back from the police station to the countryside. Barclay is pleading his innocence when Graham puts it to him that he has killed Anya. He protests that "it's completely untrue" and at this precise point, the film switches to an over-the-top bucolic scene of a pony frolicking in a meadow. The camera pans across to find Gillie riding another pony, urged on by Korchinsky who hails her as a 'gaucho', a recollection of the earlier game of Cowboys and Indians. The scene is a marked change from the earlier scene of quiet confession and looks 'completely untrue'; an attempt to recapture the innocent world of play whose 'excess' speaks of the impossibility of doing

47 de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p. 315.
48 Ibid.
so. In fact, the world of play will be a force for destruction and incrimination rather than liberation from this point onwards. Gillie unwittingly betrays Korchinsky when she becomes so involved in re-enacting the murder scene that she lets slip that she knows the foreign language the couple were speaking was Polish. This beautifully performed scene is the climax of Gillie's incessant lying and fantasising - the acting overtakes her, play and reality become confused, to Korchinsky's cost. What Neil Sinyard notes of The Fallen Idol and A High Wind in Jamaica is also true of Tiger Bay: "the child's attempt to help the adult he really cares for only serves to incriminate him still further."49

Gillie's incessant lying is the dominant feature of her personality, something noted by Isabel Quigly in her review who remarks that Gillie "lies to adults with an enthusiasm and a haphazardness that leave one (as children do) pretty well in the dark about motives".50 Her auntie criticises her for it, Korchinsky asks her why she does it (she replies "You shout at me. You frightened me") but this part of Gillie's character is most emphasised by the confrontations with Superintendent Graham. Here we have a powerful representative of the law and what French feminism would describe as 'the name-of-the-father' (one cannot help feeling the extra frisson supplied by the scene being played by a real father and daughter) who tries everything he can to get Gillie to tell him the truth, but it still does not work. Once Korchinsky and Gillie are separated, the film adheres to J. Lee Thompson's description of it as a discussion of a moral dilemma: "How far can loyalty go? Does personal loyalty excuse telling lies?"51. Both Gillie and Korchinsky are tested to see the limits of their loyalty to each other. Gillie remains steadfast and refuses to name Korchinsky as the murderer despite everything Graham has at his disposal (glasses of milk, cakes, cajoling, befriending and when that fails, intimidation: "The truth, Gillie, the truth! This is the man, isn't it? Isn't it?"). When Gillie falls overboard, Korchinsky's split loyalties, to himself and to Gillie, are tested

49 Sinyard, Children in the Movies, p. 138.
50 Spectator, 3 April 1959.
and in the end he risks his own life to save Gillie's. *Tiger Bay* fits with many of Thompson's other films as a consideration of an ethical problem. Thompson was at pains to point out that even his later Hollywood star-studded epics, 'big' films like *Taras Bulba* (1962) and *Kings of the Sun* (1963), always tried to "hold onto something, some social problem" even if it went unrecognised by critics. *Tiger Bay*’s examination of "that relentless thing, the law" and whether it is ever right to go beyond it for personal reasons would be scrutinised in more extreme form in Thompson's US debut, *Cape Fear* (1961), in which the threatened nuclear family resorts to going beyond the law to achieve justice. Graham in *Tiger Bay* does not bend the law quite as far as Sam Bowden in *Cape Fear* to get his man, but the close up of him as he reaches into the sea to haul out Korchinsky, who has just risked his life to save Gillie, is positively demonic, dwelling on the ugly distorted cast of his features. The film’s ambivalent morality is brought out by Moser’s review of the film: "The brave and foolhardy Pole is murderer and hero; the inspector is justified but unjust, and in the end acts illegally himself; Gilly [sic] is loyal to her friend and subversive to the law." On these shifting sands, nothing can be taken for granted, and what is acceptable or good behaviour is uncertain. The skewing of the conventional moral compass is matched by the shakiness and ambiguity of Gillie’s adolescent state.

The question that remains at the end of *Tiger Bay* is first and foremost what fate will befall Korchinsky, now under arrest for murder. J. Lee Thompson did not doubt the fact that "if that had really happened [...] he wouldn't have stood a chance in English law, he would have been hanged" whereas Jack Moffitt reviewing the film for *The Hollywood Reporter* disagreed: "you feel that there will be a clemency recommendation when he is tried for second degree murder. Or that he may even get off with a plea of

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52 Thompson, 'The Still Small Voice of Truth', p. 5.
53 Ibid., p. 6.
54 *Film Quarterly*, Summer 1960.
self-defence". The divergence of views about the character's fate suggests how open ended the closure of the drama is. This applies not only to Korchinsky's fate but also to Gillie's, which although perhaps less immediately pressing is significant all the same. What will happen to her next? If we look to the other women characters in the film, they present a narrow and grim spectrum of possible femininities: a bitter, lonely murder victim like Anya, a prostitute in trouble with the police like Christine, or an unsentimental housewife like Auntie. Her last word in the film as she embraces Korchinsky after he has saved her life is 'Bronig', the same term of endearment that Anya whimpered disbelievingly as she fell to the ground dead, not a happy omen. Not the ending of Duel in the Sun though, either, with its necessity to have its heroine dead, the only possible closure of her irreconcilable desires. One might argue that the hand of history will intervene, and that Gillie, as a young girl on the brink of adolescence in 1959, can look forward to a different future because of larger changes in the social climate, and with it, the greater emancipation of women. For Angela Carter at least, the contrast between the sixties, when "truly, it felt like Year One", and the fifties, which she remembers as "tough [...] Girls wore white gloves", was absolute. Liz Heron concurs in her assessment of what it meant to come of age in the sixties rather than the fifties or the forties: "Our lives are very different from those of our mothers, and this applies to all women of our generation. For the changes of the last thirty-odd years have made a greater and deeper impression on women than on men."

For a final clue as to the question of what might become of Gillie, one could look to a film released two years after Tiger Bay, but not often associated with it - A Taste of Honey (1961), directed by Tony Richardson and adapted by Shelagh Delaney from her 1958 play. Is it too fanciful to think about A Taste of Honey's Jo as a slightly

older version of Gillie? They have the same wide-eyed impetuosity and cheek, not to mention matching problematic relationships with harsh mother figures. Neither has a father. They live in similar run down tenement buildings. There is even a physical resemblance via their large expressive eyes, the similarity in their clothes (baggy dark jumpers) and hair (scruffy pageboy cuts). Both films begin with the girls ostracised from a communal game, netball in Jo's case and Cowboys and Indians in Gillie's. And most crucially, both girls are introduced to a new adult world through forming a relationship with a sensitive boy from a ship. Each film's presentation of the unconventional couple wandering through poetically rendered industrial waterside landscapes is remarkably alike. Sue Harper describes A Taste of Honey as an invocation of "a utopia in which the outcasts - blacks, homosexuals, tarts - are at the heart of society"\textsuperscript{59}, a description that with very little alteration would fit Tiger Bay very well. In A Taste of Honey, Jo's alliance with the black sailor results in her pregnancy, precipitating her groundbreaking protestation against biological destiny: "I mean it, I hate motherhood...I don't want to be a mother, I don't want to be a woman". In Tiger Bay there is the less well developed but equally angry and instinctive cry - "I'm not a lady" - but the film does not end with Gillie entrapped by her own biological destiny like Jo. Tiger Bay ends with its heroine still a child, her future not yet settled, not enveloped back into the stifling embrace of a loving and/or repressive family. Instead she is still on the boat, in Bronig's arms, with no idea what will happen to him, or her - not a happy ending but in its own small way, quite a step forward for the way women are represented in British cinema of the fifties.

\textsuperscript{58} Heron, 'Introduction', p. 8.
\textsuperscript{59} Harper, Women in British Cinema, p. 112.
1959, the year of Tiger Bay's release, is customarily seen as an annum mirabilis of British filmmaking, the year that saw the birth of the British New Wave. In January 1959, Room at the Top went on general release in cinemas across the country, inaugurating a new cycle of socially committed realist filmmaking including such films as Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960), A Taste of Honey (1961), The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962), A Kind of Loving (1962), Billy Liar (1963) and This Sporting Life (1963), which would reinvigorate a moribund national cinema devoted to endlessly reliving the war or escaping into the never-never land of Pinewood comedy. Until the New Wave’s arrival, Geoff Brown argues, looking at British cinema of the 1950s had been “like staring into a void.”¹ Many critics have subsequently taken issue with this simplistic schema and have problematised the idea that the fifties were the absolute nadir of British cinema and the New Wave its absolute renaissance.² However, the idea that everything changed with the advent of the New Wave still holds on, as indicated by Christine Geraghty’s final paragraph in her recent study of 1950s British cinema which quotes some lines from 1963’s Billy Liar before concluding that “[t]he hierarchies, the class patterns and the gender separations that had marked the rearguard action of British cinema in the 1950s were by this point under

² Ian Christie has argued that “a highly selective, though familiar, picture of British cinema sunk in torpor before the arrival of the Angry Young Men (or Northern Realists), who would transform it into a world-class contender in the early sixties” is in fact the product of “a mass of hidden assumptions and a measure of self-serving publicity”, and obscured the significance of a misfit film like Peeping Tom. (Ian Christie, Arrows of Desire: The Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (London: Waterstone, 1983), p. 102). This view is echoed by Andy Medhurst who also blames the “adulation given to the social realist, angry-young-man films” for “the hostility towards particular other areas of production.” (Medhurst, ‘Victim: Text as Context’, p. 124). The most substantial rehabilitation of the British cinema of the 1950s to date comes in the editors’ introduction to Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (eds.), British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
inexorable attack.”3 However, I would argue that the links that can be made between *Tiger Bay* and *A Taste of Honey* problematise any concept of a clear divide between the 'old guard' and the avant-garde of British cinema, and suggest that there is much more continuity between the two periods than is usually acknowledged. This is particularly true of several of the films directed by J. Lee Thompson in the mid to late fifties, which anticipated the New Wave’s focus on small-scale personal dramas about ordinary lives in a recognisably contemporary Britain, motivating Raymond Durgnat to describe Thompson as “a kind of strayed uncle”4 of the New Wave. Their innovations were in part pre-empted by Thompson’s fifties work, something which has still not been generally recognised.

One area of the New Wave’s reputation that has generated much critical debate is its treatment of women. John Hill notes that in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* and most virulently in *A Kind of Loving*, the "superficial values of new 'affluence' are linked inextricably with women, whose obsession with house, television, clothes and physical appearance is persistently emphasised".5 The virile young male protagonists have their freedom threatened and curtailed by women, who are often used to represent all that is emasculating in modern British society. However, Robert Murphy argues that Hill’s designation of the New Wave films as reactionary and misogynist is coloured by a “Marxist puritanism [which] leads him into dangerously wide generalisations.”6 He draws attention to the roles played by Simone Signoret in *Room at the Top* and Rachel Roberts in *This Sporting Life* and argues that “these incandescently intense women have a seriousness, an emotional weight, altogether lacking in the pathetically trivial roles women had to play

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4 Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 244. In his review of *Cape Fear for Films and Filming*, February 1963, he discerns in Thompson’s fifties films “a sharp stabbing integrity not altogether unlike the Angry Young Man’s.”
in most 1950s British films.” However, one might contend that these kind of female roles were in the minority in the New Wave films on the whole: such characters as Ingrid in *A Kind of Loving*, Susan in *Room at the Top*, and Doreen in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* would not fit Murphy’s category of the ‘incandescently intense’. Furthermore, however impressive the women are, they are rarely placed at the absolute centre of the narrative, which is dominated instead by the young man’s progress, often sexual. The exception to this is of course *A Taste of Honey*, the only canonical New Wave film with a female protagonist. Anthony Aldgate suggests that it "proved a major departure for both British theatre and film by virtue of the fact that its concerns were female-centred and that women were the instigators of its dramatic action".  

However, one can only reach that conclusion by ignoring J. Lee Thompson’s films of the fifties. When they are written back into the critical overview of the period, it becomes difficult to uphold the idea that *A Taste of Honey* single-handedly pioneered female-centred British filmmaking at this time. An acknowledgement of his films’ achievement necessarily means dimming the patina of revolution that the New Wave films have accrued. As Sylvia Syms, who worked with Thompson on several occasions, succinctly put it:

There are certain films of that period that have gained enormous fame, the obvious one is *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. It was a wonderful film, full of brilliant performances, but it's about a man, and men have always been more important than women.

Yvonne Mitchell did not go on to become a huge international star.

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7 Ibid., p. 33.
as Albert Finney did, but *Woman in a Dressing Gown* precedes it by some time. ⁹

I would go further. I would argue that Thompson not only pre-empts the New Wave, but in one crucial area - the representation of women - actually surpasses it. The dilemmas and desires of his heroines are frequently pivotal to his films’ narratives. The women depicted in the six films discussed in this thesis are not depicted as tools of entrapment for unsuspecting males, but as victims of various forms of entrapment themselves. Moreover, they are never purely stopping points to mark the career of a male protagonist, but are there in their own right, in all their complexity and variety.

The comparison of J. Lee Thompson’s films to the much lauded films of the British New Wave is an important one. If this thesis has shown anything, it is that the simple division in conventional historiographies of British cinema between good periods and bad periods is often responsible for the marginalisation of important and interesting films that do not fit the prescribed pattern. Full acknowledgement of the achievement of these six films not only entails a reassessment of the New Wave’s claims to originality but also, more vitally, it entails a reassessment of the 1950s as the doldrums era of British cinema. Furthermore, the female-centred films directed by J. Lee Thompson provide significant evidence that the gender politics of the period are not as simple as commonly supposed. As is being increasingly recognised, the 1950s were not a time of stagnant stability posed between wartime danger and sixties social revolution, but instead represented their own kind of upheaval, in the shape of “a feeling of change and newness”, which, as Geraghty notes, people living at the time, “both welcomed and worried about.” ¹⁰ This is as true of the position of women in contemporary society as it is of many other areas of fifties life. Although Geraghty goes

on to claim that British cinema of the time evaded these gender upheavals, instead offering comforting representations of women in a more traditional vein that appealed to audiences scared by creeping modernity, I would argue that this line of reasoning is problematised by close examination of the six films discussed in this thesis. Although each undeniably contains elements of the traditional in its representation of female characters, each film also contains elements that suggest more modern, ‘emergent’ ideas about femininity. The reasons for this are complex (as discussed in my introduction), involving directorial agency as well as what Sue Harper describes as “a combination of marital coincidence and managerial laissez-faire”\textsuperscript{11}, but, in the final analysis, I would contend that what really matters is that these films offer a view of contemporary femininity that often differs markedly from many other cultural texts of the same period. The chapter on The Weak and the Wicked demonstrates how the film’s ‘social problem film’ discourse (which constructs the female felon as an object of horror) was counteracted by the film’s ‘woman’s picture’ discourse (which encourages empathy and identification). It found telling parallels between the prescribed restricted life of the prisoner and that of the housewife, particularly in the story of the neglectful mother Babs, - a connection that is developed throughout the thesis. It also paid particular attention to sequences that hinted at an alternative version of femininity running counter to the film’s dominant view of rehabilitation and happiness lying only in the state of marriage, such as Jean and Betty’s friendship, linking it to Foucault’s notion of ‘subjugated knowledges’. The chapter on Yield to the Night looks at the film in the light of the mid-fifties phenomenon of the ‘Angry Young Man’ and discusses how Mary Hilton might be described as a rare instance of an ‘Angry Young Woman’, not an agent of stifling conformity but one of its victims. This provides a completely fresh perspective on one of the most familiar touchstones of post-war cultural history, which might be summarised as ‘1956 and all that’. The chapter also looks at how the

\textsuperscript{11} Harper, Women in British Cinema, p. 81.
resonant star persona of Diana Dors affects the film and how the film, in turn, makes use of the star's fluctuating body to tell its story. In the next chapter, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is examined in terms of its depiction of the housewife, one of the key female types in fifties culture. By comparing the film with Betty Friedan's feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*, it argues that the film's 'rhapsody of bad housekeeping' and its endearing but disorganised heroine might be understood as an inchoate expression of some of the problems surrounding women's relationship with housewifery before they could be more clearly articulated. It also scrutinises the film's relationship to melodrama's 'realm of the excruciating', and how it balances the conventions of realist representation with melodrama's more stylised modes, making particular reference to its correspondences with the work of Douglas Sirk. The chapter on the war film *Ice Cold in Alex* enables an investigation into how Thompson's female representation is affected by the demands of an overwhelmingly masculine genre; in this case, one of the mainstays of popular British cinema of the time. It also examines such issues as the significance of the nursing profession in fifties culture and how women's wartime lives were dealt with in British films on the 1950s. The chapter on *No Trees in the Street* expands upon this, this time looking at how the 1950s 'constructed' the 1930s, but also looking at the film's resemblance to 19th century melodrama, particularly in its depiction of the beleaguered heroine. In addition, it builds upon the material in the chapter on *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, exploring J. Lee Thompson's frequent use of melodramatic emotionality and how that might be interpreted in the context of a national cinema with a reputation for restraint. The final chapter looks at *Tiger Bay*'s depiction of its 11 year old girl protagonist in the context of differing psychoanalytically-informed discourses of female child development. It also discusses the film as transitional, not only in terms of its protagonist being on the brink of adolescence but also in terms of the fifties giving way to the different social
climate of the sixties. Whereas *The Weak and the Wicked* had shown us women in prison, *Tiger Bay* shows us a girl on the run, suggesting how there might have been an incremental process of liberation over the intervening years.

As is clear, each chapter offers an abundance of original insights on the individual films. Put together, they provide a clearer picture of a body of work which can help us towards a fuller and more nuanced understanding of gender identity in the 1950s, both in terms of its expression in British cinema as well as British society in general. However, this thesis is careful to make the case for these films as something more than mere historical documents: it takes them seriously as films, and pays attention to their relative aesthetic merits, an approach seldom applied to the study of British cinema. It disapproves of the films' marginalisation in British film history not only because of their immense importance for understanding the representation of women in the national cinema but also because they constitute a significant artistic achievement, which has been unfairly neglected and ought to be properly acknowledged.
Filmography: J. Lee Thompson’s 1950s British Films

All films watched on video (off air recording).
Film dealt with in detail in this thesis are in bold type.

**Murder Without Crime (1951), 97 mins, b/w**
Production Company: APBC-Marble Arch
Studio: Welwyn
Producer: Victor Skutezky
Production Manager: F. Sherwin Green
Director, screenplay and original story: J. Lee Thompson
Director of Photography: Bill McLeod
Editor: E.B. Jarvis
Art Director: Don Ashton
Music: Philip Green
Music Direction: Louis Levy
Sound: Harry Benson, Stan Jolly
Continuity: Constance Newton
Leading Players: Dennis Price (Matthew), Derek Farr (Stephen), Patricia Plunkett (Jan), Joan Dowling (Grena)

**The Yellow Balloon (1953), 80 mins, b/w**
Production Company: ABPC-Marble Arch
Studio: Elstree
Producer: Victor Skutezky
Production Manager: W.G. Eades
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Assistant Director: Cliff Owen
Screenplay and original story: J. Lee Thompson, Anne Burnaby
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Richard Best
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Philip Green
Sound: Harold V. King, Les Hammond
Special Effects: George Blackwell
Continuity: Thelma Orr
Leading Players: Andrew Ray (Frankie), Kathleen Ryan (Em), Kenneth More (Ted), William Sylvester (Len), Bernard Lee (Constable Chapman), Veronica Hurst (Sunday School Teacher), Hy Hazell (Mary), Sandra Dorne (Iris), Campbell Singer (Potter), Peter Jones (Spiv)

**The Weak and the Wicked (1954), 88 mins, b/w**
Production Company: ABPC-Marble Arch
Studio: Elstree
Producer: Victor Skutezky
Production Manager: Gordon Scott
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Assistant Director: George Pollard  
Screenplay: J. Lee Thompson, Anne Burnaby (with Joan Henry)  
Original story: Joan Henry  
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor  
Editor: Richard Best  
Art Director: Robert Jones  
Music: Leighton Lucas  
Sound: Harold V. King, Leslie Hammond  
Continuity: June Faithfull  
Make Up: L. V. Clark  

Leading Players: Glynis Johns (Jean), John Gregson (Michael), Diana Dors (Betty), Jane Hylton (Babs), Sidney James (Syd Baden), Olive Sloane (Nellie Baden), Eliot Makeham (Grandad), A. E. Matthews (Harry Wicks), Athene Seyler (Millie), Sybil Thornedike (Mabel), Jean Taylor-Smith (Prisoner Governor: Grange), Joan Haythorne (Prisoner Governor: Blackdown), Anthony Nicholls (Prison Chaplin), Barbara Couper (Prison Doctor), Joyce Heron (PO Arnold), Ursula Howells (Pam), Mary Merrall (Mrs Skinner), Rachel Roberts (Pat), Marjorie Rhodes (Susie), Josephine Griffin (Miriam), Simone Silva (Tina), Josephine Stuart (Andy), Thea Gregory (Nancy), Edwin Styles (Seymour), Cecil Triuncer (Judge), Paul Carpenter (Joe), Irene Handl (Waitress)

For Better, For Worse (1954), 85 mins, colour  
Production Company: ABPC-Marble Arch  
Studio: Elstree  
Producer: Kenneth Harper  
Director, screenplay: J. Lee Thompson  
Original story: Arthur Watkyn  
Director of Photography: Guy Green  
Editor: Peter Taylor  
Art Director: Michael Stringer  
Music: Wally Stott  
Song: Sam Coslow  
Sound: Harold V. King, Leslie Hammond  
Continuity: June Faithfull  
Leading Players: Dirk Bogarde (Tony), Susan Stephen (Anne), Cecil Parker (Anne's Father), Eileen Herlie (Anne's Mother), Athene Seyler (Miss Mainbrace), Dennis Price (Debenham), Pia Terri (Mrs Debenham), James Hayter (Plumber), Thora Hird (Mrs Doyle), George Woodbridge (Alf), Charles Victor (Fred), Sidney James (Foreman), Peter Jones (Car Dealer)

As Long As They're Happy (1955), 95 mins, colour  
Production Company: Rank  
Studio: Pinewood  
Producer: Raymond Stross  
Director: J. Lee Thompson  
Screenplay: Alan Melville  
Original story: Vernon Sylvaine  
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor  
Editor: John Guthridge
Art Director: Michael Stringer
Music: Stanley Black
Songs: Sam Coslow
Sound: John Dennis, Gordon K. McCullum
Continuity: Tilly Day
Choreography: Paddy Stone, Irving Davies
Leading Players: Jack Buchanan (John Bently), Janette Scott (Gwen), Jean Carson (Pat), Brenda de Banzie (Stella), Susan Stephen (Corrine), Jerry Wayne (Bobby Denver), Diana Dors (Pearl), Hugh McDermott (Barnaby), David Hurst (Dr Schneider), Athene Seyler (Mrs Arbuthnot), Joan Sims (Linda), Nigel Green (Peter), Dora Bryan (Mavis), Gilbert Harding (Himself), Norman Wisdom (Himself), Pauline Winter (Miss Prendergast), Hattie Jacques (Party Girl), Vivienne Martin (Kay), Leslie Phillips (Office Manager), Charles Hawtrey (Teddy Boy)

An Alligator Named Daisy (1955), 88 mins. colour
Production Company: Rank
Studio: Pinewood
Producer: Raymond Stross
Production Controller: Arthur Alcott
Production Manager: Jack Swinburne
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Screenplay: Jack Davies
Original story: Charles Terrott
Director of Photography: Reginald Wyer
Editor: John B. Guthridge
Art Director: Michael Stringer
Music: Stanley Black
Songs: Sam Coslow, Paddy Roberts
Sound: John W. Mitchell, Gordon K. McCallum, Roger Cherrill
Continuity: Tilly Day
Choreography: Alfred Rodrigues
Costume Design: Kitty Preston
Special Effects: W. Warrington
Leading Players: Donald Sinden (Peter), Diana Dors (Vanessa), Jean Carson (Moira), James Robertson Justice (Sir James), Margaret Rutherford (Prudence Croquet), Stanley Holloway (The General), Roland Culver (Colonel Weston)

Yield to the Night (1956), 95 mins. b/w
Production Company: ABPC-Kenwood Films
Studio: Elstree
Producer: Kenneth Harper
Production Manager: Gerry Mitchell
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Screenplay: Joan Henry, J. Lee Thompson, John Cresswell
Original story: Joan Henry
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Richard Best
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Ray Martin
Music Direction: Louis Levy
The Good Companions (1957), 104 mins, colour
Production Company: ABPC
Studio: Elstree
Producer: J. Lee Thompson, H. G. Inglis
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Screenplay: T. J. Morrison
Additional dialogue: John Whiting, J. L. Hodson
Original story: J. B. Priestley
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Gordon Pilkington
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Laurie Johnson
Songs: C. Alberto Rossi, Paddy Roberts, Geoffrey Parsons
Sound: Harold V. King, A. Bradburn, Len Shilton
Choreography: Paddy Stone; Irving Davies
Leading Players: Eric Portman (Jess Oakroyd), Celia Johnson (Miss Trant), Hugh Griffith (Morton Mitchum), Janette Scott (Susie Dean), John Fraser (Inigo Jollifant), Bobby Howes (Jimmy Nunn), Rachel Roberts (Elsie and Effie Longstaff), John Salew (Mr Joe), Mora Washbourne (Mrs Joe), Paddy Stone (Jerry Jemingham), Irving Davies (Jerry's Partner), Thora Hird (Mrs Oakroyd), Anthony Newley (Milbrau)

Woman in a Dressing Gown (1957), 94 mins, b/w
Production Company: Godwin-Willis-Lee Thompson
Studio: Elstree
Producer: Frank Godwin, J. Lee Thompson
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Screenplay and original story: Ted Willis
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Richard Best
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Louis Levy
Music Direction:
Sound: A. Bradburn, Len Shilton
Leading Players: Yvonne Mitchell (Amy Preston), Anthony Quayle (Jim Preston), Sylvia Syms (Georgie), Andrew Ray (Brian Preston), Carole Lesley (Hilda), Michael Ripper (Pawnbroker), Nora Gordon (Mrs Williams), Marianne Stone (Hairdresser), Olga Lindo (Manageress), Harry Locke (Wine Merchant)
Ice Cold in Alex (1957), 125 mins, b/w
Production Company: ABPC
Studio: Elstree
Producer: W. A Whittaker
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Screenplay: T. J. Morrison, Christopher Landon
Original story: Christopher Landon
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Richard Best
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Leighton Lucas
Sound: Leslie Hammond, Len Shilton
Continuity: Joan Kirk
Leading Players: John Mills (Captain Anson), Sylvia Syms (Sister Diana Murdoch), Anthony Quayle (Captain Van der Poel), Harry Andrews (MSM Pugh), Diane Clare (Sister Denise Norton), Richard Leech (Captain Crosby), Liam Redmond (Brigadier), Allan Cuthbertson (Brigadier's Staff Officer), David Lodge (CMP Captain (tank trap)), Michael Nightingale (CMP Captain (check point)), Basil Hopkins (CMP Lieutenant), Walter Geotall (1st German Officer), Frederick Jaeger (2nd German Officer), Richard Marner (German Guard), Peter Arne (British Officer), Paul Stassino (Barman)

No Trees in the Street (1959), 96 mins, b/w
Production Company: Allegro (Godwin-Willis-Lee Thompson)
Studio: Elstree
Producer: Frank Godwin
Production Manager: Al Marcus
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Assistant Director: Ross MacKenzie
Screenplay and original story: Ted Willis
Director of Photography: Gilbert Taylor
Editor: Richard Best
Art Director: Robert Jones
Music: Laurie Johnson
Sound: Norman Coggs; Len Shilton
Continuity: Joan Kirk
Leading Players: Sylvia Syms (Hetty), Herbert Lom (Wilkie), Joan Miller (Jess), Melvyn Hayes (Tommy), Stanley Holloway (Kipper), Liam Redmond (Bill), Ronald Howard (Frank Collins), Carole Lesley (Lova), Lana Morris (Marge), Lilly Kann (Mrs Jackobson)

Tiger Bay (1959), 105 mins, b/w
Production Company: Julian Wintle- Leslie Parkyn
Studio: Beaconsfield
Producer: John Hawkesworth
Production Manager: George Mills
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Assistant Director: Chris Noble
Screenplay: John Hawkesworth, Shelley Smith
Original story: Noel Calef
North West Frontier (1959), 129 mins, colour

Production Company: Rank-Marcel Hellman
Studio: Pinewood
Executive Producer: Earl St. John
Producer: Marcel Hellman
Production Manager: Denis Holt
Director: J. Lee Thompson
Assistant Director: Stanley Hosgood
Screenplay: Robin Estridge
Original story: Patrick Ford, Will Price
Director of Photography: Geoffrey Unsworth
Editor: Frederick Wilson
Art Director: Alex Vetchinsky
Music: Mischa Spoliansky
Sound: E. G. Daniels, Gordon K. MacCallum, Roy Fry, Don Sharpe
Make-up: W. T. Partleton
Special Effects: Syd Pearson
Continuity: Joan Davis
Second Unit Executive: Frederick Wilson
Technical Advisor: Colonel R. C. Cuncan
Leading Players: Kenneth More (Captain Scott), Lauren Bacall (Catherine Wyatt), Herbert Lom (Van Leyden), Wilfred Hyde-White (Bridie), I. S. Johar (Gupta), Ursula Jeans (Lady Windham), Eugene Deckers (Peters), Ian Hunter (Sir John Windham), Jack Gwillim (Brigadier Ames), Govinda Raja Ross (Prince Kishan), S. M. Asgarilli (Indian Soldier), S. S. Chowdhary (Indian Soldier)
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