SOHO ON SCREEN

CINEMATIC SPACES OF BOHEMIA AND COSMOPOLITANISM, 1948–1963

Jingan Young
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When I met Jingan Young to talk about Jules Dassin’s movie *Night and the City* for her Soho and film podcast, it was at the Curzon Soho Cinema on Shaftesbury Avenue, a road that slopes down like London’s Broadway to Piccadilly. The cinema is just over the road from Chinatown, and down from Cambridge Circus. Our conversation took place in a Soho that Jules Dassin would probably have recognised, and that Gerald Kersh, author of the original book, would also have recognised. Bounded (roughly) by Shaftesbury Avenue to the south, Regent Street to the west, Tottenham Court Road to the east and the Oxford Street to the north, Soho is a dense area of media activity, daytime drinking, clubbing and bohemianism, and until recently it was the epicentre of the sleaze industry and bought sex trade, which for decades was more or less comanaged by the corrupt officers of the Met’s Obscene Publications Squad – the ‘dirty squad’.

It has been cleaned up a lot recently – garish sex clubs and furtive spielers are now Pret-A-Mangers. A sex cinema that was shamelessly right on Piccadilly Circus is now a gleamingly gigantic Gap. I’m incidentally not at all sentimental and romantic about Soho’s nasty, seedy past, which was all about the exploitation of women. But I have a certain connection with a part of London that has been my place of work for almost twenty years: I go to press screenings in little private cinemas that are worryingly like the smut cinemas of old. Just down from where Jingan and I had our chat is the Queen’s Theatre, showing *Les Miserables*, where I was listlessly propositioned by a woman in the middle of the morning. That was a while ago, in the pre-hookup-app, pre-internet age.

I remember hanging around nervously, with a bunch of other people in Brewer Street, near the bizarrely bulbous NCP car park building, while an extremely dodgy bloke did the three-card monte on an upturned cardboard box: Find the Lady, an ace, a queen and an ace, asking you to have a go without betting, at first: ‘No money, mate, no money, no money, just for fun, just for fun. Which one do you think it is?’ This is while his extremely dodgy mates crowded round the back of...
you, making it unsubtly harder for you to leave. And another dodgy mate would have the job of pretending to see a copper coming along when it suited the card sharp to take your money and pack up for the day.

It was nearby, in Greek Street, that I had an epic lunch with the late Christopher Hitchens in the now defunct restaurant The Gay Hussar, surely the last place in Soho, or anywhere in the English-speaking world, that still used the word ‘gay’ in its old nonhomosexual sense. I remember staggering out into Soho Square at about 4 PM drunker than I would be on a Saturday night. But Christopher was unaffected.

I’ve been drinking at Black’s and in the Groucho (both in Dean Street), at the Coach and Horses when it was the site of the Private Eye lunches, and in the Colony Room Club in the era of Ian Board and Muriel Belcher, though sadly never setting eyes on Francis Bacon. And relatively recently, I took a lairy minicab home after a rousing evening at Soho House in Greek Street and the driver tried to sell me a gun.

The strangely sinister anti-glamour of Soho is still there in real life, and yet it’s also preserved in the movies that Jingan writes about so well. I experience it in both senses, and that’s why I’m glad that Jingan has written this book.

Peter Bradshaw has been chief film critic of The Guardian since 1999 and has recently published The Films That Made Me, an edited selection of his essays and reviews. He has also published three novels, of which the most recent is Night of Triumph.
Acknowledgements

First, I must thank Peter Bradshaw for his beautiful Foreword and ongoing support. Thank you to Charles Drazin for providing access to the archive of Film Finances, the collection teams at the British Film Institute’s National Archive, Jacob Smith from the British Board of Film Classification, Matthew Garbutt for lending me his ‘Films and Filming’ archive, Sarah Cronin-Stanley of Talking Pictures Television, the Soho community for welcoming me with open arms, Leslie Hardcastle and Clare Lynch of the Soho Society, and Tony Shrimplin of the Museum of Soho. Thank you to those scholars, critics and producers who assisted me in both my research and engaging with the wider community through my podcasts and interviews: Henry Miller, Melanie Williams, John Hill and Dom Delargy. Finally, thank you to my doctoral supervisors from King’s College London, Lawrence Napper and Mark Shiel. I must also thank the team at Photo Fest and of course, my editors at Berghahn Books, Amanda Horn, Sulaiman Ahmad and Caroline Kuhtz.

The pursuit of this research has proved to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. For over half a decade, I wholly immersed myself in the fabric of Soho’s past, present and future. In 2009, when I moved to London from Hong Kong, once a cosmopolitan locus in its own right, it was through the passageway of Soho that a young émigré fell in love with a city.

This book is dedicated to my husband Slane and my mother Kerrie for their love, encouragement, support, and advice. I also dedicate this book to my son Ydra and lastly, to Soho.
Figure 0.1. Map of Soho, 1720. Survey of London. Published by John Strype from a plate originally published by John Stow. Author’s own
INTRODUCTION

Soho, ‘The Forbidden City’

*Soho is a film.*

—Colin MacInnes, 1959

*Soho is like ‘The Forbidden City’.*

—Leslie Hardcastle (OBE), 2015

Soho Histories

London’s Soho is no longer considered the demi-monde of the metropolis. Like an urban village, its rapid gentrification has led to the sanitisation of its bohemian and cosmopolitan past. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, public campaigns, concerned with its preservation as a site of subcultures, have admirably sought to protect its reputation in the public imagination as a melting pot of desire, subversion and transgression. After the Second World War, Soho’s reputation as a permissive space for hedonists, beatniks, impresarios, restauranteurs, striptease artists and spivs was cemented in the public imagination by bohemian writers and filmmakers. This constructed identity was deeply rooted in its historical function as a refuge for immigrants and its early modern development as a centre of consumption. The birth of this bifurcated identity transpired during the commercial renaissance to the area following the devastation of the war, dictated by local entrepreneurs, in consonance with the popular press, who promoted their diverse businesses, from coffee shops to strip clubs, to the nation and the world as inherently cosmopolitan with a strong undercurrent of bohemian sensibility. Furthermore, they explicitly linked themselves to the area’s blossoming commercial vice industries in order to cater to a new audience that included a postwar generation who no longer felt bound by prewar conservative attitudes towards public displays of nudity.
How did Soho garner such a multifarious reputation in the public imagination? In 1925, Reverend Wilson, then-rector of St Anne’s Church, illuminated readers of his book *The Story of Soho* with the etymology of Soho’s unusual name. Pronounced ‘So-Hoe!, the name was ‘originally a hunting cry … applied to this district as early as 1632, when it occurs in the Rate books of St. Martins-in-the-Fields, the Mother Parish’. One article published in 1897 stated: ‘Some have considered that the neighbourhood owes its name to the cry with which footpads (highwaymen operating on foot) used to greet their victims when money was often sacrificed for the sake of life.’ There is often confusion with the famed district called ‘SoHo’ in Manhattan, New York, which refers to the area located south of Houston Street. There is also a suggestion that the origins of Soho’s name could similarly refer to its location south of the area of Holborn in London. However, this explanation is largely disputed. Soho is also one of London’s youngest districts. In *Capital Affairs London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (2010), Frank Mort has described the early modern development of Soho after 1820 whereby ‘four major thoroughfares … either constructed or substantially remodelled … came to form Soho’s material and symbolic outer limits. Oxford Street to the north, Coventry Street to the south, Charing Cross Road to the east, and Regent Street to the west functioned as Soho’s boundary line, enclosing the area in a great ‘rectangle’ or what was more precisely a skewed parallelogram’. Judith Summers similarly described the area in her celebrated history, *Soho: A History of London’s Most Colourful Neighbourhood* (1989) as ‘a small island land-locked in London’s West End, where for 300 years it has held away … half a square mile in size, it is cut off from the metropolis … Soho is a place to linger in’ (see Figure 0.1).

**The Biographical City**

As an immigrant in London who was born in Hong Kong, before the former British colony was handed back to the People’s Republic of China in 1997, my engagement with London and Soho began long before my arrival. Historically, Hong Kong has held a similar role to Soho as both a commercial centre and refuge for immigrants. Soho’s multifarious identity continues to be defined by its function as a commercial centre, as well as its role as a place of refuge, cultural tourism, and lucrative opportunities for investment and trade. Working on this project has been an unadulterated joy, notwithstanding the fact I too discovered the city of London
through the gateway of Soho, due to its proximity to my university campus, alongside my innate desire to seek out the comforts of home in Chinatown. This area, although it is much younger than Soho (it was confirmed officially as London’s Chinatown only in the mid-1980s by the local Westminster Council), remains one of the main draws for tourists visiting the area today.

Therefore, despite Soho’s rich cultural history, prior, celebrated function as the locus for the British film industry and the growth in literature examining the relationship between cinema and the city in the last twenty years, it is peculiar that there remains an absence of scholarship on the cinematic representation of this urban space. Until recently, the city of London has ‘not been among those privileged cinematic cites’ such as Berlin, New York, Paris and Los Angeles. Charlotte Brunsdon was one of the first scholars to publish a dedicated and extensive examination on London in film. My interest in pursuing Soho as a research subject was greatly influenced by Brunsdon, who argued the iconography of London is a ‘complex imbrication of narratives’ that existed long before the age of cinema. In her own analysis of Soho, she describes it as an ‘an alluring place which promises an escape from the everyday, the ordinary and local. This was a geography of pleasure for all classes of people’. I believe too that Soho is a temporal space, ‘not directionally or geographically coherent … it is also a gendered cinematic space of sensation and attractions’. She has also briefly remarked upon the fact that ‘Soho [in British films and television] deserves a book of its own’. This book attempts to address this absence, tracing Soho’s screen identity amidst shifting debates around British national identity, London’s immigrant history, youth culture, sex and commercialism, as well as the British film industry’s relationship with Hollywood, before looking ahead to Soho’s gentrification and the rebranding of contemporary Soho.

The Cinematic City

My decision to embark on an investigation of cinematic Soho was greatly encouraged by Brunsdon’s focus on the ways in which London is read for the modern city is ‘relational [and] each particular location in a film is rendered meaningful by its relation to the other locations’. Although films that claim London as their setting ‘must engage with the hegemonic discourse of location’, there are further complications because of London’s role in relation to the rest of
Britain. The capital city must be understood cinematically in the same way as it is understood historically, ‘between the West and East Ends, north and south of the river, and the West End, city and the suburbs’. However, besides the city’s connection to the nation historically (the British Empire) and politically (Whitehall), London can also be understood from the ‘point of view of a life lived in it’.

This book takes a step further by drawing on the work of urban scholars in order to ‘illuminate the live spaces of the city and urban societies … in the context of global capitalism’. The legacy of urban theorists from the 1920s and 1930s such as Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Louis Wirth are interwoven into the very fabric of cinema’s negotiation with the irrationalities of metropolitan life that Simmel identified as the ‘intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli’. The mechanism of cinema similarly produces a cascade of ‘onrushing impressions’. Postwar urban studies by Jurgen Habermas and Siegfried Kracauer impacted scholarship of city and cinema through the practice of examining space and spatialisation. By delving deeper into the way in which a city film is spatially organised, we may uncover new and significantly intense meanings behind the engagement between spectator and space.

British cinema has a long tradition of structuring the cinematic city within specific iconographic markers, and as responses to rapid social and historical changes within a post-imperial world. David Robinson has argued that: ‘Every sustained period of success of the British film has seemed to be based in a realist approach to contemporary life’. For Soho films, ‘realism’ is largely isolated to its representation of sexuality and cosmopolitanism. As John Hill has argued, British films ‘do more than just “reflect”; they also actively explain and interpret the way in which the world is to be perceived and understood’. Postwar Soho films also reveal more complex representations of the area’s development, reflecting the wider changes in London society. Primarily low-budget productions, these films unabashedly exploited debates of the period such as mass commercialisation and the growing sex industry. This included a critique for the driving force behind them.
Soho Filmography

During the compilation of my Soho filmography, which involved watching over one hundred films, I began my research by charting the area’s frequency as a film location from the 1900s onwards. I then developed an initial framework for defining a Soho film. First, films on this list should cinematically represent the real topography of Soho, either by shooting on location or by constructing the area artificially on a set (the mode that was most preferred by lower budget films in this period). I then isolated the search to include films that featured Soho’s more well-known commercial and subcultural spaces such as the coffee bar, the strip club and other night life businesses. This proved fruitful for streamlining my Soho filmography, as it swiftly became clear that Soho featured as a prominent locus in films released after the Second World War up until 1963, a watershed year that featured intense innovations in cinema technology, urban reconstruction and growing permissive attitudes, aspects that I will expand upon later, for they dramatically shaped modern Britain and contribute towards our current understanding of modern Soho and its representation on screen.

Cinematic Soho has emerged as a space that cannot not be separated from several thematic consistencies that include a fascination for migrant displacement, sexual difference and generational fracture. These films also have a tendency to spotlight social and cultural transformations of the area and the capital city, such as the impact of the Street Offences Act (1959), which banned street prostitution and inadvertently created new forms of commercial nightlife, as well as the emerging youthquake and alleged moral panic for premarital sex through a bohemian and cosmopolitan lens. Soho filmmakers (all male) exploited the growing permissive attitudes in a decade where cinema would soon be eclipsed by commercial television, particularly in films on the dangers of the city and premarital sex like in *The Flesh is Weak* (1957) and *Rag Doll* (1961). In the 1920s and 1930s, Soho appeared in a handful of films like *Piccadilly* (E.A. Dupont, 1920) and the musical romantic comedy *Greek Street/Latin Love* (Sinclair Hill, 1930). However, although I briefly look to these films in Chapter 2 on immigrant communities, for the purposes of this introductory study of Soho in cinema, I prioritised films that contributed towards Soho’s postwar development beginning in 1948. The crime film *Noose* (Edmond T. Gréville, 1948) forms a bridge between the interwar and postwar years, and provides vital historical and social context for my later examination of Soho, as well as anticipating those chief themes mentioned in
subsequent 1950s and 1960s low-budget Soho films such as Street of Shadows (Richard Vernon, 1953), Soho Incident (Vernon Sewell, 1956), The Flesh is Weak (Don Chaffey, 1957), The Shakedown (John Lemont, 1960), Beat Girl (Edmond T. Gréville, 1960), Rag Doll (Lance Comfort, 1961), Too Hot to Handle (Terence Young, 1960) and The Small World of Sammy Lee (Ken Hughes, 1963). Larger budget films including the Rank Studio/Emeric Pressburger passion project Miracle in Soho (Julian Amyes, 1957) and the comedy Expresso Bongo (Val Guest, 1960), based on a successful stage musical, assisted in cementing Soho’s positioning at the national/global level as a space of commercial vice, bohemian youth and thriving cosmopolitanism. I conclude my examination of Soho films in 1963 because the desire for filmmakers to examine those previously outlined debates within cinema (and Soho) all but disappeared until the mid-1980s, where we see a return to examining Soho’s postwar past in films such as Absolute Beginners (Julien Temple, 1986) and the more recent The Look of Love (Michael Winterbottom, 2013) and Adrift in Soho (Pablo Behrens, 2019). In Chapters 9 and 10, I highlight the ways in which these films were produced as responses to the legacy of leading bohemian figures in the area such as the striptease entrepreneur Paul Raymond, who, due to the deployment of fierce marketing strategies, evolved into a leading contributor to the shifting arrangement of Soho’s sex industry into a more commercial, isolated product, reflecting the growth in permissive attitudes from the late 1950s onwards.

**Realism and Spectacle**

In this book I have taken a wholly interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon historical, cultural and urban studies to support my critical discussion and close analysis of twelve unique, primarily low-budget British films. My decision to look specifically at low-budget filmmaking resulted in some critical losses, particularly regarding the diversity of films and filmmakers that will be discussed. However, I do address the absence of Chinatown and other migrant communities in Chapter 2 on Soho’s bohemian-cosmopolitan spaces. It is clear that these films privilege particular representations of Soho over others. Nevertheless, in each of the ten following chapters, which are arranged largely chronologically but also, to some extent, thematically, I reappraise these majority ‘B’ films more rigorously and consider them in the unique context of Soho. I have taken a bolder approach to
structuring the book, and it is arguably full of intersecting tangents that, in many ways, imitate the labyrinth-like geography of Soho. Through case studies of these Soho-set films, I aim to discover the area’s links to London, which were more often treated by filmmakers as two conflicting, ambiguous modes of insiders versus outsiders.

This book introduces the area of Soho as a significant and relevant locus for cinema scholarship and appreciation. Melding realism with myth, produced under great technological and financial constraints, these films offer us new understandings of the postwar period and British filmmaking through the lens of Soho, a place with a historically mutable heritage. These distinct films also function as visual artefacts, with numerous sequences shot on location in the area (signalling changes in the film industry at large to favour realism over spectacle). I have strived to interrogate these films and the ‘views of the world which they promoted’, which ‘may well have obscured as much as they enlightened and obstructed as much as they initiated to the potential for social change and reconstruction’.21 Although these films privileged a particular representation of Soho, it is clear their shared cinematic language, which was unmistakably connected to Soho’s double signifier, a mode which I have defined in this book as the ‘cosmopolitan-bohemian’ identity.

Notes

5. Charlie Q.L. Xue’s *Hong Kong Architecture 1945–2015: From Colonial to Global* (2016) details this transformation further. Following the destructive Japanese occupation during the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War, refugees flooded the city which meant that: ‘By the end of 1946, the population had grown from 600,000 to 1.6 million people.’ The British Labour government’s plans to rebuild Hong Kong to support this ongoing flux of immigrants instigated the Colonial Development and Welfare Act in 1945, which invested $500,000 out of a total of £1 million allocated to support a ten-year welfare plan for the city. Led by Sir Patrick Abercrombie, the world-renowned Professor of Town Planning at University College London, who was also partly responsible for the Greater London Plan and the *County of London*
Plan, proposals for the redevelopment for the heavily bombed capital (Hong Kong was also bombed exponentially by Allied forces), visited Hong Kong in 1947 for thirty-seven days. After his visit, he then compiled a preliminary planning report that outlined a blueprint for the city: ‘Abercrombie had good ideas that included the establishment of a garden city, satellite towns and organic dispersion. These ideas had proved effective in his Greater London plan… and he looked forward to applying them to the Far East.’ Although the plan was ultimately ‘shelved’ due to the outbreak of the Korean War in the early 1950s, his proposals influenced later policies that were ultimately realised. See Charlie Q.L. Xue’s Hong Kong Architecture 1945–2015: From Colonial to Global (Springer Nature: Singapore, 2016), 4.

9. Ibid., 110.
10. Ibid., 122.
11. Ibid., 12.
12. Ibid., 23, 10.
13. Ibid., 12.
14. Ibid.
15. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, Cinema and the City Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 6.
17. Ibid., 410.
21. Ibid., 3.
CHAPTER 1

Tracking Shot
Soho Square to Wardour Street, London’s ‘Film Row’

*Hear them down in Soho Square, Dropping ‘h’s’ everywhere.*

*Man, you don’t advertise, you ain’t easy to find!*
—Soho Incident (Vernon Sewell, 1956)

**Soho Square and the Surrounding Streets**

In 1878, one author named Walter Thornbury proclaimed the geographical boundaries of Soho ‘impossible to define accurately’.1 Thornbury was neither the first nor the last author to emphasise Soho’s transforming borders. In his third volume for *Old and New London*, he described Soho’s geographical distribution in the period as ‘roughly … lying between St. Martin’s and St. Giles-in-the-Fields, Leicester Square and Oxford Street, but its limits on the western side are very vague’.2 Soho’s development, of course, would undergo ‘imaginative remapping … in the nineteenth century … as a parallelogram bounded by the heavily commercialised West End thoroughfares of Oxford Street to the north, Regent Street to the west, Charing Cross Road to the east, and Coventry Street and Leicester Square to the south’.3 But wedged neatly in-between Soho’s narrow, interlocking streets, there are pockets of bucolic respite to be found for the tourist, worker or wanderer. Located northeast of the centre of this parallelogram, below the shopping mecca of Oxford Street, and on the eastern border of Charing Cross Road is a popular garden called Soho Square, first built in 1681. The square was previously known as ‘King’s Square’, built in memory of the Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of King Charles II whose statue by Cauis Gabriel Cibber remains on dutiful watch in the square, placed in front of a mock-Tudor gardener’s
hut that was constructed to conceal an electricity substation and used during the Second World War as an air-raid shelter. The largest green area in Soho, besides Golden Square and St Anne’s Churchyard to the south, the square acts as a threshold to the southern part of Soho, Greek Street ‘the worst street in London’ and Frith Street, home to the historic coffee shop Bar Italia and Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club. The square also provided an accessible walking route north to Oxford Street via Soho Street. It became widely known as a ‘fashionable’ area for aristocratic families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to Mort, Soho Square also housed places of sexual entertainment for the upper class in the period, like the ‘Temple of Festivity’ at Carlisle House on the west side, ‘a fashionable venue for balls and masquerades, involving ‘indecency and mocking of solemn feelings and principles’. However, like the rest of Soho, it endured extensive redevelopment for various commercial purposes in the nineteenth century and beyond. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the square was immortalised in literature, as a location in Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities (1859) and as an ironic critique of working-class pronunciation in the lyrics of the satirical song ‘Why Can’t the English?’ in Lerner and Loewe’s stage musical My Fair Lady (1956).

In the early part of the twentieth century, Soho Square and the surrounding area became a popular address for creative industries. Wardour Street was even famously known as London’s ‘Film Row’ from the 1930s onwards for it housed several film production offices and editing studios. Soho Square continues to function as the site for several notable enterprises, such as the headquarters for the British censors, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), the Hollywood film studio Twentieth Century Fox, St Patrick’s Catholic Church, the French Protestant Church of London and the House of St Barnabas, a members-only club and arts charity.

In the immediate postwar period, Soho Square was also the locus for the strategic rebranding of Soho through a staged summer festival that first took place in 1955. It was first planned around the time of the Festival of Britain in 1951 and Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953, driven no doubt by the dubious media spotlight that was placed on the more disreputable areas of the metropole like Soho and the West End, highlighting an increase in crime and prostitution. Although Soho was aligned with a boisterous and celebrated diversity, it was simultaneously and rather notoriously known as an area rife with street prostitution, particularly during and after the war. The most notable visitor to
remark upon the overt display of sexual transactions on the streets of London was the American sexologist Alfred Kinsey. Accompanied by his wife Clara and an ‘assistant keeper of the British Library’, Kinsey toured the capital in 1955, ‘tracking across the dense network of narrow streets and cross routes that led north from Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square into Soho’. Kinsey was ‘astounded by the sheer amount of sexual activity’ particularly in the ‘red-light district of Soho’. When interviewed by Wolfenden’s committee, he declared he had never seen so much ‘prostitution … except in Havana’.

According to Stefan Slater, although ‘prostitution in Soho was reputedly as old as the area itself’, the popular press exploited the sex industry in a ‘sensational vein, regardless of empirical truth, in order to sell papers’. This resulted in a campaign directed by Soho’s commercial leaders that aimed to transform the area’s moral character, which, by this period, was cemented in the public imagination as one of transgression and vice. In many ways, as Mort states, this ‘cultural experiment’ diluted Soho’s foreign character into one that was more ‘consumer-led’ lines in an effort to promote the area as a concentrated locus of consumption – a district that would offer an unthreatening network of shopping, eating and family entertainment within a densely packed square mile.

In cinema, the square, surrounding streets and its topographical features are, unsurprisingly, a ubiquitous presence in postwar Soho films. Soho’s dense network of streets featured in most if not all films, although sections of the area were primarily reconstructed on studio lots, as in the case of Noose (1948), Street of Shadows (1953), The Flesh Is Weak (1957), Beat Girl (1960), Expresso Bongo (1960), The Shakedown (1960), Rag Doll (1961) and The Small World of Sammy Lee (1963). However, there was a real attempt made to balance the artificial reproductions of Soho by filming on location and later compositing the two types of shooting together in the final edit. Montage was also frequently used as a device to juxtapose the cosmopolitan aspects of Soho with the more lewd, bohemian nightlife economy, bombarding us with neon signage, imbibing patrons and other acts of hedonism in cubist-style arrangements. Regarding Soho Square specifically, in the opening sequence of Noose (1948), an anonymous priest is framed pinning a letter to a noticeboard that reveals Soho as its address before panning out to reveal the actual exterior of the House of St Barnabas. In the low-budget noir film Soho Incident (1956), the protagonist, Jim, a Canadian ex-soldier (Lee Patterson), goes in search of his army buddy in Soho. He swiftly becomes lost in the throng crowds spilling out of shops and bars in night-time Soho, looping around Greek
Street and Frith Street, before eventually finding his way north to a dilapidated building at ‘44 Soho Square’ (a fictional address) where a prostitute is soliciting customers outside.

St Patrick’s Church was unmistakably used as a model for the design of the fictional Roman Catholic church of St Anthony’s in Miracle in Soho (1957), which even deployed cross-promotion with the Soho fair (releasing the film in the same month as the 1957 event) in order for its studio, the Rank Organisation, to capitalise upon the film’s positive attitudes towards migration and ethnic diversity in the nation. This wholesome film also subtly suggests that street prostitution exists in the otherwise parochial neighbourhood of the film through the unnamed character of an independent young woman who lives alone and keeps night-time hours.

One of my main arguments in this book is that postwar filmmakers created a specific Soho iconography through the frequent inclusion of real-life locations such as Soho Square and the surrounding streets, particularly Wardour Street, which was once considered to be the headquarters of the British film industry. This setting, combined with specific technical flourishes like tracking shots or montage, attempted to imitate the titillation and excitement of nightlife culture, and succeeded in reproducing what the tabloids of the period purported as a

Figure 1.1. Jim’s late-night ramble in Soho. Still from Spin a Dark Web/Soho Incident (Vernon Sewell, 1956). DVD, Sony Pictures Choice Collection, 2012
disreputable, sin-ridden area. However, the unfixed nature of Soho’s function(s), particularly regarding its cosmopolitan past as a refuge for immigrants, makes this distinction more ambiguous, for above and adjacent to the seedy underbelly was a richly diverse community. Nevertheless, it would be the showcasing of the corruptible nature of Soho that became and has continued to be the predominant choice for filmmakers, who clearly believed that this biased expression of the area was the more commercially profitable due to its sensationalist nature.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of Soho’s historical significance within the film industry and the implication of its placement amongst other commercial avenues as a source of the archetypal depictions of ‘seedy’ or ‘low-life’ Soho. In the second section, I discuss the use of what I argue is the ubiquitous Soho tracking shot in greater detail, tracing its antecedents within literature, particularly travel guidebooks, which, in rare instances, also strived to depict Soho’s heterogeneity. In the third section, through film’s integration of Soho’s historical association with cultural tourism and its later alignment with the vice industries, we can clearly track the emergence of Soho’s future, on screen identity.

Wardour Street: An ‘ Unreal’ Space?

Marking the boundary between St Anne’s and St James’ parishes respectively, Wardour Street, previously known as Coleman Hedge Lane, evolved into one of the most popular commercial roads in Soho during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Situated in the centre of the square mile, it runs directly from Oxford Street in the north, London’s shopping locus, down south to Coventry Street, past the West End, London’s theatre district, just west of Leicester Square. The Survey of London notes that ‘in the last quarter of the 17th century it was the northern half of this lane’ that became known as ‘Old Soho’ and there was ‘evidence that hunting took place over the lands to the west of Wardour Street’.12 By the 1680s, it was renamed Wardour Street after Edward Wardour, a landowner, though the southern section retained its name Princes Street, referring to the parallel Rupert Street to the west of Wardour Street, which was named after Prince Rupert. By 1878, Wardour was extended to include Princes Street and the entire length of the lane from Oxford Street became ‘known by its present name’.13 In the late nineteenth century, as Judith Summer points out, the street had a
‘healthy trade in second-hand books and fake antiques … the name Wardour Street has become synonymous with things unreal’. In 1988, Harold Myers, former London bureau chief of Variety, recalled his time working in and around the area as an entertainment reporter in the 1950s:

> Remember Wardour Street? Between the two world wars it really was London’s film row, home to virtually every major distribution and exhibition company … It is a different story today, with only a couple of majors and a handful of independents … An overworked gag at the time had it that Wardour Street was the only one that was shady on both sides.

In 1927, the street had become the primary location for the headquarters of film production, postproduction facilities and film distribution companies. But the reasons behind its evolution to becoming the centre of London film production have rarely been discussed independently of individual histories of leading members within the British film industry. The most prominent figure to emerge during Wardour Street’s early transformation was American filmmaker Charles Urban. Ohio-born Urban was the ‘most important producer of films in Britain in the pre-1914 period [whose] greatest triumph came with the two-colour (red-green) Kinemacolor system, the world’s first natural colour film system in 1906’.

Shortly after emigrating to Britain in 1897, he worked as a manager to Edison concessionaries Maguire & Baucus. After building a reputable position as a producer and distributor of films in Britain, he established his own company in 1903 called ‘The Charles Urban Trading Company’. He was the first member of the film industry to relocate his business to Soho in 1908 to a building located at 89–91 Wardour Street. He renamed the building ‘Urbanora House’, and it has retained the name, although today it houses the ‘Las Vegas Casino and Arcade’.

Geoffrey Macnab has provided wonderful anecdotes about film impresarios working in Soho during the 1940s and 1950s in his biography of J. Arthur Rank, where renowned filmmaker David Lean wrote of ‘nerve-racking afternoons spent in Wardour Street viewing rooms’ and the ‘doyen of distributors’ C.M. Woolf once guiding his protégé Arthur J. Rank ‘through the dark vale of Wardour Street where there were rumoured to be “shadows on both sides”’. In 2017, British Pathé produced a short film entitled 8 Things Made Inside 103 Wardour Street for its online community. The film explored eight functions of the Pathé Building, located at
103 Wardour Street. The Pathé building was opened in 1910 and used for multitude of production purposes until 1970. This included the production of newsreels, film, television, music and radio. Despite retaining its original name, the building now houses luxury apartments.

Myers’ description of Wardour Street as once being ‘shady on both sides’ could easily be interpreted as a reference to street prostitution. However, as Richard Tames has suggested, it could also form part of a critique of the questionable ethics of the entertainment industry.20 During this period, Soho was also confirmed as the home to the headquarters of the British music industry. The world-renowned music publishers Novello & Co. built its headquarters Novello House at 152–160 Wardour Street in 1906. Today, Novello House remains in use for the music business as a retail branch for Yamaha Music. Additionally, Soho played host to a variety of night-time economies that sprang up during the mid-1920s and continued to flourish after the Second World War.21 In 1925, G.C. Wilson declared Soho a ‘mecca for the pleasure seeker’.22 In the decades that followed, ‘Soho’s bohemian character was changing under the impact of music-based cultures with their emphasis on youth … jazz and blues musicians and their audiences’.23 The notorious underground jazz clubs and private drinking dens that lined the street from the mid-1950s to the 1960s, such as the Flamingo Club at 33–37 Wardour Street and the Marquee Club at 90 Wardour Street, preserved Soho’s ‘reputation for transgressive nightlife [that] vastly expanded from restaurants and cafés to a handful of illicit bohemian dance clubs located in underground basements’.24 The Harvard business economist Michael Porter established the term ‘clustering’ in his seminal publication The Competitive Advantage of Nations (1990), for which he is perhaps most well-known. In 1998, Porter expanded upon his definition of clustering as a ‘geographically proximate group of interconnected companies and associated institutions in a particular field’.25 It is wholly unsurprising that the geographical clustering of film, music, television and other commercial night-time leisure/retail industries would exist and thrive in Soho.

The welcomed and unwelcomed presence of Hollywood marked the final elucidation of the Wardour Street ‘shady’ gag. Unlike nearby Dean Street, Wardour Street survived the London Blitz (1940–41), but Film Row had been fighting its own economic war since the mid-1920s, which saw quota regulations forced upon British exhibitors as a result of Hollywood domination at the box office.26 This battle with Hollywood generated the production of a series of low-budget films