**‘A Very Unusual Self’: Queering the Home in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey***

**Introduction**

The home, in the British New Wave, is a queer thing. On one hand, it operates as a symbol of ideological stability, approved desires, and mature sexual and economic aspiration for the cycle’s young protagonists. Early critical landmarks tended to read characters’ (re-)entries into domesticity as the films’ returns to moral and narrative equilibrium, producing responsible – if unexciting – adulthoods and dependable social futures. John Hill, indicatively, describes this as ‘a moral and sexual conservatism in the endings of the films with their emphasis on marital and procreative sexuality’ (1986, p. 159). In this view, the films are seen ultimately (albeit with compromise) to recommend ‘traditional’ gender roles and life-courses, located archetypally within the familiar telos of the heterosexual home. On the other hand, however, domestic interiors within the British New Wave are with striking frequency depicted as visually and socially strange. The location at which the morally self-assured reproduction of binary gender roles and familiar social identities is assumed to take place is also precisely where they are least secure, and most open to subversion. The contention of this article is that home spaces in British New Wave films can perform simultaneously as metonyms of ‘traditional’ family ideals *and* as sites of conflict over gendered, sexual, and relational meanings, which can be appropriated to a queer politics.

I intend also to emphasise the distinctly domestic emergence of queernesses across these films. Much significant work has been written on the cycle’s confrontational masculinities and anxieties over ‘effeminacy’ (particularly, Cooper, 1970, Hill, 1986, Lovell, 1996, Murphy, 1992). These critics tend to consider treatments of femininity in tandem with these questions, largely foregrounding expressions of heterosexual and consumerist desire, and the films’ uneasy and often contradictory grappling with ideas of women’s ‘empowerment’ and – usually – punishment. Whilst concerns over the radical destabilisation of gender categories and performances are undoubtedly at the heart of these anxiogenic figures (effeminate men, and phallic women) in the films, critical applications of queer readings to the cycle have by and large focused exclusively on its only unambiguous representation of homosexuality, in *A Taste of Honey*’s Geoff. I therefore want to shift focus further into the cycle’s queer figures and fringes, and their capacity to challenge rigid patriarchal structures through irreverent subversions of the material and ideological space of the home. I argue that the queer circulates within the British New Wave both as a spectre that haunts the home, threatening at any moment to expose the fragility of the patriarchal family, and as a creative insurgent through whom new and enlivening forms of kinship, care, and relationality might be imagined.

I begin by examining subtler invocations of queerness-as-threat within male-led films, focusing on *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), in which signs of gender subversion, homosexuality, and transness make the home a primary site of ideological tension for the aspiring patriarch. Whilst I will use current (at the time of writing) terms in my discussion of trans figures, it is worth emphasising that gender transition, and its legal recognition, was rare but certainly extant in mid-20th-century Britain; as my analysis will show, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* in fact includes a subtle reference to a genuine trans history, the use of which I will consider in relation to the film’s broader gender anxieties. I then turn to *A Taste of Honey* (1961), in which queer(ed) domestic spaces become sources of liberation and ludic release, and whose unfinished, marginal, or ‘bent’ home provides critical and creative resources for counter-discursive home-making. Ultimately, the narrative closures of the New Wave films seem to conspire to ward off these queer kinships: the spectre of the queer within the ‘traditional’ home is suppressed through the reinstatement of the patriarch, and the unruly kinship of *A Taste of Honey* dissolves into impossibility. Yet, I argue, the queer lingers within these films as query, occasioning an un-making of the ‘normative’ family and an imaginative re-making of kinship that offers a complex sort of hope for the Other.

Scholarship on the British New Wave has now developed waves of its own, in a sense. Major works from the late 20th-century, led by John Hill and Andrew Higson (1996), established the parameters for consideration of the New Wave as a recognisable corpus, positioned pivotally within traditions of British social realist filmmaking. Inflected by radical film theories of the 70s and 80s, this ‘wave’ of studies tended to be socio-historically oriented, validating the importance of the cycle, but taking an often dim view of its political achievements, casting it as a ‘failed revolution’ (Hutchings, 2001, p. 309) undermined by entrenched misogyny and an overly romanticised view of working-class lives and spaces. When it came to matters of artistic expression, the films were often judged to be largely straightforward (especially by comparison to contemporaneous ‘young’ cinemas from the continent). In Sarah Street’s summary, ‘Obtrusive cinematic devices were not a feature and most films employed broadly classical narrative structures’ (1997, p. 81). Hill is again exemplary of this position:

What, above all, seemed to distinguish this new cinema was its commitment to ‘realism’, a determination to tackle ‘real’ social issues and experiences in a manner which matched, a style which was honest and ‘realistic’ as well. […] such claims to ‘realism’ can, however, never be absolute. While it is in the nature of ‘realism’ to profess a privileged relationship to the external world, its ‘reality’ is always conventional, a discursive construction rather than an unmediated reflection. (1986, p. 127)

If all that is at stake here were a naïve investment of the New Wave in the objective realism of its own images, then Hill’s criticism would be more than justified. However, more recent reassessments (Barton Palmer, 2006, Forrest, 2013, Taylor, 2006) have drawn welcome attention to the films as not only thematically but aesthetically rich. Forrest has championed a revitalising understanding of the films as distinctive and robust works of British art cinema, arguing that ‘the sustained social realist tradition in British filmmaking has encompassed an eclectic and persistently innovative school of creative figures, who have sought to interpret British society in an ever-diversifying range of ways’ (2013, p. 2). In this article, I want to draw from both angles of approach. The importance placed on gender, sexuality, and class in earlier scholarship is in many ways enduringly compelling, and I argue that the socio-political dimension *is* compatible with the close reading methods spearheaded by Taylor and Forrest. A core conviction of my argument is that the films’ gender and sexual politics are formulated aesthetically as well as thematically. To explore this fully, it is also important to make a move ‘inside’ – as the cycle’s male protagonists are indeed often reluctant to do. I will follow Melanie Williams’ insistence that ‘domestic interiors […] are as important to the films as the wider landscapes’ (2023, p. 74). The aesthetics of domestic interiors (especially those identified with subversive or fluid gender and familial roles) in these films, furthermore, tend to deviate mercurially from realist frameworks, developing stylised, even expressionist articulations. Close attention to form and mise-en-scène can allow us to revisit the ‘gender troubles’ of the New Wave in ways that might transform familiar assumptions about their basis in binary heterosexual conflict.

Whilst much aesthetic analysis of New Wave films focuses on their use of landscapes, several critics also emphasise how tensions between these exteriors (including the now almost obligatory reference to ‘that long shot of our town from that hill’ [Higson, 1996, p. 138]) and the bounded domestic interiors animate the socio-political – and, I will add, the aesthetic – stakes of the cycle’s majority of male-led films. These tensions are classed and gendered as well as spatial, mapping onto outside and inside spaces ‘contrast[s …] between modern mass culture and traditional working-class culture, “male” values and “female” values’ (Hill, 1986, p. 154). Historian Martin Francis, similarly, sees the ‘angry young men’ literature on which many of the New Wave films were based as enacting a ‘misogynistic rebellion against both the domestic and the feminine’ (2002, p. 645), categories which appear to be mutually inscribed. As Hill and Lovell identify, there is a further subdivision in the moralised mapping of spaces between *styles* of interiors, which again appear coded to class and gender hierarchies: ‘homes both rough and respectable carry the aura of “authenticity” by comparison with those households that have adapted to the styles and values of mass consumerism’ (Lovell, 1996, p. 166). This moral binary is recognisable in the use of interiors in many of the male-led films, and is especially visible in films such as *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and *Room at the Top* (1959), in which an opposition between ‘good’ homes (traditional, patriarchal, working-class terraces, ‘tough’ in their contempt for the comforts of affluence) and ‘bad’ homes (modern, matriarchal, generally new-build semis, and frivolous in their over-indulgence in commodities) are the central conflicts that drive the film.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This tension – interweaving space, class, and gender – has also often been seen as central to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In Lovell’s view, Arthur has ‘a relationship to “feminine” domestic space […] which is problematic both personally and ideologically’ (1996, p. 168); by ‘going inside’ and entering into marriage and the reproductive domesticity it implies, she suggests, Arthur risks punishment, ‘containment’, and – worse – emasculation. The film’s famous final scene has been read as urgently articulating these tensions. In it, Arthur laments the loss of his childhood landscapes; these ‘wild’, nostalgic spaces are identified with Arthur’s youthful vigour and agency, and are also an important site of male homosocial bonding, in which he and his friend Bert used to ‘roam all over’. The hills are now being visibly encroached upon by rows of new-build houses under construction, and, in the previous scene in which Arthur and Bert fish together, bisected by the angular lines of pylons and electricity cables, no doubt powering the domestic commodities and television sets Arthur regards with particular contempt. In response to Doreen’s desire for one of these new builds, Arthur throws a stone towards them; the film closes ambiguously both with the couple’s descent towards the ‘bad’ modern home, and with a promise of more stone-throwing to come. The moral implications of the scene have been subject to much debate, not least between director Karel Reisz, who saw Arthur as something of a futile rebel, much in need of the kind of sexual and social maturing represented by the familial home, and writer Alan Sillitoe, who insisted on Arthur’s continued resistance (Richards and Aldgate, 1983, p. 141). As B. F. Taylor’s detailed formal reading suggests, this very uncertainty is the substance of the scene (2006, pp. 125-40). To understand this fully, however, it is important to consider what sort of home Arthur might be ‘contained’ within.

***Saturday Night and Sunday Morning***

In focusing on the meanings specifically of the half-constructed modern home that Doreen desires and Arthur attacks, it would appear to be the ‘“new working-class” households [which] are female-headed, father-absent’ (Lovell, 1996, p. 168) that operate as the predominant location of gender conflict and patriarchal anxieties. However, the interiors of *all* homes, including ‘traditional’, father-headed households, have already been marked by the film as ideologically endangered and potentially unsafe for patriarchal masculinities. Though contemporaneous critics celebrated the film for its realism, with one writer championing Reisz’s ‘anti-style [which] does only enough work to tell the story as simply and directly as possible’ (A. Lovell, 1961, p. 52), the film’s domestic scenes adopt a far more expressionist than realist style to communicate anxieties over gender instability, emasculation, and women’s sexual empowerment. For reasons of space, I concentrate here on a single scene, but many other domestic shots could be read similarly. The visual abstraction of domestic space is introduced early on, for instance, with Arthur’s first entry into his own family home, in which a strikingly bizarre and denaturalised close-up of the back of his father’s head with an overexposed television set glaring in the background forms the reverse-shot within a failed conversation. The distinction in style is politically pointed: in contrast with the apparent realism of landscape and factory scenes, the expressionistic form of key domestic shots identifies the inside, the queer, and the disruption of patriarchal kinship models with artificiality and ‘unnaturalness’.

The scene I have in mind here takes place within Brenda and Jack’s family home, as Brenda readies herself to go out and continue her affair with Arthur under the pretence of visiting a pregnant friend. With conscious irony, it follows directly a scene at the factory in which Jack recommends the sober benefits of marriage and maturity to Arthur, using his own as an example. It is worth noting that, as Hill points out, while ‘it is in the logic of many of these films to reintegrate the characters into marriage there is, to some extent, a tension between the energies which the films release and the viability of the solutions they propose’ (1986, p. 160). In this relationship and its entanglement within the film’s gender discourses, Arthur is certainly a contradictory figure: his virility, independence, and resistance of the ‘modern’ align him with conventions of masculine idealism; yet, he is here directly responsible for the subversion of patriarchal authority and the gendered ordering of the ‘good home’. These contradictions do not need to be resolved here (in fact, it is important that they are not); it is the qualities of the representation of subverted gender ideals through the bodies of the sexually dissident woman and the domesticated man that interest me below.

The scene begins with a close-up in profile of Brenda, who takes up half the screen, applying lipstick. The left half of the screen is occupied by broken shadows and shabby, mismatched wallpaper – a queer misalignment that begins subtly to suggest the patriarchal home in disarray. She takes a step back and the camera swings with her, belatedly revealing Jack, as if he were an afterthought, the husband and father nearly forgotten from the marital scene. His gaze falls on Brenda (flickering at first, then with an earnest plea as he mildly entreats her to stay at home more), but hers remains fixed ahead, indifferent to him. She continues to apply heavy, glamorous makeup, complementing her coiffed hair and pearls. Like Brenda’s makeup, the shot is very far from naturalistic: the meticulous composition of figures is expressionistic and rich in suggestion. Brenda remains close and dominant in profile in the foreground; Jack, meanwhile, is face-on, diminished, and rising to only half her height, sunk into an armchair in the background (fig. 1). The composition resembles what Tony Whitehead has elsewhere described as a ‘centaur shot’, in which different parts of two characters’ bodies are ‘squeezed into the frame simultaneously’ (2007, p. 17). Brenda, here, occupies the visual and ideological office as ‘head’, with Jack in the more humiliating position of ‘body’. As Whitehead suggests, ‘centauric’ compositions are often used to express conflict and ‘collide’ opposing ideas, of which ‘women and men’ is clearly an important example (ibid., p. 121). There is a queerness to this figure, however, in that it suggests not only the conflict between, but also the mergence of, presumed opposites: a more conventional shot-reverse-shot formula for filming exactly the same conversation between Brenda and Jack would maintain clear, if warlike, boundaries between maleness and femaleness. The ‘centaur’ shot suggests that they might be mixed within the same body.

As Forrest demonstrates, despite critical contentions to the contrary, the film does not deploy a consistent realist ‘formal methodology’, but is punctuated by ‘subtle break[s] in objective realism’ (2013, p. 70), through which subjective authorial commentary spills. I argue that this is such a moment. Like several other shots that reveal anxieties over gender role stability and masculine potency (including the uncanny back of Arthur’s father’s head), the entirety of this shot is markedly different from the majority of the film. The lighting is subjective and stylised, with dramatic, low-key light casting rich shadows over bodies, walls, and objects. The framing, mise-en-scène, and cinematography are clearly expressionist rather than naturalistic, and taken in isolation, this shot seems to have more to do with Bergman or Antonioni than it does social realist documentary. The shift in tone from a (supposedly, if not actually) ‘authentic’ outside, to a stylised inside marks these living-room interiors as sites of strangeness and abstraction. Within a gendered reading, this is a comment on what such rooms are seen to contain: the ‘unnaturalness’ of the aesthetics is identified with the disordering of patriarchal family structures. In subverting the normative hierarchies of patriarchal gender roles, the home space itself has been made strange – queered.

If the invocation of queerness here seems a stretch, a close look at the physical objects within this scene underscore the point. At the back of the set, behind Jack’s armchair, a framed photograph sits on a dresser; whether it is of the couple, or only Brenda, is unclear, but also immaterial, as all we see of it is her. Whilst her face within the frame is well-defined, the space beside her is obscured by the shadow of an ornate houseplant, casting the place in which the husband might typically be positioned into shadow. As in the beginning of the scene, there is an urge to remove Jack from the image, or at least to make him as minimised as possible within it. More important, however, is the content of the newspaper he reads, which is held face-on towards the camera, revealing both sides. This is a genuine issue of left-leaning tabloid, *The Daily Mirror*, from 30th August 1957. And while it is possible to overstate such things, the remarkable felicitousness with which the front and back articulate precisely the sort of tensions between heroic images of robust masculine potency and the fear of gender instability that animate the hetero-patriarchal anxieties of much of the New Wave seems irresistible.

The headlines comprise an imperative and a passive. Whilst these voices could be aligned with a sexist rhetoric of masculine and feminine, they are also much more literally gendered. On the front, ‘Be Proud of These Men!’ (fig. 2); on the back, ‘He Was Once a Bride’ (fig. 3). Both of these articles, and their implications within the sexual discourses of the scene and the film, are well worth examining. Let us start with the men of whom readers like Jack are instructed to be proud. The front page shows two pictures of young white men in uniform, posing confidently in front of imposing military equipment (a tank on the left, and a complicated piece of machinery on the right). The subheadings introduce them as follows: ‘Army Driver John Lee: He Stopped Disaster’, and ‘RAF Officer Sidney Hughes: The Dare-Devil for Britain’. The stories reveal that the former was driving a tanker whose brakes failed, and the latter successfully demonstrated an ejector seat model to representatives from the US Navy. The wording of the articles is extremely bombastic (‘Seventy-three tons of unstoppable metal thundered into a crowded town centre’ [*Daily Mirror*, 1957, p. 1]), celebrating masculine strength, courage, and ‘salesmanship’ (ibid., p. 2) in extravagantly nationalistic terms. The tone of the second article – ‘Hughes calmly risked his life to show American Service chiefs that this British safety seat will save pilots’ (ibid., p. 1) – is almost parodic in its evocation of chauvinistic stereotypes of steadfast British masculinity. However, while both stories relate to peacetime military activities, their language and iconography recall masculinist ideals of war-heroism. Francis’s suggestion that post-war British cultural expression involved a ‘yearning for, and attempt to reclaim, the emotionally satisfying aspects of wartime male bonding after the Second World War, but [which] was most likely to take place at the level of (individual and collective) fantasy’ (2007, p. 168) seems pertinent here. The confidence of the imperative fetishistically masks an absence: the secure, impenetrable masculinity insisted upon here may indeed be something lost, something fragile – or something that never really was.

Underscoring this radical sexual uncertainty, we barely see this frontpage in the film. As the scene proceeds, Brenda’s elbow moves restlessly up and down in front of shot as she powders her face and combs her hair for another man. The movement persistently covers the headline in the background. Again far more expressionistic than naturalistic in directorial style, the movement is composed very precisely: Brenda’s body – the dominant half of a queer centaur – frequently disrupts the ‘heroic’ headline, and the words ‘proud’ and ‘men’, but never crosses the crease of the paper, allowing the back page to remain prominent. We now turn to this second headline: ‘He Was Once a Bride’. The headline is accompanied by the image of a man and woman on their wedding day. Taking this headline and what is visible of it here in isolation, its implications might confirm the gendered anxieties of the scene, which depicts a supposedly ‘unnatural’ world in which women are physically, socially, and sexually dominant, whilst men are reduced, powerless, and domesticated, and in which the safe fictions of binary domestic gender roles (husband, wife; mother, father; man, woman) can slip and shatter.

Brenda – who was also ‘once a bride’ – is marked as masculine in her desires, independence, and aesthetic dominance of the scene; Jack, meanwhile, is physically and symbolically reduced, the coherency of his position as ‘man’ and ‘husband’ endangered by this unruly gender hierarchy. The *Daily Mirror* article’s reference to gender transition is significant to the scene’s meanings herein. As pioneer of transgender studies Sandy Stone argues, trans lives and bodies may provoke anxiety within rigid gendered and sexual hierarchies, not because they are Other, but because they trouble and explode the categories by which patriarchal subjects understand *themselves*:

In the case of the transsexual, the varieties of performative gender, seen against a culturally intelligible gendered body *which is itself a medically constituted textual violence*, generate new and unpredictable dissonances that implicate entire spectra of desire. In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (1992, p. 165, original emphasis)

The radical fear expressed in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, then, is that genders, sexual identities, and homes, might not be stable, ideologically secure objects after all, but *points in transition*, revealing that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ were perhaps never more than fragile fictions.

Here too, it is worth uncovering detail of the story that is not visible in the film’s shot of the newspaper. The man in the photograph, and the subject of the article, is Robert Allen, who in 1944 legally changed the sex registered on his birth certificate.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though rare, Allen’s is not the first or only instance of such legal changes in Britain in the early twentieth-century. The woman in the picture is Allen’s second wife (coincidentally, like Arthur’s ‘appropriate’ final partner, she is also called Doreen). The tone of the headline is as sensational as might be expected from tabloid journalism, and it is certainly this surface suggestion of gender scandal that the scene seems to exploit. However, the text of the article is not overly prurient; it notes Allen’s ‘dapper’ suit and his wife’s dress, describes a small ceremony attended by friends and family, and quotes a colleague of the couple who reports that ‘Everyone here knows that Mr. Allen had announced a change of sex. Certainly Doreen knew of it. But no one seemed to worry about it.’ (*Daily Mirror*, back page). Whereas contemporary transphobic rhetoric is often propelled by discrediting trans people as unreliable witnesses to their own genders, the *Daily Mirror* article recognises Allen unambiguously as a man, if one with a surprising past.

Despite the headline, the substance of the article seems consonant with Christine Burns’ observation that ‘What is so interesting about this period in British history [mainly the 1930s and 40s] is that so many cases involved people going from female to male and that, by and large, the press were curious but not scandalised’ (2018, p. 14). However, this was to change with the rise of a more ‘sensationalist press’ from the mid-century; journalist and campaigner Jane Fae writes that ‘by the sixties […] the trans community joined the roster of minorities singled out for sensational, often sexualised reporting, because they lacked the political clout to stop such abuse’ (2018, p. 188). Fae locates some of the earliest prominent lurid headlines in 1960 specifically, meaning that by the date of its release, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* may well have already been operating in a somewhat different landscape of media sexual speculation than the article Jack is reading.

The reference to transness within the film – especially in direct contact with the heroic fantasies of masculinity on the front page – can be understood to act as a warning to Jack (and other men too) over threats to stable gender categories. Contrary to this suggestion, however, Allen’s own writings reveal views on gender and sexuality that are strikingly conventional and consonant with the sort of ‘traditional’ masculinity the scene appears to imply is under threat. Throughout his autobiography, Allen frequently points to his inaptitude for housework, and – pertinent to the topic of this article – his inability to be ‘domesticated’ (Allen, 1954, pp. 46-47) as unambiguous evidence of his social as well as biological maleness. Sandy Stone points out that such recourse to stereotype is reasonably common in early trans life narratives, and there are indeed many very understandable reasons why trans and gender non-conforming people existing within societies that are enduringly patriarchal and cissexist might align themselves with those societies’ most emphatic notions of binary gender expression (Stone, 1992, pp. 156-59). Nonetheless, the detail of the story suggests that the headline does not quite do the work it may be expected to within this image.

As a further point of biographical coincidence, Allen was himself a member of the film industry, and worked as a director’s assistant on celebrated landmarks of British cinema, including Powell and Pressburger’s *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), and David Lean’s *Great Expectations* (1946). Though the presence of the headline within this scene superficially implies a threatening and subversive ‘outside’ to masculinist gender discourses, in fact the man and the marriage that occasion it might have quite a bit more in common culturally, ideologically, and even professionally with the British New Wave directors than may be presumed. The juxtaposition of the two headlines within this scene, and interwoven visually and symbolically into Jack and Brenda’s queered centauric relation, at first appears to invoke a rhetorical and distinct binary between a celebrated, ‘adventurous’ masculinity, and an uneasy ‘domesticated’ emasculation. Yet the detail of both articles pushes back against these ideological currents, blurring their boundaries and calling into question the very foundations of gendered meaning.

I close this section with a point that is not made with regard to Robert Allen as a historical figure (which would be unethically speculative); I return to the film’s own use of the headline as an abstracted reference to transness, and patriarchal anxieties over radical instabilities of essentialist gender roles. When placed by the film within the hands of a man like Jack, the paper is a warning; but a queer reading could also *seize* the radical potential of transness as an undoing of gender categories and their strict social scripts, to ‘disrupt […] old patterns of desire’ and produce ‘a myriad of alterities’ (Stone, 1992, p. 168). The subversive power of Brenda’s elbow in this shot, which makes the self-assured, essentialist masculinity of the front page appear and disappear, like the illusionist’s trick it is, might be taken as a productive gesture. The future of the ‘traditional’ patriarchal family, and whether it is even desirable, is left rather uncertain, and the queered aesthetics and objects of the home work to destabilise these meanings in a way that the film never fully puts back together. In *A Taste of Honey*, this very destabilisation becomes a particularly productive style of home-making.

***A Taste of Honey***

The young protagonists of *A Taste of Honey* revel in their own queerness. This is not just a matter of Geoff’s denoted homosexuality, but also palpable in Jo’s vivacious rejection of the normal, the orderly, and heteronormative society’s expectations of what a ‘good life’ should look like. When Geoff tries to reassure her in relation to her pregnancy that she will soon be back to her ‘usual self’, she gleefully twists the promise, insisting (as she enters a railway arch that gives her voice a brilliantly ‘unnatural’ echo) that ‘my usual self is a very unusual self.’ As she speaks this line, and the conversation progresses to an exuberant embrace of their ‘unusualness’, Jo and Geoff move (or rather, move themselves) into a different stylistic regime to the ‘social realist’ landscapes and townscapes of Manchester: the exchange transports them into and through a railway arch, in which they stand small and defiant against an open and unending sky of scudding clouds, and framed by the ‘bent’ lines of the arches. The acoustics of the tunnel also give Jo’s voice a brilliantly ‘unnatural’ echo as she delivers her line, comingling the strange with the creative. The film’s second half revolves around Jo and Geoff building queer practices of living, the centrepiece of which is their weaving together of ideas of ‘usual’ domesticity into ‘a very unusual’ home. Whilst in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the queered home *could* produce resistant readings that might welcome rather than mourn the loss of rigid gender categories, the manifest currents of the cycle’s male-led films are clearly deeply conflicted over, if not downright hostile toward, such losses. In *A Taste of Honey*, however, the queerness (and queering-ness) of the domestic is no longer suggested as an unwelcome threat, but becomes an opportunity. The strange here is not haunting, but hopeful.

The aesthetic and political importance of domestic interiors in *A Taste of Honey* has been underscored compellingly by Melanie Williams in her book on the film and play (2023); I have also discussed the significance of the film’s queer depictions of queer kinships elsewhere (Oliver-Powell, 2022). Here, I want to add to this by reflecting in relation to the rest of the cycle on *A Taste of Honey*’s queered home as not only a more clearly optimistic way of being ‘outside’ the patriarchal family, but also as a question mark that can be placed at the end of almost any of the New Wave’s depictions of domestic relations. Cultural historian Matt Cook makes the obvious but welcome point that ‘Though a male-female couple was then [in the Victorian era] and since seen to be a defining feature of the home, it was not only their space and their idea’ (2014, p. 2). Whilst in films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, queerness seems to invade and affect the ‘straight’ home like a subversive but elusive squatter, domestic spaces (in 20th-century Britain and beyond) have always been deeply important sites of resilience, affirmation, and solidarity for queer people – a ‘home front’, perhaps, of resistance against material and symbolic erasure. Cook continues, ‘Home was also used by queer men in ordinary and extraordinary ways’ (ibid.). Though Cook’s study focuses exclusively on queer men, such creative strategies of domesticity and kinship are by no means exclusive to them; and as Jo herself makes clear, the ‘bloody marvellous’-ness of Jo, Geoff and their home is located exactly within the queer, fantastical mergence of the ordinary and the extraordinary – another, more joyful, queer centaur is formed.

The stakes of ‘home’ are very different for Jo and Geoff (also for Jimmie, and perhaps also for Helen) than they are for the young white working- and lower-middle-class men of the British New Wave. For Arthur Seaton, Vic Brown, Joe Lampton, and others, entering the home and aspiring to hetero-domestic promise is a *choice*, which generates core structural tensions, and offers ambivalent rewards. The oscillation between responsible domesticity and libertinism that animates the narrative flows of much of the cycle is not recognisable in *A Taste of Honey*, because the characters are not equally free to choose. Constrained by systemic exclusions of gender, sexuality, race, and in all cases poverty (unlike those of most of the cycle, the protagonists of this film are more precariat than working-class), the film’s characters never seem to question whether or not ‘traditional’ domesticity is desirable – it is simply unavailable.

Thusly Othered in myriad ways, Jo and Geoff find themselves relegated to a queer, marginal ‘outside’. As Melanie Williams points out, although the house in which they come to cohabit is not literally geographically peripheral or ‘separate from the wider community but embedded within it, as their friendly familiarity with the neighbourhood children proves’ (2023, p. 75) – and this irreverence for centre and margin provides a pleasingly queer inflection. The ‘outsider’-ness of their position is, however, *socially* symbolic; and in the first instance, the aesthetics of their interiors appear to reflect this. In conventional sexual terms, Jo and Geoff – an unmarried teenage mother-to-be, and a camp homosexual – have transgressed. By failing to resemble or aspire to mainstream society’s idea of ‘the good life’, which is ‘imagined through the proximity of objects’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 90), including most essentially marriage, home, and children within a legible heterosexual unit, they must be ostracised from the satisfactions it promises. As Sara Ahmed argues, ‘The unhappiness of the deviant has a powerful function as a perverse promise (if you do this, you will get that!), as a promise that is simultaneously a threat (so don’t do that!)’ (ibid., 91). The mythic misery of this outside is important: it is the hard crust by which the centre maintains its own shape and sense of superiority. At first, the interior aesthetics (which are as expressionistic as those of the episodes discussed above) of the domestic space appear to rehearse this promise of the ‘unhappy queer’ (ibid.). The space is empty and lonely; it is often shot in darkness; its objects, unlike those well-ordered ones of the ‘good life’ and home, are queerly mismatched, pointed in wrong directions and assembled in odd couplings, amongst the bent lines of rafters and windows.

Although the whimsical score that plays when Jo first enters the flat (and begins ‘realigning’ objects) hints at the abundant possibilities this strangeness provides, the domestic interior is not yet a home. After their day at the parade, as Geoff begins slowly to retreat into the darkness, Jo calls down to him with a levity that covers the film’s deeper meanings, ‘haven’t you got a home to go to?’ He defensively insists that he has, but nonetheless cautiously follows Jo up the stairs. What is unsaid is that at this point, neither of them really have ‘a home to go to’; but from this point, they become a self-styled queer family. The tonal shift is again played out through the aesthetics; their ‘home-making’ is introduced with a light, airy montage using dreamy editing, bright lighting, and comical music as they cook, clean, decorate, and laugh. Along with their gleeful play with signs and practices of mundane domesticity, they interweave bohemian fantasy onto their own bodies and that of the flat; Geoff decorates the walls with Toulouse-Lautrec-style sketches of dancers (queer ‘self-portraits’, as Jo describes them), and Jo poses for him as a wealthy flapper, blurring expressions of gender, class, and time in a sort of drag.

There is potential for Geoff to be read in these scenes as a negative stereotype of an effete gay man. As Cook describes, gay men historically have been maligned as both too domestic and not domestic enough, ‘characterized both as domestically adept and as homeless “exiles from kin”’, whose ‘undomesticated passions [were] often instead conceived as a threat to these things [ideas of home, Englishness and good citizenship]’ (2014, p. 5; p. 3). Certainly, within the surface narrative of the film, Geoff’s artistic flair, domestic skill, and caregiving exists within a parenthesis of homelessness. He has been criticised as no more than an ‘enabler’ for Jo (Pullen, 2016, p. 38), and Williams acknowledges that the ‘feminised’ nature of Geoff’s talents and his dedication to Jo (perhaps at the expense of his own participation in an erotic life) might be ‘seen as problematic’ (Williams, 2023, p. 68). However, she also offers a welcome rebuttal, arguing that ‘the very unsensationalism of Geoff, and the refusal of the film to place him forcibly at the centre of torrid melodrama but instead to present him as queer *and* quotidian, has its own progressive potential in an era when homosexual relations were still illegal’ (ibid., original emphasis). In fact, references *are* made to Geoff’s relationships with other men, which he protects from Jo’s (and the film’s) prurience. Their domestic kinship doesn’t necessarily preclude either character from sexual expression; but it is usefully counterdiscursive in its suggestion that erotic desire and familial care need not be located in exactly the same place, within the home as monogamous heterosexual unit.

A further objection sometimes raised here is that Jo and Geoff’s domesticity looks too much like heterosexuality to be radical. John Hill sees their cohabitation as a form of second-best ‘fantasy’, which is at the same time impossible, as ‘it is precisely his homosexuality which blocks the possibility of wish-fulfilment, his adoption of a fulfilling parental role’ (1986, p. 166). In this view, the fluidity of their gender roles and lack of sexual relation with each other are woeful accidents; their domesticity is an imitation of the heterosexual ‘good life’ performed by its exiles, at which they will inevitably and tragically fail. However, I argue that they are far from *sincerely* inhabiting a heterosexual cliché. The use of domestic stereotype within their kinship style is essential to its pleasures, and its ironic critique of the ‘traditional’ social orders that exclude them. To argue this, I want to apply Judith Butler’s notion of ground and figure slippage within the erotics of sexual parody to the home space. Writing on lesbian relationships that enact a masculine/feminine dyad, Butler writes:

The idea that butch and femme are in some sense “replicas” or “copies” of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time. In both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question’ (1990, p. 123).

Certainly, it is the very *recognisability* of the image that is being subverted (of gender type, of heterosexual form, of home) that gives it its critical edge. In much the same way as the butch/femme lesbian couple, Geoff and Jo’s home ‘recalls the heterosexual [domestic/ familial] scene, but also displace[s] it’ (ibid.). Jo and Geoff are not impossibly seeking to deny their rejection from a dominant social image of heterosexual familial bliss; in fact, when Geoff briefly suggests they do so in his awkward proposal, Jo passionately resists. The subversive energy of the domesticity that they enjoy together springs from the fact that it can so skilfully resemble what it is not, destabilising ground and figure, and thereby calling both into question within the normative instance. Like the femme lesbian who ‘likes her boys to be girls’ (ibid.), Jo and Geoff like their exile to be a home, and their home to be an outside.

This queer domestic style uses the home as resistance firstly in modelling a material space ‘outside’ the normative heterosexual home in which queers and other kinship-outsiders can take very real care of themselves and each other physically, economically, and emotionally – a space in which teenage mothers and queers (and cats) can not only survive but thrive in spite of the injunction that such lives that fail the standards of the hetero-patriarchal ‘good life’ must be unhappy. But the fact that this ‘outside’ can look so much like it is ‘inside’ the normative image – whilst it is also self-consciously not ‘really’ this – poses an abundantly useful ideological challenge to the ‘reality’ of that image itself. As Butler continues, ‘both the sexed body as “ground” and the butch or femme identity as “figure”’ – we can compare these to the ‘ground’ of Jo and Geoff’s non-reproductive, non-normative kinship, and the ‘figure’ of the domestic tropes they playfully enact – ‘can shift, invert, and create erotic havoc of various sorts. Neither can lay claim to “the real,” although either can qualify as an object of belief’ (ibid.). The ‘very unusual self’ that is expected to commit to unhappy exile is also ‘bloody marvellous’; more than this, it can strip the ‘usual self’ of its assumed right to judge and diminish the queer from a safe centre, turning that questioning back around to examine that very ‘usualness’. Herein, Jo and Geoff’s indulgence in the heightened drag performance of ‘traditional’ domestic structures and scenes can be untethered and mobilised as a question posed to all more serious representations of gendered domesticity throughout the New Wave, including Helen and Peter’s marital bungalow in *A Taste of Honey*; the ‘good’, patriarchal terraced homes from which Vic Brown and Joe Lampton emerge and which their films continue to promote as noble aspiration; and the modern new-build home with the indoor toilet that Doreen desires and to which Arthur must accept in his maturity in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. The substance of all such homes is woven around the sober and stable gender roles of the ‘traditional’ heterosexual couple, which the queer familial improvisation of *A Taste of Honey* parodies. Jo and Geoff *know* that they are playing at roles that are nowhere near as real or as stable as they seem; the other characters, perhaps, do not know they are doing the same.

Within the narrative close of the film, however, the queer possibilities of living towards which Jo and Geoff’s home space gestures disintegrates. Helen returns as an (albeit hypocritical and unpersuasive) mouthpiece for the heterosexist dogma of biological kinship’s superiority; she brings the darkness back with her, and the aesthetic tone shifts again, losing the visual and aural levity of queer fantasy, and returning to the expressionistic gloom of unhappily-ever-after, as Geoff retreats in somewhat self-imposed exile, and Jo’s horizons once again collapse. The disappointment of the ending is frustrating in its needlessness: the queer kinship Jo and Geoff co-create seems far happier than whatever is likely to follow, and appears to fall apart for no better reason than the enforced belief that this is not what happiness is ‘supposed’ to look like. Queers are tiresomely accustomed to such unhappy endings when we read about ourselves or see ourselves on screen (perhaps until recently, when we have been offered the ambivalent gift of happiness clichés in over-earnestness). However, Ahmed has also argued that ‘ironically, […] the unhappy ending becomes a political gift: it provides a means through which queer fiction could be published. If the unhappy ending was an effect of censorship, it also provided a means for overcoming censorship’ (2010, p. 88). If a society in which sex between men was still criminalised, and in which women’s identities were still imagined substantially to be determined by their relationship to motherhood, required the destruction of Jo and Geoff’s unruly and emotionally resistant domestic style, then the film’s last-minute narrative performance of ideological obedience is the strategy by which the queer alternative can survive as a question mark; an unfinished sentence.

What I have aimed to show in this article is that throughout the British New Wave, the home – like many queer things – is a jumble of signs and meanings; it is a vital site in which stable ideas of gender and sexuality are at once produced and undone. The form of the world itself is queered within these homes, and an easy discourse of binary gender, sexual hierarchy, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ homes becomes suddenly radically uncertain. Like the shot of Jack’s newspaper, simple headlines that rehearse clear ideological binaries might disguise and repress much more complex, contradictory stories. And with the clarity of chaos, the aesthetics of the queer home reveal that categories of gender, sexuality, home, and outside were never as stable as they may have seemed; and, more importantly, that this uncertainty may be creatively remade into a kind of hope.

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1. I have discussed this opposition in detail elsewhere, in Oliver-Powell, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My understanding of Allen’s life has largely been informed by his autobiography, *But for the Grace: The True Story of a Dual Existence*, which he published in 1954. Whilst detailed medical or personal speculation is not appropriate here, it is worth noting the need for nuance in identifying Allen as a historical trans figure. Allen’s writings express complex views on gender and sexuality, and how he understood himself within this context cannot be presumed. His own account suggests that he may have had an intersex condition, and he consistently insists that he was biologically male from birth, though receiving belated medical confirmation and legal recognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)