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'.[1] 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.'[2] 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'.[3] 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'[4] (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.[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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'.[8] 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'.[9] She has also briefly remarked upon the fact that 'Soho [in British films and television] deserves a book of its own'.[10] 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'.[11] 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.[12] 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'.[13] 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'.[14]

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'.[15] 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'.[16] The mechanism of cinema similarly produces a cascade of 'onrushing impressions'.[17] Postwar urban studies by Jurgen Habermas and Siegfried Kracauer impacted scholarship of city and cinema through the practice of examining space and spatialisation.[18] 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'.[19] 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'.[20] 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

1. G.C. Wilson, *The Story of Soho* (Gloucester: British Publishing, 1925), 1.
2. Anon, 'Past Days in Soho', *Chambers' Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 19 June 1897, 399.
3. Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 204.
4. Judith Summers, *Soho: A History of London's Most Colourful Neighbourhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 1.
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.

6. See 'Introduction' in Pam Hirsch and Chris O'Rourke (eds), *London on Film: Screening Spaces* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.
7. See Charlotte Brunsdon, 'The Poignancy of Place: London and the Cinema', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 5(1) (2004), 59.
8. Charlotte Brunsdon, *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945* (London: BFI, 2007), 90.
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.
16. Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), in Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, edited and translated by K.H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950); Louis Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', *American Journal of Sociology* 44(1) (1938): 1–24; Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1955]), 217–52.
17. Ibid., 410.
18. See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), translated by Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Hotel Lobby', *Postcolonial Studies* 2(3) (1999): 289–97.
19. David Robinson, 'United Kingdom', in Alan Lovell (ed.), *Art of the Cinema in Ten European Countries* (Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe, 1967).
20. Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence*, 2nd edn (London: BFI, 2011).
21. Ibid., 3.