A VIOLENT ARCHAEOLOGY OF DREAMS: THE AESTHETICS OF CRIME IN AUSTERITY BRITAIN, c. 1944–1951

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Abstract

Alexandros Papadopoulos
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In the immediate post-Second World War period, London’s criminal cultures generated popular understandings of fantasy and cinematic escapism as a modern mode of life, a pleasure-seeking activity and a form of rationality. These narratives centred on increasingly visible but enigmatic genres of urban transgression: notably the phenomenon of spivery. Mixing petty crime, gambling and the black market with proletarian dandyism, urban waywardness and celebrity posturing, the cultural iconography of spivery was also associated with the deviant lifestyles of confidence tricksters, army deserters, good-time girls and mass murderers. Drawing on cinema, popular literature, courtroom drama, autobiography and psychiatry, this thesis explores how debates about the escapist mentalities of the spiv shaped the public discussions of crime as a socio-aesthetic practice. The central aim is to explore the cultural and symbolic associations between street-wise forms of deviant illusion and the cinematic representation of fantasising criminals in 1940s London.

The thesis reveals how contemporary historical actors and cultural institutions understood the imagination as a popular and contested form of knowledge about the self, social change and erotic life. The method interweaves intertextual analysis of a key cinematic subgenre of crime, ‘spiv films’, with a historical focus on two ‘true crime’ stories: the cleft chin murder (1944) and the serial killings carried out by John George Haigh (1944–45). Utilising the criminals’ self-confessions, trial transcripts, autobiography and popular journalism, these cases studies show how spivery was rooted in the experience and representation of everyday metropolitan life. The interdisciplinary examination of cinematic text and historical evidence emphasises how Hollywood aesthetics and indigenous national culture co-determined the public construction of 1940s crime as an embodiment of the contradictions of post-war British modernity.
Author’s Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

—Alexandros Papadopoulos
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Dedication

To the memory of my mother
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Introduction

These spivs are almost the counterpart of the small-time racketeers of New York, Chi, Los Angeles and Francisco. Many have seen fighting in Hitler’s war, and have gotten an unholy familiarity with lethal weapons, such as gats and knives. […] And their plans of campaign are usually made in phoney clubs, dives, hide-outs – or even in innocent looking cafes. The spiv womenfolk are also over-dressed, over cosmeticised [sic]. They use American slang, and consider themselves no small potatoes. One such doll, often to be seen in Smoky Sam’s dive off Greek Street, was known to all and sundry as Rosalie. […] As she sat at the corner table in Smoky’s Sam’s her eyes took in every detail of the set-up, like a wide-angle camera.


Stan dreamed that night that he had come away from the burgled house with pockets laden with diamonds; that he had exchanged a fistful of these sparklers for a slap-up Rolls-Royce and a wonderful suit of bright blue tweed with widely padded shoulders and a snappy waistline to the jacket. But just as he drove up to Rosalie’s house in all his finery, the car was beset by street-traders’ barrows, each barrow being pushed savagely at him by a man who had the face of Divvy Fish.


Published in 1949, Ben Sarto’s Soho Spiv was a crime fiction novel centreing on the rise and fall of a young burglar, Stan. The quotes highlight Sarto’s understanding of the phenomenon of spivery. Spivs are described as the British equivalent of small-time racketeers operating in large American cities, such as New York and Los Angeles. The Second World War, according to the writer, was a catalyst for the emergence of similar forms of criminal life in London. It shaped the violent careers of adventurous men and stimulated their propensity for crime, social disobedience and idleness. Stan, the central hero of Sarto’s novel, began his criminal career after he deserted from the army. Along with the war, the novel resoundingly associates spivery with a specific form of urban topography: ‘phoney clubs, dives, hide-outs – or even in innocent looking cafes’.¹

Located in Soho, these spaces stage the deviant practices of their habitués.

Underground rooms and concealed entrances leading to ‘small cobble-paved yards’ were suitable for those ‘visitors [who] wishing to leave during the suspiciously small hours of the morning, were able to take a quick look up and down the street before stepping out’. Merging criminality with social space, Sarto’s text underlines an idea of spivery as a form of socialisation, a method of self-presentation and a style of moving through a city of deviance, duplicity and danger. In his words:

(Stan, the spiv,) paraded the streets of spivland so that everybody could have a dekko at his splendour; then he dropped to saloon bars [...] to look round at any folk who might be there, and to be looked at himself.

The extract foregrounds a way of looking and being looked at, a flâneur’s performance of vanity, and, above all, an art of making a spectacle of the self. In Sarto’s novel this type of presentation applies to both men and women. A filmic metaphor is used to dramatise a spiv woman’s way of surveying the social space of a café: ‘Rosalie’s eyes,’ Sarto writes, ‘took in every detail of the set-up, like a wide-angle camera.’ The cultural forces of cinema and America (‘camera’ ‘slang’) mark Rosalie’s dubious techniques of looking and being looked at. Filtered through this iconography, the engagement with the stimulations of city life is transmuted into a form a spectatorship.

In the second quote from Sarto’s novel, a criminal act (a burglary) produces a glamorous fantasy. Stan imagines a fabulous car, a ‘Rolls-Royce’, and a clothing outfit that recalls the flamboyant self-stylisation of 1940s spivs: ‘the wonderful suit of bright

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2 Ibid., p. 7.
3 Ibid., p. 74.
4 Ibid., p. 7.
5 Ibid., p. 6.
blue tweed with widely padded shoulders and a snappy waistline to the jacket’. When street traders intrude into the dream scene, the fantasy of self-grandeur is rapidly turned to a nightmare. The streetwise figures attack the dreaming spiv. Portrayed in this way, London stages and haunts the ambitions of the anti-hero.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how ideas of fantasy and escapism were instrumental in constructing the public debates about crime in Britain during the 1940s. Popular understandings of crime as a form of socio-aesthetic practice – defined as the aesthetics of crime – are systematically examined through a historically specific dialogue between the transgressive lifestyles and their cinematic and mass-media representations. The objective is to show how the personas of spivs, confidence tricksters, good-time girls, army deserters and mass murderers, and the sensational dramatisation of their anti-social and psychological life, shaped public ideas and images of the criminals as illusionists, artists and cinematic heroes.

Focusing on popular literature, crime cinema, expert opinion and a series of notorious murder stories, the thesis emphasises how a form of urban transgression, officially characterised as spivery, generated competing but also homologous understandings of crime as a type of psychic disorder and cinematic fantasy. The public portrayal of spivs encompassed a wide variety of criminal practices, deviant forms of city life and social strategies of self-presentation. These often overlapped with the activities of the confidence trickster – the so-called ‘illusionist’ and ‘magician’ of metropolitan crime.

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6 Ibid., p. 18.
Reworking 1930s forms of criminality, these lifestyles were discussed and dramatised in autobiographies, the tabloid press, as well as in the fields of sociology and psychiatry (Chapter 1).

In particular, this thesis highlights the cinematic dimension of these narratives, analysing the dialogue between American and British versions of criminality. Examining the production, reception and stylistic organisation of a sub-genre of British crime films known as ‘spiv films’, I show how the representation of the spiv’s imagination on screen, while endorsing the dramatic conventions of America gangster cinema, produced a specifically national version of criminal stardom. Highlighting the commonalities between the historical and cinematic meanings of spivery, I explore how the escapist criminal was also associated with the public image of good-time girls, wayward and young women who sought erotic and cinematic excitement in the companion of American GIs and petty criminals.

These characteristics were epitomised in the public profile of Elizabeth Marina Jones, the protagonist of the widely publicised Cleft chin murder (1944–45). The cultural encounters between the dandyism of the spivs, the social skills of the confidence tricksters and the re-enactment of cinematic stardom were exemplified in the scandalous story of John George Haigh (1949), the so-called acid bath killer. Mixing street-wise styles of deviance, interclass sociability and cultural masquerade, Haigh’s public image combined a version of the English gentleman with the celebrity posture of a Hollywood star. In all these cases, criminal imagination, conceived variously as a motivational force, a hedonistic drive and a mode of self-dramatisation was seen to conflate devious scandal and horror with public histories of selfhood. Narrated in the
language of self-confession, courtroom drama, psychiatry, photography and cinema, these episodes rehearsed, developed and embedded in the post-war moment long-held perceptions of crime as an idiosyncratic fusion of metropolitan experience, mass-media spectacle and vanity.

Prior to the post-war moment, the idea of the fantasist and narcissist criminal was deeply rooted in a wide repertoire of Victorian narratives of crime. The dandified subcultures of hooligans; the cause célèbre of the aesthete anti-hero Oscar Wilde and delusional psychopaths such as the protagonist of the McNaughton case laid down a widely recognisable historical heritage of criminal imagination. Deviant narcissists like Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* and mad scientists as represented in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) contributed towards an aesthetic understanding of crime as a riddle of the psyche.\(^8\)

While acknowledging the stylistic legacy from the nineteenth century, this project emphasises how the post-Second World War period constructed historically specific versions of crime and social transgression. This was a period in which the cinema as a dominant medium of communication and entertainment and a popular form of culture generated intense debate about the Americanisation of public life. Furthermore, it was a moment of material austerity and post-war reconstruction, when welfare ideals and material privations co-existed. Continuing restrictions on the production and

consumption of goods shaped popular experience across the period from 1945 to 1951. The contemporary spectacle of crime was grounded in these historical conditions.

The so-called spiv cycle of British crime films dramatised distinctive transgressive features of the wartime and post-war moment, especially the black market, street dandyism and metropolitan nightlife. The narrative and stylistic economy of these films adapted key conventions of Hollywood cinema. The rise and fall of the American gangster was now recast as the rise and fall of the aspirations, desires and dreams of the British spiv. A renowned film in the cycle, Good-Time Girl (David MacDonald, 1947), was based on the most sensational crime scandal of 1944, the cleft chin murder. Before the release of the film, courtroom discourse and popular journalism established the pivotal importance of cinematic stardom in the case. Central to all these narratives was the presentation of American fiction as a dynamic ingredient in the construction of British criminal characteristics.

In 1949 the mass media focused on John George Haigh, a confidence trickster turned mass murderer. Along with other contemporary serial killers, notably Neville Heath and John Christie, whose psychological lives were seen to underpin their mass-media profiles, the concept of escapism was of central importance in Haigh’s criminal career. In addition to confessing that his killings were driven by religious dreams, he imagined and sometimes identified himself variously as an artist, an inventor, a pilot, a businessman, a man-about-town, a celebrity, a politician and a film star. On account of the exhibitionistic media treatment of his dream life, Haigh figured as the post-war fantasist criminal par excellence.
All these episodes of anti-social activity fused fiction with true crime. Cultural theorists and historians have increasingly drawn attention to the relationships between the popular experience and fictional narratives. Scholars of sexuality and London history such as Judith Walkowitz, Matt Cook, Matt Houlbrook, Chris Waters and Frank Mort, have stressed that, from the late Victorian period through to the post-war moment, tabloid accounts of urban sex and danger drew heavily on the cultural resources of popular literature. This thesis aims to show how ideas of criminal escapism shaped and were shaped by the language of the tabloid press, fiction and above all the cinema.

As Michael Saler has pointed out, alongside the popular interpolations of fiction and truth, recent trends in historiography and cultural theory have set out to re-interrogate and revise the embattled position of imagination within the socio-cultural and artistic field of industrial and post-industrial modernity. In nineteenth and twentieth century magic, mesmerism and mass culture dynamically redrew the boundaries between the rational and the irrational. Saler has pointed out how forms of criminal representation and their reception, such as crime and detective fiction, fantasy novels and supernatural horror, attested to the dynamic re-emergence of fantasy within those same symbolic

11 Ibid.
territories that sociological schools have tended to define as exemplars of a ‘disenchanted’, unimaginative modernity (bureaucracy, industrialisation, consumerism).

In response to the methodological debates about the modern meanings and mediums of fantasy, this thesis explores how discourses of criminality mixed, counterpoised and reconciled imagination and rationality. How could a confidence trickster’s or mass murderer’s masterful command of reason engage with daydreaming, mysticism and illusion? Under what conditions could an inventor, counterfeiter and playboy like John Haigh relate to vampirism, atavism and religious poetry? To answer these questions, the thesis explores how historically specific versions of criminal escapism were filtered through a heterogeneous but interrelated assemblage of print and visual sources as well as more conventional public debates. My reading of cinematic, journalistic and autobiographical narratives of spivery emphasises how such cultural texts generated contested evaluations of fantasy, emotion and reasoning. I investigate how multiple social actors spoke of escapism as a daily routine, a hedonistic form of spectatorship and a psychiatric type of pathology. By bridging discourses of rationality, as exemplified in sociology, journalism and psychiatry, with the world of cinematic spectacles, streetwise tricks and popular fiction, my research seeks to integrate the binary and dialectical oppositions between rationality and imagination.

This link between criminality and magic, crystallised by the figure of the confidence trickster, draws to attention to the psychological life of both the criminals and their lives.

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victims. The aim here is to highlight the discursive and iconographic trends that dramatised the tensions arising between deviance and illusion. My focus is on the idea of crime as a deceptive mechanism, a thrilling spectacle of ordinary life which is shown to cast its spell deep into the inner life of respectable and unrespectable social actors in London during the 1940s. This line of enquiry seeks to examine under what conditions criminals were understood to deceive their own fantasies, while deceiving the fantasies of their victims and social audiences, thereby coupling a charismatic reasoning ability and sharp social reflexes with a covert yet overwhelming propensity for delusional and irrational impulses. In this respect, the visual and textual representations of the criminal imagination are studied as charged records of social mentalities.

Jacques Le Goff has argued that a history of mentalities should signal ‘the meeting point between the individual and the collective, the long term and the everyday, the unconscious and the intentional, the structural and the conjectural, the marginal and the general’. Following Le Goff, the thesis examines criminal deviance as a point of intersection between conflicting social meanings of selfhood. Spivs, confidence tricksters, deserters, good-time girls and mass murderers in post-war London moved between the social terrains of normality and marginality. Their careers echoed typical and atypical forms of cultural practice and representation. They were described as self-conscious social actors but also unconscious victims of social conditions – notably war, urban life, Americanisation, cinematic spectatorship and regressive Victorianism.

Le Goff has pointed out that the first stage in constructing a history of mentalities involves ‘the identification of different strata and fragments of “archaeo-civilisation” or “archaeo-psychology”’. My thesis reads the post-war ideas about fantasy as a dialogue between long-term categories of meaning (national character, gender, morality) and symbols of everyday, ephemeral mass culture.\textsuperscript{14} The second stage of this type of Le Goffian history directs the researcher to determine the ‘psychic systems of organisation’ under which these meanings ‘are ordered’. Following this approach, this thesis analyses the rhetorical tropes and narrative conventions (psychiatry, autobiography, cinema) used to describe how the actors understood and internalised the psychosocial meanings of their actions.\textsuperscript{15}

Alongside the study of criminal fantasy as a site of tension between imagination and rationality, my approach explores how the popular negotiation of crime raises a number of related questions about the meanings and the forms of the aesthetics of crime. Is it possible to read the mental activities of these deviant actors as aesthetic practices? Do their self-dramatisation and self-display practices, as they were mediated through forms of mass culture, amount to a social expression and affirmation of a conceptual ideal of aesthetic pleasure, a pleasure anchored in the activities of the imagination rather than in the actual, representational image of the world? How did the cultural paradigm of fantasising criminals effect the historical meaning of aesthetic experience; especially in relation to the division between high and low, mass and elite? In what ways was art understood a form of fantasy with resonances outside the confines of the art world?

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
To answer these types of questions, I show how spivery and the confidence trick was represented not only as an illusionistic practice of street life but also as a public practice of self-presentation, an art of making a spectacle out of the self. How did proletarian dandies transform their stories into sensational narratives? In what ways did popular culture portray the confidence trickster as an artist? Why was a cinematic spiv described as an ‘artist without art’? How did the interplay of Hollywood conventions and London culture link the aesthetics of crime with the activities of the imagination? Were these schemes exclusively cinematic or did they echo wider, national understandings of criminality as a metropolitan art of illusion, deception and disorientation? In what terms did the criminals present and discuss themselves as artists, celebrities and stars?

On this account, the case studies of crime covered in this thesis are not approached as direct and uncomplicated records of social experience. The aim is not simply to write a history of crime through its representations or to develop an anthropological analysis of transgression based on the categories of sexuality, class and national identity. My central question is: in what ways did the idea of escapism transform the experience of crime into a technology of spectacular self-presentation, into ways of speaking about and projecting the self, and most notably making the self cinematic? The aesthetics of crime is thus approached as one episode in a yet unwritten history of escapism, conceived as a daily and visual form of representation. My aim is not to read the social imagination as an episode in the history of crime but to read crime as a key category in the socio-aesthetic and cinematic history of the imagination in post-war Britain.

Social scientists have increasingly understood the imagination as a constituent element in the formation of collective identities such as class, gender and nationality. Benedict
Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ sketched out a relationship between national subjectivities and the emergence of distinctively modern cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{16} While this thesis also draws attention to the institutions of culture, especially 1940s British cinema, courtroom and the press, it studies them less as forms of collective imagination than as generators of significant ideas about the imagination. In this sense, the social and cultural commentaries on fantasy are approached as public idioms of truth; popular ways of understanding reality through the decoding of the mysteries of the psyche. In short, the emphasis here is on the cultural popularisation of discursive and visual systems of knowledge focusing on human interiority: how can the inner self become a valid and public source of truth?  

The idea of selfhood as a key source of contested social meaning is now at the heart of an interdisciplinary re-evaluation of post-war Britain. Historians of sexuality and London life have recently drawn attention to a specific combination of official discourses, scandalous events and urban spaces as instrumental in the circulation of meanings about morality, desire and selfhood. Challenging progressive accounts of the post-war cultural and sexual liberalisation of British society, Frank Mort has shown how public debates about pathological forms of urban hedonism (homosexuality, prostitution) were highly instrumental not only in widely disseminating contested discourses of the self but also in exposing the persistence of older frameworks of self-understanding, especially those derived from class-based forms of metropolitan culture.\textsuperscript{17} Mort maintained that any effort to understand the shifting psychological,

sexual or moral co-determinants of self-identity would remain incomplete if treated separately from the social spaces staging these changes. 18

Drawing on this body of scholarship, the thesis explores the significance of the metropolitan space in the post-war representation of the spiv as a psychologically and sexually disturbed persona. I show how psychiatry, sociology and the spivs’ own voice dissected the urban space not simply as a passive background but as an active ingredient in the forms and processes of criminal imagination and cultural masquerade. Cinematic heroes like Harry Fabian, men-about-town like John Haigh and good-time girls like Elizabeth Jones bridged both traditional and modern images of the British capital and low and high forms of culture. These escapist visions of city life shaped the emotional and erotic experience of men and women, contrasting and intermingling mobile and domestic versions of femininity and masculinity.

Key manifestations of these cultural processes were the men and women who were called to publicly explain the terms under which they participated and made sense of that world. Their testimonies mixed idiosyncratic personal experience with new forms of intellectual reasoning. Significant examples of this trend were the sexually transgressive actors, the homosexual men. In 1954 Peter Wildeblood, the diplomatic correspondent of the Daily Mail, was convicted and imprisoned for acts of indecency with two airmen. Waters has shown how Wildeblood’s public authorship of selfhood embodied key cultural markers of the post-war intellectual climate. 19 During this period,

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18 Ibid.
Waters has noted, the tabloid journalists’ reactivation of sensational tropes of moral panic about sexuality was countered by an alliance of bourgeois intellectuals, mostly notably Freudian-led psychologists who sought in psychoanalysis a means of rationalising, medicalising and modernising both established and populist versions of pathology.

My thesis emphasises how analogous discursive trends framed the public understanding of criminal escapism as an urban and psychological phenomenon. Psychology and psychiatry competed with the tabloid press in the depiction of spivery as an alarming social and metropolitan problem during the 1940s. As Waters has noted, the research horizons of the psychologists were not limited to deviant forms of sexuality. Their reformist imperatives expanded into the field of juvenile delinquency and criminality, pointing towards an interrelated nexus of social problems and urban pathologies. The tabloid press, moral purity campaigns, the cinema and popular literature exposed and described these waves of transgression as an insidious side effect of the war. The thesis engages with these exposés to show how the cultural atmosphere of wartime and post-war London shaped unusual associations between social dislocation, erotic desire and the criminal imagination.

The post-war obsession with the self was not an uncomplicated marker of cultural progress. The avowedly modern disciplines of the psyche and the reformative discourses of social reconstruction encompassed a complex negotiation of Victorian...
values. Expanding on this logic, Richard Hornsey has discussed the contrast between
the imperatives of post-war town planning and the transgressive urban lifestyles of the
queer and the spiv. Developing the recent arguments of queer and urban historians
such as Mort, Matt Houlbrook and Waters, Hornsey focused on the conflict between
the ideological imperatives of London’s post-war reconstruction in London and more
unruly accounts of the city and its key social actors. His approach draws attention to a
new category of public intellectual, the town planner, most strongly exemplified by
Patrick Abercrombie, the main contributor to the County of London Plan (1943) and the
author of the Greater London Plan (1944), who came to play an instrumental role in the
conceptual equation of social pathology with metropolitan space. Participating in a
broader ideological drive towards the modernisation of civic life, this spatial rhetoric of
governance marked a turning point in the recent epistemological interrogations of the
idea of selfhood as an object of historical and aesthetic inquiry. My thesis argues that
cinematic, journalistic and autobiographical accounts of spivery complicate what
Hornsey has described as a binary conflict between the prescriptive moral paradigm of
London life epitomised by Abercrombie and the unregulated existence of the spiv. In
the self-confessions of murderers, contemporary cinema and spiv autobiographies, the

6, 224–5. For the cinematic dimensions of this discourse, see: Gold R. John and
Ward V. Stephen, “We’re going to do it right this time”: Cinematic
Representations of Urban Planning and the British New Towns, 1939 to 1951’, in
Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zohn, eds, Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A
Geography of Film (London, 1994), pp. 230–257; Nicholas Bulloch, ‘Imagining the
Post-War World: Architecture, Reconstruction and the British Documentary Film
by Francois Penz and Maureen Thomas (London, 1997) 45–89; John R. Gold. and
Stephen V. Ward, Of Plans and Planners: Documentary Film and the Challenge of
the Urban Future, 1935–52’, in David B Clarke, ed., The Cinematic City (London,
1997), pp. 59–82; Leo Enticknap, ‘Post-War Urban Redevelopment, the British Film
Industry, and the Way We Live’, in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzaurice, eds, Cinema and
University of Exeter, 1999.
criminal imagination was not represented as an exclusively marginal or masculine episode of city life. It was complexly integrated into the social and spatial field of ordinariness and family life.

Set against the planned, rationalised and reformist reconstruction of city life, Hornsey has read the spiv and queer lifestyles as a series of disruptive cultural performances. Rituals of strolling and cruising in the city projected strategies for masking and fulfilling highly individualised forms of desire. Most importantly, they shaped a set of discursive, visual and material enunciations of exhibitionism, unruliness and excess. Taken together, these thematic and methodological approaches and, most importantly, the symbolic imagery of social disruption and disobedience inform this thesis’ effort to historically ground and emphasise how public meanings of criminal imagination produced, visualised and contested post-war ideas of selfhood. In contrast to Hornsey, however, my account stresses that the ‘amorphous’ concept of the spiv was not simply homologous with an unruly sexualisation of modern space. It was instrumental in a broader psychologisation of metropolitan life. The stories told about spivs in the press, literature and cinema, and, most importantly, the stories told by spivs themselves, in their forms of street-life representation, sensational autobiography and cinematic posturing, disseminated popular vocabularies of the imagination; that is to say, popular perceptions of social experience as an episode of the psyche.

Spiv lifestyles, as exemplified in the career of notorious criminals like Haigh, gave rise to self-reflective representations of fantasy as popular forms of knowledge and self-understanding. Imagination was treated here as the subject matter of the imagination; cinema speaking about the cinematic energies of daily life, and escapist culture about the
escapist impulses of ordinariness. While cultural historians and film theorists have often explored the imagination as a tool in the study of social and cultural homogenisation (national, gender, social class), this project focuses on the imagination as a public form of knowledge, and one that challenged normative notions of identity: 22 What could be popularly understood as ‘imagination’ with regard to national identity and cinematic spectatorship when a good-time girl posed interchangeably as an aspiring fighter against Germany and a cinematic gun moll? Throughout the thesis criminal and cinematic manifestations of escapism emerged as disruptive forms of self-narration and as complex and controversial ways of constructing the self. In this respect, the central question of this thesis is: what forms of popular language could discuss subjectivity as an illusionistic mode of experience?

Michel Foucault, in one of his later writings, argued that the history of the self should be replaced by a history of self-aesthetics. 23 His neologism pointed towards a psychological and self-presentational exercise, one that, as he argued, would allow the self to oscillate between different discursive paradigms. Foucault’s aesthetic reappraisal of agency was based on the Baudelairean conception of dandyism. The dandy’s poetic capacity to continuously transform temporal configurations of modernity (fashion, beauty and style) into unpredictable sources of meaning signalled the modern subject’s capacity to expose and undermine the temporality of dominant social codes of truth, morality and knowledge.

22 For cultural histories drawing on imagination see: Graham Drawson, Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and Imagining Masculinities (London/New York, 1994), Daniel Bivona and Roger B. Henkle, The Imagination of Class: Masculinity and the Victorian Urban Poor (Columbus, Ohio, 2006).

An analogous association between self-aesthetics, as a dandified practice of self-display, and a continuous reframing of social meaning shaped the cultural imagery of crime in post-war Britain. Criminal dandies and men-about-town, such as George Heath and John Haigh, challenged fixed categories of self-identity. They variously posed as national heroes, entrepreneurs, conservatives, bohemians, visionaries, film stars and celebrities. Their self-image unleashed a chaotic masquerade of morality, professional identity and social class. In the face of dominant ideals of post-war Britain (welfare citizenship, social harmony, reformist planning), they generated in their lifestyles highly transgressive versions of social selfhood.

Chapter 1: The Phantasmagorical Enigma of Spivery: Criminal Illusion in the Age of Austerity, sets out to show how the idea of spivery played a catalytic role in post-war understandings of criminality as a form of escapist disorder. Combining proletarian dandyism, black marketeering, gangsterism, gambling and confidence tricks, the figure of the spiv attracted widespread attention during the summer of 1947. Popular culture conducted an extensive investigation of the spiv’s persona, in the context of London’s metropolitan culture. The chapter’s attention to political, financial and cultural features of this immediate post-war moment provides a deep context for spivery. Investigating the propaganda strategies and the general socio-economic agenda of the Attlee government, the chapter excavates the shifting meanings of criminality in this period. My emphasis on the historical and ideological background shows how official narratives were unable to decisively define the constituent elements of spivery. The central question posed here is: what impelled a number of public commentators, notably politicians, journalists and the metropolitan police to discuss the spivs’ transgressive culture not as a fixed set of criminal practices but as a malignant type of social temperament and moral disorder?
Alongside this emphasis on official discourse, a full examination of the press highlights a wider body of popular sources, voices from below and autobiographical narratives. A focused reading of two literary sources from the 1930s, John Worby’s *The Other Half: Autobiography of a Spiv* (1937) and *Spiv’s Progress* (1939), explores the semantic and aesthetic treatment of spivery in popular culture during the inter-war years. Worby’s novels show how, as early as the 1930s, spivery blended a variety of forms of urban transgression – confidence tricks, prostitution, homosexuality, Americanisation and the metropolitan underground – with the cultural imagery of wayward mobility, self-disguise and sensational publicity. A comparative analysis of post-war journalistic, sociological and psychiatric texts reveals how Worby’s main way of understanding the spiv’s aesthetics was developed and reframed in the changed conditions of the 1940s.

The central questions raised in the first chapter set the overall research strategy of the whole thesis, namely, under what historical and aesthetic conditions did street-wise forms of self-presentation emerge as a publicly debated discourse on selfhood, desire and the imagination in 1940s Britain? What was the symbolic importance of city life and material culture in these renderings of criminality and psychic disorder? How did these representations engage with the cultural climate in Britain during the post-war austerity period? Central to my research here is an effort to trace the links between different disciplinary discourses and mediums of representation, especially the ways in which the popular culture discuss, imagine and present the spiv as a deviant illusionist.

Chapter 2: Criminal Escapism and National Character in British Cinema and Society, pursues this line of interrogation in more detail, by exploring the idea of criminal escapism within the aesthetic territory of the cinema. The chapter focuses on the
iconography, critical reception and contextual background of Jules Dassin’s renowned American–British spiv film *Night and the City* (1950). Centring on the anti-social metropolitan life of a spiv anti-hero, Harry Fabian, Dassin’s film at once reproduced and transgressed the dramatic conventions of the Hollywood gangster film. A focused textual analysis of criminality as portrayed in Melvyn Le Roy’s archetypal gangster film *Little Caesar* (1931) highlights the narrative constituents of this recognisably Hollywood form of transgressive subjectivity. While noting the commonalities between the 1930s American cinematic paradigm and the 1940s popular versions of spiv aesthetics, the chapter explores the impact of Dassin’s film in the specific cultural context of post-war Britain. The critical reception of *Night and the City* as an American misreading of British criminal mentality and London life is set against a wealth of cinematic and extra-cinematic evidence. The main aim here is to re-think how the figure of the spiv embodied the cultural conflict between American cinema and London criminality.

Overall, the chapter expands on the idea of criminal aesthetics as a dialogue between a way of life and a mode of representation, as well as a metropolitan space and a stage for the imagination.

Released in 1950, Dassin’s film was the last of a group of films centred on spiv aesthetics. Chapter 3: Self-reflexivity and National Temperament in 1940s British Crime Films, examines the visual framing of spivery as an escapist mode of living in this wider body of British films. A close textual and inter-textual analysis of *Noose* (Edmond Gréville, 1948), *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944), *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950), *No Way Back* (Stefan Osiecki, 1948) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hammer, 1947) develops my systematic reading of the cinematic genre as a discourse on criminal fantasy. The narrative, material and spatial dynamics of spiv films promoted a popular and visual understanding of imagination as a constituent yet unsettling force.
within a symbolic turmoil of social, national and gendered identities. In this light, the idea of criminal aesthetics as an escapist mode of living is critically re-examined. Erotic, domestic and daily networks of socialisation redraw the spatial, emotional and cinematic framing of crime. Merging Hollywood conventions with a national style of British cinema, spiv films also registered wider understandings of contemporary criminality, erotic imagination and urban life.

In Chapter 4: The Cleft chin Murder: Cinematic Escapism and Wayward Femininity, the gendered, cinematic and national features of criminal escapism are further examined via a sensational murder story that claimed national public attention at the end of the war. In 1944–5, two violent flâneurs, Marina Jones, a self-professed good-time girl, and Karl Hulten, an American army deserter, were the protagonists in a sensational murder case, the cleft chin murder. The criminal lifestyle of the young offenders echoed the inter-war definition of spivery, especially as a style of moving across the city, an art of making a spectacle of the self, and an irresistible urge for excitement. A close reading of the antiheroes’ self-confessions, the courtroom drama of the murder trial itself, tabloid coverage, true-crime literature and letters sent to the Metropolitan Police reveal how associations between criminal escapism and cinematic spectatorship shaped public understandings of the cleft chin murder. In particular, definitions of criminality and metropolitan experience meshed uneasily with contemporary images of American culture and Hollywood. The treatment of the personas of the good-time girl, gun moll and Chicago gangster in the case reconfigured the boundaries between cinema and street culture.
The defendants in the cleft chin case employed the idea of fantasy as a form of self-defence in the courtroom. This was taken up and expanded in fictional and tabloid journalism, which grounded the murder drama in debates about national culture. The strong associations made between disruptive forms of escapism and the Americanisation of British culture were a central point of concern for most contemporary commentators. My approach reads the social impact of the cleft chin story as a turning point in national understandings of youth culture, proletarian dandyism and cinematic escapism. The impact of Hollywood stardom was not the only ingredient in contemporary representation of criminality as a side effect of fantasy life. As the following chapter shows, one notorious protagonist in the post-war spectacle of mass murder registered a complex relationship with both English national temperament and mass media spectacles of modernity.

Chapter 5: The Acid Bath Murder: The Confidence Trick and Escapism in Austerity Britain, examines the highly publicised story of John George Haigh, the so-called acid bath murderer. Centreing on the career of a 1930s confidence trickster turned 1940s black marketeer and mass murderer, the chapter shows how Haigh’s macabre story drew together many of the historical and representational trends shaping the idea of criminal aesthetics as explored in the previous chapters. It explores how Haigh combined the dandyism of the spiv with the wizardry of the confidence trickster and the psycho-pathology of the mass murderer. I seek to emphasise how Haigh’s sensational story reproduced but also transgressed the iconographic, narrative and spatial conventions of spiv films. The final part of the thesis demonstrates Haigh’s paradigmatic importance in the post-war understanding of transgression as a pathological form of spectatorship and fantasy.
The chapter also reveals how a horror story was transformed into a discourse about the criminal psyche. The multiple psychiatric framings of the case, in and out of the courtroom, demonstrate how the scientific rewriting of murder paralleled post-war reformist accounts of pathological masculinities in psychiatry and psychology. In contrast, the tabloid coverage of the case draws attention not only to traditional popular representations of the post-war metropolis as a place of danger but also to Haigh’s celebrity performance. The murderer’s tabloid and literary autobiography, his photographic posturing and his overall attitude towards publicity are investigated as key determinants in the formation of an aesthetic of crime. The aim here is to show how this notorious criminal case was represented as a set of psychological riddles and visual tricks, which were themselves grounded in cinematic and celebrity culture.

Overall the thesis explores how multiple narratives of social transgression constructed an aesthetics of crime in Britain during the late 1940s. Filtered through cinematic representation, intellectual debate and autobiographical testimony, highly publicised forms of criminal imagination are investigated as significant records of post-war ideas about selfhood, desire and social identity. The spivs’ version of escapism is studied as a historically and nationally specific idiom of rationality, a metropolitan way of life and a form of erotic pleasure. The first chapter introduces the exploration of the 1940s relationship between crime and escapism, by addressing official discourses and autobiographical voices. Why did these sources discuss spivery as an ‘undefined’ social problem?
Chapter 1. The Phantasmagoric Enigma of Spivery: Criminal Illusion in the Age of Austerity

For this Government of planners the unplanned existence of the Spiv (unplanned that is for the existing requirements of Capitalism) becomes at least a little irksome. [...] From a slang term of doubtful pedigree it is on its way to an assured place in the English Dictionary. Henceforth it will be synonymous with idler, drone and parasite. [...] As a definition it will obscure rather than enlighten. Its emphasis will be on those who live by their wits and doubtful practices [...] All of which might suggest that there is a form of intellectual Spivery in addition to a social one. Concluding we may repeat – what is a spiv?


Young people to-day were [sic] subjected to influences unknown to their grandfathers – namely gangster films, black market activities, cheap thrillers, and the like. “Spectatoritis” – the disease of people who liked [sic] looking at things instead of doing things – was [sic] widespread. There was [sic] a reluctance to work hard.

—Field Marshal Lord Montgomery, ‘National Trust for Youth: Lord Montgomery’s Suggestion’, The Times, 26 October 1948, p. 2.

In the words of Lord Montgomery, as reproduced in The Times, a new ‘disease’ cast its shadow on the young generation during the immediate post-war period. His neologism, ‘Spectatoritis’, called attention to a new type of mental disorder, one that equated living with looking. Montgomery relegated this state of being to an unprecedented assemblage of cultural stimulants drawn from the American visual spectacle of crime, adding to his definition of ‘not doing’ the phrase ‘a reluctance to work hard’. This equation between idleness and social pathology, while reworking Victorian values, addressed an explicitly modern social problem. The vocabulary of moral danger was not exclusively predicated on the decline of a work ethic or simply a paralysis in the face of the allure of America; it invoked a much more alarming and widely recognisable phenomenon of anti-social behaviour. Rather than a mere state of continuous spectatorship, Montgomery’s
emphatic coupling of idleness and spectacular violence echoed a highly publicised association between the impulses of spectatorship and an extensively disputed form of social transgression, one that merged visual escapism with the world of the black market, cheap glamour and the metropolitan underworld.

In the immediate post-war years, ‘gangster films’ and ‘cheap thrillers’ were not mere symbols of escapism; they were marking modes of self-fashioning for a national type of dandified transgressor. Brought to public attention in a series of newspaper articles and criminal episodes that erupted in the summer months of 1947, as well as in a contemporary film series, the sensational columns of the press, true-crime literature, lifestyle magazines, courtroom dramas, murder cases and political debates, the spiv and his female companion, the ‘spivette’ or ‘good-time girl’, represented a form of urban unruliness that emulated the spectacle of Hollywood gangster cinema.¹ As Donald Thomas has suggestively pointed out, Billy Hill, a leading spiv persona of the 1940s, ‘was said to take pride in resembling Humphrey Bogart’.² Robert Murphy has stressed that the spiv’s obsession with Hollywood was not limited to exceptional criminal figures:


² Donald Thomas, Villain’s Paradise: Britain’s Underworld from the Spivs to the Krays (London, 2005), p. 149.
by the forties the underworld began to follow the American gangster film: Eddie Ramo, hit man for the Kings Cross gang, adopted George Raft’s black shirt and white tie and affected an American accent; Carl Brisson, protections racketeer, borrowed his name and style and dress from the Danish boxer who starred in Hitchcock’s The Ring and then went on to Hollywood.³

The cinematic stylisation of the metropolitan underworld of the 1940s did not entail a concrete cultural style. While mainly associated with the semi-illegal activities of the black market, the spivs’ repertoire of deviance, style and urban habitat was quite diffuse, variant and mobile. One aspect of its iconography recalled a type of urban folklore, such as the barrow boys, wide boys and costermongers.⁴ Renowned for their exceptional performative skills in trading goods on the street (mainly in East End street markets), this picturesque version of spivery was exemplified on stage by comedians like Arthur English and Frankie Howard and was satirised in Daily Express cartoons. However, spivery also pointed towards a panorama of seamier and heavier violence: London gangsters, racecourse bookmakers, protection racketeers and runners for semi-legal gambling clubs (spielers) in Soho, the East End and south London, and prominently represented by the notorious figures of Jack Spot, Billy Hill, and the Kray Twins. This was the metropolitan underworld evoked on the cinematic screen by an indigenous cycle of crime films known as the ‘spiv’ cycle.⁵

⁵ Murphy, Realism and Tinsel, pp. 146–47.
Finally, the concept was also flexible enough to include a higher, aristocratic class of criminal. Also referred to as confidence tricksters (a term that, as will be shown, overlapped with spivery), this last category consisted of deviant men-about-town who exhibited an aptitude for social and professional masquerade. In a number of highly publicised scandals, a number of these individuals featured in the sensational pages of the tabloid press as celebrity murderers. They were men like Neville George Heath the ‘sadist’ killer, Donald Hume a celebrity spiv and murderer, John George Haigh, a confidence trickster turned acid bath killer, and John Christie, a necrophiliac mass murderer, variously disguised as a petty criminal, policeman, and man-about-town.  

Cultural theorists and historians have approached this tapestry of transgression as a key marker of the social and intellectual turmoil of the 1940s. David Hughes has interpreted spivery as a sign of wider changes in British society and culture: a reaction against bureaucracy, stoicism and material adversities. Robert Murphy and Donald Thomas have situated the spiv in a specific historical context of metropolitan criminality, emphasising the prominent stories and protagonists marking the public sphere of the post-war period. Richard Hornsey has read the visual excesses of spivery against a canvas of semiotic oppositions between urban reformatory discourses and the unplanned yet increasingly visible queer and unruly topographies of post-war London.

Finally, Frank Mort has viewed the spiv alongside a wider amalgam of metropolitan

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8 Murphy, Realism and Tinsel; Thomas, Villain’s Paradise, pp. 61–85.
commercialisation, mass-media scandal and sexuality, challenging the conventional evaluation of permissiveness as a progressive cultural phenomenon of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{10}

Drawing on this scholarship, this chapter asks a different question. It seeks to understand why, despite its increasing visibility and spectacular and commercial organisation, spivery’s conceptualisation and imagery remained shifting, undefined and seemingly nebulous. While contextualising its meanings within the discursive battleground of contemporary politics, public administration and Metropolitan Police surveillance, I explore how the intellectual and aesthetic ambiguities surrounding this form of deviance related to the contemporary socio-economic and cultural controversies. Was it understood solely as a modern phenomenon of social transgression and Americanisation or did it rehearse older conventions of criminal representation and indigenous popular culture? How was the association between escapism and crime discussed by experts, popular cultural commentators and by the spivs themselves?

Counteracting the voice of the spivs with the analysis of their personas in the tabloid press, sociology, literature and psychiatry, the central question asked here is why the material and historical specificity of a mild social transgression gave rise to large-scale ideas about psychic disorder, spectatorship and sexual imagination. To this end, I comparatively examine the ways that these ideas were played out in the mass-media sphere, in self-confessions and in the social sciences. While the subsequent chapters of the thesis emphasise how the aesthetic organisation of crime set in motion a series of fictional representations of escapism in cinema, popular literature and press, here the

aim is to explore the concept of criminal aesthetics within the territories of social experience, self-narration and intellectual commentary. What system of representation informed the spiv’s everyday practices of self-presentation? How did ways of looking at, speaking, dressing, or ultimately, telling one’s life story produce a distinctive aesthetics of crime?

“What is a Spiv?”

The ambiguity of the term was graphically illustrated in numerous journalistic exposés featured in the pages of daily and Sunday newspapers, especially during the summer of 1947 and subsequently. Often labelled under the question ‘What is a spiv?’, these articles set out to explore the elusive network of meanings, images and ideas associated with this criminal type. Extending the debate from parliamentary reports, to the correspondence pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, the sensational exposés of the *Sunday People*, and the radical commentaries in *The Socialist Standard*, this intense public interest over a semi-marginal icon of popular culture was not purely philological. It was inseparable from a specific socio-economic agenda. Indeed, despite its slippery conceptualisation, the term’s strongest associations were arguably with the black market. The spiv was the in-between, the contact man who mediated between the illegal operations of the underworld (robberies, smash-and-grabs raids, burglaries, etc) and the consumer needs of the wider public in a period of post-war rationing and austerity.

The black market was a popular method of defying a basic premise of the Labour government’s post-war policy, involving the continuation of controls over consumption

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that had been imposed on British society since the beginning of the Second World War. Prescribing the consumption of foodstuffs, fuel and clothes according to individually allocated rations, these so called austerity measures persisted well into the post-war years, until 1954, with 1947 being one of its harshest moments. Marked by a fuel crisis, further cuts on imports, reduction of the food and clothing ration, and further rationing (on the consumption of potatoes) that year put to the test Labour’s rationale for a strictly controlled and planned economy.¹²

In line with the wartime period, the political authorities tried to popularise its austerity policies through an extended propaganda campaign. The information ministry set out to inform the public about the critical financial situation, the need to increase exports over imports, and, overall, the need for the population to be productive.¹³ Centring on the slogan ‘We Work or Want’, a widespread campaign emphasised that the nation itself, as the collective subject – ‘We’ – was now responsible for its well being.¹⁴ The collective community was then called to fight against its own idleness and unruly impulses. The enemy lay within.

In this political and economic context, the social and intellectual battle over the meaning and the importance of spivery acquired a particular nuance.¹⁵ The figure of the


¹⁴ For the propagandistic slogans see Croft, ‘The Attlee Government’s Economic Information Propaganda’.

spiv came to personify the danger of idleness and defiance that threatened to undermine the impetus for a rationally planned post-war recovery. In the summer of 1947 a series of political authorities came to reaffirm the national threat represented by ‘spivs and drones’. In a widely quoted statement, Lord Pakenham told parliament: ‘We must wage unceasing war on the class frequently known as spivs’, and the Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison declared ‘let us point the finger of scorn at such parasites who make themselves comfortable at the expense of community’.

In November, the Registration for Employment Order, together with a separate order especially aimed at spivs and street traders, was introduced as an administrative antidote to what the political discourse denounced: social parasitism.

In reality, as S. W. Crofts has suggested, this was another propagandistic measure that was not expected to have any discernible effect. It was merely ‘a gesture for its psychological effect’. In October, the labour minister, George Isaacs, claimed that the government regarded spivs as the ‘men and women who make no contribution to the national well being, including employees of football pools, gambling undertakings, amusement arcades and night clubs, and certain classes of street traders’. This statement equated spivery with semi-legal businesses and leisure activities. In Isaacs’ mingling of unproductiveness and hedonism, the moral and financial economy seemed to coalesce. The loosely defined concept of the spiv pointed towards a moral, abstract danger, rather than a specific and easily quantifiable target. Despite its bureaucratic pretences, official discourses discussed spivery as a general social attitude rather than as a fixed terrain of social experience.

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16 Cited in S.W. Croft, ‘Economic Propaganda’.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., p. 459.
19 ‘Spivs and Drones’, The Times, 27 October 1947, p. 3.
In December 1947, the chairman of the Select Committee on Statutory Rules and Orders criticised the Registration for Employment Order, for leaving the notion of spiv ‘undefined’. They did not know if girls were going to be brought in, or of what class or description, at what age, on what date. Also included are how and what particulars they must provide about themselves. Elucidation of these points was required.’

Tabling questions about gender, class, and age, the chairman exemplified the ignorance, awkwardness and confusion of the political authorities. The contemporary media offered ambiguous, competing and contradicting information about spivs’ gender, age and class. What is more, analytically examined in the subsequent chapters of the thesis, young women, frequently called ‘spivettes’ or ‘good-time girls’ (see the Cleft chin murder, Chapter 4), interclass sociality (see the cultural profile of John Haigh in Chapter 5), delinquents as well as middle age men emblematised and elaborated the promiscuous meanings and images of the term in popular culture. While, however, in cinema and mass culture the incongruent cultural meanings served the dramatic energies of fictional representation, the chairman’s statements affirmed that the cultural the meaning of spivery was persistently denied a precise definition by the same authoritative and socially constructive language that brought it into the spotlight as an alarming political issue.

A precise explanation of the phenomenon of spivery was also missing in the Reports of the Commissioner of the Police of the Metropolis produced between 1944 and 1950. Interestingly, in 1947, the commissioner stated that the popularity of the black market was largely responsible for a soaring 40 percent increase in crime that marked the immediate post-war years. ‘Shortages of all kinds,’ he noted, ‘had led many people who

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21 Ibid.
in normal times were scrupulously law-abiding to dabble in the black market and to evade regulations, and [...] as a result the level of public morality falls and the figures of crime of dishonesty reach new heights.’ 22 The implication was that, due to the unprecedented expansion of the black market, the boundary between the law-abiding citizen and the criminal was becoming increasingly unstable. This complicity of the wider population in spivery was confirmed by many commentators in the press. These exposés frequently cautioned that the evasion of law could take a multiplicity of forms, from under-the-counter dealing to what Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has described as ‘countless examples of exploitation of loopholes and breaches of legislation controlling production, distribution and supply of consumer goods’.23

In these accounts, spivery was viewed as a partial aspect of a widespread problem. However, as an idea, an image or a slogan, it fitted public efforts to make concrete a disruptive social pathology. In the 1940s, mass-media campaigns were deemed to be a highly effective means of political persuasion. Croft has showed how Labour’s belief in the political value of economic propaganda was embodied in its numerous posters, newsreels, films and newspaper adverts.24 Similarly, the Metropolitan Police mobilised BBC broadcasts, films and advertisements to communicate its broader agenda to the public. In regard to spivery in particular, the Metropolitan Police closely collaborated in the production of the renowned crime film *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950). The increasingly publicised form of transgression represented by the spiv was inexorably

23 Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain*, p. 8; ‘We Are All Law Breakers’, *Sunday People*, 1 September 1946, p. 7.
24 Croft, ‘Economic Propaganda’.
linked to a propagandistic strategy. The key aim was to dramatise a complex social problem; to visualise and make broadly intelligible an abstract idea. This ideological target demanded a new ethical paradigm. The image of the spiv usefully brought together different demands. Being simultaneously familiar and distant, recognisable and undefined, visible and invisible, his/her image could teach a lesson of national self-restraint. If spivery was mainly a psychological temperament, then everybody was potentially complicit in it.

However, the social or psychological pathogeny of the spiv was not merely constructed from above. In addition to administrative language, a number of expert voices (psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists), journalists and writers had been trying to map the meaning of the term before, during and after the crucial summer months of 1947. They attempted to do this via a series of discursive and rhetorical strategies that purported to offer a view from below, one occasionally taking the form of a first-person narrative, notably the spiv’s self-confession. These portrayals associated the spivs’ transgressive lifestyle with impressionistic descriptions of their self-display and fantasy-driven mentalities. Echoing older conceptualisations of street crime as an aesthetic of illusion, theatricality and narcissism, this scheme sketched out a fluid province of social and spatial experience that resisted static intellectual and visual mapping, either from below or from above.
The Spiv’s Progress from the 1930s to the 1940s: The Aesthetic Framework of Deviance

On 29 July 1947, the correspondence page of the Daily Telegraph listed, under the headline ‘What is a Spiv’, three letters addressed to the editor of the paper. In one of them, the Earl of Roseberry announced that, although during the current period the word spiv had ‘taken on a different meaning’, he had ‘certainly known [it] for 40 years […]. It used to denote runners and other helpers to bookmakers.’ Another correspondent, Howard Spring, claimed that the term first featured in two novels written by John Worby in the 1930s, The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Spiv (1937) and Spiv’s Progress (1939). Spring provided from Worby’s glossary a definition of a spiv: ‘A man who gets a good living by his wits without working and (if possible) without crime.’ A third letter was signed by a medical psychologist. He described the spiv as:

a common type of individual who combined in himself an inflated ego, a rather ‘pansoid’ [sic] tendency to exhibitionism and self-display and a incorrigible and incurable determination to avoid work whatever the trouble or inconvenience to himself or others […] his intelligence is brightish [sic] but never high: he is always sure that he would get away with what better brains would tell him he cannot. He is the symptom of a temporary and local social demoralisation and insecurity and a contributory cause of it; he is easier to prevent that to cure.’ […] Spivery is a useful concept: it keeps us alive to the disruptive elements not only in society but in ourselves.

‘What is a Spiv’, Daily Telegraph, p. 4.
Worby, The Other Half.
Ibid.
This letter page revealed the multiple definitions of spivery. Literature, metropolitan slang, a new science of the psyche and medical psychology framed the cultural, spatial and historical determinants of the crook. While the first correspondent associated the dandified criminal with the professional and leisure space of racecourses and the second with a literary definition of idleness, the psychologist described spivery as ‘a common type’ of psycho-social disease, one in which the promotion of a spectacular image of the self and an over-confident ego replaced the socially functional desire to work. A spiv was, for the psychologist, someone who believed in and showed off his ability to survive without work and to defy the social rules. In this way, the concept framed a social problem that was implicitly linked to a psychic pathology.

The combined emphasis on psychic environment and physical locality fused two different discursive trends marking the contemporary public understandings of social dislocation and pathological selfhood in the nascent reforming imperatives of Freud-led psychology and the moralising language of the tabloid press.29 Scholars such Chris Waters and Hornsey have shown how these antagonisms centred on the spatial framing of disorder, with the tabloids pointing towards the public cultures of the city whereas psychologists drew attention to the subject’s psychic environment, family life, education. While merging these two paradigms, the medical psychologist’s view clashed on one more level with the other correspondents. This expert conceived spivery as the product of ‘temporal’ demoralisation, while the two correspondents detected its

pedigree in older cultural predecessors: a 40-year-old tradition of racecourse rites and 1930s literary sources. The correspondents did not further clarify the exact original meaning and imagery of these definitions. However, the literary aesthetics of spivery (the ones mentioned by the second correspondent) can now be studied in detail. The following examination of Worby’s book aims to argue that the literary promotion of spivery was not simply contained in the pages of the 1930s criminal autobiography; it complexly informed the 1940s popular, visual and intellectual reconfigurations of the term.

Worby’s *The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Spiv* and *Spiv’s Progress* were published in 1937 and 1939, respectively. Narrated through a first-person voice, they deployed a detailed memoir of a life spent on the road, in America, where Worby lived as a migratory worker and tramp, and afterwards in Britain, in particular London, where he continued a life of wandering and petty crime. By interweaving the tropes of the American ‘hobo’ genre of autobiographic literature of the 1920s and 1930s with an idiosyncratic type of criminal and metropolitan point of view, the novel’s style and content attested to the ambiguous and polysemic connotations underpinning the concept of spivery since its first introduction to the British reading public in the late 1930s. In the annotated glossary at the end of the book, the spiv was defined as one living by ‘his own wits’. Worby was referred to as a spiv when he joined a London gang that organised a smash-and-grab raid. The protagonist abandoned his criminal team shortly before the commitment of the crime. While socialising and closely

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30 Worby, *The Other Half* and *Spiv’s Progress*.
befriending a wide variety of criminal types, the central hero was seen to abstain from any serious violation of the law.\textsuperscript{33}

Situated at the fringe of the underworld, Worby’s spivery was presented as a nomadic state of existence. Rather than centring on a violent crime, this lifestyle was seen to involve continuously adaptive and improvising skills in deceptive strategies, inscribed in storytelling techniques of self-presentation. This self-display mechanics involved ways of speaking and introducing the self. For example, Worby described how he convinced random strangers to financially support him while revealing and dramatising his ventures in life. These modes of self-disguise included the dandification of the hero’s external appearance. Flamboyant suits endowed Worby with the self-confidence needed to socialise with other spivs and confidence tricksters.\textsuperscript{34} Finally, a key aspect of these self-presentation strategies involved sexual role playing. The hero fashioned himself as a lady’s companion but also as a queer and sadomasochistic partner, though always for profit.

The spiv’s survival through theatrical tactics combined the illusionistic manipulation of objects and the self-image.\textsuperscript{35} From card games to professional masquerade, these deceptive practices evoked what in contemporary popular culture were known as confidence tricks. The Metropolitan Police meticulously studied this criminal problem, launching a pamphlet describing their tactics, entitled \textit{Illustrated Circular of Confidence Tricksters and Expert Criminals} (1935). They also exchanged correspondence with the

\textsuperscript{33} Worby, \textit{Spiv’s Progress}, pp. 58–62.
police departments of other European capitals, anticipating that King George V’s jubilee in that year would attract foreigner tricksters to the city.\textsuperscript{36}

The police circular was written by Percy Smith, a Scotland Yard officer, who in 1938 and 1961 published two books about confidence tricksters, in which he described these criminal types metaphorically as actors, artists and illusionists (con artist being another term for the criminal). Smith suggested that their heyday was mainly the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{37} In his account, confidence tricksters ranged from street-wise fraudsters to much more flamboyant criminals who intruded into wealthy social circles. The ‘big-time’ tricksters lured their victims by promising to fulfil an array of extraordinary, yet costly, desires; these could range from communication with dead spirits to the quick earning of money. In this way, metropolitan life was transformed into a continuous theatre of deception where everything was possible; becoming suddenly rich or enjoying forbidden erotic pleasures. Overall, the art of the confidence tricksters drew on self-disguise, cultural knowledge and psychological observation. The trickster had to detect and manipulate the desires, social reflexes and weakness of his/her victims and then stage a compelling illusion of daily life. This is why Smith compared this criminal activity with the art of a magician or the performance of an actor.\textsuperscript{38}

In analogous ways, Gerald Kersh’s \textit{Night and the City} (1938) and Richard Llewellyn’s \textit{None But the Lonely Heart} (1943) – novels set in the 1930s London underworld and


\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid.}
adapted into post-war spiv films – contrasted the metropolitan criminal’s skill to manipulate impressions and emotions with the proletarian dream of becoming an artist. In Worby’s novel, the petty criminal’s capacity to blur the boundary of life and representation was cast as a form of elusiveness, disguise and mobility. Continuously reinventing himself by stories told through words, gestures and objects, Worby’s spiv managed to produce from this self an object of escapist desire, one variously stimulating the sexual instincts, emotions and fantasies of the people he encountered. Designed to deceive but also to amuse and seduce, these self-displays graphically illustrated Worby’s descriptions of his return to his native village after a long period of street wandering in the USA. He stressed that he used to dress in American clothes, ‘to the great amusement of all the local lads who called out ‘Oi Jack!’ adding that ‘many were the tales of adventure I told them as I stood at night at the corner of the street and showed off my American rig-out by the light of the village lamp.’ As for the village girls, ‘they were round me like a swarm of bees.’ While, this style of self-narrative, woven from adventurous recollections, sartorial style and exhibitionism, seemed to transform the spiv’s image into a ‘street-corner’ object of American escapism, Worby’s internal monologues and inward thinking in the text appeared to mould a self-reflective style of escapism.

After seeing homeless people receiving assistance in Trafalgar Square, Worby reflected on the reasons for his inability to fit into society, always being trapped in a restless, wayward lifestyle. He concluded that this was not a problem. ‘I began to look on these tramps and spivs in a different light. I began to see them as I now saw myself: rebels from everyday misery,’ and hence superior to ‘the respectable people’ who were ‘slaves

to the clock’. In these definitions, the spiv’s lifestyle emerged as a disruptive mode of self-understanding. In addition to being an object of escapism for others, this type of narrative articulated an escape from the constraints of the dominant frameworks of social morality and life management.

In these ways, wayward idleness was discussed as an act of freedom; one securing a position of superiority against the conventional superiority of the mainstream citizens, the ‘mugs’ who work. Escapism as a mode of self-display merged with escapism as a self-invented manifesto of liberation – one re-working and inverting dominant social codes of respectability. While this scheme seemed to prefigure the medical psychologist’s schematisation of the spiv in the *Daily Telegraph* (super-ego, over-confidence, self-display), Worby’s account was more nuanced and ambivalent. In his narrative, spivery was not simply the byproduct of an inflated ego, exhibitionistic impulses and social demoralisation, it was rather described as a self-reflective amalgam of decisions, moral values and survival techniques, a response to a circumscribed set of available choices. Worby emphasised the innumerable obstacles that made it difficult for him, as well as other street life personalities whom he encountered, such as prostitutes, to find ‘respectable’ work.

Ironically, the commercialisation of spivery marked the rite of passage from a state of existence described suggestively in the title as ‘the other half’ to the respectable half of the social world. The spiv’s art of telling the story of the self was turned into a textual commodity, a popular autobiography. The last part of Worby’s book tells of his

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encounter with a literary agent, his life as a writer, the success of his book, his transformation into a celebrity and his socialisation in the hedonistic world of the wealthy classes. At that point, the spiv’s lifestyle turned from a wayward episode to a professionalised act of self-confession. The autobiography of an autobiography charted the creative process of writing, its public reception and its implications for the author’s private and social life.

If in Worby’s *The Other Half*, the autobiography of a spiv was presented as storytelling about the power of storytelling, what petty crime viewed as an aesthetics of self-presentation, in his *Spiv’s Progress*, the aesthetic of spivery merged with the public spectacle of crime: Worby described how he managed to transform street life into a popular spectacle of public life. This conceptualisation of the spiv as an object and agent of escapist storytelling, one introducing the illusionistic spells of street culture within the illusionistic spectacle of mass culture, over determined in the long run the notion of spivery as an aesthetic idiom of crime. Hovering between self-representation as a way of life and true life as a dynamic component of public representation, this idea of crime as an art of the self would be rehearsed and more fully developed in the intellectual, economic and mass media context of the immediate post-war period.

The post-war years witnessed a proliferation of sensational self-confessions that were drafted by the protagonists of various scandalous events. Expanding a media practice that originated in the inter-war period, the tabloid journalism of self-confession competed for attention with novels, courtroom trial testimonies, interviews and autobiographical accounts. These revolved around scandals fusing espionage with sex,
such as the revelations of the Profumo Affair, interclass homosexual encounters, as analysed in Peter Wildeblood’s *Against the Law* (1955), and mass-murder stories, such as the tabloid autobiographies of the serial killers John George Haigh and John Christie.\(^\text{43}\)

Sexual and urban historians have shown how this genre of confessional literature often mingled the intellectual imperatives of psychiatry and the nascent science of psychology with discursive configurations of class, race, professional life, etc. Emblematic of these trends were Wildeblood’s autobiographical portrayal of homosexuality as a psychological phenomenon complexly adapted to his class background and way of life.\(^\text{44}\)

While the self-narrative of the bourgeois homosexual was filtered through metropolitan culture, class and Freudian psychology, when in the summer of 1947 spivery became the focus of public attention, the popular press attested to the ways in which the meanings of transgressive selfhood could be expanded, dramatised but also ideologically circumvented by a mixture of economical, moral and psychological concerns. Recalling *The Daily Telegraph* debate that took place one month earlier, on 24 August 1947 the *Sunday People* article ‘The Confessions of a Spiv’ purported to shed light on the everyday


reality and way of thinking of a young spiv.\textsuperscript{45} Photographed at home, dressed in shirt and tie, and smoking a cigarette while reading a comic book or a newspaper, a ‘26-year-old cabinet maker’ named George Elms, who admitted being ‘a spiv in a police court’, seemed to epitomise what the official economic policy was fighting against: unproductiveness, idleness and leisure.\textsuperscript{46} Combining the conspicuous consumption of free time and smart clothes, his visual and biographical profile pointed towards a self-indulgent escape from the constraints of post-war austerity.

The article was advertised as ‘a frank document that is a remarkable commentary on our time’, a historical moment during which ‘wasted manpower is the nation’s big problem’ and ‘spivery is denounced in Parliament’.\textsuperscript{47} While these comments discussed spivery as a socio-economic problem, the tabloid confession recalled the style and content of Worby’s autobiography. In line with \textit{Spiv’s Progress}, the newspaper article admitted that Elms’ self-confession was only one more of his ‘deals’. A ‘spiv,’ noted the paper, ‘is someone who will sell anything at any time to anyone.’\textsuperscript{48} In this fluid commercialisation of social experience, the story of the self became a type of economic transaction: textual and visual exhibitionism merged with unproductive survival. The article ironically stated that £20 was paid to Elms for the article and ‘for the benefit of the Minister of Labour it was money well spent’.\textsuperscript{49}

In line with Worby’s narration, Elms’ confession narrated in vivid detail the way that the art of presenting the self and the pleasures of self-display in the streets of London

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
mingled with the art of profit-making without working or seriously violating the law. Elms’ narration suggested that his flamboyant style was a type of business investment: ‘I put out a lot of dough on real natty suits and socks and ties and shirts.’ The fashionable clothes served as a strategy of marketing and street socialisation: ‘I’ve got to dress smart. You can’t do business when you’re shabby see. […] Then I go round to the café on the corner and they say: “Hello, another suit George?” and that’s good for credit.’ Thus clothing confirmed the commercial qualifications of his expertise in trading objects of glamour, mainly suits, usually found dumped or bought secondhand for a low price and then processed ‘until they’re as good as new’ and then sold for double the price.

These facilitated Elms’ visibility in a series of loosely defined spaces of the city, the ‘cafes’ or ‘around the corner.’ Sartorial style emerged as a marketing device within the fleeting spatial and cultural economy of the capital. Mixing the language of sensational revelation with detailed insights into the operations of unregulated market economies, the spiv’s tabloid self-confession seemed to define the entrepreneurial spirit as a creative activity. While evoking anti-Labour ideals, associated with the ‘casino’ economy and excessive individualism, Elms’ overall confession framed his ways of making ‘dough’ with comments gesturing beyond economic interests and towards a personal evaluation of pleasure and lifestyle. While he admitted that ‘money is not everything’, he did concede that ‘clothes really worry me: You see I like to be smart. And I reckon half my dough goes on shirts and suits and hats.’ More than a business activity, clothing was discussed as a key impulse of self-presentation: a style of looking which overlapped with a way of being. Elms’ commentary on his tastes, lifestyle and identity (he described in detail his food, clothing and leisure habits) framed his revelations about the secrets of

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
street trading. This was a type of ‘business’ that, as the paper cautioned, avoided taxation, yet simultaneously elevated marketing into an art of self-expression. Elms’ flamboyant style was a matter of personal taste as well as of entrepreneurial strategy.

Posed in this way, the materiality of clothing and style emerged as key indicators of intellectual self-management and psychic pleasure. Merging the material with the psychic economy, this dandified organisation of selfhood coupled vanity with an alarmed response to the demands of social reality: ‘I’m happy, healthy and satisfied,’ Elms admitted, ‘and that’s a lot more than many people can say in these days, isn’t it?'

Hence, either by selling items on the street, or marketing sensational information to a tabloid paper, the art of promoting, displaying, and writing the story of the self marked the spiv’s ability to be both an object and an agent of escapism, and overall, to evade the material constraints of 1940s Britain.

The spiv’s self-confession, with its vivid narrative of disobedience and pleasure, sketched out a lifestyle of social difference as urban fantasy. The *Sunday People* extensively collaborated with authors and journalists whose vivid gossip aimed to reveal as well as to entertain, often by dramatising sensational versions of spivery and urban transgression. The columns of Arthur Helliwell, Duncan Webb and Gerald Kersh (the aforementioned author of *Night and the City*) recurrently provided voyeuristic reports about metropolitan immorality. It is likely that the ‘Spiv’s Self-Confessions’ was not actually written by its claimed author, Elms, for the ghost writing of spiv’s autobiographies was not an unusual phenomenon. A journalist with *The People*, Duncan

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Webb, wrote the autobiography of Billy Hill, a notorious spiv figure, for example. In a similar way, Elms’ text could also have been written by a journalist. Combining popular assumptions, social experience, or, even, a real interview with Elms, the writer could have employed a first-person narrative as a means of affirming and expanding on the recognisable imagery of spivery.

As we will see in more detail the following chapters (Chapter 4 on the Cleft chin murder and Chapter 5 on John Haigh), during the post-war period first-person narratives, autobiographical accounts, ‘true confessions’ and court testimonies in court were widely employed in the sensational representation of spivs, confidence tricksters, good-time girls and petty criminals turned murderers, such as John Christie, Haigh, Donald Hume and Elizabeth Jones. These portrayals further complicated the dialogue between criminal storytelling and the spectacular organisation of the criminal’s inner thoughts. Foregrounding the idea of ‘living on someone’s wits’ variously as individual impulses of erotic, cinematic or narcissistic escapism, these personal accounts became mass-media points of collective escapism. Large crowds queued at the entrances to courtrooms where the killers were tried and addressed innumerable inquiring letters to the Metropolitan Police and Scotland Yard in an attempt to understand the identity puzzle posed by the crime stories.

Indicative of these trends were the letters sent to Scotland Yard about the cleft chin murder, a sensation centring on an American deserter and an English good-time girl. Their adventure involved strolling around in London, robbing, black marketeering and, finally, murdering a taxi driver. An anonymous correspondent to Scotland Yard

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assumed that the young anti-heroes of the story were victims of a Nazi conspiracy, while another letter writer provided the couple’s astrological map. Furthermore, a German correspondent to Scotland Yard thought that the mass-murder techniques of John George Haigh (a confidence trickster turned serial killer, who dissolved the bodies of his victims in tanks of acid), was part of the promotion for a film whose plot was based on acid bath murders. As these letters testified, the line between representation and life was blurred, while criminality evoked a set of representational strategies (the Cleft chin heroes pretended to be cinematic heroes, Haigh was a black marketer, gambler and confidence trickster disguised as a man-about-town, inventor and businessman) and the public representation of crime was seen to effect or be effected by a set of lived historical experiences (i.e. Nazis, actual murders to promote cinematic murders). Behind the veneer of scandalous facts as retold in court room trials, tabloid reports and autobiographies, the audience re-imagined an invisible network of meanings, emotions and desire. Criminal action dissolved into the fantasy life of spectatorship.

The decoding of criminal selfhood was not the exclusive province of the lay public. Alongside the dramatic portrayals of the mass media, the self-display and psychic organisation of the men and women who lived by their own wits was also communicated in the public sphere through the imperatives of scientific language. The post-war moment witnessed a renewed scientific interest in the unusual, marginal and neglected voices of the low strata of social life. From the inter-war years onwards, the

54 See Murder of George Edward Heath by Private Karl Gustave Hulten, United States Army and Elizabeth Jones at Great West Road, on 7 October 1944, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/2280.
55 Mass Murders Committed by John George Haigh at South Kensington and Crawley, Sussex: Bodies of Six Victims Dissolved in Sulphuric Acid at Crawley. TNA PRO: MEPO 3/3128.
nascent academic disciplines of sociology and ethnography had been increasingly focused on registering and celebrating the lifestyles and worldviews of the low-life characters rarely seen in the public arena. The following section will show how and why spivery was an attractive field of research for these types of intellectual interrogations.

**Spivery as a Social Science of the Imagination**

In the 1930s an alliance of intellectuals, academics and poets had formed Mass Observation, a major project of social and anthropological research designed to record first-hand reports of working-class experience, everyday life and popular culture. In 1945, *Pilot Papers*, a sociological journal edited by a leading figure of the Mass Observation project, Charles Madge, featured the self-narration of a spiv, offering a valuable counter example to the sensational self-confession provided by *The Sunday People* two years later.\(^{56}\) The narrator was an anonymous lorry driver named only with the letter ‘J_’. He was interviewed by the writer, sociologist and fellow lorry driver Bill Naughton. The interviewee noted that although a spiv might be involved in ‘buying and selling objects of glitter, a watch, a fountain pen, cigarette case, rings, or some handy jewellery line’, the money-making practices were not strictly defined. A ‘Spiv’, he noted, would not mind working as a ‘bookie’s runner, market help, or the old barrow with fruits and flowers. […] A job where you can make a bit on the side, and there’s no income tax to it.’\(^{57}\) More than an unregulated market activity, J_’s words linked spivery to a specific type of mentality. He remarked that it is ‘just that bit of style and poise, that knowing you’re different from the ordinary run of fellows – that’s what makes a Spiv’.\(^{58}\) Defining the essence of the spiv phenomenon as a mental disposition, one recalling

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\(^{58}\) *Ibid.*
Worby’s autobiographical self-reflection on the superiority of idleness, the sociologically framed voice of the spiv translated its own cultural image into an emotional impulse, or, in J_.’s own words, ‘the whole cocky attitude’ someone ‘carries around with him’.\textsuperscript{59} This emphasis on ‘attitude’ expanded rather than limited the possible meanings and manifestations of spivery.

In addition to his own life story, J_.’s account offered various examples of the way a spiv’s attitude shaped the representation of the self through words, gestures and material objects. From the supervisor of their lorry-driving work, who was dressed in ‘his spivvy coat’ with wide lapels, padded-out shoulders, curled round his backside’, who was said to make an odd movement to the narrator (as if ‘he was playing a fiddle […] giving thus the “wire”, that is, signalling that ‘he’s one of us and wanting to know if we’re making money on the side’) to types coming from ‘ordinary respectable homes’ that somehow or other have the Spiv attitude’.\textsuperscript{60} J_. referred to an eighteen-year-old kid who looked like an ‘engineering apprentice’ but ‘he’d got the Spiv walk off alright. You stiffen the shoulders, and lift them a drop [sic]. And walk knowing you are walking. Fancy little style it is, and there’s no other walk just like it. It’s a mixture of pug and pansy.’\textsuperscript{61} The material and commercial laboratories of this ‘pug and pansy’ style ranged from the Jewish tailor shops of ‘the East End Way, South London’ to ‘the American outfitters in Charing Cross, who could only provide them with a ‘draped “barrelled coat”’ (a lounge suit clipped in over the bottom).\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 99.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 103.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 104.
The sartorial codes of spivery seemed to reconcile the indigenous handmade production methods of Jewish tailoring with the stylistic imperatives of mass-produced American fashion. Furthermore, these self-displays seemed to link the topography of East and South London (alternative sources further specify Bethnal Green, Petticoat Lane Market in East London and the Elephant and Castle in South London) with the heart of central London; Charing Cross being the eastern boundary of Soho. Discussed by contemporary commentators such as Helliwell, Webb and Kersh as the spiv’s habitat par excellence, from as early as the 1930s Soho, replete with commercial shops, cafés and pubs, had been setting the stage for an increasingly visible portrayal of high-class leisure linked to bohemianism and low-life prostitution, striptease, homosexuality, alcoholism and drugs.

While drawing attention to the visual, social and spatial promiscuity of metropolitan culture, J’s anecdotal stories stressed how the spiv’s performances of sociability and deviance ranged from homosexual self-disguise in the army to forms of storytelling that would make his presence unwanted at a family dinner: ‘how they used to grow cotton in Egypt two thousand years ago’ or ‘how many bones in the human foot and why’. The spiv, according J, would also be ready to invent a story when found without a ticket on the London Tube so as to avoid paying, combining this deception with an aptitude for unexpectedly treating friends and acquaintances with drinks in the pub. In all these types of social positioning (a working supervisor, married, respectable kid, lorry driver, urban commuter, fashion enthusiast, pub socialiser, etc.) the art of telling the story of the self was a continuous demonstration of the art of ‘wits and show off’. An

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63 See Tomas, Villain’s Paradise.
64 See Mort, Capital Affairs, pp. 22–242.
impressionistic strategy of social deception was coupled with a constant desire for exhibitionism. This conflation reconciled a sociable form of self-display with an ultra-egoistic mentality. Posed in this way, J_’s narration pointed towards a popular idiom of proletarian escapism. This was a further autobiographical account that emphasised an idea of spivery as a form of metropolitan and psychological particularity, rather than a fixed set of criminal practices.

In the last paragraphs of the text, the self-narration of the spiv was succeeded by the voice of the interviewer, Naughton. After describing his own experience of spivery, he concluded that the spiv was a ‘big city product’ ‘brought out from acute individual egoism, vanity, and wits-frustrated, as well as an unfortunate family and social environment. London offers to him agreeable society for his social ambitions; and only in London could he implement them.’ The voice of the social researcher defined spivery as the spatial manifestation of a psychic malfunction (egoism, vanity, wits). London’s metropolitan atmosphere was said to be the breeding ground for the material articulation and nurturing of a disease of the self. Naughton’s emphasis on the urban environment as a constitutive factor of transgression seemed to tally with J_’s remarks on the relationship between spivery and movement through space. J_ admitted that, as opposed to work in a factory, driving is compatible with the life of a spiv:

get out on the road and there’s no telling what you can make. Another thing about driving: suppose I was to step out of this van along the street, go into a pub or caff; who’s to know what job I do? Who’d take me for a driver with these two rings and a

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66 Ibid., p. 108.
67 Ibid., p. 104.
Echoing Worby’s on-the-road autobiography (Worby had also worked as lorry driver), these comments epitomised, as a sort of manifesto, the ways that mobility, randomness and self-display advanced the idea of the spiv’s escapism. Both the sociologist and the spiv, the subject and object of research, discussed spivery as an urban exercise in role-playing; a continuous experiment in theatrical sociability. In their words, London’s spatial chaos, anonymity and cultural promiscuity encouraged such practices of self-disguise. In these heterogeneous social environments, the spiv could superimpose an aura of spectacle, extraordinariness and entrepreneurial ingenuity on the material and visual conditions of ordinary life. Discussing spivery as a product of space did not only mean strictly locating it within the geographical boundaries of Soho or the East End but associating the phenomenon with the psychological character of metropolitan experience. The spiv’s state of mind was concomitant with the flexibility and expansiveness of metropolitan fantasy, the feeling that someone could negotiate his/her identity in various ways within the visual and spatial choreographies of the city; an idea that, as we will see in more detail later, featured strongly in the murder scandals of the post-war period.

If cultural sociology read the aesthetics of spivery as a spatial materialisation of social escapism, psychiatry understood it as a psycho-pathological type of erotic/sexual escapism. A ‘Clinical Contribution’ to ‘spivdom’ written by Peter Scott appeared in The Roots of Crime, a 1954 collection of psychiatric articles on the psycho-social causes of crime, which transferred the problem from the city to the psychic topography of the
transgressor, as Hornsey has suggested.\textsuperscript{68} The book was edited by Norwood East, a prominent criminologist, prison administrator and prolific writer of medical treatises on crime. Focusing on the psychiatric framing of social transgression, East mixed the research interests of psychiatry with those of cultural anthropology.\textsuperscript{69} Following East’s research agenda, Scott’s analysis provided a detailed examination of the stylistic appearance and social attitude of a spiv. The psychiatrist stressed that it is very unlikely that the spiv, or wide boy, is product of our time; the market places of most civilisations would probably provide a comparable sample. Is he a type, degenerate, atavistic? Has he narrowly missed high success? Or is he only representing just another of those difficult phases which constitute the progress of some unstable children of unstable parents from cradle to grave?\textsuperscript{70}

As opposed to the medical psychologist who, as we have seen, discussed the spiv in the correspondence column of the \textit{Daily Telegraph} as a product and cause of the ‘demoralisation of our time’, Scott contended that beneath the material and external forms of spivery lay psychic phenomena that transcended historical, spatial and national boundaries.

Scott’s emphasis on stylistic and self-presentational characteristics signalled early in the text his intention to sexualise the psychiatric interpretation the criminal: haircuts resembling the ‘arse of ducks’, buttonless coats and a strange fascination for zip-


fasteners were supplemented by ‘copies of a comic-paper’ that were ‘peeping from the pocket of the coat’ along with ‘photographs of themselves in shorts or bathing drawers which show their broad chests and ample muscles’. These elements marked the image and behaviour of the young men, aged eighteen to twenty five, who would call themselves ‘by names culled from American stories and films’. Simultaneously evoking the embryonic imagery of Teddy Boys (especially as regards the name of haircuts) and the Victorian hooligans (who were also said to read ‘comic papers’: the penny dreadfuls), this portrayal complied with and reworked a widely typified conception of spivery as an exhibitionistic style of self-fashioning.

If his introduction referred to modern forms of mass culture, ‘television, films, or comics’, as standard ingredients in the making of contemporary petty crime, Scott’s overall argument associated spivs with less culturally and historically specific notions of escapism. Under the surface of these ephemeral symbols imagination and self-fashioning, the psychiatrist detected points of comparison with the sexual world of the pervert, the transvestite, the homosexual, the exhibitionist, the chronic masturbator, the fetishist, or someone who combined all these problems. Appearing as universal concepts exceeding the boundaries of time and space, all of these pathological types, according to Scott, compensated for the blocking of erotic desire by activating the key assets ‘of ingenuity and powers of make-believe, and an ability to flout or dispense with

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71 Ibid., pp. 60, 63.
72 Ibid., p. 61.
73 Ibid., p. 55, pp. 67–70.
Sexual perversion like spivery was defined as an art of escapist re-invention of the self.

For Scott, it was the spiv rather than the pervert who won out in the battle over repressed desire and excessive imagination. Despite the similarities with the effeminate pervert (flashy clothes, long hair), the spiv’s dandyism (‘that wonderful tie’) restored the integrity of his masculinity. While undergoing the same struggles as the pervert, his transgressive mode of subjectivity, in Scott’s words, had ‘the ability to deal with things realistically and aggressively’. Thus, although the self-display of spivdom evoked the ‘self-deceptive’ ventures of the pervert, the spiv’s persona was capable of returning back to reality. The anti-social adherence to fantasy life was utterly compatible with a sensitivity to the demands of social life.

The psychiatrist, the sensational journalist, the psychologist and the cultural researcher presented the world of spivery as a movement between the social and the psychic, on the one hand, and life and representation, imagination and reality, on the other. Despite their differences, all these sources confirmed the semantic association of the spiv phenomenon with varied notions of escapism. Discussed at once as a literary, economic, metropolitan and psychiatric puzzle, spivery was recurrently debated in the public sphere as a mode of deception: a way of making an illusionistic spectacle of selfhood via representational strategies, storytelling techniques and modes of movement across social space. The spiv figure exemplified a paradoxical capacity to live a fantasy

74 Ibid., p. 68.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
life while also mastering waking life, to deceive one’s social audience while deceiving one’s own conscience. In the following chapter, I will address the ways this popular idiom of everyday escapism was negotiated in the cinema, pulp fiction and in tabloid journalism.

Focusing on the aesthetic tropes, critical reception and the intertextual background of a classic American–English film on spivery, Jules Dassin’s *Night and the City* (1950), I will emphasise how the cinematic medium compressed, expanded and transgressed the ideas and images of criminal escapism closely examined in this chapter. Central to this line of inquiry will be the linked issues of national identity, fictional convention and cinematic style. The idea of metropolitan criminality as an escapist disorder was not exclusively British; it was inseparable from the cultural imagery of Hollywood. The aim here will be to underscore the tension between international and indigenous understandings of the spiv as a fantasising and wayward figure of the city. Based on the intellectual parameters explored here, Chapter 2 seeks to examine criminal aesthetics in both the 1930s and 1940s as an escapist mode of life, on and off screen.
Chapter 2. *Night and the City*: Criminal Escapism and National Character in Post-war British Cinema and Society

Scratch the surface of London and you find a vast, surging “spivery” from Soho to Hammersmith. At least, the moviemakers tell us so. Maybe they don’t know London.

—Audrey Leonard, ‘London is Not as Bad as This’, *Sunday Graphic*, 18 June 1950, newspaper cutting, microfiche collection, *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), British Film Institute (subsequently BFI) Library.

*Night and the City* should be great help in sending American tourists to Paris.


We would find it easier to live without food than without mirrors.


The main hero of the aforementioned film under review, *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), a ‘super-spiv’ club tout called Harry Fabian, tricks an old Greek veteran wrestler into believing that it is possible to cash in on classical Greco–Roman wrestling, without meddling with the barbaric commercial lure of the London scene and the entertainment economy of Soho. Squeezed between Oxford Street and Shaftsbury Avenue, Soho’s palimpsest of narrow streets, side corner cafés and restaurants was a renowned habitat of leisure and night life as well as a hub of illicit sexuality and bohemianism.¹ In the original 1930s literary origin of the film, Gerald Kersh’s *Night and the City* (1938), this hedonistic environment stages the encounter between Harry Fabian and Adam, a hard-working waiter who aspires to become a sculptor, while moulding imaginary and hallucinatory statues out of the walls of cafés.

Whereas the novel’s finale suggests that Adam did not have many chances of becoming an artist, the 1950 film’s finale categorically emphasises that Fabian never had any real chance of becoming a successful entrepreneur. The spiv hero dramatically fails to keep his promise to transform Greece’s classical cultural heritage into a metropolitan spectacle. For the majority of contemporary British reviewers, however, the foremost failure was that of the film’s director. They claimed that Jules Dassin, the American Jewish filmmaker from Hollywood, did not succeed in making a convincing film about the authentic indigenous culture of London. If Fabian tricked his social audience, Dassin was accused of tricking the cinema audience. His London was said to be a filmic fraud.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, three years before the release of this film, a severe economic crisis, a series of austerity measures and the Attlee government’s economic information propaganda had shined the political spotlight on the elusive and socially disruptive aesthetics of the spiv. Widely interrogated and debated in the press, social sciences and in autobiographical literature, the self-representation strategies of this flamboyantly dressed transgressor conflated the economic danger of unproductiveness and the black market with metropolitan, social and sexual forms of escapism. As it was argued, despite the public attention, the notion of spivery persistently eluded a solid definition. It mainly came to personify a loose attitude of idleness and proletarian dandyism, an emotional temperament of superiority, selfishness

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3 Leonard, ‘London is Not as Bad as This’. 
and irresponsibility, and overall, an effort to evade the economic constraints of the late 1940s.

This chapter’s focus on the production, reception and intertextual context of *Night and the City* seeks to examine in what ways this increasingly visible and widely discussed illusionistic idiom of proletarian life intruded into the sphere of cinematic illusion. Setting the ground for the following chapters’ comparative examination of a wider body of cinematic, sensational and autobiographical narratives, this chapter aims to raise a number of issues pertaining to the social and aesthetic meaning of criminal escapism. How did the spectacular and commercial organisation of cinematic spivery make sense of its national and gendered determinants? How was the encounter between the Hollywood gangster genre and London criminal culture critically perceived and evaluated by contemporary commentators?

A wealth of contemporary evidence, examined in this as well as in the previous chapter, suggested that popular culture understood criminal life in particular and hedonistic life in general as, an art of making a spectacle of the self, an illusionistic technology of self-presentation, or rather, a metropolitan aesthetic of crime. Here the aim is to see in what dramatic, visual and conceptual terms, a streetwise spectacle was transformed into a filmic spectacle. How could a daily technique of illusion participate in the cultural, spectatorial and diegetic mechanisms of cinematic illusion? Exploring how contested notions of escapism espoused indigenous forms urban experience, this line of inquiry aims to challenge and expand old and recent readings of spiv cinema as a site of conflict between contrasting national and aesthetic styles, and more specifically, Hollywood escapism and British pragmatism.
The National Production of Cinematic Escapism

In the summer of 1947, when spivery was brought centre stage as a national symbol of pathogenic imagination, an international symbol of collective escapism, the Hollywood film industry boycotted the British market, responding to a new ad valorem tax imposed by the UK on its filmic exports.¹ In the following years, even after the withdrawal of the embargo, the Rank Organisation, the largest British cinematic conglomerate, increased its production of films, taking advantage of the situation in an attempt to improve its position in the home market, one that, for decades, was largely dominated by American products. This ultimately unsuccessful competitive manoeuvre exemplified a dramatic moment in what many film scholars have referred to as a persistent ‘Hollywood shadow’, permeating and over-determining the production, aesthetics and reception of cinema in Britain during the immediate post-war years.²

Indeed, as many film historians have shown, although cinema had been broadly synonymous with Hollywood in the public mind for years, in the 1940s, the Rank Organisation put together an ambitious and long-term strategy not only to increase the commercial importance of British films in the home market but also to reach American audiences.³ The expansion of the indigenous cinema industry, the successful export of several films to the USA (as early as in the 1930s), the overall popularity of wartime British cinema, a number of protectionist policy measures (the aforementioned tax

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² Ibid.
being quite indicative) and the collaboration with American studios pointed towards British cinema’s effort to compete in a transatlantic market.  

Spiv cinema was a key manifestation of this trend. While real-life spivs fashioned themselves according to American cinematic heroes, a number of post-war British and British–American films transformed the Hollywood-driven criminals into cinematic figures. This trend produced a group of feature films that were suggestively called ‘spiv films’. Mixing the conventions of the American gangster genre with the style and mise-en-scène of ‘ordinary people’ melodramas and on-the-run crime dramas, this group of films formed a crime sub-genre which, despite its national subject matter, pointedly gestured towards the escapist tropes of Hollywood, keeping an eye on the American market. As the double versions of some of the script dialogues testified (cockney slang adjusted into American English), the films simultaneously targeted the home-market and American audiences. Ironically, what was seen as an escapist transgression of economic rationality at the level of social life (see Chapter 1) came to assist the competitiveness of an aspiring branch of the national economy at the level of cinematic representation.

Many contemporary reviewers expressed their disagreements with these developments. In 1947, a critical outcry erupted against the cinematic spectacle of the black marketeers and criminals. Newspaper articles bearing polemical titles, for example, ‘Why Pick On

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7 Ibid.
10 See among many others It Always Rains on Sunday (Robert Hammer, 1947), shooting script, BFI.
the Spivs’ (Sunday Graphic, 29 June 1947), ‘Now let’s drop the Spiv’ (Daily Mail, 29 June 1947), ‘Why the Stars the Spivs’ (Daily Mirror, 27 June 1947)\(^1\) expressed their worries ‘not only about the moral effect’, as Reg Whitley argued in the Daily Mirror, but also ‘on the effect on the sovereign markets’.\(^2\) Whiley’s article questioned the ability of spiv films to compete with what Americans ‘can make a darn sight better than we can’.\(^3\)

In opposition to these contemporary views, more recent approaches marked a turning point in the revisionist evaluation of British cinematic aesthetics. Firstly, catching the attention of Robert Murphy, who coined the term ‘Riff-Raff realism’, the rediscovery of the films coincided with an overall tendency to rethink ‘realism’ as a constituent and monolithic element of British cinema.\(^4\) This line of argument informed the various contributions of All our Yesterdays (1989), a collection of critical readings on neglected aspects of British cinema history, which, apart from Murphy’s article, included Andrew Higson’s compressed yet comprehensive overview of the stylistic and ideological amalgam that came to be conventionally recognised as British realism.\(^5\)

This national canon was mainly associated with documentary devices, Soviet/constructionist montage, the voice and the point of view of an external observer coupled with the celebration of community values and the ideals of social reconstruction. Higson argued that British cinema was not reduced to this set of


\(^2\) Whitley, ‘New Films Worry Me’.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Murphy, ‘Riff-Raff’, Murphy, Realism and Tinsel (London, 1989).

\(^5\) Andrew Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film”: The Documentary-Realist Tradition’ in Barr, All Our Yesterdays. pp. 72–97.
ideological and stylistic norms. According to his approach, in many ways British cinema eroded the binary tensions between escapism and realism. Tropes attributed to the ‘escapist’ cinema of Hollywood (the emphasis on the individual, point-of-view shots, continuity editing) merged with the schematic signifiers of realism (multifaceted plots, community values, propagandistic themes). This largely overlooked stylistic hybridity, Higson noted, occurred at a moment during which the British studios were absorbing into their creative dynamic many of the filmmakers who excelled in the 1930s documentary movement.

Taking as one of his examples a spiv film, Robert Hammer’s *It Always Rains on Sunday*, (1947), Higson’s argument confirmed what Charles Barr signalled in the introduction of the collection. Barr maintained that rather than being a pure aesthetic condition, the association between realism, British cinema and national identity was mainly a conceptual construction, one aligned to a number of intellectual paradigms of indigenous as well as foreign journalistic and academic literatures.\(^{16}\) Barr stressed that elements of the British character typically deemed as un-cinematic such as restraint, repression, stoicism or what elsewhere would be described as a ‘poverty of desire’ dynamically informed this cinematic vocabulary.\(^{17}\) In addition to themes of ideological emergency, post-war national film production exhibited a number of distinctive self-reflexive and fantastic elements, emblematised in the creative idiosyncrasy of David Lean and Michael Powell.

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One of the purposes of this, as well as the following chapter, is to shed new light on the ways spiv films reconfigured the relationship between cinematic escapism and the conventional signifiers of British realism and national character (restraint, community values, social didacticism). Despite the innovative reading of cinematic spivery as a key element in a ‘lost continent of British films’, the questioning by *All our Yesterdays* of the notion of escapism was not systematically applied to this type of cinema. This was partly due to stylistic heterogeneity and generic ambiguity of the films in question. Indeed, in addition to the elusive meaning of historical spivery, there was and still is no strict definition of what constitutes a spiv film.  

Based on the imagery of masculinity, Andrew Spicer included some of the films in his own gender-based sub-categorisations of British crime cinema, pointing towards a notion of indigenous British *film noir*. Peter Wollen provided a list of the most significant spiv films and coined the *sui generis* term ‘vernacular fantastic’, as a way of characterising their unique blending of subjective elements with the compelling representation of working-class life. Expanding on this approach, Cecilia Mello has suggested that in five of the most representative films of what she defined as the spiv cycle [*Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1945), *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hammer, 1947), *The Blue Lamp* (Hammer, 1950), *The Blue Max* (Carol Reed, 1966), *The French Connection* (Peter Drury, 1971)], the films were characterized by a strong sense of place and a particular style of narrative and visual presentation that was distinct from other British crime films.

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1947), They Made me a Fugitive (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1947), Night and the City (Jules Dassin, 1950), The Blue Lamp (Basil Dearden, 1950)] the atmosphere and style produced an idiosyncratic mode of realism. According to her argument, the films’ emphasis on proletarian subjectivity and romanticism was framed by a mise-en-scène that, despite being largely although not exclusively studio based, made London and its geography look lifelike and feel like a ‘state of mind’.

Mello’s reading seemed also to expand on Charlotte Brunsdon’s reading of Night and the City and It Always Rains on Sunday, when she stressed that the films’ national style and settings co-existed and stood in opposition to the generic space of Hollywood and noir cinema. In Night and the City, Brunsdon noted that, while landmark London was dynamically contrasted with as well as inexorably linked to an underground, cinematically noir London, Harry Fabian’s American spirit collided with the hardworking ethos of British swindlers who surrounded him. While drawing on the aforementioned revisionist literature of cinematic aesthetics, this chapter analyses and contextualises the filmic negotiation of spiv escapism. I shall rethink, yet also expand, Brunsdon’ reading of Night and the City’s dialectics between Hollywood and London, mainly by foregrounding the ways that escapism moved between aesthetic convention and historical experience, cinematic illusion and grounded metropolitan life. The starting point for this rethinking will turn towards the prototype stylistic features of the American gangster genre and their own conventional ways of addressing the dramatic

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22 Ibid., p. 47.
value of criminal fantasy. The aim here is to show how Hollywood and British cinema produced far more complexly interrelated forms of criminal subjectivity.

**Gangsters Looking at Gangsters**

Before addressing how Hollywood cast a shadow over British crime cinema, Brunsdon admitted the American *noir* was itself marked by spatial ambiguities and hybridities. She mentioned, for example, the contrast between domestic, ordered and public/disordered space in *Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953). 24 What this view ignored, however, was that underneath these binary dynamic of noir space lay a much more instrumental convention, one strongly rooted in the classic American gangster cinema of the 1930s. This centred on the dramatic emphasis on escapism as a constituting factor of social transgression and crime. As Jack Shadoian has shown, in the narrative and moral economy of the classic films of the genre [*Little Caesar*, (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931), *Public Enemy*, (William A. Wellman, 1931), *Scarface*, (Howard Hawks, 1932)] becoming a gangster meant fulfilling explicitly and implicitly expressed dreams of social, professional and sexual success. 25 Moving across cultural space, from the low ranks of society (proletarian life, petty crime, the domestic environment) to the higher echelons of urban glamour and deviance (night clubs, luxurious houses, dance halls and so on) was largely presented as a violent response to an inner impulse for stardom.

This was most highly exemplified in *Little Caesar*, the archetypal film of the genre. Its establishing scene introduces the main heroes, Rico (Edward G. Robinson) and Joe (I Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) by exposing their life aspirations. While reading a newspaper in

a café, they both seem to imagine themselves in roles that usually attract the attention of
the mass media. Rico expresses the wish to become a king of crime and Joe, a dancer.
Thus, prior to the spivs’ autobiographical self-presentation in the public sphere of post-
war Britain, the cinematic 1930s American gangster cast the spectacular inauguration of
criminal selfhood under the rhetorical spell of self-confession, emphasising that beneath
the transgressive choreography of anti-social life lay strong mobilising motors of fantasy
life.

As the aspiring American gang leader joins forces with an aspiring dancer, the
spectacular impetus of crime and art seem to interlace, yet not in a harmonious way.
While both heroes achieve their dreams, the fall of the gangster is triggered by his
intense efforts to repossess the companionship of the dancer. Rico is simultaneously
shown being passionately affectionate towards Joe and threateningly envious towards
the latter’s wife, Olga (Glenda Farrell), whose influence is deemed responsible for Joe
‘going straight’ and becoming a ‘sissy’. (The couple ultimately turn Rico in to the police,
who chase him to his death.) Rico’s vaguely homosexual, explicitly deranged and
ultimately self-destructive adherence to homosocial partnerships (commenting on his
fall, he says ‘This is what I get for liking a guy too much’) is linked to an iconography of
narcissistic self-admiration. Flamboyantly dressed in a coat, shirt and handkerchief, the
gangster is shown to take great pleasure while observing his photographic portrait in a
card, posing for the press photographers (the cinematic camera capturing the stillness of
his smile before the photographic camera), admiring the journalistic publicity of his
image, and even breaking his solidly macho body posture into a series of effeminate
pirouettes while checking out his tuxedo outfit in front of a mirror (figures 2.1–4).
As we have seen in the previous chapter, an analogous mingling of visual escapism and sexual abnormality informed the post-war clinical psychiatrist’s interpretative portraiture of spivery. British psychiatrist, Peter Scott, in his ‘Clinical Contribution’, interpreted spivs’ flamboyant dressing outfits and overall photographic and cinematic exhibitionism (adopting the names of film characters, fascination for photographic self-portraits) as material manifestations of a psychic attitude evocative of the ‘make-believe’ inclinations of sexual perversion.  

Scott argued that the spiv’s material outfit confirmed the final triumph of manliness, his lifestyle achieving an extraordinary balance between escapism and reality, passive spectatorship and active life.

Figure 2.1. Criminality as a performance of vanity: photographic self-admiration. 
*Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).

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Figure 2.2. Posing for the photographers. *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).

Figure 2.3. A newspaper photograph on screen encapsulates gangster’s glamour. *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).
Figure 2.4. The gangster’s self-observance: Rico admires his transformation into an object of stardom. *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).

While by the early 1950s, the psychiatrist saw in spivery a transgressive impulse of spectatorship, as early as the 1930s, the American screen had emphatically portrayed the spiv’s original object of spectatorship, the gangster, as a criminal exemplification of escapism. Seen from this perspective, the real-life spiv was the spectator of a spectator, and the cinematic one, the imitator of an imitator. As opposed, however, to its post-war British mutation, the American gangster’s narcissistic, sexual and professional imagination transgressed reality in a far less diplomatic, much more grandiose and ultimately tragic way. Indeed, the American gangster did not merely imitate the dressing style, name or slang of his idols (as spivs were said to do); he violently transformed himself into the object of his spectatorship.

At the beginning of *Little Caesar*, Rico reads about a gangster who made the newspaper headlines, while at a later point of the narration, he manages to become himself a gangster featured on newspaper front pages. This emphasis on photography (the shots of the newspaper cover, and the photographic portrait in the card, Rico’s posturing and
self-observance) transforms the visuality of the mass media into symbolic embodiment of criminal vanity (figures 2.1–4). Filtered through static frames, the filmic construction of the fantasising gangster foregrounds the psychic dynamics of photographs, newspaper headlines and celebrity posturing. The vocabulary of mass-media self-reflexivity is emblematised in scene of self-mirroring. The audience confronts the reflection of Rico’s body posture standing on a table, while in the lower right-hand corner of the frame, an enthusiastic spectator, a younger gangster, looks towards him with admiration (figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5. Rico’s self-mirroring, a dialogue between criminal vanity and cinematic self-reflexivity. *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).

Dressed in a tuxedo, framed in the reflective surface of the mirror, Rico is watched by an admirer from a low, diagonal angle, which conjures up the perspective of a cinematic or theatre audience. The gangster’s posturing recalls a celebrity star, a stage performer or a magician, who hypnotises his audience (the aspiring young gangster) while being
hypnotised by his own image. The gangster figure is a spectacular image which consumes its own reflection in a spectacle. To deceive the spectators’ gaze visually overlaps with the capacity to deceive ones’ own self-gaze. A gangster, this scene suggests, is someone who knows how to demonstrate his capacity to hedonistically conflate his sense of the self with an image of glory. Crime is a masculine attitude that reconciles the art of being seen with the art of self-observance.

The allegorical alignment of the figure of the gangster with a psychologically electrifying spell of visual impressions culminates in Little Caesar's tragic finale. Chased by the police, Rico finds shelter behind a large poster advertising Joe and Olga’s theatrical show (figure 2.6). While the bullets killing Rico are seen to rip holes in the lower part of the poster which proclaimed ‘Laughing, Singing, Dancing Success’, the final image of the film is the poster for the ‘Grande Theatre’. By juxtaposing the hero’s fall with Joe and Olga’s theatrical rise (Rico’s objects of desire and envy respectively), this dramatic closure emphasises the notion of the film as a spectacle about spectacle.

Overall, by merging the psychic illusion of the hero with the optical illusion of the modern commercial world (fashion, photographs, advertisements), the film speaks about the complexities of human interiority while addressing the exterior appearance of a mundane, ephemeral and commodified materiality (newspapers, mirrors, clothes, posters, etc.). Establishing the spectacle of crime as a popular representation of the workings of the psyche, Little Caesar was followed by two ‘classic’ films (Public Enemy,
Scarface), whose stories mixed the moral and social didactic message (crime does not pay) with a dramatic emphasis on the fantasy life as a motivational force of crime.  

Figure 2.6. The snapshot contrasts the theatre poster's 'laughing singing dancing succes' with the fall of a fantasising gangster. Little Caesar (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931).

Long before spivery reached the British screen, the gangster genre had invented ways of welding the material to the psychological and the didactic to the entertaining. To be spectacular, a criminal needed to look real, and to look real he had to somehow release on screen an excess of imagination, desire and deception. By constructing illusions about illusions, the gangster genre and its noir mutations emerged as the criminal spectacle par excellence, one that redrew the possible boundaries between what could

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27 See Sadoian, Dreams and Dead Ends.
count for real and fantastic, within the stylistic confines of a mainstream and popular medium of mass entertainment.

This precise aesthetic paradigm was primarily held to be the original source of reference for the criminal aesthetics of British spivery (Chapter 1), both as a cultural practice of self-presentation and a trope of cinematic representation. This is partly why this thesis places the analysis of films before the examination of the cultural imagery of actual crimes (examined in chapters 4 and 5). The second reason for this arrangement relates to a question that has already been signalled in the introduction. How did popular culture, cinematic audiences and criminal actors understand the distinction between representation and life, considering that the life of the criminal was publicly conceived as a form of street-wise representation? In what terms did the screen portray spivery as a deviant mode of self-disguise, one involving the diplomatic entanglement of a materially and bodily embedded imagination (social, sexual, cultural masquerade) and the active energies of spectatorship (acting as a Hollywood actor/American gangster)?

**Night and the City: Hollywood's Confidence Trick in London?**

Jack Sadoian, in his *Dreams and Dead Ends* (2003), wrote:²⁸

> the gangster is a paradigm of the American dream. The gangster film is a vehicle that responds to our wish to have our dreams made visible to us in a form that retains their dreamlike qualities but contains a narrative that is the living dream of its hero who makes it happen, actualises it.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4
Sadoian encapsulates the perception of the gangster film as a cinematic vision about dreamers (gangsters), designed for dreamers (spectators). As this view seems to suggest, both types of fantasising subjects, the spectator who observes the dream on screen and the gangster who enacts it, simultaneously undergo a dreamlike experience while being awake. Sadoian’s approach, while linking the exposure of fantasy on screen with the secret fantasies of those confronting the screen, refers to the latter in a rather vague way as ‘everyone who exists in particular configurations and contradictions of American society’, and who is familiar with ‘a dream in conflict with the society’. Marking long-held methodological problems within film scholarship, the tension between an abstract positioning of the spectator vis-à-vis the psycho-textual dynamics of filmic text, on the one hand, and the conjectural specificities of audience responses, on the other, emphasises the need for methodical approaches that, as Jackie Stacey has stressed, would aim to balance psychoanalytic interpretations with the historically situated evidence. By focusing on the ways the conventions of the American gangster genre informed the cinematic aesthetics of British spivery, and more particularly, Jules Dassin’s American–English film, Night and the City (1950), the following sections will approach the film as a public discourse on the criminal psyche and national identity, firstly through an analysis of its critical reception and then of the wider intertextual associations between illusion and metropolitan crime.

While Night and the City reproduced many of the conventions that were intrinsic to the classic gangster genre, negative contemporary reviews and the film’s disappointing box-office performance suggested that it failed to appeal to the British critical and lay audiences. Introducing the film to his reading public, the Daily Mail reviewer wrote:

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29 Ibid.

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Bars, American tourists, for the fleecing of; clubs, ladies for the shady use of; Soho gangsters; all-in wrestling; these things provide the lyrical background to an empty fable about a night-club tout who dreams of better things. The fact that three of the leading characters are played by Americans does not help the illusion that this is an authentic portrait of London Town after dark.31

Highlighting thus the film’s lyric treatment of urban hedonism and crime (Soho gangsters, clubs, wrestling, etc.), the Daily Mail reviewer stressed, however, that, owing to the American identity of the lead actors [Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark), Mary Gene (Gene Tierney), and Adam (Hugh Marlowe)], Night and the City failed to construct a convincing illusion out of heroes’ dreams for the British audiences. The language employed by the newspaper was indicative of the controversies inherent in public discussions of the relationship between reality and representation. The film was not simply criticised for not being ‘realistic’ in a way a British film should be, but also for not being illusionistic in the ways that American films were apparently supposed to be. The uncomfortable interference of the foreign Hollywood element, combined with a story which – as another reviewer, Roger Manvel, suggested stretched ‘credulity too far’ – was said to disrupt the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’.32 What these reviewers considered as disappointing was the film’s ‘entertainment’ value. Employing instead of the word ‘illusion’ the terms ‘reality’ and more rarely ‘realistic’, most of the critics conceived its failure in national terms. As the Manchester Guardian reviewer wrote:

The scenery is there all right, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, and the rest of the landmarks –

31 F. M, Daily Mail, 16 June 1950, newspaper cutting, Night and the City, microfiche collection, BFI Library (author’s emphasis).
32 Roger Manvell, ‘On Being Entertained’, Cinema, June 1950, newspaper cutting, microfiche collection, BFI.
but this background of reality only makes more fantastic those curious personages who fill the foreground of the story [...] It shows once again that in making a realistic film there is no substitute for knowledge of place and people.33

According to this view, the visual reality of space accentuated the disruption of the cinematic illusion, underscoring the disharmoniously unrealistic and fantastic portraits of the protagonists. The idea that the cultural proximity of space exposed the cultural distance of character, disrupting the illusory effect of the narrative was shared by nine out of the thirty contemporary reviews that are now archived in the British Film Institute’s library. Furthermore, two reviewers gave some merit to the overall film: eight suggested that, despite the film’s ultimate failure, the acting of Stanislaus Zbyszko (an old Hungarian boxer who played the old Greek wrestler) was decent.34

The positive comments were in the minority. While twenty-eight out of the thirty reviews thought that overall the film was a failure, five reviewers condemned the representation of London on explicitly moral grounds, arguing that it overemphasised the city’s seedy aspects at the expense of its normal, peaceful side, while two commentators denounced the stylistic ambiguity of the photograph, complaining about the ‘monstrously distorted figures, shot from a worm’s eye in and out of shadows’ or

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33 Untitled, Manchester Guardian, 17 June 1950, newspaper cutting, Night the City microfiche collection, BFI
claiming that ‘those shadowy shots might as well have been Manchester’.35 Finally, seven of the writers ironically emphasised that the most annoying element was Widmark’s neurotic acting. ‘One leaves the cinema,’ the Sunday Chronicle’s reviewer noted, ‘happy at the least in the knowledge that Mr. Widmark has stopped running’.36 Two reviewers compared the film’s representation of London with The Blue Lamp – an indigenous spiv film, and propagandistic vehicle for the metropolitan police force – in favour of the latter, and finally, another two referred to Night and the City as ‘touristic propaganda’, deceptively presenting London as part of the continent.37

Seen against the wider historical context, all the points of the film critics (most of which will be revisited when we engage with the textual analysis) pointed towards wider institutional concerns. Indeed, merging aesthetic with moral anxieties, and commenting simultaneously on realism, illusion and entertainment, these reviews did not only echo the contemporary outcry over the moral and stylistic peculiarity of spivery. They reflected on the wider crisis of contemporary British cinema. As one of the most highly respected British critics, the Sunday Times’ Dilys Powell, noted, the film was released at a difficult time for the industry.38

At the end of the 1940s, (a decade that would later be described as the golden age of national cinema), the industry was witnessing, as Powell’s article stressed, ‘studios closing’ and ‘technicians out of work’. In that context, American co-productions came

35 Lester, ‘A Touch of Madness’, newspaper cutting, Night and the City, microfiche collection, BFI.
36 News Chronicle, 17 June 1950, BFI.
38 Powell, Times 16 June 1950, BFI.
to be seen as an opportunity for recovery.\footnote{Ibid.} ‘At the beginning of the nineteen-forties,’ Powell quoted a director as saying, ‘American companies were ready to finance a British film and leave the British to make it. Today, the idea is to move in with a Hollywood script, a Hollywood director and a largely Hollywood cast…’\footnote{Ibid.} Expanding on this perception of Anglo–American collaboration as being ‘imperceptibly Anglo’ and ‘unmistakably American’, Powell argued that Dassin’s London ‘has given us a conglomeration of night-clubs, “thieves” kitchens, all-in wrestling and river-rats, the never never city which does service in the cinema for any capital’\footnote{Ibid.}. Referring to filmic representation of the metropolis as a cinematic gesture of abstraction, one that sought not to emphasise what is unique there, but to appropriate what could comply with an internationally recognised idiom cinematic language, Powell’s view predated Brunsdon’s reading of \textit{Night and the City}’s London as a generic ‘noir’ space, one co-existing and contrasting with landmark London.\footnote{Brunsdon, ‘Space in the British Crime film’.

As the next section will show, however, a number of cultural factors, mainly the conventions of the American gangster film, the metropolitan aesthetics of spivery, and recurrent thematic and stylistic motifs in Jules Dassin’s cinematic cities, there is plenty of evidence to re-evaluate the opposition between Hollywood and Britishness. Closely reading the cinematic and social context of the film, I shall try to argue that \textit{Night and the City}’s construction of the spiv persona was far more complexly associated with the indigenous perceptions of criminal mentality and its relationship with American culture.
An American Spiv: Cinematic Convention or National Anomaly?

The aforementioned film reviews, while highly indicative of the anxieties underpinning the British cinematic industry, were hardly reliable indicators of the reasons the film did not perform well at the box office. Considering the wider cultural context, what the reviewers considered as the central problem of the film, mainly its alleged explicit Americanness, might have attracted rather than distanced the British public. Indeed, since at least the 1930s onwards, the high popularity of American gangster aesthetics was strikingly evident not only in the self-fashioning and cinematic vision of spivery, but also, as Steve Chibnall has noted, in the indigenous production and consumption of popular fiction. In the 1930s and 1940s, numerous authorial voices, ranging from professional crime writers and, self-confessing spivs, to ordinary British men and women masquerading as Americans authors, produced a highly popular stylistic panorama of adventure, fantasy and crime that was either set in the USA or in Britain, and, in the latter case, more specifically in the environs of London’s Soho.

An increasingly visible consumerist public, comprised mainly of young people and women, was becoming familiar with American-related cultural products (cinema, fiction, music, clothing, newspaper journalism, comic books). The catalytic historical marker of this social fervour came to be the presence of American GIs in wartime Britain and especially London (1942–1945). In dance halls and in metropolitan night life generally, American men were seen to attract the over-enthusiastic companionship and sexual liaison of licentious, young women or ‘good-time girls’, while simultaneously

43 Steve Chibnall, ‘Counterfeit Yanks: War, Austerity and Britain’s American Dream’ in P.J. Davies, ed., Representing and Imagining America (Keele, 1996), pp. 45–57.
44 Ibid. p.50.
marking the contemporary mass cultural imagery of criminal sensation. This historical phenomenon combined with the evident popularity of American and gangster cinema for both marginal figures (spivs, good-time girls, petty criminals) and the wider public, suggested that by 1950 (the year of \emph{Night and the City}'s release) the image of an American or Americanised crook operating in London was not such an unusual, unpopular or unreal phenomenon as the film reviewers seemed to have suggested.

Judging by \emph{Night and the City}'s critical reception, what seemed in question was the line distinguishing the American from the Americanised. A contemporary reviewer found it ‘odd’ to hear Fabian speaking with ‘a broad American accent’. This was a strange comment to make, considering that, as it was well known, the character was played by an American actor. If the character of Fabian was not self-evidently American, the pressing question is: what stylistic or narrative element would impel a 1940s British reviewer to express his uncertainty about the fictional national identity of a character played by a Hollywood actor? Could this issue shed some light on the ways the British public responded to the film?

In addition to contemporary reviews, recent readings of the film have emphasised the centrality of Fabian’s Americanness in the overall hybrid stylistic economy of \emph{Night and the City}. Paralleling it with tension in \emph{mise-en-scène} between landmark and criminal London, Brunsdon’s view has suggested that the stark contrast between Fabians’ American identity, his ‘fly and fancy’ spirit on one hand, and the pragmatism and hard

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working ethos of British criminals on the other, was the central dramatic device of this Anglo–American collaboration.48

In the film, Fabian’s ambitious plan to preside over London’s wrestling racket is shown to be largely mistrusted by all of his fraudulent acquaintances (counterfeiters, smugglers, beggars), all of whom categorically refuse to invest in his idea. This contrast between an ambitious small crook and the street-wise pragmatism of London strongly recalls the literary source of the film, Gerald Kersh’s novel Night and the City (1938). Despite Kersh’s claim that the only commonality between the film and his book was the title, this feature is common in both versions of the story.49 Film and novel contrast Fabian’s ambitious world view with the pragmatism of London’s traditional criminal culture. In the book, Fabian is criticised by a costermonger, a figure representative of a folkloric type of street-trading.

The novel, however, emphasises that Fabian is not American. He is a cockney pretending to be an American. From the outset, this cultural masquerade is conveyed by narrative tropes recalling iconographic devices that framed 1930s American cinema’s convention of the fantasising gangster. For instance, in line with Rico’s self-mirroring scene in Little Caesar, Fabian is introduced to the reading public when looking at himself in the mirror while at the barbers. ‘If there was one spectacle,’ reads the first paragraph, ‘that pleased Harry Fabian better than the reflection of his own face it was the back of

49 All they used was the title. That makes me the highest paid writer in the world’. ‘£10,937 10s. A Word’, Daily Worker, 12 September 1949, microfiche collection, BFI Library.
his head’. Pretending to have left behind an imaginative career of song writing in the USA, speaking in an American accent, ‘adjusting his tie’, and surveying ‘himself from head to foot’, Fabian’s narcissistic portrayal is not the only element of the book recalling *Little Caesar*’s narrative economy. The novel also contrasts Fabian’s deviant dreams with the genuinely artistic dreams of Adam, a Soho club waiter. While Fabian’s daydreaming persona is prone to spending all his quickly earned money during one night out, hard-working Adam mixes his dream life with the cheap materiality of the surrounding environment: his imaginary sculptures are made out the walls of a café. Soho’s setting juxtaposes these versions of dream life. Fabian loses his money (and the entrepreneurial dreams based on them) in the same club where Adam works as a waiter. Adam imagines himself as an sculptor, Fabian imagines himself as an American songwriter. Overall, the story is not about an American criminal in London, but about a British criminal who disguises himself as an American. National masquerade and media fantasies are represented in the text as authentic aspects of London criminal life. Criminal vanity, American exhibitionism and unrealistic fantasies mark the psychology of a Londoner.

A detail of the literary portrayal of the spiv persona – Fabian’s carnation falling from his coat while he is carried away from the club penniless and drunk – marks the introduction of Fabian’s character on screen. *Night and the City*’s establishing scenes picture him being chased away at night time in London. Running through London’s landmarks sites (St Paul’s Cathedral) as well as the narrow streets of Soho (around Fleet Street), Fabian stops to pick up the carnation that falls from his coat (figures 2.7–8). This gesture exemplifies an indirect cinematic vocabulary of emotion. In contrast to the

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51 Ibid.
classic gangster film, in *Night and the City* Fabian does not admire his image at mirrors. The sharp demands of criminal life undercut the hero’s fantasy life: Fabian collects his carnation while running.

Figure 2.7. Fabian drops a carnation; dandyism merges with danger. *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950).

Figure 2.8. The collection of the carnation, a gesture that exemplifies the criminal aesthetics of spivery. *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950).
Barr has argued that understatement and indirectness, typical signifiers of British temperament, enhance and complicate the dramatic dynamics of what has come to be recognised as British realism.\(^{52}\) While Barr’s emphasis is on the national production, there is a reason to argue that Dassin’s film applied this version of British character on a crime film. The iconographic emphasis on a detail of literary narrative (fallen carnation) nuances on the screen the novel’s explicit emphasis on criminal escapism and vanity. While the novel contains direct references to narcissism, in phrases such as ‘we would find it easier to live without food than without a mirror’,\(^{53}\) the film overlaps the act of self-mirroring with a style of moving across the city. Mingling the art of subversive survival with an art self-observance, the image of Fabian picking up a carnation from the ground reproduces as well as distorts the gangster convention of the fantasising criminal. Fabian’s performance points towards the spiv imagination without visualising it. Since there is no mirror in the scene, the spectator is invited to imagine Fabian imagining himself as a spectacle. Framed on the screen, the city – and not a mirror – emerges as the reflective surface of fantasy.

This idea (the city as a mirror of fantasy) is further developed via the metonymic orchestration of spaces, objects and gestures. Rather than depicting the self-observance of success, these objects emphasise the desire for success. Marking a series of short scenes, these images disrupt and delay the flow of the diegesis, foregrounding glamorous projections of Fabian’s name: an advertising sign situated on the façade of Fabian’s wrestling gymnasium, a poster of the wrestling match promoted by him, and an office statue which recalls trophies given to sporting champions. Fabian’s passionate interest for this object (he takes it to his office and observed it) contrasts with his

\(^{52}\) Barr, Introduction, pp. 8–35.
\(^{53}\) Kersh, *Night and the City*, p. 117.
emotional neglect towards the female characters that surround his presence in the film – his girlfriend and his ex-girlfriend (figures 2.9–11). Instead of heterosexual romantic encounters, the office sign emphasises Fabian’s emotional engagement with material symbols of self-aggrandisement. Once again the narrative emphasises Fabian’s imaginary life, without visualising it directly. While evoking the conventional gangster films, Night and the City constructs a cinematic vocabulary, in which, in stark contrast to its American counterparts, any hint of disorder in its hero’s emotional or erotic economy is conveyed in a much more subtle way.

Figure 2.9. Fabian Promotions: the city as a symbolic surface of self-mirroring. Night and the City (Jules Dassin, 1950)

This is also exemplified in scenes revolving around Fabian’s visit to his girlfriend Mary. He is shown walking up the stairs to Mary’s apartment, while rearranging the carnation of his suit, which he had recently picked up from the street. His body language, now more slow-paced and solid, exudes cheerfulness and self-confidence. The sartorial detail restores the hero’s sentimental self-control. In a related vein, in the post-war psychiatric
discussions of spivery, small details of self-fashioning, such as a tie, confirmed spiv’s recovery of manliness and the reconciliation with reality (as opposed to the irreparable escapism of the pervert, the homosexual, the transvestite). Echoing these narratives of transgressive selfhood, in this Night and the City, the hero’s narcissism emerges as a defence mechanism against reality and points towards a problematic erotic life.

In the following sequence, Fabian plagues the domestic, private and feminine space (Mary’s apartment) with the escapist transgression and anxieties of his waywardness. (He is caught stealing from his girlfriend’s wallet). Exhibiting an emotional detachment from an old romantic photograph given to him by Mary, Fabian, when asked to quit his lifestyle and settle down, mumbles the phrase: ‘I just want to become somebody.’ While strongly suggesting that his drive for self-stardom disrupts the domestic values of married, hetero-normative life, when compared to Little Caesar’s dramatic emphasis on Rico’s passion for Joe, this scene of emotional disorder looks rather mild.

Fabian’s relationships with women are marked by money. Apart from stealing money from his girlfriend, his ex-girlfriend funds his wrestling project. Vaguely echoing the literary origins of the character (in the novel he is as pimp), Fabian’s detachment from women strongly contrasts with material (carnation, office statue) but also verbal articulations of stardom. Little Caesar merges the gangster’s self-admiration with the visual vocabulary of self-reflexivity. The cinematic screen frames the still portraits of the heroes in cards, press photographs and theatrical posters. In Night and the City Fabian’s

mass media fantasies are dramatised in more indirect ways. ‘I read all about in The Times’ ironically comments Nosserros, the owner of the Soho club, where Fabian works as tout.

Figure 2.10. The poster as a metonymy of stardom. Night and the City (Jules Dassin, 1950).

Figure 2.11. The office sign as a material trace of fantasy. Night and the City (Jules Dassin, 1950).
‘Fabian, it is reported, is suffering from highly inflamed imagination, a couple of delusions of grandeur.’ Following a subtle and dramatic establishing depiction of the city as a mirror of living fantasy (the running scenes in landmark London and in Soho, the carnation, the narcissistic disruption of domestic dreams), Nosseros’ statement vividly establishes a link between pathological imagination (‘suffering’, ‘delusions of grandeur’) and mass-media imagery (I read all about in *The Times*). If Fabian wants to be a mass-media spectacle, this will be in his words, a spectacle about the desire for spectacle.

Displayed in this way, the night life of the metropolis shapes Fabian’s imaginary self-aggrandisement and emotional disorder. Complying with contemporary sociological interpretations and tabloid accounts of spivery as a symptom of disordered metropolitan space, this image of the criminal as an urban fantasist, culminates in the final stages of the narrative. Fast-paced scenes of a manhunt in an expressionistically photographed London are interrupted by a moment of stasis, centring now not on the picking up of a carnation but on the apologetic self-confession of Fabian who is now faced with his inevitable death.

While the anti-hero’s face adopts interchangeably expressions of agony, daydreaming and despair, he confesses that were it not by accident, the journalists would seek to interview him. Following the frenetic capturing of urban imagery, this self-exposed tour into snapshots of fantasy life, echoes but also transgresses *Little Caesar*’s finale (the image of a giant theatre poster behind which Rico was shot dead). In *Night and the City*,

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due to the absence of any overt visual signifier of success, the viewer has to guess the contents of Fabian’s dream life from his facial expressions, words and body postures.

Paralleling *Little Caesar*, *Night and the City* narrates a dream that is turned into a nightmare of waking life. In the London based film, though, the central hero, instead of grasping or directly revealing the content of his dream, sketches its shape by moving spasmodically around it. In both cases, the viewer seems to watch a movie within a movie. In 1931, *Little Caesar* visualises screens within screen, frames within frames. In 1950, the Anglo–American film centres on a character who re-imagines the English metropolis. If the Hollywood film is about an American, *Night and the City* is about a criminal of ambiguous national identity; an American actor pretending to be an English criminal, or an English criminal pretending to be American star, in the way real-life spivs do.

Fabian’s neurotic, hyperactive performance, which annoyed the British reviewers, did not invoke the solid body posture of American gangsters, but the energetic, semi-comical, ‘reluctantly sentimental’ body language of the British spiv, as was exemplified, for example, by Nigel Patrick’s style of acting in the film *Noose* (Edmond Gréville, 1948). Spivs emulated the style of American gangsters in a number of contemporary British dramas [i.e. *Waterloo Road*, (1945), *The Blue Lamp*, (1950)]. Addressed to an audience that was used to watching English petty criminals posing as American gangsters, but not American actors impersonating English petty criminals, *Night and the City* seemed to have failed in the box office, not necessarily because its protagonist

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looked too American, as the contemporary reviewers suggested, but rather because he did not look American enough.

Contrary to Brunsdon’s view, rather than sharply contrasting with the criminal ethos of London, Fabian’s echoed an authentic version London’s deviance. The type of confidence tricks that Harry Fabian enacts on screen recall contemporary police accounts of confidence tricks, most notably the ones described in the testimony of a Scotland Yard officer, Percy Smith, in his ‘circular’ on confidence tricksters (1935) as well as in his two memoir-based books. In the film Fabian is seen tricking American tourists into visiting a club by promoting (or masquerading) his Americanness and Smith noted that confidence tricksters operating in London usually targeted people of the same national identity. In Smith’s account, what the ‘fly and fancy’ attitude is described as a common among London’s confidence tricksters, irrespective of their nationality. As the Scotland Yard Officer revealed tricksters were as capable of winning money as quickly as loosing it through an ultra-expensive, exhibitionistic and hedonistic lifestyle. The act of showing off, Smith emphasised, was a key strategy of self-presentation (sartorial style, manners, and storytelling techniques). The same source highlighted the strong association between confidence tricksters and the public celebrations of the metropolis. Circulated in the police departments in 1935, the year of King George V’s jubilee, Smith’s booklet was designed to assist the London


Percy Smith, Plutocrats, pp. 9–25.

Ibid.

Ibid.
Metropolitan Police’s efforts to deal with the increasing presence of confidence tricksters within crowded urban landscapes.\footnote{Illustrated Circular of Confidence Tricksters, 1935, TNA PRO: MEPO 8/41.}

In this light, Dassin’s film showed how the 1930s culture of the confidence trickster shaped the 1940s cinematic re-imagination of the modern metropolis. In Night and the City, the 1930s petty criminal becomes a club tout who guides American tourists through an urban space that is now transformed into a setting of adventure. Participating in the expanding commercialisation of London as centre of pleasure-seeking economy, this rediscovery of lowlife as a spectacular mise-en-scène was not simply a Hollywood misinterpretation of spivery. This style of urban reportage was exemplified in the contemporary popular press, and especially in the pages of the Sunday People.

It was in this newspaper, that Gerald Kersh (the author of Night and the City) used to publish short autobiographical stories. Recalling the style of his novels, Kersh’s writings mixed social observation with the colourful and fictional elements.\footnote{See among many Gerald Kersh, ‘Gerald Kersh Meets a Tramp with a Load of Money’, Sunday People, 29 September 1946, p. 2.} The Sunday People also included Arthur Helliwell’s column ‘Follow me around’. His writing involved a set of representations of London that anticipated Dassin’s film, even more directly than Kersh’s novel. Apart from the fact that both writers worked for the same paper, plenty of textual evidence from Helliwell’s journalism suggests that, if the makers of Night and the City were aware of Kersh’s 1930s literary dramatisation of Americanised cockney, they were quite possibly also aware of Helliwell’s 1940s sensational view of the city.
Rather than focusing exclusively on London’s night life, however, Helliwell introduced his column in September 1946, by narrating his memories from ‘Labua Island’, the ‘incredible, breath-taking pink and green sunsets’ and the ‘little Javanese girl with the Mona Lisa smile’.63 ‘We East of Suez sahibs,’ he mentioned, ‘can be crashing bores once we get started.’64 The antidote to the erotic, picaresque and exoticised nostalgia for the East was the resource to the secrets of ‘wonderful London’, which, as he contended, ‘is still the most exciting city in the world, crammed with the world’s most exciting people’. Interchanging an oriental with a metropolitan exoticism, Helliwell’s inaugural article envisaged post-war London as that place that encompassed, compressed and modernised all the ‘exciting’ historical, cultural and geographical elements that traditionally shaped the spectacle of the British Empire.

Mixing gossip about the royal family, high society, national and international film stars and celebrities with the workings of Soho spivs and confidence tricksters, Helliwell’s narrative strategy did not contrast the official ‘landmark’ vision of London with that of the criminal city, it presented the spiv London as a morally ambivalent and authentic landmark of the cosmopolitan metropolis. Indeed, Helliwell’s writings included reports on ‘dominion airmen’ who joined ‘the swanky re-opening parties of the Metropolitan Hotel’, as well as a repertoire of sickly dressed deviant inhabitants of Soho.65 These spivvy characters were emphatically described as being racially varied. Helliwell talked of ‘a chocolate skinned dandy in a long black overcoat with an astrakhan collar’ playing a dice game as well as other ‘nigger boys’ at gambling parties set ‘on the counter of one of

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64 Ibid.
Soho’s back-street café bars’. Pictured in this way, Helliwell’s version of Soho, what in
the film was Fabian’s habitat, emerged as microcosm of glamour, deception and cultural
chaos, one that along with its cosmopolitan, racially mixed imagery, was now acquiring a
cinematic allure.

To address the cinematic element in Helliwell’s writing, it is instructive to compare the
way that Night and the City introduced the night and the city of London to its viewer and
the way Helliwell did in one his texts in November 1947. In the film, a blurry night shot
of the Thames followed by clearer shot of the brightly lit Piccadilly Circus (the
southwest boundary of Soho) was accompanied by a voiceover saying: ‘Night and the
City. The City is tonight, tomorrow night or any night. The city is London.’ The
subsequent shots depict Fabian being chased through London landmark sites (such as
St Paul’s Cathedral) and the back streets of Soho. On 17 November 1946, Helliwell
introduced the London night to his readers in the following way:

Midnight moves in Piccadilly Circus. A little red-head teeters on tip-toe as she kisses her Yankee
boy friend good night on Rainbow corner […] The last of the late kinema (sic) and theatre crowds
have disappeared into the suburbs. The B.B.C. has wished the world good night. Respectable London
prepares for bed. But the other half, rubbing the
day’s sleep out of its eyes, is just stirring. The dark
web of narrow streets that hems the bright Circus
is spread ready for the night’s haul of mugs and
suckers. This is the spiv’s hour …

Anticipating Night and the City’s establishing scene, Helliwell’s nightscapes foregrounded
the bright lights of Piccadilly, the topographical labyrinth of Soho and the waking life of

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66 Ibid., 2 March 1947, p. 4; 9 November 1947, p. 6.
spivs: the bedtime of normal citizens is deemed the rush-hour of spivs. According to this textual iconography, when theatres, cinemas and radios close, the night seemed to emerge as a ‘bright’ terrain for the performances of urban subversion (‘mugs’, ‘suckers’, ‘spivs’). In the film the image of Fabian running through the dark spaces of the city, picking up his carnation or imagining himself as a celebrity, produced a metaphorical alignment of the city’s night-time with a spectacle of transgression set outside the closed theatres and auditoriums.

The cinematic significance of Helliwell’s writing was even more vividly underscored by an article which appeared alongside the aforementioned exposé. Entitled ‘Soho on the Screen’, its writer, S. Rossiter Shepherd, stressed that ‘Soho […] whose “strong-arm boys and dope dames” have been made famous by my colleague Arthur Helliwell, is now for the first time in its lurid history coming to life on screen.’[68] [He was speaking about the making of Alberto Cavalcanti’s They Made Me a Fugitive (1947)] Signalling the increasing visibility of spiv films, Shepherd directly associated the publicity of Soho and its subsequent screening with Helliwell’s writing. What began as a sensational urban guide was now deemed to have facilitated the transformation of Soho into a cinematic landscape. If Helliwell’s city looked towards cinema, it was now cinema that looked towards Helliwell’s city.

Therefore, the dark and deceptive version London was not exclusively constructed by Hollywood. This form of representation shaped the ways English journalists and writers discussed, dramatised and textualised 1940s London. Helliwell’s portrayal of club touts, (Fabian’s profession) encapsulated this trend. It is important to note here, that in the

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original novel, Fabian was not a tout. The filmmakers borrowed this idea from an alternative source, perhaps Helliwell. ‘Ignore the touts,’ the journalist advised ‘respectable bottle parties and night spots do not employ touts.’ The joints that employ touts, he argued, are disreputable and prone to taking ‘your money’. Further dramatising their unreliability, he wrote:

In place of the gilt-engraved guest card of the swank bottle party, these dens substitute the whispered invitation of the shady looking character who slides up to you from the shadows. Incidentally, bottle parties, clubs and all-night bars are not all that London after dark has to offer. Many of the nastier dives are gateways to all kinds of vice, from gambling to “queer” erotic parties and private kinemas (sic) where a seat cost a fiver.

Thetout emerged as the 1940s embodiment of the deviant and hedonistic temptations of the metropolis. Strongly associated with the convoluted topographies of Soho, this mobile figure was presented as a streetwise confidence trickster, an expert in the promotion of illicit urban pleasures. The key trick here was to advertise an alternate mode of metropolitan sightseeing (sexual and ‘queer’ as well as respectable and privileged), one that was not visible from the external façade of the city and its official landmarks. In line with Fabian’s ability to variously run away, attack or set a trap, this evocative portrayal of disillusion, in film, fiction and journalism, promoted London’s uniqueness via its capacity to deceive, disorientate and disguise.

In this tour-guide style, the metropolis’ was not projected as a set of solid monuments but as a way of moving between them (as Fabian was seen to be doing in Night and the

70 Ibid.
City) while seeking access to private parties and members’ clubs. Channelling these invisible attractions on the visible surface of the city, the tout premised London’s spectacle on a mobile technology of illusions. Overall, by emphatically speaking about the city as a conspicuous spectacle of deception, the London of the touts evoked the pleasures of spectatorship. Along with the screen, the city was a spectacle of moving images, and, along with the gangster drama, it targeted the secret illicit fantasies of its visitors/spectators.

Fabian’s city invoked a contemporary image of London as a site of excitement and glamour. It represented a new way of understanding landmark London, one that was emblematically tied to the imaginary and hedonistic construction of Soho as the heart of the metropolitan pleasure economy. This style of urban spectatorship was not a wholly new. Night and the City echoed the deeper cultural controversies of London’s history and geography and the ways they were being reworked in the public and mass-media sphere of the post-war period. As many cultural historians have shown, most notably Judith Walkowitz, since the late Victorian period the spectacle of crime, murder and sex have been shaping ways of transcending the spatial and imaginary borders of the British metropolis.71 These presented British society in general and London in particular as a bipolar battleground, a site of conflict between the high and low extremes of the social strata.

Ten years after the release of Night and the City, Jules Dassin cinematically adapted into film the Greek myth of Pygmalion. George Bernard Shaw had used the same myth in

his *Pygmalion* (1912), a theatrical play dramatising Edwardian London’s high and low social encounters. Apart from reviving a version of the Greek myth, Dassin’s Oscar-winning *Never on Sunday* (1960) reworks and develops a central theme of *Night and the City* – the idea of an American visionary now depicted as reviving and modernising the classical heritage of Greece. Significantly, Fabian’s dream had been to dominate the London wrestling scene through a revival of Greco–Roman wrestling. Paralleling *Night and the City*, *Never on Sunday* was set in a capital city (Athens) and centred on the relationship of the city’s lowlife with its classical heritage (see figure 2.13).

Dassin achieves this effect by dramatising the efforts of Homer Thrace (Jules Dassin), a visionary American classicist effort to change the ways that a local prostitute Ilya (Melina Mercouri) enjoys and understands ancient tragedy and sex. This light-comedy scenario makes more apparent that what is less clear in the dramatic structure of *Night and the City*. It underscores the superficiality of a foreign cultural observer. Played by Dassin himself, the overlapping of the image of the American classicist with the American Jewish director makes a strong self-reflexive comment on the distance between the film director and his object of study. In the Greek film, the contemporary low culture of Athens with its illicit and subversive forms of dance, music and sexuality, forms a type of cultural heritage that cannot ultimately be decoded and manipulated by a foreigner. In the end, the American visitor fails to re-create the values of classical heritage, in the same way that in *Night and the City* the American or Americanised criminal fantasist fails not only to cash in on classical Greco–Roman wrestling but also to understand the popular taste and culture of London.
This self-reflexive statement was not understood by the reviewers of *Night and the City*. However, the film’s press book pointed towards that interpretation, by revealing Dassin’s admission that he had spent ‘three weeks tramping the streets by day and night to get what he called a “private eye”’: 72

I set out to discover some of the most beautiful and striking locations suitable to the story, and I hope I have found them. But I don’t pretend that I shall show London to filmgoers as if I knew it intimately. In the short time I have been here that would need a wizard not a film director. 73

In addition to emphasising the key importance of location, by characterising the director as a ‘tramp’ and ‘wizard’ these extracts alluded to the broad semantic connotations of the film’s theme: London’s spivery. Indeed, ‘tramp’ was the word that replaced the term ‘spiv’ in the American edition of John Worby’s *The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Tramp* 74 while ‘wizard’ invoked the commonly held association between confidence tricksters and practical magic and illusion. 75 Associating himself as director with the central subject matter of the film, Dassin seemed to suggest that the only honest film that he could make about London was one centring on the point of view of a wanderer.

73 Ibid.
74 Worby, *The Other Half*.
75 Smith, *Plutocrats*. 
The metaphorical association of the spiv with a visionary who wanders in the city is the central narrative engine of *Night and the City*. Fabian’s mass media fantasies seem to construct a film within a film; his self-obsessive imagination transforms London’s life into a rehearsal of stardom. Shortly after the establishing running scene, Adam, the sculptor said of Fabian: ‘He is an artist without art. He must be happy to groping (sic) for the right lever for the means to express himself.’ In contrast to his literary counterpart, the cinematic version of Adam does not construct his artworks out of his visionary encounters with the walls of Soho cafés. He is a hard-working craftsman whose decorative objects are designed for domestic environments (a ‘doll house’). This invokes what Mary seeks in vain to receive from Fabian – a settled life. The artist in the film, the man constructing artworks out of the landscape of the city, is Fabian. His imagination superimposes on to the visible landmarks of the city an immaterial canvas of illusion and self-deception. The film encapsulates a popular idea of the art as a form of fantasy operating outside the confines of the art world: the 1930s bohemian artist is
transformed into a 1940s deviant spiv who re-imagines the city as stage of glamour. Art is a way of negotiating one’s fantasies within the city. In this light, *Night and the City* illuminates how in the 1940s, the fusion of 1930s Hollywood conventions and the street-wise traditions of London life emblematised a modern idea of the aesthetic experience as an encounter between the criminal illusions and the illusions of the screen.

Considering its contextual dynamics and critical reception, *Night and the City* was a film about escapism that failed to be escapist. It played out the anxieties of national character, criminality and the city by simultaneously reproducing as well as transcending the conventions of gangster drama. One of the key protagonists of the film, the *mise-en-scène* of London, was at the same moment, the key element in wider social debates about post-war modernity. Cultural historians and theorists noted that in this period the modern seemed capable of imaginatively adapting tropes of the past within the new, while continuously repositioning (and re-evaluating) the high culture against its low other. Night and the City was another telling marker of these widespread cultural anxieties. The films’ Hollywood-driven criminals, the cosmopolitan imagery of Soho, and its forms of cultural and spatial masquerade echoed an authentic version of the pleasure economy of 1930s and 1940s London. The contemporary commentators, however, read the film as an American misinterpretation, if not violation, of national culture. *Night and the City*’s unpopularity and critical failure showed that, despite the international intelligibility and commercialisation of modern visual pleasures, spatial psychological and cultural factors provoked misinterpretations, gaps and ruptures of meaning. American or Americanised criminals disrupted official accounts of British

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76 Mort, *Capital Affairs.*
culture while pointing towards a highly idiosyncratic feature of modern identity. Hollywood emerged as a symbolic marker of fantasy life: America was revealed to be a way of imagining one’s self in London while remaining recognisably British. In other words, American culture became a national dreamland that was staged in the night life of the capital.

The dramatic encounters between the new and the old as well as the high and the low, dominated the contemporary debates about the aestheticisation of the city in cinema and the popular press. Despite their publicity, these narratives did not produce undisputable and coherent meanings of national, cultural and gendered identities. Together with Night and the City, spiv films played an instrumental role in this cultural battle over national fantasies and criminal aesthetics. The following chapter further develops this problematic, examining the ways that notions of escapism, mass-media self-reflexivity and gender dynamics codetermined the narrative, *mise-en-scène* and editing strategies of a number of other films of the cycle.
Chapter 3. Self-reflexivity and National Temperament in 1940s British Crime Films

The term cinematic escapism typically points towards the attitudes of the audience, drawing attention to the emotional and imaginative dynamics of spectatorship. In contrast, this chapter aims to show how social attitudes towards cinema can reciprocally shape the cinematic responses to society. The issue here is to explore how historically and culturally specific forms of imagination, such as the fantasies of being a Hollywood star, an American and a gangster, were visualised on screen. Drawing on the narrative, spatial and erotic economy of a number of spiv films, this line of investigation seeks to examine the plurality of forms, functionalities and meanings of escapism within the cinematic vocabulary of crime.

Centred on the representation of British criminal types, spiv films carved out an idiosyncratic stylistic language, one that blended the conventions of Hollywood cinema with the iconography of criminal dandyism, proletarian life and metropolitan space. In the previous chapter, the focused analysis of a renowned film in the cycle, Jules Dassin’s Night and the City (1950), highlighted the tense dialogue between these heterogeneous social and stylistic forces. Foregrounding the Hollywood convention of the fantasising criminal, it sought to examine how an American–British production adapted the American style to the historical, spatial and cultural specificities of the British metropolis.

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Expanding recent critical readings of the national character of cinema, this approach aimed to rethink and problematise the social and aesthetic encounters between British crime and Hollywood escapism. While contemporary reviewers read Dassin’s version of spivery as an American misreading of the British criminal mentality, many of his film’s stylistic details and narrative devices espoused dramatic tropes that have recently inspired revisionist evaluations of realism as a national aesthetic canon. As was shown in detail, a number of film scholars, notably Charles Barr, Andrew Higson, Robert Murphy, Charlotte Brudson and Cecilia Mello have argued against a monolithic reading of British realism as a socially instructive discourse, one solely addressing the workings of the national community and the dictates of public morality. These writers have all stressed that post-war British cinema was undercut by stylistic devices underlying the dramatic dynamics of subjectivity and romanticism. Barr and Higson have further argued that aesthetic features of American cinema, such as point-of-view shots and narrative emphasis on the individual, merged with documentary devices, didactic voice-over and multifaceted plots. Moreover, according to Barr, elements of British national character dismissively described as anti-cinematic and expressionless (restraint, understatement) played an instrumental role in the production of dramatic tension.

Expanding further on the dialogue between American aesthetics and British cinema, this chapter addresses the ways that the stylistic and dramatic economy of spiv films realigned the symbolic iconography of Hollywood escapism with national versions of criminal vanity and gender dynamics. During the late 1940s, spivery emerged as an elusive concept, intimately associated with the lifestyle of black marketers and confidence tricksters. Contemporary psychiatric discourses, most notably Peter Scott’s contribution in *The Roots of Crime*, discussed these figures as transgressive social actors, comparable yet distinct from pathological types of fantasy-driven masculinities, notably the pervert, homosexual and transvestite. Richard Hornsey has explored how this association between the spiv’s visual excess and sexual disorder was homologous to a number of other discursive configurations which counterposed the disruptive imagery of queer pathology with reformist visions of metropolitan life and welfare citizenship.

In a similar vein, the previous chapter argued that the idea of spivery as a pathogenic form of imagination and sexuality resonated with *Night and the City’s* dramatic structure, and most notably, its way of juxtaposing Harry Fabian’s self-admiration with an emotional neglect of women.

The main purpose of this chapter is to open up this line of inquiry to a wider number of films and themes. While examining how a set of Hollywood conventions about criminal fantasies were played out on the British screen, it addresses the ways that social space and criminal culture shaped the emotional economy of transgressive lifestyles in the spiv cycle of films. This approach also aims to rethink the idea of criminal escapism as an exclusively masculine terrain. It seeks to underscore the role of feminine subjectivity in

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the cinematic formation of the aesthetics of crime; in other words, it emphasises how constructions of femininity contributed to the public conception of spivery as a set of escapist self-presentational tactics.

Drawing on a textual and intertextual examination of cinema, scandal and the tabloid press, this chapter aims to underline the role of erotic fantasy and gendered positioning in the symbolic entanglement of criminality and cinematic spectatorship. The focus here is on the narrative and visual associations between the diegetic spectator (the spectator on screen) and the cinematic spectator (the spectator in the audience). \(^5\) In what terms, were cinematic heroes and heroines represented as Hollywood-driven subjects? How did these visual strategies echo and contribute towards the instability or fixity of social and gendered identities?

In *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994), Jackie Stacey has discussed how feminist scholars have expanded and complicated the understanding of the interplay between filmic fixations of selfhood and the psychic dimensions of spectatorship. \(^6\) In contrast to scholars such as Elizabeth Cowie, for example, who uses psychoanalysis to argue that conventional cinematic construction of the feminine produces fluid, unstable and poly-sexual subject positions (for women or men), \(^7\) Stacey sought to interweave psycho-textual theories of spectatorship with historically specific

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\(^5\) For the terms diegetic spectator/spectator in the audience, see Barbara Creed, untitled article, *Camera Obscura* 21/22 (May 1984): 132–7.


\(^7\) Elizabeth Cowie, untitled article, *Camera Obscura* 21/22 (May 1984): 127–32.
data such as interviews and memories of spectatorship. Alongside Stacey’s emphasis on spectatorship and escapism, the dialogue between the historical formations of subjectivity and national cinema informs Christine Geraghty’s exploration of the cultural and aesthetic meanings of picturing-going in the 1950s. Geraghty’s *British Cinema in the Fifties* (2000) exemplifies how the study of cinema, both as a way of life and an aesthetic text, nuances our understanding of the cultural conflicts that shaped the post-war formations of national, gendered and social fantasies.

My chapter addresses the methodological issues raised by Stacey’s and Geraghty’s approaches, by exploring how filmic convention and historical context codetermined the cinematic construction of the criminal as a spectator, a dreamer and an erotic subject. It seeks to explore how a popular discourse on the psyche can negotiate and dramatise the relationship between multiple or even contradictory forms of erotic escapism and cinematic spectatorship. In what ways did a historically and nationally specific idiom of filmic language visualise and dramatise competing but also homologous representations of the imagination? If spivery was widely represented as an elusive form of escapism, then what types of spectatorial positions were publicly seen to be formed in response to it? While subsequent chapters closely examine the wider social formations of erotic desire, criminality and escapism, here the main aim is to ask in what terms the spectacle of spivery delimited and/or destabilised the meanings of gendered and cinematic fantasy.

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8 Stacey, *Star-Gazing.*
Although this chapter does not include empirical research on audience responses, the overall thesis explores cinema as a form of social experience. As subsequent chapters argue, a wealth of historical evidence revealed not only the multiplicity and the interchangeability of the criminal/spectatorial positions but also the projection of cinema as a way of life, an art of self-presentation and a self-aesthetics of crime. A key dimension of these testimonies on spectatorship was the blurring of the boundaries between transgressive lifestyles and cinematic fantasy. If the study of ‘true crime’ intends to show how historical actors presented themselves and were represented as cinematic heroes, this chapter follows the opposite direction. It seeks to understand under what conditions film heroes were cinematically represented as ordinary historical actors. To this end, the detailed focus here on plots, dialogues and characters aims to underline a particular historical dimension of spectatorship – the idea of film as an extra-cinematic social experience.

Pursuing this line, I show how filmic constructions of ordinariness were transmuted into discourses on fantasy, daydreaming and illusion. In short, my aim is to sketch out a popular technology of self-reflexivity. In what ways did visual narratives of fiction, artfully designed to look lifelike, draw attention to the cinematic deception of reality? How could cinematic illusion unmask the nature of a cinematic illusion? What was the role of national specificity in these popular idioms of the imagination? What were their dramatic effects? Did these tactics abruptly violate or further expand the reliability of the characters and the dramatic energy of the plots? In what ways did mass culture reproduce, expose and dramatise the representational conventions of Hollywood?
An interrelated set of questions concerns the dialogue between the public perception of spivery as an art of storytelling and the idea of cinema as a discourse on history, a visual negotiation of historical experience. The press books of the spiv film cycle promoted the historical reliability of the works, repeatedly advertising the factual roots of the plots. *Waterloo Road* was inspired by an actual event that its screenplay writer, Val Valentine, heard in an air-raid shelter, while *The Blue Lamp* was based on the personal professional experience and memoirs of its screenwriter, T.E.B Clarke.10 *Good-Time Girl* was based on the true crime story of the cleft chin murder, which also seemed to influence the script of *The Blue Lamp*. Taking into account these elements, many critics praised the films’ celebration of ordinary life, their ability ‘to offer the drama of ordinary people in near-ordinary circumstances’.11 It was after the release of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (St. John Legh Clowes, 1948) and Alberto Cavalcanti’s *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947) that a broad critical and moral outcry arose against the films.12

When cinema advertises itself as history, as it did in these films, the issue at stake is not the reproduction of historical truth but the dramatic evaluation of social truth. How could historical actuality become a dynamic ingredient of escapist fiction? Why did truth telling take particular narrative forms? Since its first appearance in the public sphere in the 1930s, the autobiographical, semi-fictional representation of spivery in popular literature and the tabloid press conflated the social history of spivery with an art of presenting stories about the self. The spiv manipulated his social interactions by

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constructing an imaginative spectacle of selfhood, on one level as a streetwise self-presentation and, on another, as a literary or tabloid autobiography. This chapter aims to demonstrate how these public forms of self-presentation shaped the cinematic representation of the transgressor. It shows how crime films contributed towards a public history of illusion. It interrogates the textual and contextual conditions under which the cinematic language attempted to present the malcontents of social and historical life as pathogenic complications of spectatorship. Were these rhetorical strategies exclusively cinematic? Was the spiv film the only idiom of popular culture that saw in crime a secular discourse on the psyche? What type of material culture and mise-en-scène could formulate an intelligible dialogue between ordinariness and imagination? Generally in late 1940s British cinema and society, under what dramatic conditions did ‘to be real’ mean ‘to be fantastic’?

**Objects, Poses and Spaces: The Expansion of Spectatorship**

As has been shown in the previous chapter, Jules Dassin’s *Night and the City* reproduces but also transgresses the conventions of the American gangster cinema. Played by a Hollywood actor, Richard Widmark, the film’s spiv anti-hero, Harry Fabian, unleashes on the screen a neurotic, overactive body language, one that contrasts with the solid body posture of all American gangsters. It was argued that the film’s way of visualising criminal vanity is quite subtle when compared to the aesthetic norms of Hollywood. Rather than presenting the transgressive hero admiring himself in mirrors, as was done in the archetypal gangster film *Little Caesar*, this film symbolically transforms the city into a surface of self-mirroring. This connotative style of representation marks the diegesis from the outset. While being chased in the streets of Soho, Fabian, the spiv on the run, is seen to risk his life in order to pick up a carnation that falls from his lapel. In
this way, a gesture of self-stylisation and a way of moving across the city reconcile the act of escaping from danger with the imperatives of narcissistic escapism. This idiosyncratic dialogue between external reality and inner fantasy encapsulates the construction of the aesthetics of crime. Described at another point of the filmic narration as an ‘artist without art’, Fabian treats his self-image as a vehicle of hedonistic escape from urban reality, and, simultaneously, a means of polemical engagement with it. While the artful deception of the victims conditioned the self-deception the violator, a deviant form of self-display visualises a disruptive force of the imagination.

Despite this reconfiguration of the gangster’s vanity, the British reviewers considered Fabian’s image ‘too American’ to pass for a Londoner. Two years earlier, however, an analogous cinematic representation of spivery, Edmond Gréville’s Noose (1948), was seen in a more sympathetic light. Most critics, while condemning the film on moral grounds, appraised the ‘sentimentally reluctant’ acting of the protagonist. This critical disparity can serve as a constructive starting point for the comparative examination of the idea of escapism in spiv cinema. What made Noose’s criminal aesthetics, its heroes’ techniques of self-presentation, ‘sentimentally reluctant’ and thus more credible in British eyes? Were there any commonalities between the style of performance in this film and the others films in the cycle?

Along with Night and the City, Noose was an international production. Directed by a French filmmaker, yet based on a British theatrical play, Richard Llewellyn’s Silk Noose. The film employed Hollywood casting for two of its leading roles: Linda Mendbury (Carole Landis) and Jumbo Hyde (Derek Farr). As opposed to Dassin’s film, the spiv

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character, Bar Gorman, was played by a British actor, Nigel Patrick, who had performed the same role on stage. In line with *Night and the City*, the establishing scenes in *Noose* advance a playful interaction between urban *mise-en-scène* and the spiv’s way of moving across it. Successive images of Soho involving a panoramic view of its rooftops, an Attlee government economic-propaganda poster that reads ‘We Work or Want’ (figure 3.1), buildings reflecting on wet streets and St Giuseppe’s Church conclude with a close-up of the word Soho written on a blackboard. As this image gradually dissolves, the word Soho is superimposed on the figure of a man (Bar Gorman) walking through narrow and crowded streets (figure 3.2). Dressed in a flamboyant suit, trilby hat and bearing a trimmed moustache – in other words, the highly recognisable stylistic panoply of a London spiv – Gorman’s figure contrasts with the propagandist poster featured in the establishing shots. His social type strongly evokes a violation of the dilemma posed by the official propaganda of ‘We Work or Want’. Spivs neither worked nor wanted.

Figure 3.1. The propagandistic slogan prefigures and contrasts with the representation of the spiv as a sociable being. *Noose* (Edmond Gréville, 1948).
A year prior to the release of *Noose*, the phantasmagoria of spivery, filtered through political rhetoric, tabloid exposés, expert opinion and autobiographical accounts, came to embody the uncontrolled forces undermining the impetuses of social cohesion and planned modernisation pioneered by the Labour government. Spivery interwove the black market, gambling and confidence tricks with idleness, selfishness and exhibitionism. Seen in this context, the smooth visual transition from the iconography of the city to the image of a recognisable social anti-hero in the film seems to set in motion a nuanced synecdoche of metropolitan transgression. Indeed, while the introductory visual synthesis equates Soho with spivery, the subsequent sequence eloquently underlines the spiv’s harmonious, if charismatic, relationship with the surrounding socio-spatial environment. Gorman is seen dancing his way around, cheerfully chatting and interacting with the urban crowd that he encounters:
streetsellers, a black housekeeper, a musician, a boy. Faced with this mix of cosmopolitanism and bohemianism, the spiv’s tactful navigation through the busy streetscapes generates a series of comical acts such as verbal jokes and body movements. The overall picture highlights the hero’s inventive social adaptability and familiarity with the surrounding cultural chaos of the city.

Paralleling Harry Fabian, Gorman’s body language appears overactive, dandified and bohemian. Unleashing on screen a street-wise spectacle, this choreographed self-presentation seems to prefigure *Night and the City*’s idea of the spiv as an ‘artist without art’. The spiv’s art is seen to be a way of moving across the city, mingling deviance with sociability. In the archetypal American gangster film *Little Caesar* (Melvyn LeRoy, 1931), one of the leading gangster characters becomes a professional dancer. In *Noose*, the bodily playfulness of dancing merges with the routines of quotidian life. Gorman transforms his surrounding space into a theatrical stage. Soho’s streets appear suitable for musical entertainment, a place for the playful engagement with passersby and the continuous fulfilment of Gorman’s own vanity.

In line with Dassin’s film, a small stylistic detail underlines the spiv’s narcissistic self-obsession, a carnation pinned on the lapel of his suit. As opposed to *Night and the City*, however, this is not an act of self-stylisation. An elderly female peddler delivers this gesture of embellishment as Gorman walks by her side. In this way, contrary to Fabian, Gorman’s street glamour is not reduced to a self-exhibitionistic posture addressed to an imaginary audience. A symbolic act of self-mirroring merges with a flow of choreographic movements portraying the spiv as an artful, sociable being. The carnation is not now solely a symbol of vanity but also a manifestation of friendliness and
solidarity towards a street-life figure (the female flower seller). The spiv’s selfishness and
vanity dissolve into a spatially defined network of social interactions.

This psycho-social dimension is further developed in the subsequent shot in which
Gorman decides to enter into a building housing his office through the back entrance.
While preparing to climb an external wooden staircase, set in a narrow, shadowy street,
a woman suddenly appears at the window of the building opposite, announcing that she
has run out of tea (figure 3.3). Before climbing the stairs, Gorman replies that he would
take care of it. Emphasising the close associations between anti-social activity (the black
market) and a community network (a Soho neighbourhood), and linking criminality
with daily life, the ambiguity of this socio-spatial organisation is not solely related to
Gorman’s black-market activities. The narrow, shadowy street and a back entrance
aggravate the dialogue between transgression and ordinariness. In contemporary
journalistic and fictional accounts of spivery (in Arthur Helliwell’s column ‘Follow Me
Around’ in the People and Ben Sarto’s Soho Spivs, 1949), the deviant techniques of spivs
and confidence tricksters were inexorably tied to the spatial dynamics of Soho: back
exits, secret underground rooms, narrow shadowy streets, and, in general, places
suitable to run through, hide in, or attack from. Pointing towards these spaces of
deception, this short scene fuses the spiv’s choreography of cheerfulness, sociality and
amusement with strong overtones of deviousness, danger and disorder.

Rather than presenting a man on the run, as was done in the establishing scenes of Night
and the City, Noose introduces the darker connotations of spivery more indirectly. It
symbolically links the idea of dangerous criminality with the semiotic dynamics of social
space. In this spatial organisation of sociality, danger and drama are mixed with comedy
and a light-hearted atmosphere. The evocative setting of emotional and moral ambiguity
culminates in the scenes depicting Gorman finally entering the Soho building. The place appears to be the headquarters of Sugiani, the leader of a black-market racket and owner of a Soho club. Being Sugiani’s right-hand man, Gorman has his own office. The cultural signifier of professional status (an office) frames the portrayal of a figure whose social attitude was broadly synonymous with unproductiveness and idleness.

This ironic style of representation again differs from Dassin’s film. After the initial running scene of Night and the City, Fabian is seen to bring the anxieties of street life into his girlfriend’s apartment. He attempts to steal money from her wallet. In Noose, Gorman’s pirouette in the streets of Soho, his elegant way of hovering between sociality and deviousness, normality and unlawfulness, is further developed within this interior setting. In such an environment, friendliness is mixed with dubious authority. While socialising with a nationally and culturally heterogeneous group of people (an Italian clerical worker, a barman, a spiv), Gorman is also seen giving orders and checking the fraudulent performances of his accomplices (a counterfeiter). This set of social interactions further underlines Gorman’s hyperactive body language, without disrupting his apparent sense of self-control and sentimental balance.

This performative style strongly contrasts with the atmosphere of emotional disorientation that marks the representation of spivery in Night and the City. While finding refuge in his girlfriend’s apartment, Fabian is seen to look disapprovingly at a photograph of marital happiness, admitting that, instead of settling down, he would prefer to ‘become somebody’. In Noose one of the quick-paced scenes framing Gorman’s appearance in his office involves a loud celebratory reflection on marriage.
Holding for a moment a picture of his wife and children in his hands, Gorman is heard saying: ‘Mrs Gorman, you should be proud of your husband.’

Figure 3.3. The *mise-en-scène* (Soho, narrow street, back entrance) fuses deviousness with familiarity. *Noose* (Edmond Gréville, 1948).

In *Noose* Gorman’s expressions of vanity and pride affirm the spiv’s familiarity with normative emotional attitudes. Gorman’s self-admiration is inexorably tied to his role as a husband, an effective breadwinner and a sociable being. His persona appears simultaneously overactive and controlled, comical and authoritative, bohemian and socially responsible. The skilful balancing of antithetical self-presentational elements reconciles vanity and gentleness, domesticity and criminality, over-ambition and astute social grounding. Framed in this way, criminal escapism is smoothly integrated into the symbolic materiality of social normality.
The energies of a transgressive fantasy life discernible in Gorman’s flamboyant clothing, social manners and body language merge with the routines of his daily life. These contradictory images not only link emotion to practicality or amusement to criminality but also excess to restraint. As every act of self-aggrandisement is quickly turned into a trick of humour, deviousness and practicality, the treatment of vanity seems to demand a delicate masking of vanity. Indeed, despite his excessively flamboyant image, Gorman is never captured in a pose of oneiric self-observance. The only plain episode of self-admiration in the film is a comically performed self-compliment uttered before a family photograph (not a mirror or a self-portrait). A streetwise dandy is thus seen to be too narcissistic to lose control of his narcissism. It was probably this unique balance between Hollywood exhibitionism and British emotional masquerade that inspired the positive critical appraisal of Nigel Patrick’s acting.

This type of portrayal starkly contrasts with that of Gorman’s boss, Sugiani (Joseph Calleia). Modelled on the Maltese vice racketeer Eugene Messina, Sugiani was the non-British, authoritative, super-spiv character in the film. Contrary to Gorman’s sentimentally ambiguous style, the Mediterranean spiv emphatically appears to have no sense of modesty. Introduced on screen while being groomed by his barber, his self-mirroring and strong Italian accent point towards a very different type of criminal vanity. If Gorman merges playful interaction with social manipulation, Sugiani is a nouveau-riche gang leader who seems to observe society from the outside. Arrogant and comical as well as sexually promiscuous and morally ruthless (he orders his barber to kill his ex-mistresses), Sugiani’s profile mixes a flamboyant sartorial style, a macho body language and a series of hyper luxurious settings, notably a Soho club and a luxurious mansion. When one of his French mistresses visits his drawing room, she compares this space with a film set. In stark contrast to this explicit association between criminal
glamour and cinema, Gorman’s figure is embroiled in a subtler dialogue between the aesthetics of spivery and spatial deviance.

This is exemplified in a scene which, set towards the ending of the filmic diegesis, brings to a climax the semiotic dynamics punctuating Gorman’s introductory self-presentation on screen. Learning that the Sugiani’s building is under siege from the police, the spiv protagonist rushes towards the back exit, which, in the establishing scene, facilitates his choreographed passage from the streets of Soho into his office. Hence, what at the starting point of the film covertly emerges as a spatial technique of playful deviousness, at this final stage it epitomises his ultimate strategy of survival. On his way to the exit, Gorman encounters the woman who, on their first encounter, asked for tea. The ensuing goodbye scene dramatises the bond between the British spiv and a feminine personification of domesticity. Despite the overwhelming atmosphere of anxiety, Gorman is seen to retain his sense of humour. He asks what the neighbours would think in the event of him being caught by the police at the front door, passing to his interlocutor a dress intended as a gift for his daughter as well as an office sign bearing his name.

Amplifying the synecdochic entanglement of status (an office sign) and intimacy (fatherhood), this dramatic synthesis underscores Gorman's ability to construct an atmosphere of emotional tension while playfully sabotaging any direct expression of feeling. While a Hollywood convention (the gangster’s downfall) is adapted to the semiotic economy of British temperament (understatement, restraint, stoic sarcasm), the overall synthesis is placed within a symbolic iconography of self-reflexivity. Gorman’s silhouette, dressed in a flamboyant tuxedo and coat, is reflected in the mirroring
surfaces of a folding screen. Simultaneously depicting the figure of Gorman from two
different angles, the mirrors create the illusion of a split screen. Gorman’s reflection
invokes the image of a fictional, spectacular and illusionistic hero, possibly a filmic star,
who fleetingly intrudes into the everyday life of a housewife (figure 3.4).

The following scene depicts Gorman’s arrest by a policeman. The woman is seen
thanking Gorman for the tea and then turning towards the mirror, wiping her tears with
a handkerchief (figure 3.5). This detail magnifies the cinematic dynamics of the scene.
Framed by a mirror surface, the woman’s gesture evokes the response of a female
spectator to the melodramatic events on the screen.

Figure 3.4. The goodbye scene: the split screen transforms the spiv into an
imaginary/cinematic figure. Noose (Edmond Gréville, 1948).
Figure 3.5. Tears in front of a folding screen: the female diegetic spectator evokes the women in the audience. *Noose* (Edmond Gréville, 1948).

Rather than distantiating the viewer, however, these self-reflexive elements expand the social meanings of the drama. A subtle interplay between cinematic illusionism and everyday life undercuts the materiality of ordinariness. Gorman’s downfall signals not simply an ethical or material return to normal social material life but also a disruption of the female character’s domestic fantasies. The double mirror reflection of his silhouette highlights not only the moral ambiguity of his character, meaning the contrasts between criminality and intimacy, sociability and vanity, but also the semi-fictional dimensions of his social positioning. His figure stands in between private and public space, psychic and material life, cinema and society. If Gorman’s unlawful lifestyle is inexorably tied to his artful sociality, then his defeat is a socially shared experience of disillusionment. Bridging the aesthetics of spivery with the female diegetic spectator’s perspective, this dramatic device recurrently marks the narrative economy of many spiv films. The following section will expand the study of spivery on screen as a popular idiom of
cinematic self-reflexivity, highlighting the interplay of Hollywood stardom, erotic disillusionment and national identity.

**Erotic Escapism and Spivery**

The interaction between the aesthetics of spivery and the emotional world of women largely marks the narrative and stylistic economy of what is considered to be the first film of the spiv cycle, *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944). The film was produced at Gainsborough Studios, a company mostly renowned for its popular costume melodramas. Broadly targeting female audiences, Gainsborough promoted fictionalised and romanticised visions of the past. However, several of its productions focused on the history of the present. Edward Black, the head of production, as well as his successor, Sydney Box, encouraged the production of films that tackled social and historical problems of the wartime and post-war periods, such as *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943), *Two Thousand Women* (Frank Launder, 1944), *Good-Time Girl* (David MacDonald, 1947). Women’s lives loomed large in these films. The propagandistic *Millions Like Us* focused on the wartime experiences of women factory workers, while *Good-Time Girl* narrated the ventures of a young girl in the metropolitan underworld of the 1940s.

Similarly, in *Waterloo Road* a female point of view is distinctively visible. Based on the antagonism between a spiv and an army deserter, the principal storyline emphasises the moral dilemma disturbing the erotic life of a woman. During the winter of 1941, amid

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the Blitz, Tillie (Joy Shelton) is tempted to cheat on her husband, Jim, who was doing his military service, with Ted Purvis (Stewart Granger), the local spiv, ‘king of the pin table saloon and lady killer’. This tension culminates in a prolonged fight scene; one that brings to a climax an emotional conflict that, in the preceding stages of filmic narration, is delivered via milder dramatic means such as scenes of jealousy and erotic flirtation. Producing a visual vocabulary of continuous erotic disorientation (both men appeared charming), these narrative dynamics draw attention to the ways that masculine competition is experienced and internalised by Tillie.

A key moment in this dramatic strategy is the sequence that introduces Ted and Tillie on screen. Set in an air-raid shelter during the daytime, the scene creates a contrast between Ted’s flamboyant character and the material deprivation of the setting. Crowded with working-class occupants comprised mainly of women and children, the shelter reveals a series of underground arches crammed with sleeping bunks, set somewhere underneath Waterloo station (figure 3.6). Against this setting, Ted is seen shaving with an electric razor in front of a mirror. His posturing is interrupted by the visual intrusion of Tillie. Provoking a moment of stasis in Ted’s body movements, her presence makes the mirror appear not only a tool of self-observance but also of a means of devious surveillance. The spiv is seen to visually control the human and spatial setting that surrounds his presence.

The following scene highlights the skilful intermingling of erotic dynamics and visual manipulation. Ted resumes his shaving and, without turning his face, reminds Tillie about their date (figure 3.7). The image of Tillie, framed as a reflection in the mirror,

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15 *Waterloo Road*: Press Book, BFI Library.
responds by pausing and gazing at Ted. She then affirms the date with a voice that exudes embarrassment. Set against Ted’s visual excess and self-confident manners, the sequence further develops Tillie’s awkward position, depicting a contrasting choreography of male self-confidence and female disorientation. Ted has bet with May, a blonde woman standing by his side, that Tillie will turn around to see him. While heading towards the exit, Tillie is seen stopping, turning back and looking at Ted (figure 3.8). Emphatically portraying Ted as the manipulator of the female gaze, this narrative synthesis explicitly introduces the spiv as a man who knows all about the art of being seen. Simultaneously posing as an object of spectatorship and an astute spectator, Ted is seen to effectively unlock on screen Tillie’s troubled emotional life. Luxury ornaments— the electric razor, exhibitionistic body language, and phrases such as ‘half a dollar’— emphasise the Hollywood overtones of the scene. Ted emulates the performative power of an American star. Artfully treating the allure of his self-image as a bait to catch Tillie, his self-mirroring gaze traps the bodily and imaginary reflexes of his erotic target.

Interestingly, the shooting script describes May as ‘an artificial blonde whose hair style and manners always ape the latest film star’. Ted’s figure is thus meant precisely to embody a cinematic illusion that casts its shadow on the daily and imaginary life of women viewers. The moments of stasis between Ted and Tillie further advance the relationship between cinematic illusionism, female spectatorship and contemporary historical reality. While the shelter exemplifies the harsh conditions of routine life during the Blitz, the overall scene emphasises the psychological unpredictability of female fantasy. The material degradation of a crowded air-raid shelter arises as a setting for desire and flirtation; cheap objects generate an atmosphere of glamour and Ted’s

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16 waterfall Road, shooting script, BFI Library, p. 10.
body language transforms mundane moments of everydayness into snapshots of cinematic exhibitionism. Treating the mirror both as a tool of self-observance and a means of observing himself while being observed by a woman, Ted’s attitude grounds the masculine stardom of Hollywood in the unimaginative landscape of proletarian life in London during the Blitz.

Based on this synthesis of erotic and cinematic spectatorship (a man treating himself as a cinematic hero and woman starring at a man who stares at himself as a cinematic hero), Tillie and Ted’s erotic encounter forms an index of the ways cinema can be experienced outside cinema. Expressed through words, gestures and eye techniques, cinematic pleasure emerges as a spontaneous practice of sociability, a codified way of

![Figure 3.6. The spiv as an object of spectatorship (vanity) and an astute spectator. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).](image-url)
Figure 3.7. Interchange of gazes through a mirror. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

Figure 3.8. Tillie looking back at Ted: the disoriented, diegetic spectator. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).
looking and being looked at. Set within a social and historical landscape of crisis and emergency (the war, the Blitz), this mix of seductive deviance and cinematic imagination transforms symbols of national heroism into disruptive forms of individualised desire.

Recalling Noose, the dramatic effect of self-reflexivity is adapted into a symbolic vocabulary of understatement. Ted’s excessive manners contrasts with Tillie’s restrained body language. The litany of gazes seems to compensate for unsaid words and veiled feelings. The downscaling of emotional expression magnifies the dramatic dialogue between Hollywood aesthetics and British modes of socialisation. Signalling a housewife’s silent invitation to be seen, Tillie’s body language can only be decoded by an experienced eye. Merging eroticism with narcissism, the British criminal’s self-presentation assumes its American power by disrupting the self-control of a resistant spectator. A housewife and not a mobile good-time girl confirms and augments the erotic and cinematic status of the spiv fantasist.

While both mise-en-scène and editing (instant pauses) emphatically associate the spiv’s charm with escapism, similar stylistic manners frame the portrayal of Ted’s competitor, Tillie’s husband Jim. After having a fight at home with Jim’s sister about her flirting with Ted, Tillie wanders the streets of Waterloo until she comes across a photographic shop. She is seen stopping and looking at the window display, focusing on her own wedding photograph. The heroine touches the window and calls Jim’s name. Intercutting shots of the photograph and of Tillie staring at the photograph dissolve into a blurry image of smoke, followed by a flashback scene set on the platform Waterloo station (figures 3.9–12). Jim and Tillie, the ‘just married’ couple, standing among friends and family, are about to embark on their honeymoon. In line with the
dramatic dynamics of her encounter with Ted, the idyllic iconography of Tillie’s flashback leads to an explosion of anxiety. Set in the carriage, a romantic dialogue scene quickly turns into an argument, centring on Tillie’s resentment about not having their own house and child. Finally, the flashback dissolves into Tillie thinking aloud while walking the streets of London, her image combining contemplative introspection with an uncontrolled expression of emotion.

In the shooting script, the scene is situated at a later stage of the diegesis. However, its final position emphasises more effectively the contrast between Tillie’s visual memory of her husband and her previous encounter with Ted. In both cases, the act of staring at a man imposes a halt in the flow of the filmic narrative. In *Death 24x a Second* (2006), Laura Mulvey comprehensively explores the symbolic dynamics of cinematic pauses, showing how halting moments, points of stasis within the cinematic narrative, generate a highly charged dialogue between the photographic and the cinematic modifications of time. The fleeting time of a moving image contrasts with the freezing time of a static frame, according to Mulvey. Similarly, in this scene, Tillie’s response to the photograph underlines the idea of stasis inherent in the photographic imagery of the wedding. The sequence breaks with the flow of the narrative and destabilises the heroine’s perceptions of time. Signalling the unfolding of a flashback, the still image works as self-reflexive comment on the cinematic construction of time. If the film is the flow of still images, then a static frame emphasises the cinematic rhythms of a woman’s life. The memory of marriage exposes the visual structuring of time.

17 *Waterloo Road*, shooting script, BFI Library.
Figure 3.9. The window display overlaps with the cinematic screen. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

Figure 3.10. A photograph as a dream. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).
Figure 3.11. The viewer of the window display as a dreaming spectator. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

Figure 3.12. The cinematic construction of time: the still image dissolves into a flashback. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

While Tillie is seen to experience the emotional disturbances of time in a cinematic way, successive point of view shots invite the spectator in the audience to assume her
sensory and emotional position. The shooting script at this point emphasises the instruction to ‘hold’. The camera retains a stable position, offering a medium shot portrait of Tillie’s figure. Her only gesture is that of her hand touching the window display. The languorous softness of this movement invokes the body language of a sleepwalker. The image of her calling her husband’s name intensifies her sense of withdrawal from waking life. Tillie’s body position, as she leans towards the window display, reveals a strong impulse to enter into the world of the photograph.

*Mise-en-scène* and editing emphasise her effort to access the contents of her dream. The material barrier to her bodily expression of desire is the transparent surface of the window display. The frame of this surface blends with the frame of the cinema screen. The overlapping of the two frames (window display, cinematic screen) creates an idiosyncratic, oneiric vocabulary. The heroine’s attempt to enter into her dream overlaps with her efforts to pass through to the other side of the screen. Hence, the invisible yet material surface of the screen forms a borderline between present and past, life and representation, embodied presence and photographic memory. Seen in these terms, the continuous intersplices between Tillie and the photograph invite the viewer to face the screen through the eyes of the heroine; that is, to experience the heroine’s mode of spectatorship.

Overall, these dream-like portrayals emphasise the ‘reality’, the ordinariness, but also the extra-ordinariness of the masculine heroes. While Jim is distant both in terms of space and time, Ted markedly dominates Tillie’s immediate sensory experience – she sees him

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19 *Waterloo Road*, shooting script, ‘She looks tired and nervous, but her face softens as she looks. We HOLD at this moment’, p. 42.
early in the morning and has a date with him on the same day. While Jim is unable to fulfil her aspirations for the future, mainly to provide her with a house and child, Ted is impervious to her current material adversity. Jim is associated with a domestic environment (she appears to share the same house with her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and her husband, a teenage sister-in-law, and a lodger), while Ted takes her out at night, guides her through pubs, dance halls and amusement arcades. Finally, while Jim is an engineer, Ted looks like a film star.

Figure 3.13. The position of the female diegetic spectator evokes the perspective of the cinematic spectator. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

These contrasts are intensified in the final fight sequence. The setting (Ted’s living room and amusement arcade) is rife with evocative symbols of the spiv’s vanity: photographic portraits, boxing postures and a big mirror that breaks. The choreography of the fight is interrupted by a pause that is associated with Tillie’s point of view. Observing the men from the ground floor, her perspective (low diagonal) evokes the
spectator’s perspective of the cinematic screen. Ted’s posture expands these cinematic connotations. After winning the first round of the fight, his body language echoes the cinematic image of an American gangster, especially his arrogant style of speaking and the way he shrugs his shoulders. A strong interchange of gazes – intercutting shots depict Jim looking at Tillie and Tillie looking at him – emphasises the visual energy of the scene. The diegetic spectators, both female and male, are seen to experience cinematic fantasy as an aggressive emotional force, one embodied in the figure of the spiv, the star and the boxer (figures 3.13–16). The tension between cinematic vanity and masculine pride is further aggravated and finally resolved in the final fighting scene. Jim attacks his antagonist and Ted falls to the ground floor of the building. The fight continues in a setting that is now spatially and symbolically distanced from the level of the cinema screen. The breaking of pint-table machines signals the defeat of the spiv’s seductiveness. In this grounded battleground, Jim, the husband, is the winner. These narrative developments restore moral order and celebrate the normative values of national community (assisted by Tillie, Jim carries the semiconscious Ted out of the room, while footage reveals scenes from the Blitz). Pragmatism, affection and stoicism become the antidote to the spiv’s hedonism, deceitfulness and individualism.

In an interview, Sidney Gilliat admitted that the acting style of Stewart Granger, who played Ted, was exaggerated and that he had advised him to ‘act less’. Gilliat added though ‘his phoneyness [sic] as an actor in the film suited the intentional phoneyness of the character’. Hence, the spiv figure was purposefully meant to look like an actor playing an actor. Some contemporary reviewers criticised this ‘phoneyness’. Ernest Betts noted in the Daily Express that instead of ‘a cockney bruiser’, Granger frequently talked

21 Ibid.
like ‘a West End club man’. Another anonymous writer suggested that the ‘sordid intrigue of the film’, while suitable for a French film, would be certainly done differently in cockney. However, most reviewers praised Granger’s ‘remarkable portrait as a handsome small-time racketeer’. The film scholar Bruce Babington stressed that the Hollywood associations of his character were evident in his ‘spasmodically transatlantic accent, his shoulder shrugs imitated from American cinema’. Toni (Jean Kent), an embittered girlfriend, was seen to declare that ‘he [Ted] might be at the cinema picking up hints from Victor Mature’. Hence the character of Ted, argued Babington, was intended to embody on screen what George Orwell tackled in his famous essay *The Decline of the English Murder*; ‘a fear of sweeping Americanisation’. Orwell’s essay was inspired by the true crime story of the cleft chin murder, a sensational event that erupted in the same year (1944) as *Waterloo Road*’s making.

The cultural impact of the cleft chin murder is examined in detail in the following chapter. Here, it is useful to emphasise how this crime foregrounded competing versions of masculinity. The story revolved around the murder of a taxi driver by a ‘good-time girl’, Elizabeth Jones, and an American deserter, Karl Hulten. Courtroom drama, popular literature and the press presented Jones as a fantasy-driven girl, led to crime by the cinematic appeal of the American GI. Yet the most widely used visual framing of her story in the tabloid press was that of her wedding photograph. Jones’

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22 Anon, Untitled film review, 14 January 1945, press cutting, microfiche collection, *Waterloo Road*, BFI.
23 Anon, Untitled film review, 20 January 1945, press cutting, microfiche collection, *Waterloo Road*, BFI.
24 Anon, Untitled film review, *Spectator*, 17 January 1945, press cutting, BFI.
26 George Orwell, *The Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth, 1965).
27 Babington, *Launder and Gilliat*, p. 87.
28 See Chapter 4.
marriage took place during the war and the groom was pictured dressed in military uniform, as he was serving in the army (figure 3.17). According to several sensational exposés, immediately after the wedding Jones rejected the prospect of becoming a faithful housewife and sought in wartime London wayward adventure, cinematic glamour and American men. Like the character of Tillie in *Waterloo Road*, Jones was surrounded by competing images of men: a British husband dressed in a military uniform and an American who posed as a star. Recalling the dramatic energy of Tillie’s wedding photograph, the picture of Jones’ marriage, contrasting with the tabloid accounts of the anti-heroine’s disobedient and wayward life, encapsulated an ambiguous celebration of domesticity. Rather than being a mere visual memory of happiness, the photographic framing of marriage foregrounded the emotional conflicts and tensions that disturbed contemporary structures of desire and imagination.

Seen against his context, spiv films drew attention to a historically specific concept of the female audience. The representation of men in photographs and dream-like shots played out a broadly publicised aspect of women’s contemporary perspective on men. Many of the ordinary men (husbands) were absent, while those who were present looked extraordinary (Americans GIs or spivs, who, like Ted, had found tricky ways of avoiding military service). In both sensational press coverage and spiv films, the disruptive portrait of masculinity was vividly associated with cinematic deceitfulness.

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Figure 3.14. The spiv figure embodying cinematic glamour. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

Figure 3.15. The masculine diegetic spectator challenged by a spiv’s glamour. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).
Figure 3.16. Ted's fall: The disenchantment of the spiv's cinematic aura expressed in spatial terms. *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1944).

Figure 3.17. Tabloid photograph of Marina Jones’s wedding. *News of the World*, 24 January 1954, p. 5.
This form of narrative did not simply transfer to the screen a contemporary historical reality. It exemplified British cinema’s response to Hollywood versions of fantasising criminals. In contrast to American gangsters, spivs on screen do not transform themselves into super criminals. The emphasis is not on glamorous success, but on the desire to look glamorous. In this sense, spiv films produce prototypically escapist versions of masculinity. Women who surround the spivs emerge as the spectators of spectators; they become the audience for the transgressive re-enactment of stardom. Commenting on Hollywood’s stardom, Laura Mulvey has argued in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ that:

the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals as expressed in particular in the star system, the stars centring both screen presence and screen story as they act out a complex process of likeness and difference (the glamorous impersonate the ordinary).  

In Mulvey’s words, a distinctive characteristic of stars is their capacity to ‘impersonate’ the ordinary. Seen in this light, the spivs’ ordinariness, as epitomised in their distance from and the fantasy of Hollywood, is not intended to undermine the dramatic techniques of American cinema. Rather it reproduces the Hollywood conventions of stardom under a national façade. The interplay of stardom and proletarian is adapted to the British cultural environment. Glamorous self-stylisation presents the spivs as at once familiar to and distant from their audiences. This is also applied to the women in spiv cinema. Facing dilemmas of ordinariness (housewifery) and glamour (spivery), they evoked women in the audience, while being at the same time distant from them. This

representational strategy is not reduced to a fixed typology of female characters. If the sensational protagonist of the cleft chin murder is a housewife who aims to become a gun moll, then the women of spiv cinema in fact assume multiple spectatorial positions in relation to the social, cultural and spatial constructions of femininity. They are at once housewives and good-time girls, mature and young, mobile and domestic. The following section will explore and expand on the significance of these multiple gendered identities. The question here is: on what dramatic, spatial and material terms did spiv films reproduce and transgress the Hollywood dialectics of ordinariness and glamour?

To answer this question it is worth returning to the historical and cultural conditions of the post-war period. The writer Arthur La Bern, whose novels *It Always Rains on Sunday*, (1945) and *The Night Darkens the Street* (1947) were adapted into spiv films, noted that at the end of war, and with the departure of the ‘over-sexed’ American GIs, spivs and petty criminals replaced the transatlantic heroes of stardom. These streetwise crooks served as the primary masculine attractions for the cinematically driven fantasy of ‘good-time girls’; that is, girls like May, the artificial blonde in *Waterloo Road*. A similar type of girl, Diana, featured in *The Blue Lamp*, a social problem film focusing on the ways the Metropolitan Police dealt with young amateur criminals. The film was directed by Basil Dearden, a filmmaker with a strong interest in contemporary crime. It was based on a script originally written by T.E.B. Clarke, who, as the film’s press book advertised, drew extensively on his professional experience as a police officer.

The Blue Lamp largely resembled a documentary film about metropolitan police life. The scenario invoked the Antiquis case (1947), a smash-and-grab robbery involving murder, but also the cleft chin murder, whose central heroine, Jones, had many similarities with Diana’s character. Like Jones, Diana (Peggy Evans) is a young blonde woman who abandons her family home and moves in with a young, aspiring criminal, Tom Riley (Dirk Bogarde). Moreover, just like Jones, Diana’s entry into crime is explicitly associated with the impulses of cinematic spectatorship. This is overtly dramatised in a shot depicting her asleep with the film magazine Movie Life under her arm. The shadow of Tom is seen to fall on her (figure 3.18). Photographs of film stars adorn the wall. In the following shot, Tom’s still portrait is captured from a low angle. The position of the camera invokes simultaneously Diana’s perspective (who is still in bed and sees Tom from below) and the spectator’s view of the cinematic screen. Unkempt, Tom appears sleepless and stressed.
Figure 3.19. The spiv’s self-mirroring mingles with his pose as a object of spectatorship for a good-time girl. *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950).

This brief transition from a cinematically coloured sleep (the magazine *Movie Life*) to a degraded image of waking life emphasises the instrumental role of the cinematic imagination in framing Diana’s point of view. Indeed, the unkempt image of Tom creates a stark antithesis to the way he appears for most of the film. Dressed in flashy suits and trilby hats, his portrait invokes the image of a Hollywood gangster. The scene also highlights the psychological importance of masculine self-observance. Tom is seen to regain his self-confidence after asserting his ability to affect the emotional life of his female partner. He panics Diana by telling her that she is going to be arrested. Amused by Diana’s reaction, Tom regains his self-confidence while shaving in front of the mirror (figure 3.19). In this way, the emotional vulnerability of the spiv’s woman is pictured as an instrument of masculine self-assurance. Set within this dramatic structure, female spectatorship evokes the instrumentality of a magic mirror, one that revitalises the emotional dynamics of criminal vanity.
In a previous scene, Tom showed his gun to Diana, provoking feelings of fear, confusion and excitement in her. According to the script, in this scene Diana is ‘trying to understand [Tom’s] mentality which both shocks and intrigues her’. The dialogue includes the following exchanges. Diana: ‘That’s your idea of good time. To frighten the wits out of people?’ Tom: ‘It’s good for you. I reckon a bit of a scare is good for your insides.’ Similar dramatic contrasts between eroticism and fear played a pivotal role in the courtroom drama and the literary adaptation of the cleft chin murder. Combining ‘intrigue’ and ‘shock’, the term thrill was generally employed to delineate a good-time girl’s emotional relationship to danger. Jones’ companion, the young American Hulten, introduced himself by exhibiting a gun and posing as a gangster. As with Hulten, Tom was involved in a reckless murder (he shot a policeman), one implicitly and explicitly associated with the dramatic collision of cinema and criminal life.

In *The Blue Lamp*, the murder takes place at a cinema entrance. Tom and his associate Spud hold up the box office. A young couple are shown walking out while discussing the film they have seen, the girl complaining to her boyfriend that he only enjoys films with murders. Shortly after this discussion of cinematic taste, comes the climactic murder scene. Tom shoots a policeman at the entrance to the cinema. The young man’s spasmodic body movement, hysterical voice (he shouts ‘Get back, get back!’) and worried eyes attest to his criminal inexperience. Lacking a practical knowledge of gunmanship, his body language acts out the role of the gangster. Like the figure of Ted in *Waterloo Road*, Tom seems to be an actor playing an actor. Furthermore, in line with the real-life amateur criminal of the cleft chin story, he is later seen defending himself, claiming that the shooting was an accident – his target being his victim’s legs.

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33 *The Blue Lamp*, shooting script, BFI Library, p. 45.
Figure 3.20. *Granny, Get Your Gun* mise-en-scène and cinematic self-reflexivity. *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950).

In the background, at the entrance to the cinema, is an advertisement for the film *Granny, Get your Gun*, while on the upper level of the frame is a sign on the buildings façade’s that reads ‘Continuous performance’ (figures 3.20–21). The overall setting destabilises the boundaries between cinematic fiction and criminal life: cinema tends to re-enact the re-enactment of cinema. In the subsequent shot, Diana enters the crime scene and starts screaming. Set against the self-reflective signifiers of *mise-en-scène*, narration and performance, her hysterical reaction accentuates the idea of a film within a film.

While *The Blue Lamp* frames its heroes in explicitly cinematic contexts, in *Waterloo Road* and *Noose* the association between spivery and cinema is dramatised in more indirect ways, via the use of static frames, photographs and mirrors. Stefan Osiecki’s *No Way Back* (1949) is premised on the depiction of criminal stardom. The film tells the story of Johnnie ‘the Croucher’ Thompson (Terence de Marney), an alcoholic ex-boxer who joins a black-market gang. Echoing the narrative structure of *Waterloo Road*, the diegesis is centred on the masculine antagonism between Johnnie and Joe Sleat (Jack Raine), set in motion by a woman, Beryl (Eleanor Summerfield). Each of the antagonists alludes to a different system of values and styles of self-presentation. Sleat is flamboyant (but not handsome), sly and ruthless, while Johnnie is the fallen symbol of glamour striving to regain his self-respect.

Recalling the narrative forms of *Waterloo Road*, *The Blue Lamp* and *Night and the City*, the rise and fall of the hero relies heavily on the representation of plebeian vanity. The introductory portrayal of Croucher, seen combing his hair in front of a mirror, evokes the self-mirroring depictions of Ted Willis and Tom Riley. Paralleling *Waterloo Road* and
Night and the City, boxing becomes the physical and psychological battleground of masculine prowess. Set at the beginning of the diegesis, the match between Croucher and a younger boxer emerges as an allegory of pathological spectatorship. Continuous intercuts contrast Croucher’s point of view with the portrayal of his wife, Sally (Shirley Quentin), who is observing the match while smoking. The scene counterposes the physical brutality of violence, as it is viewed through the bleeding eyes of the masculine hero, with the anxious eyes of a female spectator. Associating a woman’s view of man with the proletarian performance of stardom (boxing), this trope partly tallies with the narrative structures of spiv films. However, in stark contrast to many of them, most notably Waterloo Road, the starting point of the narrative reveals how a woman’s gaze confronts the fall of masculine stardom.

Using point of view shots that invite the viewer to assume the position of a boxer in the ring, the sequence ends with a still image of the stadium lights and the perspective of the knocked-out boxer. This is followed by a totally dark screen, which, surrealistically, features at its centre one of Croucher’s eyes. Under a medical examination in a doctor’s clinic, Croucher’s eye is revealed to have been irreversibly blinded. Marking the end of his boxing career and, by extension, the beginning of the hero’s fall, the loss an eye allegorically associates boxing with stardom. The juxtaposition of the bright frame (the stadium lights) with the dark one emphasises the transition from a life of glamour to a life of misery. The following sequences, based on photographs, mirrors and point of view shots, chart the transformation of the spectacular protagonist into a disillusioned spectator, who leaves behind the Croucher persona and becomes an ordinary man – ‘Johnnie’.
The first of these sequences, set in the dressing room of Johnnie’s wife, who appears to be a cabaret singer, inverts the gendered terms of spectatorship that marked the boxing scene. The spectacular protagonist is now Sally. While facing the mirror, she is seen hearing the news of her husband’s bankruptcy. In the following shots, on removing her dressing gown she arrogantly announces her break up with him. Invoking the *noir* convention of the ‘femme fatale’, this narcissistic and materialistic portrayal of femininity merges a voyeuristic account of feminine corporeal nudity (a woman in her underwear) with the metaphorical exposure of woman’s inner nudity as calculating, egoistical and ruthless. The sequence that follows becomes a parody of a classic farewell scene.

While Sally’s singing is distantly heard from the stage, the camera pans across the room. A close up on the photographic portrait of the ex-boxer, similar to the ones used for autographs, is followed by Johnnie’s announcement: ‘Good bye, sucker.’ The framing of the scene ironically redefines the meaning of ‘goodbye’. Sally, as the final shot suggests, is married to a photographic, and ultimately imaginary, form of masculinity. Marriage is reduced to a snapshot of erotic exhibitionism, comparable to a spectacular show (a boxing match or a cabaret performance).

Based on an extensive use of point of view shots, the following sequence accentuates the allegorical association between a physically injured boxer (half-blind) and his state of inner disillusion. Viewed through the eyes of Johnnie, a parade of social types state their unwillingness to help the unemployed ex-star: boxers, a pawnbroker, a barman, spivs. The final close up – on a weathered advertising poster for a boxing match – synecdochically emphasises the fall of stardom. The same crowd used to be Johnny’s
audience. Alongside the previous ‘farewell’ scene, in which the hero confronted his image in a photograph, this sequence emerges as the exact inverse of a narcissistic fantasy. If the imaginary construction of stardom demands the ability to see the self through the admiring eyes of the others, then, conversely, the fall of a fantasy involves the confrontation with the callous eyes of the crowd. Premised on this visual rhetoric, the filmic narrative dramatically presents the practice of spectatorship as a symbolic battlefield of self-mirroring: a way of understanding and experiencing the self through the eyes of others. The audience regulates the transition from ordinariness to stardom, and vice versa. Intimate social relationships (marriage, friends, colleagues) are cynically elided into temporal deceptions of eyesight.

The symbolic iconography of defeat reaches its apogee when the film presents Johnnie facing an actual mirror. The scene in question comes after a series of challenges to the protagonist’s pride. Beryl, a blonde, former admirer, criticises him for being employed by her spiv husband, while a young boy acting out the role of a boxer announces his admiration for Croucher, ‘the biggest of ’em all. He licked all the boxers in America and now he lives with the American king in his palace.’ In the next shot, Johnnie is seen to deliver punches in front of his mirror, repeating the phrase ‘the biggest of ’em all.’

In both scenes, the protagonist confronts idealised versions of selfhood in the statements, memories and fantasies of his admirers. As opposed to Hollywood conventions, these spectacular images are not visualised on screen. They are delicately yet indirectly conveyed via words, feelings and gestures. Self-mirroring is transmuted into an activity of the imagination. The kid’s phrase ‘American king’ graphically illustrates how international symbols of collective fantasy undercut these emotional
conflicts and the ideas of usual Britishness. Sketching out a zone of fiction within the diegesis, these narrative and stylistic techniques superimpose the perspective of the lay viewer onto that of the hero. A star is now seen to observe reality through the eyes of the common man.

This split between a grounded and a fictional portrayal further underpins the filmic presentation of a woman’s view. Set in a pub, Johnnie and Beryl’s first encounter involves static frames, pauses and gazes. While approaching the bar, Beryl’s attention is caught by the photographs hanging on the wall. They appear to be photographic portraits and posters of Johnnie’s boxing triumphs. The scene is presented through a shallow focus. In the foreground, Beryl’s profile sharpens, while the object of her gaze becomes blurred. This transformation of photographic spectatorship into a dreamlike episode is almost instantly followed by a return to reality. The drunken, semiconscious man is revealed to be the protagonist of the photographic spectacle. By juxtaposing two still portraits of Johnnie, the scene underlines the bipolar tension of feminine spectatorship. Photographic posturing and alcoholic decadence, triumph and degradation and dream and reality are seen to coexist and codetermine visual perceptions of the same man.

In Waterloo Road, Tom’s stardom is undermined in the final fighting scene. In No Way Back, the dialogue between female spectatorship and male defeat is far more complex. Beryl’s passion for Johnnie reaches its climax at the nadir of her lover’s life. Chased by the police, the couple is trapped in the upper floor of a warehouse. Echoing the closing scenes of William Wellman’s Public Enemy (1931), a classic Hollywood gangster film, this spatial entrapment sets the stage for the ultimate resolution of the drama. The
director organisation overtly endows the final dramatic episode with the aura of a mass-media spectacle. Newsreel cameras, journalists and a mainly female crowd surround the warehouse. The lights of the projectors and the camera crews visually transform the space into a film studio. The whole scene emerges as a self-reflective comment on the construction of a drama; a representation within a representation.

Women’s relationship to stardom plays a prominent role in this overall strategy. A series of intercutting shots depict Johnnie’s ex-wife giving a press conference in her dressing room. Holding Johnnie’s photographic portrait, she strikes erotic poses for a group of photographers. Along with competitive men, *No Way Back* constructs confrontational images of female fantasy, in a dynamic response to the anxieties and frustrations marking a man’s relationship to glamour. In stark contrast to Sally, Beryl actively participates in Johnnie’s final traumatic encounter with the memories of stardom. While the couple remain trapped in the warehouse, a radio announcer narrates the triumphant life of ‘Croucher’. A series of acoustic hallucinations, such as sounds from boxing stadiums, frame Johnnie’s emotional response the public retelling of his life story. Combined with the still position of his body and a highly charged facial expression, he seems to dream with his eyes open. The shooting script instruction is that Johnnie should look as though he is in ‘a state of dreaming’. However, the content of this fantasy is not directly visualised on screen. This imagery invites spectators to look at the protagonist of the film as yet another spectator. The final words of the radio biopic strongly emphasise this idea of spectatorship within spectatorship. The radio announcer is heard saying: ‘this, ladies and gentlemen, is all we know about the story of Beryl and

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*No Way back*, shooting script, BFI Library.
Croucher.’ The representational device places the audience of the radio show, the two protagonists and thecinematic audience in a similar position.

It is the final act of the drama that redraws the boundaries between these viewpoints, radically inverting the idea of spectatorship as a state of continuous daydreaming. Johnnie and Beryl are seen exiting the room, ready to meet their death, and, thereby, reclaiming for themselves the role of heroic actors. The final scene centres on a photograph of Johnnie as a boxer. It is placed on the broken mirror of Beryl’s compact, which is left on the floor. The close up of this object is combined with the sound of shooting. Confronting the viewer with material symbols of narcissism and illusionism (a broken mirror, a photograph), this synecdochic portrayal of the protagonists (a photograph/Johnnie, mirror/Beryl) celebrates as well as transcends the erotic dynamics of stardom. The idea of spectacle coalesces with the iconography of a fall. A nightmare is presented as the photographic negative of a dream.

An analogous use of mirrors and photographs as visual signifiers of the disruptive female imagination marks the atmosphere of It Always Rains on Sunday (Robert Hammer, 1947). Produced by Ealing Studios, the film exemplifies the tension between the creative idiosyncrasy of its director, the poet and mathematician Robert Hammer, who had a penchant for morally ambivalent topics, and Michael Balcon, the director of Ealing studios, who advocated the need for a morally and nationally instructive cinema. Mixing ordinariness with transgression, the film centres on men and women in the working-class community of Bethnal Green’s Petticoat Lane, in east London. The

main plot involves the escape of a convict from Dartmoor Prison on a rainy Sunday. As the *Daily Mail* reviewer noted, this extraordinary event was the ‘dropping of the pebble into the water. What this excellent, realistic comedy-melodrama is concerned with is how the ripples affect a number of ordinary people.’ The comment draws attention to the idiosyncratic generic style, the fusion of realism and melodrama and the ordinary yet extraordinary subject matter of the film. The reviewer admits that: ‘When *It Always Rains on Sunday* opened with a shot of a piece of paper being blown against some dingy railings in a rain-swept East London street, we sat back and thought: ha, another of those!’ ‘Those’ were the other spiv films of the cycle, films such as Cavalcanti’s *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947), which tended to intersperse the narration of crime with dreary shots of London life.

In *It Always Rains on Sunday* the visual dramatisation of space is not limited to exterior, urban environments. Beyond the amusement arcades, pubs, dancehalls, gramophone shops, markets, fairs and alleys that loom large in the film, the central drama is staged within the daily routines of an ordinary housewife. The escaped convict Tommy Swann (John McCallum) seeks refuge in his ex-lover’s bedroom, Rose (Googie Withers), now married to another man, George Sandigate (Edward Chapman). The other members of the family are George and Rose’s son and George’s two daughters from his previous marriage.

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36 Anon, *Daily Mail*, [date damaged] 1947, newspaper cutting, microfiche collection, BFI.
This crowded domestic setting serves Hammer’s explicit intention to make ‘films about people in dark rooms doing beastly things to each other’. In the film, John’s unexpected presence has a ‘beastly’ psychological effect on Rose; he reminds her of lost happiness that disrupts her ability to control her present life. Accordingly, Rose’s behaviour is tyrannical towards her stepdaughters; in an establishing scene, she authoritatively orders the younger daughter to prepare breakfast for her father. This atmosphere transforms the domestic sphere of the Sandigate family into a space of psychic tension and suspense, interweaving the aesthetics of crime with the claustrophobic mise-en-scène of a working-class melodrama. Once again, mirrors dramatically visualise these tensions. Their reflective surfaces guide the viewer from the material surface of the setting to an immaterial territory of desire and memory.

Exemplifying this dramatic dynamic is a scene revolving around the character of Vi (Susan Shaw), George’s oldest daughter, as she observes herself in the mirror of her closet, a few seconds after waking up one morning. She shares the room with her younger sister who, following Rose’s orders, goes to the kitchen to prepare breakfast for her father. Vi has slept in her evening dress.

The framing of her reflection on the surface of the mirror reveals a wall replete with the posters of film stars in the background. This still imagery dissolves into the moving image of a saxophone player (figure 3.22). The musician Morry Hyams (Sydney Tafler) is revealed to be Vi’s boyfriend. The sequence shows how Morry promised Vi to help her begin a career in singing. The visual synthesis of Vi’s memories (the dancehall, the

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flamboyant lover, the promises of stardom) creates a stark antithesis to the stillness and claustrophobia of the domestic scene. The mirror and photographs redefine the boundaries of space and reality, bridging the representation of masculine stardom with its feminine and domestic experience.

Subsequently, Rose has a flashback while looking at her bedroom mirror and listening to her husband reading aloud from the newspaper about Tommy Swan’s escape. The reading of a newspaper emerges a key form of everyday illusionism. Tabloid sensations create the impression of familiarity with things that are spectacular and distant such as celebrity criminals. In contrast, the act of self-mirroring creates the impression of distance from things that are close. Visualising a memory that is mediated through mirrors, the following sequence plays out this contrast between everyday familiarity and distance. Rose recalls her encounter with Tommy Swan in a pub. Depicted as a young, blonde barmaid, her image invokes the style of her step-daughter Vi and overall, the
portrayal of a number of good-time girls in other spiv films (Diana in *The Blue Lamp*, May in *Waterloo Road*). While standing at the bar, with her back facing the crowd and the pub’s entrance, Vi confronts the mirror reflection of a man (Tommy Swann) who is dressed in a flashy suit, padded shoulders, trilby hat and tie. In the next shot, she turns to her right to see Tommy’s smiling face reflected in another mirrored surface (see figures 3.23–24).

Figure 3.23. The first mirror framing of Tommy. *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hammer, 1947).
Portrayed in reflective surfaces, Tommy’s portrait evokes the cinematic and photographic posturing of film stars. The mirrors mobilise a transition from a photographic pose (Tommy smiling at Rose) to moving image and from a frozen image to embodied reality (Rose finally talks face to face with Tommy). In line with the previous sequence, which was set in Vi’s room, the dialogue between static frames and masculine stardom stages the intrusion of cinematic illusion into the sensual reality of female subjectivity. A dreamy vocabulary of everydayness is transformed into an erotic representation of spectatorship. In all these scenes, still images miraculously start moving. Glamorous men move out of screens and mirrors and invade women’s sensory or imaginary horizons.

These photographic/mirror portrayals contrast with Tommy’s image as an escaped convict. Rose’s encounter with him takes place in a shadowy room; a backyard air-raid
shelter. Brunsdon has argued that these settings point to the compromise between the generic space of noir film and British atmosphere.\textsuperscript{40} The mix between glamour and darkness accentuates the dramatic dynamics of the setting. The contrasting imagery of dark and light seems to transform the confinement of a routine life into a spatial allegory of the female psyche. While mirrors and dark rooms guide the viewer into the complexity of female interiority, instability and emotional fluidity are seen to erupt beneath the surface of domestic order and normality. Rose’s encounter with both versions of Tommy’s profile – glamorous and dark – strongly collides with the daily practices of a housewife. In the flashback sequence, her husband’s voice brings her back to reality with his question ‘what’s for dinner?’ Similarly, when Tommy is smuggled into the house, Rose is confronted by a local housewife who suddenly opens the window and asks a routine question about dinner. In both scenes the discussion about cooking appears as a continuous performance of ordinariness and normality, pointing towards Vi’s negotiation of repressed desires and the demands of housewifery.

While in spiv films glamour and darkness alternate with disruptive renderings of memory and ephemerality, the transition from dream like to waking life often assumes violent forms. In \textit{Waterloo Road} violence erupts between competitive men. In many other films, however, the female spectator becomes the victim of men’s physical brutality. In \textit{The Blue Lamp}, Tom attacks Diana. When Narcy, the evil spiv in \textit{They Made me a Fugitive}, beats his chorus girl ex-girlfriend in her dressing room, the mirror reflects a distorted, monstrous version of his image. Towards the finale of \textit{It Always Rains on Sunday}, Tommy punches Rose and runs away. His punch facilitates Rose’s abrupt return to reality. She subsequently attempts suicide and resumes a life of domestic normality.

Women’s fascination with transgressive men was a recurrent motif in the post-war mass cultural aestheticisation of crime beyond the cinema screen, most notably in the journalistic and literary dramatisations of notorious crime stories. In the late 1940s, the sensational portrayal of mass murder in the tabloid press and true-crime literature drew attention to the hysterical responses of women’s audiences towards masculine types who combined monstrosity and charm. Crowds of women were captured queuing outside the courtrooms of sensational murder trials, and commentators warned about the macabre erotic taste of these women. One the most renowned crime reporters of the period, Duncan Webb, wrote in the *People* about the feminine ‘worship’ of John Haigh, the confidence trickster and black marketer turned mass murderer. A young female friend of this celebrity criminal, Barbara Stephan, was said to have transformed her relationship with Haigh into a cinematic or literary experience, a ‘melodrama’. As Webb put it, ‘there was a touch of heavy melodrama, but there was no doubting her sincerity’. Webb quoted Stephan, saying that her notorious friend ‘knew everything that I didn’t know. About art, music, food, wines, everything that a girl hears about but rarely gets the chance to experience.’ Masculine criminality under these conditions was seen to accentuate a woman’s escapist and erotic fantasy.

Spiv films transferred this idea of criminal stardom to the screen. By suffusing the mass cultural representation of crime with the tensions and anxieties of women’s interior life,

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their narrative structures superimpose cinematic, criminal and erotic forms of imagination. The reflective surfaces of mundane materiality become windows of fantasy. Criminals insinuate themselves into the daily and emotional environment of women as forms of tabloid journalism, mirror reflections and dark shadows. The versatile, spectatorial positions of housewives transform these daily invasions of stardom into genres of thriller and melodrama.

Together with representations of masculinity, spiv films emphasise the dramatic tension between criminal escapism and women’s perspectives. Erotic and criminal transgression dissolves the boundaries separating the domestic from the public sphere. While in *It Always Rains on Sunday* Rose’s and Vi’s fantasies evade the confines of domestic space via the reflective surfaces of mirrors, in *Waterloo Road* Tillie returns to a form of domesticity via the window display of a photographic studio. In *No Way Back* and *The Blue Lamp* the female protagonists move across the urban settings of leisure, entertainment and danger.

In all of the films discussed in this chapter, the dream-like portraits of men attest to the breadth and depth of women’s escapism. The acting style, *mise-en-scène* and narrative structure expands the space of the imagination. Gendered anxieties and erotic disillusion are inextricably linked to the dynamics of cinematic illusion. Set in these terms, telling elements of British realism filtered through stereotypical features of national temperament amplify the spectatorial ambiguities and instabilities of historical life. While social reality merges with fantasy, escapism is not merely reduced to a popular reception of cinematic aesthetics. Rather, it emerges as a way of life, a mode of
subjectivity and a form of socialisation; in short, a popular, but also pathological, technology of self-aestheticisation.

The following chapter examines in more detail the popular conceptions of escapism as transgressive modes of self-presentation. Focusing on the sensational impact of the cleft chin murder, it foregrounds the self-confessional, tabloid and literary associations between crime, gender and cinematic imagination in late 1940s Britain. It shows how many of the rhetorical and semantic strategies influencing criminal and erotic escapism in spiv films resonated with wider social understandings of the crime and the criminal beyond the screen.
Chapter 4. The Mystery of the Cleft Chin Murder: Wayward Femininity and Cinematic Escapism

She was eighteen, her name was Elizabeth Maud Jones, she longed for glamour and adventure, and she had Carl Gustav Hulten for her companion. How did it come about that this young girl from Wales and her American boy found themselves enmeshed in the murder trial of the century? What brought them to their journey’s end on the Great West Road? What really happened – and what happened behind the scenes in this strange, fateful and true drama of modern life in London?


On 3 October 1944, Elizabeth Marina Jones, an eighteen-year-old waitress, and Karl Hulten, an absent-without-leave US paratrooper, met in a café on Hammersmith Broadway.¹ Hulten was introduced as Ricky and Jones as Georgina Grayson. Hulten was one of the approximately 650,000 American soldiers stationed on British soil in the

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¹ The following account is based on the written statements of Elizabeth Marina Jones, 11 October 1944, Carl Hulten, 12 October 1944, Divisional Detective Inspector W. Tarr, 24 October 1944, The National Archives (subsequently TNA), Public Record Office London (subsequently PRO), Criminal cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, convicted at Central Criminal Court (CCC) on 23 January 1945 for murder and sentenced to death (commuted), records created or inherited by the Home Office, Ministry of Home Security, and related bodies (subsequently HO), Registered Papers, Supplementary HO 144/22219. See also the Murder of George Edward Heath by Private Karl Gustav [sic] Hulten, United States Army, and Elizabeth Jones at Great West Road, on 7 October 1944, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/2280; Defendant: Jones, Elizabeth Marina and Hulten, Karl Gustav. Charge: Murder, Records of the Central Criminal Court (subsequently CRIM) 1/482. Jones, Elizabeth Marina: at Central Criminal Court (CCC) on 23 January 1945, convicted of murder; sentenced to death (commuted); released on conditional life licence on 24 February 1954. TNA PRO Home Office Prison Department (Subsequently PCOM) 9/2035; Children: Elizabeth Maud Baker (later known as Elizabeth Marina Jones): committed to approved school on account of her not being under proper care of guardianship and falling into bad associations, TNA PRO: HO 144/22159; Criminal cases: Hulten, Karl Gustav. Convicted at the Central Criminal Court (CCC) on 23 January 1945 for murder and sentenced to death, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
winter of 1944. The couple spent six days strolling around London, driving a stolen American military truck and provoking a number of reckless criminal episodes. They physically attacked two girls, a cyclist and a hitch-hiker, and made a failed attempt to rob a taxi driver.

On the fourth day of their partnership, they eventually succeeded in robbing a taxi-driver. While Hulten lay in wait in a shop doorway, Jones stopped a private-hired car somewhere on Hammersmith Broadway. The driver agreed to drive them as far as Great West Road, Chiswick (on the western outskirts of London). When the driver stopped the car, Hulten shot him suddenly in the back and then took his position in the driver’s seat. After removing money and valuables from the cabbie’s pockets, they drove the cab into a nearby deserted street, where they threw the man’s corpse into a ditch. Then they drove back to central London. During the weekend, they used the stolen car, a Ford V8 sedan, to get around, sold their victim’s jewellery on the black market and made a failed attempt to rob a woman in Piccadilly.

On the Monday, the driver’s body was discovered and the murder story featured in the headlines of American and British press as the ‘Mystery of the cleft chin murder’. The title was coined metonymically; a cleft chin being a facial characteristic of the victim. However, the police had already managed to recognise the identity of the murdered man – his name was George Heath – and almost immediately mobilised a hunt for the missing Ford. The car was located in Lurgan Avenue, Fulham, and Hulten was arrested while getting into it. In his testimony to police, he claimed that he was ignorant about

the case. He also stated that he had spent the previous Friday night, which was the time of the alleged murder, in Jones’ flat in Hammersmith. Two days later, Jones repeated a similar version of the facts to police interrogators. Later on the same day, however, she admitted that her testimony was inaccurate. That evening, she finally confessed to the crime and was remanded in custody. Hulten also changed his testimony and confessed to the murder. They were both charged put on trial in the Old Bailey in March 1945 and found guilty. Hulten was hanged, but Jones was reprieved on the grounds of her young age and remained in prison until her release in 1953.

The proceedings of the trial were covered widely in the press and almost immediately turned into a book. In the subsequent years, the story inspired a novel, a film, an episode on Orson Wells’ BBC radio drama series, and one the most famous of George Orwell’s essays, ‘The Decline of the English Murder’. Commenting on the sensational impact of the case, R. Alwyn Raymond, a Daily Mirror reporter and author of the literary version of the trial, stressed that even in the early days of the scandal, the press coverage had made clear that this was ‘the cause celebre [sic] of two decades, if not of the century’. ‘On the eve of the trial,’ Raymond wrote, ‘the newspapers had reminded their readers of the facts of the case in great detail just as in the ensuing days they were to keep the public quite as fully informed of the progress of the trial as of the advance of the Soviet armies to the gates of Berlin.’ Raymond’s emphasis on the juxtaposition of the crime scandal with major war news underlined the social significance of the cleft

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chin case. The scandalous story of two anti-heroic individuals seemed to compete for attention with the heroic events that concerned the lives of many fighting in the Second World War. This cultural tension can serve as my constructive starting point for a contextual reading of this murderous episode: how did a story of individual crime relate to the dominant narratives of contemporary national history?

During the 1940s, the national community was heralded as the protagonist in the dramatisation of social life into ‘historical’ time. A rich interdisciplinary literature has emphasised the ways that, during and after the war, the press and broadcasting media, and cinema and advertisements constructed an image of the British nation as a unified, integral and homogenised entity. This publicly constructed collective subject of the nation was assigned a leading role in a grandiose spectacle of violence, heroism and material discomfort in the various visual and journalistic media.

The ideological, political and social dynamics of this national and collective identity formation has been the subject of a series of ongoing debates. Historians and cultural theorists have stressed recently that divergent parameters of class, ethnic, gender, sexual, moral, geographical and political identities disrupted the hegemonic promotion of social harmony and consensus. None of these interpretations, however, has disputed

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the idea that during the wartime and post-war austerity era, the notion of history as a living experience of facts tended to overlap with the notion of history as a narration of facts. As Sonia Rose, quoting Lucy Noakes, has stressed, ‘this was a time when people’s “lives seemed to be a part of history”, a time when they were living through momentous events’. War and austerity shaped the ability of different social groups to imagine and experience their own lives as key ingredients in the visual and textual aestheticisation of social life as representation, particularly in the cinema and the press.

This chapter aims to understand how the aesthetic blurring of historical representation and actual social life was determined by the interaction between criminal behaviour and mass-media images of the murder story. As will be shown, coverage of the cleft chin case moved between the spectacle of street life and the powerful imagery generated by the media. In the first chapter, I argued that a version of criminal aesthetics constituted the essence of the spiv lifestyle. Published in the 1930s, John Worby’s *The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Spiv* (1937) narrated the activities of a wayward figure who invented devious ways of narrating, imagining and projecting his story while moving across social and especially metropolitan space. Focusing on the cleft chin story, this chapter asks how this 1930s concept of criminal aesthetics re-emerged and over-determined the interpretation and representation of homicide in the very different cultural and moral atmosphere of the 1940s.

This line of investigation raises a number of interrelated questions. What ideas of criminal escapism shaped the protagonists’ self-dramatisation of their lives and actions

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9 Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p. 45.
in the print and visual media? What modes of self-disguise, sexual performance and deviant behaviour informed the dynamics of the cleft chin drama? Considering the anti-heroes were repeatedly described as actors, spectators and cinematic dreamers, how did these cultural resources reshape the social and aesthetic meanings of cinema? Overall, how did the contemporary public sphere, the mass media and popular culture more generally interrogate and debate the idea of crime as an aesthetic entanglement of imagination and (anti-)social life?

**Self-Confession and Courtroom Drama: The Rhetoric of Self-Deception**

Hulten’s and Jones’ confessions agreed on several points. They both described how they met in the afternoon of October 3 in a café in Hammersmith, on Queen Caroline Street. From there, they arranged to meet at 11.30 in the evening outside the Broadway cinema, in King Street. Hulten, who was known to Jones as ‘Ricky’, was late and so Jones started walking away. Driving an American military truck, Hulten managed to locate her and asked her to join him for a ride. Jones accepted and entered the truck. At that point their story lines differed:

Hulten said in his witness statement:

> We started to go for a ride. During the course of the conversation she said that she would like to do something exciting like becoming a ‘Gun Moll’ like they do in the States. At first I thought she was kidding, but she told me that she was serious. I

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11 Written statements of Elizabeth Marina Jones, 11 October 1944, Carl Hulten, 12 October 1944, Criminal Cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker’, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
then explained to her that we had a stolen truck. We drove towards Reading.12

The term ‘gun moll’ referred to the female companion of the American gangster. Gun molls featured in the American press coverage of crime, gangster cinema and ‘hard-boiled’ literature of the 1930s. During that decade, the journalistic and cinematic coverage of American gangster crime thrived in the USA, Britain and Europe.13 During the trial proceedings, Jones admitted that she recognised the term ‘gun moll’ through ‘books’ that she had read.14 However, in her confession she did not employ the term. She described the same scene narrated earlier by Hulten in the following way:

I told him in the truck that I would like to do something really dangerous, meaning to go over Germany in a bomber. I meant that, but he got me wrong.15

This account offered a competing interpretation of the meaning of danger: Jones’ ambition was to bomb Germany, and not to become a ‘gun moll’. What in Hulten’s words appeared as a fantasy of criminal violence, in Jones’ narration was translated into a fantasy of war violence. Her statement hinted that behind her involvement in crime lurked a desire for national heroism. For her, this was a socially and morally acceptable way of understanding violence as excitement. The urge to be actively involved in the mass murder of the enemy emerged as a morally valid way of socialising with...

12 Ibid., Hulten’s statement, p. 7, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
13 For the social impact of hard-boiled literature and cinema in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s, see Steve Chibnall, ‘Counterfeit Yanks: War, Austerity and Britain’s American Dream’, in P.J. Davies, ed., Representing and Imagining America (Keele, 1996), pp. 151–9.
14 Jones cross-examined by Maude, Transcript of the trial, p. 186, Criminal Cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
15 Ibid., Jones’ statement, p. 17.
Americans. In the ensuing part of her confession, Jones’ narrative strategy focused on her partner’s deviant social skills:

He then told me what he was doing and showed me a gun which he pulled out from an inside pocket, or it might be hooked to his pockets. He went on to say that he had killed a number of people in Chicago with a gun. He told me he had done a lot of it over here too. I then asked him why he was not with his unit. He was dressed in officer’s clothes and he replied my unit is in ‘Holland’.¹⁶

This passage described in detail Hulten’s tactics of socialisation. The young man carried a gun; Jones admitted that she was not sure where exactly on Hulten’s body and clothes the gun was pulled out from. Alluding to an element of surprise, this detail portrayed Hulten’s body language as quick, controlled, and criminally trained. The exhibition of the gun, as Jones went on to reveal, was followed by reference to gangster life in Chicago and London. Although dressed as an army officer, the young American allegedly explained that his unit was in Holland. Combining the roles of the gangster and the army officer, Hulten’s self-image projected different styles of violence. Phrased in this way, Jones’ account carefully selected the bodily gestures, images and phrases out of which Hulten constructed his forms of self-disguise. These testimonies revealed that both of the defendants set out to tell a story of crime by reproducing sequences of everyday life as a form of cultural masquerade: their accounts constructed exhibitionistic narratives of deviant sociability. A set of cinematic statements and gestures (holding a gun, dreaming of gun molls, etc) crossed the boundaries between actual London street life and cinematic representation.

Gangster stories, real or fictional, were conventionally set in contemporary spaces and times, especially American cities, and their imagery aestheticised the immediacy of the present through violence. Accordingly, violence was the next step in the progress of Jones’ and Hulten’s careers. The couple confessed that, on the same day, they attacked two girls, a cyclist and a hitch-hiker. However, if posing as a gangster was a re-enactment of cinematic fiction (gangster films), killing would be something more than representation. The couple’s actual involvement in a murder and their subsequent arrest marked the transition from criminal fantasy to social justice. The next section of this chapter aims to show how, while attributing the key force of evilness in their partner’s self-disguise techniques, the two anti-heroes further unpacked and dramatised the process of awakening from the excitement of crime. As these narrative tropes were amplified in the courtroom, the transcript of the trial is read as a polyphonic record of criminal imagination: the defendants, witnesses, lawyers and mass-media commentators variously discussed the murder story as a form of visual, literary and, most notably, cinematic escapism. The detailed reading of these homologous, but also competing accounts, of criminality explores how the national, sexual and moral tensions of the drama were filtered through the symbolic associations between violence, visual spectacle and psychological life.

The Trial: Staging Criminal, Sexual and Cinematic Time

He told me he was a gunman ... a gunman from Chicago ... the leader of a gang operating in London. Whisper by whisper – her face pale and

drawn, a girl of 18 muttered these words in the crowded No. 1 Court at the Old Bailey yesterday.\textsuperscript{18}

One of the most vivid depictions of the trial came from Alwyn Raymond, the Australian author–journalist (and later filmmaker), who turned his \textit{Daily Mail} coverage of the case into a book. Raymond emphasised the social and sensational impact of the trial in a chapter dramatically entitled as ‘Cold-Blood Murder: I Lied to You … I Was terrified … I Told him that it Was.’\textsuperscript{19} The subtitle hinted at the tense atmosphere of the courtroom drama, which, as the author noted, ‘was the first time in history that an American Citizen was tried in a British Court.’\textsuperscript{20} In contrast to other armies remaining on British territory during this period, such as the Canadians, Americans usually had the privilege of being subject to the legal jurisdiction of their home country. This legal arrangement was the product of tense diplomatic negotiations that had begun in 1942.\textsuperscript{21} As a result, the trial of an American citizen in a British court was a diplomatically charged exception. The sensitivity of the situation in terms of American–British relations was clearly evident in Home Office records. In addition to keeping a transcript of the trial, the British Intelligence Service reported extensively on the press coverage of the case in the USA.\textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{18} W. A. E. Jones, ‘Cleft Chin: Girl’s “He told me He was A Gunman”’, \textit{Daily Herald}, 19 January 1945, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{19} Raymond, \textit{The Cleft Chin Murder}, p. 21; For the \textit{Daily Mail} coverage see ‘Glamour-crazed Girl danced her way to a Sentence of Death’, \textit{Daily Mail}, 24 January 1945, pp. 1, 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Raymond, \textit{The Cleft Chin Murder}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{22} Hulten’s case, Criminal Cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
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As well as being British, Elizabeth Jones was a woman. According to Raymond, the journalist, this element was another key aspect in the sensational impact of the cleft chin story. ‘It was the first time for ten years,’ Raymond noted, ‘that a man and a woman had stood in the Old Bailey dock jointly charged with murder.’  

A retrospective tabloid exposé of the cleft chin murder, published in the News of the World, confirmed this view. The article featured a list of the ten women in Britain who had been convicted for murder and later executed. Four of them were convicted for murdering their husbands, three for murdering their babies and one for poisoning a patient at her nursing home. In this newspaper account, crime and capital punishment at once dramatised and celebrated transgressive female actors as exceptional individuals of the national past.

In addition to the issue of female offenders facing capital punishment, Raymond argued that the ‘historical’ importance of the cleft chin story was inexorably linked to its capacity to trigger an ‘avid appetite for sensation, the morbid pleasure that so many seem to obtain from the spectacle of human beings fighting in the dock to escape the hangman.’ By virtue of this ‘morbid pleasure’, Raymond argued that the story was expected to stamp the memories of the nation for ‘two decades’ if not ‘a century’. Beyond the act of capital punishment, the historical importance of the cleft chin murder lay, according to his account, in the dramatic dynamics of the courtroom. It was the defendant’s rhetorical confrontation with the prospect of death that transformed the story into a monumental cultural episode. By representing the story as a public

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23 Raymond, The Cleft Chin Murder, p. 21  
26 Ibid.
spectacle, the courtroom appeared to over-determine the aesthetic character of the case: the murder was an object to be seen and enjoyed by a large audience, through a process that aestheticised crime and criminality as entertainment.

Paralleling the journalistic coverage of many of the post-war murder stories, Raymond’s account coupled moral caution about the ‘morbid pleasure’ of the public with a set of textual representations that actively stimulated this pleasure: pictorial details (Jones’ dress, style and appearance) and powerful phrases (‘I Lied to You … I was terrified’) produced an overtly dramatic narrative.27 Considering the introductory caution about the ‘morbid’ spectatorial pleasures, Raymond’s rhetoric suggested that his book did not make a spectacle out of horror, rather it reflected on a trial that was visually organised as a spectacle.28 This rhetorical tactic echoed the language of the tabloid press. In newspaper reports, the sensational representation of the trial intermingled with reflections on the theatrical quality of the trial. A *Daily Herald* exposé of 1 January 1949 discussed Jones’ testimony in the following terms:

It was a dramatic moment in a courtroom that has been the scene of many moments of drama this week – a drama played out to the ticking of the court clock and the dull noises of the world outside the sombre Old Bailey building. The red-robed judge, the barristers, a jury of nine men and three housewives, three Negro law students, American Army officers and West End stage artists and dance club hostesses made up the audience.29

28 For comments on the spectacular character of the trial, see Raymond, *The Cleft Chin Murder*, pp. 21–2.
29 Jones, ‘Cleft Chin: Girl’s ‘He told me He was A Gunman’.”
In this passage, the atmosphere of the courtroom was repeatedly conveyed through a theatrical vocabulary – ‘dramatic moment’, ‘drama’, ‘scene’, ‘a drama played out to the ticking of the clock’. The ritualistic spectacle of the law with its red-robed judge contrasted with representatives of London’s theatrical leisure industries – West End stage artists, dance club hostesses. Negro law students and housewives supplemented the mise-en-scène. While the former pointed to the American presence, the latter pointed up the importance of gender. Numerous tabloid biographies revealed that Jones herself was married but had abandoned her husband on the second day of their marriage. As a potential murderer, she was now held up as an object of spectatorship and legal surveillance for ‘housewives’, ‘stage artists and dance club hostesses’ alike. In that sense, the trial dramatised an encounter between normative and disruptive versions of femininity, with the courtroom setting as the stage for the enactment of contested forms of moral agency.

While the courtroom itself emerged as a place of social tension, the trial proceedings enlarged on the anti-heroes’ techniques of self-dramatisation. The defence strategy adopted by the both barristers (J.D. Casswell for Jones and J.D. Maude for Hulten) emphasised their clients’ propensity to be manipulated by the deceptive skills of their respective partners. Expanding on their written confessions, Hulten and Jones presented themselves as passive vehicles for the fulfilment of their partner’s impulses. Hulten testified to his lawyer that on the night of the murder:

I went up to her [Jones’] room after I whistled for her. She brought me back up to the room and she then made some remark about going out at night and robbing a car. I argued against her and she just kept on arguing with me and she told me to give her my gun and she was going to go out by herself.\textsuperscript{31}

Hulten’s testimony pointed towards the emotional dynamics of the crime. His reference to whistling, for example, suggested simultaneously an encoded and a playful way of communication. It signalled a bond of exclusivity, a gesture suitable for people who might have something to hide or share, such as lovers or gang members. Overall, it invoked a ritual of trust and familiarity as well as of conspiracy. This type of detail underscored the atmosphere of excitement and deviance that the protagonists of the cleft chin murder projected. In the course of a few phrases, the atmosphere of playful partnership developed into a hysterical scene. Jones’ explosive mood was described as the catalyst in the development of the murder story: she wanted to leave her room, she took his gun and claimed that she could carry out a robbery on her own. In this version of the story, Jones’ uncontrollable impulses were an instrumental and emotional force of violence. She was the figure who transformed a game into a crime.

Hulten’s narration worked to depict Jones as moody and capricious. She wanted to take the gun and go out; then she decided to leave for a meal but changed her mind and insisted on stealing a taxi. She was also seen to be familiar with London’s night life; she knew places that stayed open all night and above all, she was manipulative and determined to commit, or to encourage the commitment of, crime. Her decision to rob a taxi was the product of a second fight that she provoked while standing in a shop

\textsuperscript{31} Hulten’s testimony for the defence, the Transcript of the Trial, p. 186, Criminal Cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina nee Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
doorway in Hammersmith Broadway, sometime after midnight. With regard to the actual murder scene, Hulten claimed that the gun was fired by accident, his sleeve being trapped in the door of the car.32

According to this version, the crime would never have happened if he had not been trapped by the imaginative impulses of a wayward London girl. She was the deceiver. It was an argument that was reversed by Jones’ barrister, Casswell. While cross-examining Hulten, Casswell forced the defendant to admit that he purposefully created the fantastic persona of a Chicago gunman, one described in his words as a ‘build up’.33 Following this admission, Casswell’s questions presented Hulten’s behaviour as the force that preoccupied Jones’ imagination: ‘Does a build up mean that you wanted to make yourself a bit of a he-man and a hero for her? […] I suggest you were making yourself out to be a very fine man, one of these adventurous spirits who does not know what he does […] Why did you deceive her like this.’34 While Hulten’s legal defence was based on the idea of him being trapped by the imaginative energies of Jones, his cross-examination emphasised his ability to trap the imagination of a young and vulnerable girl.

Hulten’s position in this drama drew attention to a basic tension in the wartime encounter between the Americans and the British. Despite common bonds of language and tradition, many ordinary Britons appeared wholly ignorant of American culture and society. Contemporary research carried out by the Ministry of Information revealed that

33 Casswell cross-examining Hulten, Transcript of the Trial p. 194, Criminal cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
the majority of the population did not even have a basic knowledge about the social and political life of the USA.\textsuperscript{35} The mass media, and especially the cinema, deeply coloured British perceptions of America and Americans. For the vast majority of the British population, Hollywood, ‘hard-boiled’ literature and comic books produced the most familiar images of their transatlantic neighbours. These media-based fantasies shaped the social and sexual interaction between American men and British women in particular.\textsuperscript{36} Sexual and social histories of the war have underlined the enthusiasm of many British women for American GIs.\textsuperscript{37} What has not yet been described in detail is how cinema influenced these emotional and sexual encounters. The cleft chin case was significant in this respect; the trial advertised the cinematic framing of erotic socialisation. Hulten’s testimony vividly described how his erotic games with Jones became a re-enactment of a gangster film. He admitted that ‘building-up’ a gangster portrait was trick of flirtation, one initiated by Jones’ aspiration to become a ‘gun-moll’.

This cinematic element changed the meaning of sex as it was represented in the case: for Hulten the erotic interplay of performances and gazes outweighed the importance of full sexuality. He categorically claimed that, during the six days of their adventure, he did not have sexual intercourse with Jones. This was because Jones had a rash on her belly and, according to Hulten, the ‘Army is always telling us to watch out for things like


\textsuperscript{36} For British imaginings of America in the late months of the war and the immediate post-war years, see Steve Chibnall, ‘Counterfeit Yanks: War, Austerity and Britain’s American Dream’ in Davies, ed., \textit{Representing and Imagining America}, pp. 45–57.

that and stay away from that kind of thing’.\(^{38}\) By these ‘things’, he meant venereal disease. This was confirmed by Jones, who added that a medical examination had revealed that her rash was not VD.\(^{39}\) This defendants’ discussion about sexual behaviour and responsible attitude towards health echoed medical concerns about the changes to wartime sexuality.

The wartime US and British authorities had propagated a responsible attitude towards sexual hygiene in their effort to stem the 1943 VD epidemic. As the historian David Reynolds argued, the VD epidemic created a friction in American–British relations.\(^{40}\) The two military administrations had to overcome considerable differences in national perceptions of public health politics. The Americans traditionally dealt with the VD problem though ‘anti-prostitution laws and compulsory treatment of VD suspects’, whereas in Britain, after the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1886 and as a result of continuous political pressure from women’s’ organisations, compulsory medical examination was considered morally unacceptable.\(^{41}\)

The wartime VD epidemic brought to the fore these contrasting national policies; the American side pushing towards the regulation of women’s behaviour and the British of men’s. While the masculine version of the problem was mainly associated with the uncontrolled behaviour of the American GIs, the feminine issues were mainly

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\(^{38}\) Hulten’s testimony for the defence, Transcript of the Trial, p. 185, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.

\(^{39}\) Jones cross-examined by Maude, Transcript of the Trial, p. 17, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.


represented by two types of British women – the prostitutes, so-called ‘commandos’, and underage girls, ‘the youngsters under 18’ who, according to an American official’s report, ‘have little to do but play.’

Contemporary popular culture referred to this latter, deviant-type of young woman as the ‘good-time girl’, meaning young girls, often amateur prostitutes, who, like Jones, were willing to explore the wartime opportunities for sex and fun, mainly by socialising with American GIs. It was for this reason that Good-Time Girl was the title chosen for the cinematic adaptation of Jones’ story. Set in the historical context, the cleft chin murder was depicted as a microcosm of this nationally defined battle of the sexes, foregrounding the sanctioned regulations of sexual hygiene and public morality.

While acknowledging the importance of these moral regulations, Hulten and Jones shifted its emphasis. Through their actions, moral transgression appeared as a violent redefinition of sexuality beyond sex. As we have seen, Hulten’s testimony described his story as a visual adventure turned into crime as a result of the emotional impulses of his female partner. Accordingly, when the trial proceedings sought to reveal what ‘good time’ meant for a good-time girl, pleasure was not equated with sex, but with the set of gestures, movements and gazes that transformed crime into an erotic stimulant of the imagination. In the words of Jones’ landlady, Edris May Evans, this was a ‘queer’ experience of time.

As Evans admitted at the beginning of her testimony, in September 1944 Jones, who introduced herself as Georgina, started renting one of her five bedrooms in the upper

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43 The following account is based on Edris May Evan’s testimony, Transcript of the Trial, pp. 70–74, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
premises of a building in King Street, Hammersmith. The girl never hid from her
landlady the fact that she had a wide circle of American friends. She discussed her
acquaintance with Hulten and introduced him to Evans. When examined by Jones’
barrister Casswell, the old lady was asked to expand on this and, more particularly, to
clarify the term ‘fishy’, an expression that, according her written testimony, was how
Jones’ defined her first impression of Hulten. The witness explained that by fishy she
meant ‘something queer about him’. 44 She expanded on the point by saying that she
considered this queerness to be part of the couple’s erotic game. Jones was ‘romancing’
with Hulten because she interpreted his queerness as an indication of him being a
deserter. 45 The girl had explained to her landlady ‘all the technical reasons’ that
supported her belief about Hulten’s true identity. 46 Evans forgot these technical details
but strongly believed that Hulten, known to her as Ricky, had ‘self-advertised’ as a
deserter because he was very ‘keen on Georgina’. 47 Finally, when examined by the
barrister Maude, Evans added that, upon hearing that their first date was for 12 o’clock
midnight at Hammersmith Broadway, she warned her tenant that she would have her
‘throat cut off’. Jones, however, had responded with ‘a laugh’. 48

Evans’ account was a detailed third-person testimony about the way that the good-time
girl spoke about her good time. In this version of the story, there was no deception, but
a desire to be deceived. Jones fully understood the self-disguise of her partner and was
fascinated by his ‘fishy’, ‘queer’ identity and the fact that he was a deserter. This
fascination was not simply the product of her partner being American, like most of her

44 Ibid., p. 72.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 73.
other partners, but also of Hulten being unusual, bizarre, disruptive and adventurous. In this way, enigma and transgression were associated with an erotic vocabulary of deviancy. Furthermore, the prospect of danger appeared as a source of exhilaration, ‘a laugh’ for Jones. The good time, the time that pleased Jones, was equated with time spent with the men who ‘cut off throats’. Overall, erotic transgression blended with flirtation and with the dangerous spaces of the city.

Evans’ testimony also brought into the courtroom the culture of gossip. A product of acute observation and of imaginative speculation, Evans’ story vividly revealed that curiosity marked the lifestyle of both the female witness and Jones as the heroine of her story. While for the gossiper the pleasure of storytelling was to listen and to reveal, Jones demanded to look and be looked at, to speak and be listened to, to seek out interactive ways of dramatising life, of ‘romancing’, via the urban sociability of queer strangers. In Jones’ testimony, this ‘fishy’, ‘queer’ style of eroticism was expanded, emphasising the strong relationship between violence and erotic imagination, or, in other words, the projection of violence as the negotiation of visual hedonism.

Like Hulten’s testimony, Jones’ speech debated in court the contradictory evidence of double-faced deception. While the defence sought to present Jones as prone to deception, her cross-examination emphasised the detrimental effects of her fantasy life. ‘Tell me,’ asked Maude, ‘so far as your imagination is concerned, are you a girl who likes to imagine stories about yourself?’49 The barrister then referred to an episode in Jones’ adolescence when a man accused of molesting her was found to be innocent, the accusation emerging as product of Jones’ erotic caprice (she was then a thirteen year

49 Ibid., p. 153.
posed at an early moment of the interrogation, Maude’s question did not merely present Jones as a girl lost in imagination: a girls’ fantasy life was now seen to affect the public life of men. It had brought an innocent man to trial. Jones’ make-believe life orchestrated dangerous forms of gendered interrelationships. Rather than being a signal of innocence and weakness, the habit of ‘imagining stories about the self’ was a weapon of intelligence and power – a threat to the opposite sex.

Pursuing his cross-examination, Maude attempted to stress the influence of fantasy life in Jones’ actions and words and, most of all, in her criminal career. According to Jones’ version of the story, at the beginning of their acquaintance she considered Hulten to be a gentleman. When he revealed himself to be criminal, she said that she followed his instructions out of fear. She was afraid of his threats and of ‘the gang he was supposed to be the leader of’. Maude reversed this line of argument, by suggesting that Hulten’s self-disguise did not terrify her, it actually ‘thrilled’ her. Maude’s use of the word ‘thrill’ pointed towards a transgressive mix of fantasy and desire. This language increasingly portrayed Jones as a girl who wanted to live her life in a thriller.

The idea of cinematic fiction and the role-playing game of gangsterism recurrently marked the discussion of Jones’ imagination. Although the defendant categorically denied having used the word ‘gun moll’, Maude made her admit that she was pretty familiar with the term from books. This line of argument was pushed further through a detailed focus on the couple’s leisure time. Jones’ recollections blended the sensory

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 158.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 160.
memories of criminal violence with the memories of wartime hedonism located in the *mise-en-scène* of cafés, races and cinemas. On the day of the murder, apart from the sound of the shooting, Jones recalled entering a café while the sound of an air-raid siren was blaring. The prevailing sense, however, was eyesight because cinema-going dominated the couple’s leisure life. According to Hulten’s written statement, in the course of one week (October 1–8) he went to the movies five times: on Sunday, October 1 with an English friend Tony Bexley, on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday with a girl named Joyce Cook, and on Thursday and Saturday with Jones. The meeting place for his first date with Jones was the entrance to Hammersmith Broadway cinema. Under pressure from Maude, Jones was asked to give a detailed, personal account of her movement between cinema-going and crime:

Maude: But you went to the cinema with him, that was on the 7th, the very afternoon after Heath had met his death, you went to the cinema together, did not you? You remember the name of the film?

Jones: Yes.

Maude: What was it?

Jones: Christmas Holiday.

Maude: Who was in it?

Jones: Deanna Durbin.

Maude: Do you remember what was it about?

Jones: Yes.

Maude: What else was there on the programme?

Jones: I think we only saw the one big picture.

Maude: How were you sitting in the cinema; just you two alone; or was Lenny or somebody else there?

Jones: No.

Maude: Did you sit with your head on his shoulder?

Jones: No.

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55 Jones written statement read at the trial, p. 163, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
56 Hulten’s written statement, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
In these exchanges the couple’s cinematic experience was reconstructed out of a set of visual memories: the programme, the film, and the protagonists. By scrutinising the pleasure of spectatorship, however, Maude’s questions also excavated a set of sensory memories from Jones that went beyond eyesight, focusing on the way she and her partner sat and touched. This set of gestures signalled a bond, a sensory communication, a way of being together. The time of visual pleasure spent in the cinema was also a time of bodily contact; the pleasure of looking at images on the screen overlapped with the pleasure of touching a body. Maude’s probing of Jones’ visual memory sought to show that her cinema-going was not just visual but corporeal. She was there not just to look at the screen but to be with, look at and touch her partner.

Jones defended her role as a spectator, referring to the film and the lead actress Deanna Durbin, but her testimony did not hide the emphatic gendering of cinematic spectatorship. Her description exposed the erotic bodily rituals of spectatorship. Hulten was holding her hands and had pinned a ‘spray of flowers’ on her coat. These erotic and affective gestures took place only a few hours after the murder of the taxi driver. Hence, what came after murder was a ritualistic celebration of eroticism; involving visual entertainment, bodily contact and an exchange of gifts. The couple seemed to seek in

57 Maude examining Jones, p. 153, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
cinematic space the continuation of criminal excitement. Their act of sharing the
pleasure of cinema-going expanded the thrill of murder, and re-aesthetised the
couple’s brutality through spectatorship. The period after the crime appeared as a time
of erotic and romantic communication, in the same way that the period before the
crime was a time of erotic stimulation. In the confessional reconstruction of the story,
cinema was seen to filter the initiation and the fulfilment of transgression in two ways –
as a theatrical game of role-playing and as a physical space that staged the
experience of pleasure.

This notion of cinema as a spatial configuration of eroticism, one in which the
stimulation of spectatorship was extended into corporeal gestures, was also recorded in
the written statement of Joyce Cook, a sixteen-year-old girl with whom Hulten started
flirting two days before he met Jones, and whom he continued to see during the week
of the murder. In his first written testimony, Hulten referred to Cook as his girlfriend,
whereas Jones was seen as a ‘commando’, the slang term for prostitute. Cook, in her
own testimony, described her first meeting with Hulten in the following terms:

We came out of the pictures [in the Gaumont Picture House, Hammersmith] at 6.30, and just
outside a man in American Officer’s uniform smiled at me, and I smiled back. It was raining at
the time and I entered a nearby shop doorway. The American followed and spoke to [Cook’s friends
and] myself. The American asked me to go to a milk bar with him. I declined and he then asked me
to meet him later. I agreed and it was arranged that
I meet him in half an hour’s time in the same shop doorway.58

In this passage, Hulten, the American dressed as an officer, was seen to treat cinema as a space of erotic socialisation. For the female viewer, the visual stimulation of the street came immediately after the visual stimulation of the cinema. Hulten smiled at Cook while she was exiting the cinema building. Paralleling Jones’ account in this passage of Cook’s story, cinema was for her too a space of erotic fantasy. As her overall testimony revealed, on the same day as they met, Hulten came to her house for dinner and introduced himself to her mother. Similarly on the first day of their acquaintance, Jones and Hulten committed their first crime, when they attacked and robbed a girl. In both cases, Hulten’s visual magnetism triggered a quick unfolding of events; while cinema staged the eroticisation of time, eroticisation brought about an acceleration of time – criminal and erotic relationships unfolded in the course of one day. Hence, for both female narrators, to reconstruct the time spent with an American counterposed the pleasure-seeking activities of erotic life with the leisure time of cinema-going. The illusions of the cinematic screen passed on to their erotic experiences of London street life.

The trial proceedings and the witness statements portrayed London life during the wartime years as a resource for various forms of female escapism. Jones’ criminal activity embraced cinematic leisure, erotic flirting and an ability to move across picture houses and shop doorways. Presenting criminality as the product of visual deception and gendered manipulation, her accounts exemplified Jones’ story of ‘good-time’ living.

58 Written statement Joyce Alma Cook (9 October 1944), Criminal cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
The various courtroom exchanges brought to the fore her attempt to transform herself into a cinematic heroine, ‘a gun moll’ on the side of an ‘American gangster’. Violently blurring the boundaries between criminality, leisure and everyday life, Jones’ story showed how the fiction of cinema dominated the debates about public morality.

Press, Literature and the Cinema

These cinematically informed arguments provoked the resentment of Mr Justice Charles. Addressing the jury, he introduced his summing up speech in the following way: ‘We have to deal with the facts and you in this serious case come to your conclusion, by a consideration of the facts, not by the imagining of films, constructing films, and so on and so forth.’ The judge’s statement did not only exemplify a legal distaste for arguments based on abstract and speculative grounds; it explicitly denounced the cinema. Yet his denouncement seemed to further confirm the significance and potential appeal of contemporary film culture. It seemed to reflect the wider public and popular understanding of cinema as a contested site of cultural experience, one that, as the defendants and their lawyers suggested, could affect the audiences’ structures of feeling and their desires. Indeed, although the jury finally found the defendants guilty of murder, by adding ‘a recommendation for mercy’, the trial’s portrayal of criminality as an daily episode of cinematic fantasy was reproduced and enlarged in the public and popular re-imagination of the story. The following section will focus on the ways that these discourses expanded on the idea of criminal action as at once an erotic and pathological form of spectatorship.

59 Mr Justice Charles, Summing-up, Transcript of the Trial, p. 220, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
As has been shown in the previous section, the trial itself projected an atmosphere of theatre. The courtroom exchanges overtly associated criminal action with the gendered and visual dynamics of transgression. Hulten’s defence argued that the ‘gun moll’, inspired a man to disguise himself as a ‘gangster’, while Jones argued that the man’s ‘gangster’ appeal lured a girl into crime. The gendering of violent imagination led to a gendering of truth: moral agency was discussed as a battleground between cinematic imagination and erotic manipulation. This form of dramatisation was dramatically expanded by the tabloid press in the coverage of the case.

A *Daily Mail* article of 24 January 1945, entitled ‘Glamour-crazed Girl Danced her Way to Sentence of Death’, described Jones’ career as a glamorous daydream. After describing her escape from her family home in Wales, the *Mail* associated her ambition to live in London with a desire for dance and cinematic glamour. Readers were told that:

> she worked as dance hostess in many London clubs, the Slavia Club, the Cabaret Club, and at the Hammersmith Palais [...] she was thrilled with all this [...] painting of her face she went on to drink and dance until dawn, usually having some American officer or soldier as a partner. [...] From her small room [in London] she was forever writing letters. Still dazzled by the stage and the screen, she wrote scores [letters] to famous stars of the film and the theatre – to Jack Buchanan she sent dozens.61

Jones’ sensational newspaper biography painted a dream life that was staged in the hedonistic night-time world of wartime London. To be in London was described as a

girl’s way of becoming cinematic: criminal life emerged as the response to the desire to be on ‘screen’ or on the ‘stage’. The good time was a time of promise, a state of ambitious living in London’s pleasure economy.

Alongside the tabloid press, intellectuals discussed the cleft chin story as a significant record of broader socio-cultural trends. George Orwell, in his ‘Decline of English Murder’, saw in the Cleft chin murder a sign of national decadence. His essay expressed nostalgia for earlier types of English murder mysteries located in domestic country settings, in which, instead of American adventure, murder emerged as an adventure of the mind. Against the upfront, visual directness of gangster violence, Orwell longed for a time when murder was still a sophisticated art of manners. By reflecting on the Americanisation of English aesthetics, Orwell approached the true crime story as a cultural artefact. His criticism shifted emphasis from the immorality of the action to the style of immorality that was displayed. According to this view, Jones’ story seemed to threaten a notion of cultural heritage based on the perception of murder as a display of English elegance and mental agility.

The relationship between crime and national culture was further expanded by the responses of the lay public. Letters sent to the Metropolitan Police testified to the wide circulation of the story. As the police archives reveal, while one correspondent sent an astrological map of the devious couple to the police, another (anonymously) offered a highly conspiratorial interpretation of the case:

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62 Orwell, ‘The Decline of the English Murder’.
62 Raymond, The Cleft Chin, p. 21
The Cleft Chin Murder

I am writing this letter after careful consideration & I state empathetically that Hulten and Jones are the victims. Not the guilty parties – their lips are sealed – I doubt if you will ever get the truth from them because they know, that if they spoke vengeance will fall on those they love. There is a reign of terror sweeping across this country of which you apparently know little. (It’s the old Nazi game). This is not just a murder case – it connects most intimately with the war. Hulten and Jones saw too much (accidentally). When he said, “I am not a Gangster,” he spoke the truth. Read all he said carefully. Some of it had a double meaning. 63

In line with the self-defensive rhetoric of the protagonists, this letter explicitly presented the violators as victims. As opposed to the courtroom’s gender-based evaluation of deception, this commentary sought the agents of crime in wartime espionage. According to this correspondent's account, Nazi elements were the secret force of horror driving events. Hulten and Jones were described as transgressive spectators: ‘they saw too much’. The source of evil was not now the cinematic spectacle of violence, but the secret activities of the national enemy. Seen in this way the murderers emerged as victims of war. Transforming the criminal anti-heroes into national heroes, this letter contrasted the spectacle of criminal aesthetics with the drama of world war. Crime and war shaped the re-imagination of reality as a murder mystery demanding solution.

This complex dialogue between fiction and contemporary history, cinematic imagination and social reality informed many literary representations of the crime story.

The cleft chin murder was written up as a novel, Arthur La Bern’s The Night Darkens the

63 Anonymous, The Cleft Chin Murder [Date number damaged] March 1945, Murder of George Edward Heath by Private Karl Gustave [sic] Hulten, United States Army and Elizabeth Jones at Great West Road, on 7 October 1944, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/2280 (emphasis in the original).
In the same year, La Bern’s book was adapted into a film, *Good-Time Girl*, directed by David MacDonald. The novelist was invited to comment on the relationship between the ‘good time’ and the national time, meaning the contrast between young women’s subversive lifestyles and the ‘historical times’ of the 1940s (war, austerity). Published in the *Sun* (6 May 1947), La Bern’s comments promoted as well as defended the film in the face of severe censorship problems.\(^6^4\)

The British Board of Film Censors delayed the classification of the *Good-Time Girl* for three months, between July and September 1947, and its premier did not take place until the end of April 1948. One of the first to protest about the film was Jones herself and her parents, who, represented by a Mr Fletcher, addressed a letter of complaint to the Home Office.\(^6^5\) The Home Office archive also reveals that Jones had also given a negative response to writers, radio producers and journalists who wanted to dramatise her story, including a proposal of Mr Fletcher and his wife, who visited her in prison.\(^6^6\)

As James C. Robertson has noted, in addition to Jones’ own protest, letters were also sent by Sir Cuthbert Headlam, a Conservative MP and former parliamentary secretary, who spoke on behalf of women’s associations, as well as from a girl from an approved school.\(^6^7\) These objections were mainly in response to an article in the *Picture Post*, which was published three days before the publication of La Bern’s article and featured

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\(^6^6\) See letter of the Under Secretary of the State for the Home Department in regards to BBC broadcasting, 4 September 1952, Report of prison governor J. Martyn, 8 July 1953, Letter of Mr. Stapley, 11 August 1953, Criminal Cases: Jones, Elizabeth Marina née Baker, TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.

While I was collecting material for my novel I was told that in the war years there were at least 5,000 girls between 14 and 20 who had left home to live promiscuously with Allied forces in London. […] 

After the Allied forces had gone very few of them have returned home. Some of them are still with deserters and petty gangsters, the riff-raff rather than the elite of the Black Market. But life for them was not so luxurious as it used to be. A few went to the busier ports. 

Out of a hundred young girls who appeared at various London police and juvenile courts in one recent month, 73 had lived or associated promiscuously with Allied soldiers during the war. Thirty of them had one illegitimate child, twelve of them had more than one illegitimate child. All these girls were under 23. 

And what are the social causes of the Good Time Girl? […] to a large extent a certain type of film must share the responsibility. […] Fortunately Hollywood no longer tries to glamorise crime. In Good-Time Girl we are also trying to present a fairly unvarnished picture – and there is no happy ending. This change of policy becomes terribly significant when you realise what a large part films play in the life of a good time girl. 

Some months ago I visited a prison to talk to girls who had taken to crime when the end of the war finished their happy-go-lucky, good-time existence. I asked several of the girls what they missed most in prison. 

Not one of them said “Drink”. Not one of them said “Cigarettes.” Not one of them said “boyfriends”. They all said: “We miss going to the pictures.” 

The problem of the good-time girl (and all its ramifications) did not begin with the war, as many probation officer will tell you. It was the war that
brought the problem into the open. The war is over, but the problem is still with us, and goes on. 69 Discussing the social dangers of cinema in the article designed to promote the film, La Bern directed moral criticism away from fiction and into the field of social experience. His novel, he seemed to suggest, did not glamorise crime; rather it exposed its historical roots. La Bern supported his argument with a detailed account of the research that informed his fictional writings, especially the statistical information and the interviews with good-time girls themselves. Making wider historical associations between wartime hedonism and petty crime, La Bern presented these girls as the enthusiastic and licentious companions of flamboyant masculine types: Americans GIs during the war and spivs after the conflict. This portrayal established good-time girls as the cultural precursor and female counterpart to the spivs.

In line with wider journalistic, literary and sociological accounts of spivery explored in Chapter 1, La Bern sketched out a portrait of wayward female types who sought adventure on the streets of London. All these elements were already intrinsic to the 1930s conceptualisation of the spiv’s lifestyle; Americanisation and a flamboyant outlook had loomed large in John Worby’s The Other Half (1937), the first autobiographical account of spivery. While, as La Bern noted, the girls’ escapism was largely premised on the appeal of cinema (‘we miss going to the pictures’), their overall attitude seemed to echo pre-war social realities; ‘the war,’ La Bern argued, ‘just brought the problem to the open.’ Similarly, many of the 1940s accounts of spivery placed its cultural roots further back in the inter-war period. Bill Naughton’s interview with a spiv in 1945 and the correspondence debates in the Daily Telegraph explored in Chapter 1 addressed the pre-war realities of spivery. By emphasising the girls’ fascination with

69 La Bern, ‘Good Time Girl’, p. 76.
cinema, La Bern seemed to read their attitude as the contemporary manifestations of long-term psychosocial pathologies of spectatorship.

Seen in this light, the cleft chin story was one of the first post-war scandals that brought to centre stage the idea of spivery as a form of escapist disorder. In the cleft chin case this did not revolve around the figure of the flamboyant London cockney, which was the typical representation of spiv, but a British girl and an American soldier who recklessly masqueraded as cinematic gangsters. While ideas of escapism were instrumental in the 1930s literary dramatisations of spivs, cinematic forms of escapism over-determined the 1940s development of the social meaning of spivery. Robert Murphy noted that during the 1940s spivs increasingly emulated the style of cinematic gangsters. The cleft chin case played a catalytic role in the wider understanding of these developments: spivery was now seen as a form of spectatorship expressed through crime. Foregrounding these popular associations between criminality and cinema, La Bern’s text pointed towards the social, cultural and psychological version of contemporary forms of social transgression. If to be a spiv was to be a cinematic dreamer, then criminality was rooted in the inner life of the social actors.

Argued in this way, La Bern’s understanding of criminality expanded and complicated the cultural importance of cinematic aesthetics. Inviting readers and spectators to realise ‘what a large part film plays in the life of a good time girl’, La Bern superimposed the role of spectator on to that of the fictional hero. His view suggested that the criminal lifestyle was an impulse of spectatorship; both his novel and the film centred on social

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responses to fiction, especially the criminal’s relationship to the object of spectatorship. The aesthetic re-imagination of the eleft chin murder in La Bern’s account inevitably came to be a text within a text, a representation of a representation. This self-reflexive dynamic disrupted the distinction between text and audience. Protagonists emerged as spectators; true crime re-enacted fictional crime. While one text emerged as the re-reading of another text, life merged with representation. This charged reciprocity between fiction and reality over-determined the literary narration of La Bern’s *The Night Darkens the Street*.

In the novel the actual murder story occupied only a small part in the finale of book. A much larger section was devoted to the events that preceded it. Crime here was spatialised, politicised and heavily gendered. When the heroine Gwen Rawlings, who grew up during the 1930s in Pimlico, abandoned her family house and her detested job in a pawnshop and found a job in the cloakroom of a West End striptease club, her first customers were a group of *nouveaux riche* men with philo-German and anti-Semitic sentiments. The scene triggered an extended reflection on contemporary English political morality. Drawing on the hedonistic atmosphere of the metropolis, and especially the attitude of the press, political authorities such as the lord chamberlain and the social elites such as the governor of the Bank of England, La Bern painted a morally shocking picture of English Nazi sympathisers in the 1930s. Immediately after that analysis came the portrait of the good-time girl who had just started to understand what a good time was:

Out of the wilderness of Pimlico came Gwen Rawlings, an ignoramus with starry eyes, a well developed body and underdeveloped mind. She had no inherent vice, only a greed for the sweet
things of life. [...] She was a blonde rebel from a musty pawnshop. Her revolt brought her to the West End, knowing less about the town in which she was born than the veriest provincial [...]. What jejune ideas of life she did have she got from the cinema.

She smiled at the three men as they entered ...

In the quotation, the mise-en-scène of West End nightlife staged the dramatic confrontation between the anti-heroes of national history (the lord chamberlain, the governor of the Bank of England, the nouveaux riches) and the anti-heroine of a story (Gwen Rawlings). The scene juxtaposed men who morally violated political life with a girl who ‘rebelled’ against the limitations of her life story. The girl’s social transgression contrasted with the masculine protagonists of the public world. Throughout the whole novel a gallery of male actors were shown to shadow and interfere with Jones’ transgressive activities. From the owner of the West End club, bohemian musicians to American deserters, masculine pleasure repeatedly framed the depiction of female criminality.

A vivid example of this type of dramatisation in the novel was an early scene of feminine flânerie in the West End. After witnessing a vendetta fight between her club boss and a violent gang, Rawlings was afraid to go home and strolled aimlessly through the streets, passing by neon lights and the amusement arcades of central London. The heroine’s wandering in space provoked a comment from the author about metropolitan space and time. La Bern informed the reader that the area:

emptied early – except for few hundred perpetual night hawks. War had yet to multiply those night hawks ten, twenty, fifty-fold and deliver unto them for the plucking the young men of a dozen nations. War had yet to multiply and accentuate all that was inherently worst in the square mile centred around Piccadilly Circus.72

During the war, as these phrases suggested, Piccadilly Circus was synonymous with prostitution. Dubbed ‘Piccadilly commandos’, local prostitutes mainly targeted the men of the international Allied forces: ‘the men of a dozen nations’. ‘Commando’ was also the term that Hulten used to refer to Jones in his first confession. La Bern’s novel presented Rawlings’ movement against the social and historical spaces of wartime Piccadilly. She was portrayed strolling around the streets of the West End disguised as a blonde widow, alone or in the company of American deserters. Piccadilly offered new opportunities for female transgression: prostitution, waywardness and friendship with American men. In this context, the war marked Rawlings’ transformation from a spectator into an object of spectatorship. As a ‘blonde widow’ and a prostitute, she became a spectacle of street life.

In sharp contrast to this wartime image of the good-time girl, the young Gwen Rawlings was also presented as a spectator herself, one who blurred the boundaries between the cinematic screen and eroticised masculinity. Her stroll in the West End led to a scene set in the apartment of Red Farrell, a bohemian pianist. His flat appeared as an emotional and cultural oasis in the ‘catacombs of the West End’.73 By entering it, Rawlings, a ‘back-street blonde without a mental vision’, had the chance to fill the gap

72 Ibid., p. 71.
73 The metaphor is simultaneously moral and spatial since the club she was working was an underground one.
of her ‘mental vision’ with the vision of a dandy.74 Across the table she watched Red. Watched devouringly, with an intensive receptiveness, every moment of his hands, face or body. She focused her eyes upon him as if they were the lens of a camera.75 In this portrayal of Gwen’s eyes as ‘the lens of a camera’, a cinematic framing of her female gaze became a metaphor for erotic stimulation; erotic life appeared as the re-enactment of cinematic experience. The relationship between imagination and reality was, to put it in La Bern’s terms, ‘reversed’:

Gwen Rawlings had reversed the values of fact and fancy. In her jejune mind screen plays were not something to be measured against the warp and woof of reality. To Gwen Rawlings life itself was measured against the technicolor pattern of romance as viewed from the cinema stalls, and in this comparison it was not surprising that life was found wanting.76

Employing metaphors that treated visual technology as organic extensions of human stimulation – eyes like the ‘lens of a camera’ – La Bern sketched out his heroine’s acute dystopia. By reversing ‘fancy and fact’, Rawlings found herself exiled to a historical reality (facts). What is real is what pleases (fancy). The hedonism of cinematic spectatorship shaped the standards of social life; the richness of cinematic representation, ‘the Technicolor pattern of romance’, over-determined the poverty of the social experience of her ‘life’ that ‘was found wanting’. Extending the meaning of austerity deep into the portrayal of the emotional economy of a young girl, La Bern’s narration constructed a literary character who re-imagined society according to the values of cinematic spectacle.

74 La Bern, Night Darkens the Street, p. 89.
75 Ibid., p. 96.
76 Ibid., p. 87.
While Rawlings responded to the discontents of her social life through the workings of her visual imagination, the gradual criminalisation of her career transformed her into an object of spectatorship. In the final stage of this transformation, she became the sexual companion of American deserters. In the meantime, successive relationships with men produced various stages of her demoralisation: a lorry driver, a middle-aged married man, a homosexual confidence trickster, a Brighton spiv. The turning point in this transition from subject to an object of spectatorial desire was her sexual liaison with women.

Accused unfairly of theft, Rawlings was sent away from the West End house of her first lover to a reformatory school where, in addition to disobedience and violence, she had sex with her closest female friend. The act takes place during the night while the girls in the reformatory slept, ‘but even the sounds these girls made in their sleep seemed more bestial than the conscious obscenities of their waking hours’. 77 La Bern’s detailed descriptions of these ‘bestial sounds’ are presented as the soundtrack of an animalistic ritual: ‘Roberta was kissing her hungrily.’ 78 Presented as a form of socialisation with ‘beasts’, this sexual act with a woman initiated Rawlings’s own transformation into a moral beast. After this experience, she takes the decision to return to the outside world, where she would be seen employing her sexuality as weapon of self-dramatisation and disguise.

The novel’s shocking representation of sexual deviance prefigured negative press reactions to the film Good-Time Girl. These were directed against a Picture Post

77 Ibid., p. 114.
78 Ibid.
photographic tribute to the making of the film, which centred on scenes of fight between girls in an approved school. The photographs vividly blended homo-sociability and violence, featuring caption titles such as ‘Good Time Girls Become the Tough Girls’, ‘A Long Strong Pull’. Considering the novel’s direct depiction of the approved school as a site of homosexual ‘bestiality’, these photographic versions of the film’s fight scene connoted an atmosphere of sexual ambiguity, lesbianism and female transgression.

Muriel Box, the scriptwriter and co-producer of the film as well as one the few female filmmakers in the industry, later admitted that the majority of scenes cut by the censor involved events in the reformatory school. The censor, Box said, was ‘an absolute bastard.’ ‘He objected to certain scenes in it, including the one where the girls in the home – Jean Kent and Jill Balcon – had a fight. Yet you couldn’t have the horrid things that had to go into the film without showing what the girls’ plight was.’ The ‘plight’ of the girls was erotically violent in the film: the character of Roberta (Jill Balcon) befriends Gwen (Jean Kent) following an angry physical fight, and Gwen’s ensuing confrontation with the school authorities. Disobedience, violence and rudeness emerged as a ritual of homosocial eroticism and feminine solidarity. Indeed the film, as opposed to the novel, emphasised Roberta’s support for Gwen. She facilitated her access to smoking, correspondence and eventual escape from the school. Foregrounding the emotional bond between the girls, the cinematic version of events offered a much more sympathetic picture of what the novel explicitly described as homosexual ‘bestiality’.

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79 Hardy, ‘Fight in a Reformatory’.
In the novel’s narrative, though, this type of sexual transgression was only a transitory episode in Rawlings’ trajectory towards a violent and cinematic type of demoralisation. During the trial proceedings, what Evans, Jones’ landlady, described as the girl’s erotic ‘queerness’ involved the hedonistic negotiation of cinematic violence. The erotic re-enactment of cinema preceded the cinematic imagery of erotic violence: in both courtroom drama and popular literature, the climactic point of the story was not the experience of the reformatory school but the lifestyle of wayward crime. In the novel, the heroine vividly rediscovered the pleasure of cinema through criminal action. Her robbing of the taxi driver was described in the following way:

True she was pale, taut and rather apprehensive. At the same time, she was fascinated, even conscious of a thrill, such as she might have experienced by watching the scene on a cinema screen.

As the above extract underlined, cinematic excitement overlapped with the act of robbing a taxi. Cinema was reinvented beyond the screen, in the same way that, in the defendant’s testimonies, ‘thrill’ had been rediscovered beyond sex. This aesthetic conception of crime expanded what was defined as criminal. Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), a literary exemplification of the literary tradition that Orwell contrasted with the cleft chin murder, shocked the reader by revealing the murderer to be the narrator. La Bern’s intention was to shock the reader by revealing that the cinematic murderer was a member of the audience, one operating beyond the screen, in the darkened streets of post-war London. This form of criminality

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81 For the use of the term ‘queer’, see Edris May Evan’s testimony, Transcript of the trial, p. 70. TNA PRO: HO 144/22219.
transcended the boundaries between criminal fiction and city life, damaging Gwen Rawlings’ experiences of youth. ‘Gwen,’ La Bern wrote, ‘had passed from childhood to womanhood without knowing the cleansing pangs of adolescence.’ Her attempt to re-enact life as a visual artefact, to play a filmic role, dramatically transgressed the structure of her life. She had missed adolescence.

During the trial, one of the defendants made an analogous remark about the relationship between criminality and Jones’ age. Hulten noticed that Jones’ age was unclear or ambiguous: ‘I was told she was 22 years old [when he met her]. She looked a lot older that she does now [in the courtroom].’ If, as was previously argued, the defendants’ testimonies presented the time of the trial as transitional time, a time of awakening after a short period of criminal daydreaming, then Hulten’s comment encapsulated the conceptual complexity of the story. The key issue in the ‘Mystery of the cleft chin murder’ was not just the public morality of crime but the ways that historical, personal and cinematic time framed the interplay between true crime and imagination.

Overall, in the trial proceedings, in literary representation and in cinematic fiction the cleft chin murder was presented as a game of self-presentation and fantasy, one that extended the meaning of cinematic experience from cinema screens to the streets of London. In line with Worby’s *Autobiography of a Spiv*, these multiple narratives projected crime as an act of urban waywardness, sexual promiscuity and self-disguise. Posing interchangeably as a gun moll and a German fighter, Jones fused the criminal fantasy of

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85 Hulten examined by Maude, Transcript of the Trial, p. 192.
Hollywood with the world of wartime London. Her story transformed the English capital into a place of cinematic excitement, *flânerie* and erotic flirtation. While revisionist social histories of war have increasingly challenged older readings of this historical moment which cast it as a triumph of British heroism, the cleft chin case, as retold in the court room, the popular press and in literature offered a far more nuanced picture of the contemporary cultural atmosphere of the city. Wartime London was depicted as place of cultural transformation, spontaneity and excitement in ways that redefined the boundaries between life and representation, fantasy and reality, cinema and crime. In this sense, the wartime metropolis stimulated and expanded forms of collective action that were instrumental to the development of key social and cultural trends of the immediate post-war years: youth culture, proletarian dandyism, urban waywardness, petty crime, all defined as forms of disobedience, hedonism, and desire. These attitudes were not simply understood as phenomena of social dislocation and psychological pathology; they signalled public and private experiences of daily escapism, gendered positioning, and collective self-understanding.

While the cinematic culture of America and Hollywood overwhelmingly determined the social, sexual and aesthetic framework of these cultural tensions, in a series of scandalous murderous stories that erupted in the post-war period the relationship between national identity, escapism and criminality was further complicated. Men-about-town, confidence tricksters and high-society characters rubbed shoulders in the scandalous stories of Neville Heath (1946), John George Haigh (1949) and John Christie (1953). Following the specific career of Haigh, a confidence trickster turned murderer, the following chapter addresses the interconnection between mass murder, social deviancy and the media that framed the horror.
Chapter 5. The Acid Bath Murder: Horror, the Confidence Trick and Escapism in Austerity-Era Britain

In February 1949, at Chelsea police station, John George Haigh, a 38-year-old well-dressed entrepreneur and inventor, resident of the Onslow Court Hotel, South Kensington, admitted his instrumental role in the disappearance of six people. His testimony revealed an astonishing mechanics of death. After developing friendly relationships with his victims, he would invite them to his laboratory, shoot them, drink their blood and finally dissolve their bodies in tanks of acid. His extraordinary confession lifted the curtains not only on one of the most highly publicised murder scandals of the post-war period but also on an extensive body of competing and homologous representations of metropolitan crime as a disruptive mode of selfhood and transgressive sociality. The ensuing theatre of quotidian deviance drew together the forms of escapism and self-dramatisation underlying the notions of the aesthetics of crime as has been examined in the case studies of this thesis.

Filtered through tabloid sensation, true-crime literature, psychiatry, courtroom drama and autobiography, Haigh’s story revealed a rich repertoire of spectacular genres of deception. On one level, his criminal profile echoed the highly publicised and politicised

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1 The following account is based on: the Statement of John George Haigh, Chelsea Station, B Division, 21 February 1949; Antecedent History: John George Haigh, 7 April 1949; Family History: Informants, the Prisoner and the Father by statement to the Police, John George Haigh: Criminal cases: Haigh, John George: convicted at Lewes on 19 July 1949 of Murder and Sentenced to Death, The National Archives (subsequently TNA) Public Record Office London (subsequently PRO) HO 45/2633. See also police reports and witness statements on mass murders committed by John George Haigh at South Kensington and Crawley, Sussex: Bodies of Six Victims Dissolved in Sulphuric Acid at Crawley, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/3128; Haigh, John George: convicted at Lewes 19 July 1949 of Murder and Sentenced to Death, TNA PRO: PCOM 9/818; John George Haigh, Criminal cases: Haigh, John George: Convicted at Lewes on 19 July 1949 of Murder and Sentenced to Death TNA PRO: HO 45/2634; HO 45/2635; HO 45/2636.
forms of urban transgression that monopolised public interest in the summer of 1947, with their moral panics about spivs and confidence tricksters. As was argued in the first chapter, the conspicuously unproductive lifestyle of these characters exemplified one of the most worrying disturbances of national cohesion at a time of economic emergency and austerity.

Haigh admitted to the police that, apart from stealing the property of his victims (from their houses to their clothes), and in addition to orchestrating a series of confidence tricks (such as forging techniques and self-disguise manoeuvres), his usual source of income had been ‘fiddles in black market’ and racehorse gambling. The Metropolitan Police investigation revealed that Haigh ‘had for some years no regular source of income and had been living precariously, apparently on the proceeds of crime, betting and black-market activities’. In addition to a weakness for flamboyant clothing, discernible in his first court appearance after his arrest, his activities strongly pointed towards the lifestyle and public image of spivery.

Haigh unquestionably assumed a leading position in the post-war cycle of murderers and psychopaths. This was a tapestry of horror revolving around figures that, in line with the acid bath killer, entered the urban topography of unruliness as minor transgressors; men and women, who, as Worby’s original definition of spivery dictated, were seen to live ‘by their own wits’. The inauguration of this post-war cycle of blood, as shown in the previous chapter, was the eclef chin murder sensation (1944–45). The

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2 Antecedent History: John George Haigh, Criminal Cases TNA PRO: HO 45/2634.
3 John George Haigh, Criminal Cases: TNA PRO: HO 45/2634.
fatal shooting of a taxi driver was the climax point of violent flânerie on the streets of London. The deviant anti-heroes were Elizabeth Jones, the ‘good-time girl’ disguised as a striptease girl, and Karl Hulten, an American deserter disguised as a Chicago gangster. The combination of murder and self-disguise was further sexualised in 1946, when into the public scenery of the macabre entered George Heath, the ‘sadist’ killer.\(^5\) Centring on the sexual murders of a man-about-town and confidence trickster, the Heath scandal mixed social masquerade and sexual pathology. In a related vein, sex, murder and cultural disguise loomed large in the story of John Christie (1953). Various adopting the roles of small-time crook, policeman, clerical worker, man-about-town, as well as that of the respectable white character in an increasingly Caribbean neighbourhood, Christie was responsible for the death of nine women including his own wife.\(^6\)

This chapter seeks to explore how the acid bath murders carried out by John Haigh generated distinctive representations and forms of criminal spectatorship in austerity-era Britain. What type of criminal aesthetic was produced by the encounter between the dandyism of the spiv, the devious sociability of the confidence trickster and the psychopathology of the mass murderer? What notions of imagination and self-disguise shaped the portrayal of murder as an episode of quotidian life, a psychiatric puzzle and a mass-media spectacle? How did the social and emotional life of the violator and his victims reconfigure the relationship between class, modernity and national character in the 1940s?\(^\) 

Murder Stories and Vernacular Horror

Metropolitan Police reports, Haigh’s autobiography and accompanying true-crime literature together revealed how the scandal deployed a complex amalgam of criminal representations, social geography and historical coverage. This section, while focusing on the settings, protagonists and social dynamics of the murder stories, aims to show how these different registers embodied a contemporary aesthetics of crime. Moving between, on the one hand, a social practice of deceptive self-presentation and, on the other, a spectacular organisation of horror, these criminal aesthetics were premised on a dialogue between popular ideas of criminal escapism and the demands of the mass media. The main issue here is to show how these contested forms of dramatisation were complexly interrogated by the deviant protagonist, the lay audience and the experts, especially the psychiatrists who gave evidence in the case.

Haigh was arrested, convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of Mrs Olivia Durand-Deacon, a widow he met in the restaurant of the Onslow Court Hotel, South Kensington, in 1949. However, the murders he confessed to dated back to 1945, and his criminal career as a fraudster and confidence trickster began as early as the 1930s. Thus, while the murder stories extended over the most representative years of Britain’s austerity period, his criminal career was rooted in the inter-war years. As was argued in the first chapter, the cultural, intellectual and socio-economic climate of the late 1940s reworked and reframed older forms of criminality and its representation. Indeed, while the black market, which was one of Haigh’s dubious sources of income, was indissociable from the strict economic controls imposed on consumption and production during the wartime and post-war period, the dandyism, idleness and overall

7 Antecedent History: John George Haigh, Criminal cases TNA PRO: HO 45/2634.
lifestyle of the spivs, reworked forms of criminal self-representation and street-life imagery dated back to the 1930s. As I have argued, the first ‘spiv’ autobiography, John Worby’s *The Other Half*, was published as early as 1937.  

According to Scotland Yard officer Percy Smith’s memoirs, *Plutocrats of Crime* (1960), the inter-war period witnessed the heyday of ‘big-time’ confidence tricksters – men and women who organised their frauds in the metropolitan ‘playgrounds of the rich’, such as places like the Onslow Court Hotel, where Haigh met his last victim. While the simplest types of confidence tricks entailed a set of street-wise performances (card tricks, gambling games), in its more advanced forms, as Smith and Worby showed, it involved the capacity to convince potential victims that their illusory desires, for easy money, communication with the dead, evading the law, or becoming famous, were somehow realisable.

According to Smith, tricksters needed the social skills to approach their victims and the self-presentational and/or practical means to deceive, which involved counterfeiting, and impersonation. Smith compared this criminal activity with the art of an illusionist, a magician or an actor. Haigh’s criminal record pointed to clear evidence of his skills in deception. In 1934, he was sentenced to fifteen months in prison for ‘conspiracy to defraud’ and ‘forgery’. Masquerading as the proprietor of a firm of car mechanics, he obtained loans from hire-purchase companies on behalf of clients who in fact did not...

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8 Worby, *The Other Half* and *Spiv’s Progress*.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Statement of John George Haigh, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
exist. Furthermore, as his police record revealed, in 1937 he was sentenced to four years penal servitude, having pleaded guilty to obtaining bankers’ cheques under false pretences. ‘Falsely representing himself as a solicitor,’ he sold shares in imaginary companies at low prices.\(^\text{13}\)

Taken together, these tricks required advanced skills in counterfeiting, professional and social self-advertisement as well as astute legal knowledge. Haigh used to present himself as an inventor. At the time of his arrest, his professional title was ‘liaison officer’ between an engineering company in Crawley and potential inventors.\(^\text{14}\) This type of self-presentation played an instrumental role in his murder tactics. All of his killings took place inside engineering workshops; his visitors were friends and potential collaborators who had been invited to discuss inventions and related projects, ignorant of the fact that the actual business plan was their own death. They were usually fatally shot or beaten and subsequently dissolved in tanks of acid.

If a confidence trick centred on wizardry applied to crime, then Haigh’s acid bath technique involved a confidence trick applied to murder. It was a miraculous way of making people disappear. In addition, Haigh’s alleged drinking his victim’s blood, as well as his own urine, ensured that the scandal had all the ingredients of a horrific spectacle. Its iconography, settings and characters brought to the fore the social, technical and psychological secrets of a deceptive art of terror. The encounter between horror and spectacle was brought to the fore in the first murder scene. Its setting invoked a colourful aspect of post-war quotidian life, the pin-table machine. The

\(^\text{13}\) *Ibid.*

engineering and promotion of this type of machine was Haigh’s first business plan after serving his final prison sentence in 1944. Back in the 1930s, shortly after his arrival in London from his native Yorkshire, he had worked for a short time as a chauffeur and manager in Donald McSwan’s amusement arcade company and pin-table machine repair shop, Max Automatic Arcades, in Tooting High Street. After the war, they met again and renewed their friendship. Haigh promised to help McSwan avoid military service and the latter appeared inclined to accept the former’s offer of technical and professional advice. When McSwan visited Haigh’s workshop in Gloucester Road, the aspiring businessman delivered a fatal blow to his ex-boss by hitting him over the head with ‘the leg of pin-table’, before placing his body in a vat of acid.\textsuperscript{15}

Haigh then forged a series of letters purporting to come from his victim, addressing them to McSwan’s parents. The letters suggested that McSwan had moved to Scotland and instructed his parents to forward financial aid to their son, via Haigh. After some months, McSwan’s parents were also invited to Haigh’s workshop, where they were killed and disposed of in the same way as their son. Following their murder, Haigh met with lawyers, impersonated the young McSwan, forged his signature and gained a power of attorney over McSwan’s estate, passing into his name the ownership of all his victims’ houses, bank savings, securities and properties.

Set in a workshop of pin-table machines and revolving around the proprietor of an amusement arcade, Haigh’s idiosyncratic mix of macabre inventiveness (acid baths) and deceptive skills (forged letters and impersonation) linked his killings to a material culture

of cheap leisure that was broadly synonymous with the highly publicised lifestyle of spivs. Indeed, when in 1947 Attlee’s economic propaganda targeted social parasitism as a key obstacle to the government’s ‘Work or Want’ policy, the minister for labour, George Isaacs, listed amusement arcades among the key cultural features of contemporary social transgression. Spivs, according to his statement, were the men and women who make no contribution to the national well-being, including employees of football pools, gambling undertakings, amusement arcades and night clubs, and certain classes of street traders.16

This repertoire of dubious leisure became the focus of official surveillance. As the Metropolitan Police records reveal, during the 1940s secret police investigators were sent to explore amusement arcades and to write reports about their social atmosphere.17 While the police looked on these places administratively, that is to say, from above, Arthur La Bern, one of the authors who endeavoured to write a literary account of Haigh’s story in 1973, had in the 1940s offered a view from below. In two of his spiv novels, *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1945) and *The Night Darkens the Street* (1947), pin-table machines and amusement arcades framed the social experience of urban *flânerie*, spivery and proletarian drama. In his book on Haigh, La Bern named the chapter on McSwan

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as the ‘Age of Pin-table Machine’. Presenting the murder scene as the symbolic marker of an epoch, the chapter’s title was suggestive of the dramatic significance of amusement arcades in both La Bern’s work and Haigh’s career.

In Robert Hammer’s *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947), a filmic adaption of La Bern’s book, an amusement arcade replete with pin-table machines embodied the spiv’s tricks of sociality. In one sequence, a young, working-class woman wins a packet of cigarettes from a miniature crane machine, while a flirtatious spiv character, the owner of the amusement arcade, promises her an escape from her ‘dull’ life, a job offer at his beauty parlour. Settings and dialogues emphasise how a deviant man could play on the emotions and daydreams of a feminine subaltern character, whose inner life appears emphatically locked into a reserved and hesitant body language. The technological wonder, cheap glamour and false hope of the amusement arcade evoke the confidence trickster’s capacity to detect, expose and manipulate the repressed and covert desires of the people he encounters. Standing amid pin-table machines, the dandified transgressor miraculously manipulated the social and psychological life of his victim. While in the film, the heroine was deceived by an unexpected gift of cheap luxury (a packet of cigarettes), in Haigh’s case the deviance was far more macabre – the victim received a fatal blow and was disposed into a tank of acid.

Post-war cinematic coverage of spivery augmented the links between pin-table machines and criminality. The iconography of amusement arcade impelled Peter Wollen to coin the term ‘vernacular fantastic’, as a characterisation encapsulating the evocative

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connections between ordinariness and fantasy in spiv films.\textsuperscript{20} One year before McSwan’s murder, in Sidney Gilliat’s \textit{Waterloo Road} (1944), the amusement arcade emerged as the central \textit{mise-en-scène} for violence. The fight scenes take place in between pin-table and what-the-butler-saw machines. In Alberto Cavalcanti’s \textit{They Made Me a Fugitive} (1947), a funeral parlour evoked the décor of an amusement arcade with expressionistic paintings and posters on the walls. Visualised on screen, this type of flamboyant setting subtly yet intelligibly reflected the spectacular fantasy of the crooks’ flamboyantly dressed milieu. By depicting a materiality of playfulness and idleness in an atmosphere of moral ambivalence, this funfair of crime underlined the spiv character’s double sidedness, his combination of colourfulness and evilness.

By the time the Haigh story erupted in the public life, the framing of McSwan’s murder was already established as a cinematic field of criminal escapism and emotional disorder. The Haigh scandal revealed how this type of cultural setting worked as an exploration of human subjectivity beyond the cinema screen. Indeed, newspaper coverage enlarged the subversive connotations of this type of leisure. In the \textit{Daily Express}’ exposés of the acid bath murders, Mr Beaumont, an amusement machinery maker friend and associate of McSwan, revealed that by 1941 McSwan’s amusement arcades and repair shop were so successful, that he was already not only wealthy enough to ‘buy houses and let them’ but also to sell his business in order to ‘disappear’ when faced with the ‘call up’ for national service.\textsuperscript{21} In line with the majority of the spiv characters profiled in tabloid journalism and in the cinema, McSwan was depicted a ‘man on the run’. Beaumont’s


\textsuperscript{21} Express Crime Reporter, ‘Was Donald McSwan on the Run from Call-up?’, \textit{Daily Express}, 4 March 1949, newspaper clipping, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
Donald McSwan was a strange man, tall, handsome, with fair wavy hair and a small ginger moustache. He dressed well and lived well. He was extraordinarily vain but, for some reason, he would never have his picture taken. He had many different girlfriends, although as far as I know he was never engaged.22

Set under the banner title ‘A Vain Man’, Vade’s account not only framed McSwan’s portrait with the usual visual and social signifiers of spivery – a small moustache, nice clothing, self-indulgence, vanity, erotic promiscuity – but also pointedly emphasised the complicated nature of his vanity. By reporting that McSwan was evidently a vain man who nevertheless avoided being photographed, Vade explored his strangeness, especially his apparent reluctance to leave traces, which tallied with her account of his expressed desire to ‘disappear’.23 This mix of exhibitionism and invisibility, vanity and disguise was central to British cinema’s interpretation of criminal vanity, especially in its emphasis on the signifiers of obsessive narcissism.

While always seeking to cover their traces, cinematic spivs like Harry Fabian in Night and the City (1950) or Nigel Patrick in Noose (1948) never ceased to be vain. However, rather than observing themselves in mirrors, their body language, gestures and ways of moving across the city conflated their aptitude for self-mirroring with alternating imagery of glamour and darkness. The surfaces reflecting their vanity were material and social spaces of the capital’s night life. Framed by this cinematic context, the cultural economy

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
of McSwan’s business dealings and metropolitan social exchanges suggested a world of unruly escapism. This cultural space exemplified a capacity to alarmingly engage with the demands of urban reality while seeking to escape from it. It exemplified the spivs’ ways of combining the art of being seen with the art of hiding.

In Haigh’s first acid bath killing, murderer and victim were both seeking to evade the restrictions imposed on their self-indulgent metropolitan lifestyles, while simultaneously making flamboyant spectacles of themselves. The photographs of Haigh and McSwan, as kept in the Metropolitan Police files (figures 5.1–2) vividly demonstrated their common adherence to glamorous self-stylisation. They appeared dressed in flashy suits, shirts and ties, with their hair and moustache meticulously combed and glossed.

While both men were portrayed as dandies, their art of being seen differed considerably. McSwan was said to dislike photographs. His photo never surfaced in the tabloid press. In contrast, Haigh seemed to take immense pleasure in being photographed. As a *Sunday Dispatch* exposé revealed, Haigh’s pictures were taken by a theatrical photographer, Angus Bean, one year prior to the scandal (1948).24 This was a moment of unexpected publicity for Haigh, as his stolen ‘saloon car’ was mysteriously found at the foot of a valley.25 The mystery of the car remained forever unresolved, but it revealed to the photographer a key aspect of Haigh’s character, one that Bean was keen to share with reading public of the *Sunday Dispatch*.

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I deal with theatrical folk but rarely have I had a sitter who made more fuss about his portrait. He insisted upon four sittings on successive days and it had struck me since that those days followed immediately upon the mysterious disappearance of his car over Beachy Head. I have often thought since that his vanity prompted this picture of himself regardless of expense.26

As the extract showed, the photographic portrait was the product of a four-day-long sitting involving posing and styling. A minor opportunity of publicity was turned by Haigh into a meticulous exercise in photographic exhibitionism. Prefiguring Haigh’s celebrity status as murderer, this overt celebration of self-observance transformed a form of negative publicity into a vehicle of vanity. If a ‘man on the run’ like McSwan preferred to disappear, leaving behind no visual trace, the dandified murderer, while taking great care to make his victims disappear, enthusiastically endorsed the visual game of self-publicity.

The two men’s photographic profiles further illuminated the differing versions of their respective presentational strategies. While McSwan’s thin moustache recalled typical stylised markers of spivery, especially in its lighter, comical and theatrical versions, Haigh’s moustache, clipped at the edges, was read by many contemporary journalists either as reference to Hitler or to the Hollywood star Ronald Colman, a British actor whose career epitomised how Hollywood understood and dramatised English

26 Ibid.
gentlemanliness in the 1930s. The writer Conrad Phillips imagined Haigh saying ‘Know something? I was once mistaken for Ronald Coleman.’

As is also shown by the photographs, McSwan smiled at the camera, while his body posture appeared still. Haigh, on the other hand, assumed a more theatrical posture, his facial expression appearing reflective and enigmatic. Compared to McSwan’s image, Haigh’s elegant and controlled choreography of his body language and facial expression played the ideal of gentlemanliness. While in economic and professional terms McSwan was several steps ahead of Haigh, in terms of visual self-presentation and class disguise the murderer was evidently many degrees above McSwan.

Overall, the two men’s material, social and psychological differences exemplified the varied imagery of spivery. McSwan’s life was rooted in a fleeting world of cheap glamour and criminal escapism. Haigh’s advanced art of self-presentation and disguise encompassed and yet transcended these spatial and social boundaries. Raised in a respectable working-class family in Yorkshire (in his teens he was choirboy and a pianist), with employment in various clerical and white-collar jobs, his social and criminal façade was built up from more sophisticated cultural resources. After the McSwan murders, Haigh moved to the luxurious Onslow Court Hotel, in South

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29 For a broader cultural analysis of man-about-town, gentlemanliness and upper-class revivalism during the post-war period, see Mort, Capital Affairs, pp. 56–90.
30 Family History, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
Figure 5.1. Studio Portrait of John George Haigh. *News of the World* (date damaged) newspaper clipping, TNA PRO: HO 45/2634.
Kensington, and began mixing in an upmarket social milieu and with an elite criminal clientele. From then on the Haigh murders revolved around exclusively middle-class protagonists. His next victims, Dr Archibald Henderson and his wife, Rose, were, in Haigh’s words, ‘widely travelled, sophisticated people’, ‘fond of gay life and expensive

Figure 5.2. Studio portrait of Donald McSwan. TNA PRO: HO 45/2634.
parties’. He met them by answering an advertisement in the press; the couple put their house in Ladbroke Square up for sale and Haigh pretended to have an interest for it. In line with McSwan’s story, the tabloids offered colourful accounts of the Hendersons’ social and psychological life.

This was especially apparent in the way the story was told in Haigh’s autobiography in the pages of the News of the World. Published in three successive instalments during the summer of 1949, shortly before Haigh’s execution on August 10, the serialised exposé blended the murderer’s own self-narration with journalistic gossip concerning the Hendersons’ family background and everyday life. These accounts mixed a high-brow version of sociability (Haigh ‘interpreting the classics at the piano’, photographs of the Hendersons in the restaurant of prominent West End hotels, at the beach, at weddings, figures 5.3–4) with an emphasis on the couple’s severe financial and psychological problems. The alcoholic doctor and his wife confided in Haigh that they were ‘heavily overdrawn on the bank’.

The Hendersons were portrayed as leading a hedonistic lifestyle that they could ill afford. True crime literature expanded on this theme, with Conrad Phillips suggesting that Haigh’s man-about-town façade appealed to the Hendersons’ nostalgia for their more luxurious lifestyle in the 1930s. As with McSwan’s earlier story, this tension

33 Haigh, ‘Death comes to the Hendersons’.
34 Phillips, Murderer’s Moon, p. 89.
between the material restrictions of the present and the nostalgia for the past was framed by urban mobility and domestic instability. According to Haigh’s account, the couple’s life was marked by incessant fights and continuous movement from one house to the other. After selling their house on Ladbroke Square, they bought one in Dawes Road, Fulham, before moving to Kingsgate Castle, Broadstairs, Kent, and from there to the Metropole Hotel, Brighton.35

While paying them a visit at this holiday resort, Haigh convinced Dr Henderson to follow him to a storeroom in Crawley, a place used by Haigh as a workshop for technological experiments. Upon arriving, Haigh shot Henderson with the doctor’s own revolver, and then dissolved his body in acid. Returning to Brighton, Haigh convinced Rose Henderson that her husband was waiting for her in Crawley. He drove her there and repeated the same homicide. Addressing a series of forged letters to Henderson’s family, he made it appear as if the couple had moved to South Africa and had formally offered Haigh the ownership of their house in Fulham.

This second murder story magnified the contrasting mix of leisure, horror and devious sociability that also characterised the McSwan episode. The visual coverage of the murders in a British Pathé newsreel showed viewers a panoramic shot of the Hendersons’ house on Dawes Road.36 As the newsreel revealed, the ground floor of the building was a toyshop, called ‘Doll’s Hospital’, as the Hendersons had rented out the shop and lived on the upper floors. A group of little pianos were displayed in the shop window. Recalling Haigh’s account of ‘interpreting the classics’ for the Hendersons, this

35 Haigh, ‘Death comes to the Hendersons’.
iconography invoked the deceptive intrusion of evil into the Hendersons’ domestic world.

Building on the imagery of the ‘Doll’s Hospital’, the newsreel then projected a young woman driving a toy car, which was one of Haigh’s most highly publicised inventions. Aside from the mechanics of death, the newspapers emphasised Haigh’s talent for technological wizardry (figure 5.5). This emphasis on the invention and display of toys transformed a playful material culture into a visual vocabulary of violence. In much contemporary British crime cinema, toys dramatised a contrast between the world of spivs and the social atmosphere of austerity Britain. Two sub-plots in It Always Rains on Sunday revolved around the effort of a group of spivs to find a buyer for roller-skates stolen from a lorry, as well as kids getting their hands on mouth organs. In a sequence from Basil Dearden’s The Blue Lamp (1950), the murderous anti-hero, Tom Riley, looked in the direction of a street seller’s mechanical toy birds, while checking for the arrival of the oncoming policeman.

The newsreel’s material culture framed the social reality of murder as horror with cinematic connotations of petty crime and idleness. Overall, Haigh’s criminality, in line with the dubious aesthetics of spivery, involved a continuous game of distraction; an artful negotiation of everyday impressions that broke with the cultural norms of austerity Britain, by reconciling leisure and crime. While highbrow culture (piano playing) emerged as an important setting for Haigh’s confidence tricks, technological innovation mixed entertainment (toys) with killing (acid bath murders). Linking positive with negative images of material culture, the mass-media vision of spivery presented the
social experience of crime as being even more dubious, horrific and fantastic than its cinematic representation.

Figure 5.3. John George Haigh, ‘Death comes to the Hendersons’. News of the World, newspaper clipping, 7 August 1949, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
Figure 5.4. John George Haigh, ‘Death comes to the Hendersons’. *News of the World*, 7 August 1949, newspaper clipping, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
The links between the materiality of horror and the symbolic economy of spivery were not restricted to the mass-media portrayal of the scandal. Police records revealed that beneath the irrational impetus of violence lay an inventive and resourceful black-market economy. Barbara Stephens, a young woman who had known Haigh since her teenage years, admitted that her dandified friend sold her and other women clothing items that were allegedly left behind by Rose Henderson after her emigration to South Africa.\footnote{Barbara Stephen’s Witness statement, 20 March 1949, B Division, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.}
The police investigation also revealed that, while Haigh found buyers for most of the Hendersons’ personal items, he kept a few of the doctor’s accessories for himself (a dressing gown, a square box, a pen, glasses). This coupling of personal consumption with illegal marketing alongside Haigh’s attitude towards glamour echoed the tabloid profiles of proletarian dandies that had been published two years earlier, at the peak of the public interest in spivs.

As was argued in Chapter 1, in one *Sunday People* tabloid exposé entitled the ‘Self-Confession of a Spiv’, George Elm, a young black marketeer of men’s clothing, revealed how his flamboyant outfit was simultaneously an entrepreneurial strategy, an art of sociability and a means of self-expression.\(^{38}\) He revealed, for example, that instead of putting some of his best second-hands suits on sale, he used them as devices for his own stylisation and self-promotion. In Elm’s words: ‘Real nice suits they are and too good to sell. So I sacrificed my profit and pressed and cleaned these natty suits for myself.’\(^{39}\)

In a similar vein, Haigh’s dandyism combined an exercise in personal vanity with his visual self-advertisement vis-à-vis potential customers. Among those who found this type of self-presentation appealing was Mrs Olivia Durand-Deacon, a wealthy widow, who lived in the Onslow Court Hotel. Durand-Deacon was to become Haigh’s last victim. She made her acquaintance with Haigh at the hotel restaurant and bought Mrs Henderson’s handbag from him. As represented in the mass media, the widow’s encounter with Haigh pointed to the sophistication of Haigh’s tactics of deception, and

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especially his astute art of sociability. The *News of the World* dramatised the interaction between the murderer and his last victim in the following way:

Haigh was good looking, charming and well spoken. He discussed music, art and literature with ease. His manners were graceful, and, moreover, he perfectly understood Mrs Durand-Deacon’s regard for good works and her religious outlook. She had a written a volume called “Thus said the Lord – a book for contemplation, arranged by Olive Durand-Deacon.” This was too easy for Haigh. He himself had contributed to ‘Loving Words’ and similar magazines.40

The tabloid exposé showed that despite their differences in age and social status, Haigh’s manners and cultural capital appealed to Durand-Deacon. The encounter between the confidence trickster and the widow undercut the symbolic economy of highbrow culture (literature, music and poetry) and respectability (religion) with a material culture that eroded the traditional values of sophisticated taste. Durand-Deacon was a fashion enthusiast who was considering setting up a small business promoting artificial fingernails as a beauty aid. The elderly lady endorsed a commercial ethos of cheap glamour and *faux* technological innovation. Promising to advance her marketing idea, Haigh drove her to his storeroom in Crawley, shot her and then placed her body in a tank of acid. Deacon’s murder wove together deviant sociality and skilful cultural masquerade. This time, though, the police checked Haigh’s criminal record, investigated his storeroom in Crawley, discovered Deacon’s personal items (a fur and jewellery) and called him for questioning. Faced with new evidence, Haigh confessed to his murders and set in motion a criminal narrative that, alongside his own extraordinary

persona as the deviant protagonist, brought to the fore the escapist mentality of his victims.

The stories of the murders revealed characters confronting and implicitly challenging the cultural and social norms of austerity-era Britain. McSwan wanted to avoid military service, the Hendersons longed for the life of leisure that they had known in the 1930s, while Durand-Deacon wanted to invest in luxury. The psychological manipulation of the victims’ aspirations echoed contemporary sources on the actual working methods of confidence tricksters. As Percy Smith, the Scotland Yard officer, stressed in his memoirs, the art of gaining someone’s confidence was largely premised on a bond of mutual complicity between the deceiver and the deceived; the trickster would make his victim feel like a trickster himself. Similarly, all Haigh’s victims were attracted to smart or quick ways of making money. They were invited to overcome the material and cultural constraints of austerity Britain. The desire to evade the army during the war, the revivalism of 1930s leisure and the investment in fashion emblematised an idea of crime as a form of daily illusion, a confrontation with the demands of contemporary social reality.

In this respect, Haigh’s criminal magic involved the reinvention of historical life. Smith argued that the tricksters had flourished in the elegant hotels and casinos of the interwar years. The acid bath scandal adapted the art of the traditional confidence trick to the cultural circumstances of the 1940s. Haigh’s public persona reconciled morality and tradition (a Victorian upbringing, gentlemanliness) with innovation and unruliness (technology, fashion, the black market). Combining the practices of the spiv, confidence

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41 Smith, Plutocrats of Crime, pp. 9–25.
trickster and murderer, his character reproduced, but also transgressed and expanded, popular and cinematic negotiations of criminal escapism.

Mingling old and new genres of deception, his activities redefined a number of social codes underlying the contemporary modes of criminal subjectivity. While on the cinema screen, spivs and confidence tricksters were seen running, hiding or attacking their enemies in the dark, the acid bath murderer endorsed visual exhibitionism, professional masquerade and cultural sophistication as weapons of self-presentation and social disorientation. During Haigh’s trial, the expert opinion of a psychiatrist revealed how this visual dynamics of deception were deeply rooted in the criminal’s own strategy of self-deception. The following section aims to show how the psychiatric discourse shifted the point of emphasis, foregrounding the fantasy life of the murderer.

**Psychiatry as an Archaeology of Dreams**

Haigh’s trial on 9 and 10 July 1949 at Lewes Assizes was a spectacular event that mirrored many of the other prominent show trials of notorious murderers during the post-war years. The event at Lewes drew large crowds and many celebrities including the Hollywood actor Robert Montgomery and distinguished representatives of the legal, political and scientific establishment.\footnote{The following account is based on the Transcript of the Trial, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.} The presiding judge was Sir Travers Humphreys, an elderly and prestigious figure, whose legal career, as the press emphasised, dated back to the late Victorian period.\footnote{For the legal importance of the case and the profiles of the protagonists in press, see: Clement Yorke, ‘The Battle for Hi[damaged], *Sunday Dispatch*, 17 July 1949; Edgar Lustgarden, ‘Shawcross V. Fyfe’, *Sunday Chronicle*, 17 July 1947; Ralph} The defence was undertaken by a prominent political and
legal personality, David Maxwell Fyfe, a leading Tory MP, later to become home secretary. An important witness for the defence was Dr Henry Yellowlees, a psychiatrist with a privileged position in a number of leading academic and medical institutions including Glasgow University and the Royal College of Physicians.

Yellowlees’ analysis of Haigh’s psychic life competed with the tabloid narratives of crime. Haigh’s strict Victorian upbringing, the fundamentalist sect of his parents, who were members of the Plymouth Brethren, a Catholic education during his adolescence at Wakefield Cathedral and recurring dreams of the ‘Bleeding Christ’ were all said to nurture his escapist flight into a world of ‘fairy tale’ and ‘make believe’. Casting religion as a regressive cultural throwback and also a force contributing towards mental disorder, Yellowlees emphasised the importance of psychiatry as a modern, secular, authoritative discourse on the workings of the psyche. This approach stressed the links between morality and culture: religious respectability and crime.

During the post-war period, similar interpretative strategies, linking moral conservatism with transgression, were widely employed by psychologists as means of rethinking and rationalising disruptive types of subjectivity. As Richard Hornsey has shown, drawing on modern psychological theories of projection, the sociologist Michael Schofied (alias Gordon Westwood), in his Society and the Homosexual (1952), suggested that ‘the most aggressive opponents of homosexuality’ were in fact ‘those most likely to be afflicted’


with sexual deviancy. Overall, Westwood’s Freudian engagement with psychology presented family upbringing, social environment and the psychic workings of the individual as the critical terrain of pathological disturbance. This approach offered a more internalised account of psychopathology, in contrast to the tabloid press, which tended to focus on the negative aspects of metropolitan space.

This discursive competition between psychiatry and tabloid sensationalism informed every aspect of the Haigh scandal. While Yellowlees presented Haigh’s psychopathology as a post-Victorian anomaly, one that was rooted in the regressive environment of Haigh’s childhood upbringing, a feature in the *Daily Mirror* imagined the vampire killer as a problem of metropolitan dislocation. In Robert Deane’s ‘Murder Stalks the Lonely’, serial killing was discussed as product of urban alienation, one that was concomitant with the expansion of ‘boarding houses’ in central urban areas near mainline railway stations, especially Euston and Paddington, and inner-city districts, from ‘Notting Hill Gate, and Kensington, to Clerkenwell’. ‘It was from this sort of district,’ argued Deane, ‘that the families whom the police are trying to trace vanished.’ Sketching out a portrait of lonely individuals who passed by each other with ‘no recognition’, without saying ‘good morning’ and who lived in cheap ‘rooming’ houses, Deane noted that

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46 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
most the areas accommodating this transient population were mainly situated in ‘central London’. 49

The dramatic focus on urban decay underlined the instrumental importance of space as a key factor in the drama. This narrative scheme echoed wider conceptualisations of urban culture as a source of social transgression. Contemporary intellectual and town-planning discourses, as outlined in Patrick Ambercombe and J.H Forshaw’s *County of the London Plan* (1943), pictured parts of central London as dysfunctional urban zones. 50 In a similar vein, Deane warned about the decline of community values in London’s inner-city areas. The social tactics of the vampire killer, in the writer’s opinion, were inexorably tied to the rapidly shifting conditions and moral atmosphere of the metropolis.

Assisted by a cartoon image of a vampire, Deane’s account placed the iconography of the scandal alongside generic representations of the city as a modern landscape of temptation and danger. In the post-war period, this style of tabloid reporting was exemplified by the *Sunday People’s* regular exposés of capital city vice, especially in Arthur Helliwell’s column ‘Follow Me Around’. As was shown in more detail in Chapter 2, as early as 1946 Helliwell began popularising an image of city life as a place of traps and dangers, embodied in the world of the black market and the various forms of petty crime that loomed large in Haigh’s case.

The ‘Follow Me Around’ exposés portrayed confidence tricksters as urban chameleons who added to the cultural promiscuity of the metropolis. In Helliwell’s reports gambling, illicit sexuality, and petty crime were part of the underground attractions that undercut the metropolitan glamour promoted by royalty, high-class luxury and cosmopolitanism in London. Mediating between traditional forms of urban spectacle and a covert zone of hedonism and danger, confidence tricksters and dandified transgressors like Haigh managed to move between visibility and darkness, past and present, conventional and unconventional glamour. In accordance with this emphasis on the double face of the city, Haigh artfully appealed to Durand-Deacon’s old-fashioned gentility, while also revealing much more modern forms of cultural stimuli.  

It was Haigh’s entrepreneurial and commercialised cheap glamour, especially evident in the artificial fingernail project, that played a decisive role in the final entrapment of Durand-Deacon.

The Yellowlees’ psychiatric portrayal of Haigh radically reversed the relationship between his forms of criminality and contemporary culture. As has been shown, Yellowlees analysed Haigh’s attitude as the pathological outcome of atavistic Victorian values. Expanding on the defendant’s mental disorder, the psychiatrist associated confidence tricks with a ‘paranoiac disposition’, emphasising that, in general, paranoiacs were ‘throw-backs’, unconsciously following ‘the customs of primitive and savage people’. This psychiatric discourse seemed to read criminal dandyism as an external manifestation of primitive and irrational impulses. Clarifying the significance of the confidence trickster’s mental disorder, Yellowlees stated:

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51 Haigh, ‘The Last Hours of a Condemned Man’.
52 Transcript of the Trial, p. 89.
[...] a person with paranoid constitution has to live
two lives at once; he has got as far as he can, to
keep up the appearance of being clever and to
avoid his psychological bluff being called. You
therefore find such characteristics, although in no
way obviously insane, extremely vain, very
conceited, very fond of showing off, and taking a
delight in scoring off their fellow creatures.53

Coupling intellectual exhibitionism and the psychological exercise of self-disguise, the
psychiatrist presented the life of the confidence trickster as a site of tension between
‘appearance’ and ‘psychological bluff’, external self-presentation and intellectual self-
management. Haigh was said to have developed the psycho-social attitude of self-
admiration to an extreme degree. According to Yellowlees, a number of symptoms,
mainly recurrent dreams, daydreams and visions signalled the defendant’s transition
from the mental state of the ‘paranoid constitution’ to that of ‘pure or mystical
paranoia’. This was a mental condition in which, as the psychiatrist stated:

the patient’s fantasy world becomes really his
psychological home; his fantastic solutions and his
ideas of personal cleverness pass all bounds and he
regards himself as nearly omnipotent.54

In practical terms, this recourse to a fantasy life signalled the confidence trickster’s
transformation into a mass murderer. The development of fantasy was analogous to the
escalation of his criminal activity. Vividly establishing the portrait of Haigh as a
pathologically fantasising subject, Yellowlees’ psychiatric discourse conceived the
lifestyle of the mass murderer as a state of experience in which the boundaries between
imagination and reality were blurred. As he put it, Haigh inhabited a life of ‘waking

53 Ibid., p. 86.
54 Ibid., p. 88.
fantasy and day dreams’. The murderer’s fantasy life, based on what Yellowlees referred to as ‘the fantastic solution’, was compatible with ‘the practical solution’, that is, the skilful engagement with fraud and other dubious money-earning activities. Supporting this argument, Yellowlees referred to Haigh’s own ideas about confidence tricks, noting that:

Of his previous convictions he [Haigh] says that he is like an artist painting a picture, when he has successfully diddled or hoodwinked his fellow creatures. That, of course, is typical of the early paranoid constitution, and shows the conceit and fantasy of it, just as you see in the petty trickster.

Emphasising Haigh’s pride in fraud, Yellowlees presented deception as the other side of self-deception. The skilful manipulation of Haigh’s social interactions revealed the manipulator’s inner chaos and loss of mental balance. Accordingly, rationality (a practical talent in deception) was a signifier of irrationality (atavistic self-worship) and, overall, the character of the murderer was caught between the dialectics of ordinariness and extraordinariness and between waking life and fantasy.

Predictably, this line of argument failed to convince the jury. Influenced by the judge’s and the attorney-general’s characterisation of psychiatric ideas as purely speculative, the jury unanimously found Haigh guilty. Indeed, the prosecution argued that all the alleged symptoms of psychic pathology were essentially designed to support the defendant’s plea of insanity. Other psychiatric studies of Haigh, however, supported many

55 Ibid., p. 85.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p. 91.
58 Ibid., pp. 95–105.
elements of Yellowlees’ diagnosis. The prison medical officer, Dr Matheson, while denying Haigh was insane, wrote in his report that:

[Haigh] is a man who tends to live in a world of fantasy and is ready to lose touch with the common aspects and problems of life, seeking always to find an escape from the real problems of life and resenting anything which is drab and ordinary.\(^59\)

Matheson’s views echoed the wider discursive consensus of post-war psychiatric literature which, while employing different diagnostic terms, presented Haigh as a fantasising personality *par excellence*. These psychiatric debates did not solely focus on Haigh’s criminal practice, but also on his attitude towards celebrity life. Matheson attested that Haigh ‘has got a great thrill out of the publicity which his case has received in the press, and the reaction of the public to him as shown at Horsham Magistrates’ Court’.\(^60\) Diagnosing sanity, the prison medical officer at that institution acknowledged that the murderer’s self-presentation was not just a conceit designed to assist his plea for insanity, but the genuine product of his overwhelming vanity.

Expanding on this view, Clifford Allen, a Seamen’s Hospital and ministry of pensions psychiatrist, in his medical appendix to *The Trial of John George Haigh: The Acid Bath Murder* (1953), published a document written by Haigh in 1945, when the murderer’s ‘mind’, as the psychiatrist noted, ‘was unbuttoned’ by legal procedures.\(^61\) The document

\(^{59}\) Matheson’s Report, p. 13, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

was an imaginary speech addressed by Haigh to the president of the United States.\(^{62}\) Presenting himself as a mathematician, Haigh commented variously on issues of post-war economic reconstruction, to Anglo–American relations and the influence of Hollywood on public morals and violence. Allen thought that this document was incontestable evidence of Haigh’s ‘terrific fantasy of self-importance’, noting that:

One can see him [Haigh] imagining himself standing, perhaps fiddling with a wine-glass, addressing an audience of the most important nature. All eyes are on him and await his solution.\(^{63}\)

Incessantly reinventing himself as an object of spectatorship, Allen presented Haigh a self-regarding virtuoso; his mental disorder combined psychopathic elements (‘the idea of being a ‘great man’”) and sadistic elements.\(^{64}\) According to Allen’s argument, vanity intermingled with sadistic hedonism, produced a rich repertoire of self-grandeur and pleasure in Haigh’s personality, ranging from fantasies of intellectualism to ‘fantasies of blood and blood drinking’.\(^{65}\) Presenting the mass murders as the violent enactment of Haigh’s imagination, Allen emphasised that, beyond any fabricated pretence of insanity, Haigh’s hedonistic engagement with self-publicity was unquestionably a key factor in his self-presentation.

A similar view was expounded in the *Sunday Dispatch* by the criminologist Dr Harold Dearden, who wrote that the ‘ruling passion’ in Haigh’s life was ‘self display’:

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\(^{64}\) *Ibid.*
\(^{65}\) *Ibid.*
[...] the enthralling activity of dramatising himself left no room in his mind for any other idea. His make believe was more vivid to him than reality, and like an actor, who in the grip of his part can forget not only material things but even the pain of a mortal illness, he would be wholly unaffected when giving rein to his obsession to what to most of us would be an appalling, a shattering situation. [...] I believe that Haigh sensed it was a chance to die unique. It was a whole of a part. He could not resist it. I believe that he played his part to the end.”

Employing theatrical images, Dearden interpreted Haigh’s celebrity life as a pirouette of self-exhibitionism, suggesting that the psychic pleasure of vanity outstripped the murderer’s fear of death. Drawing on the gestures, movements and poses that marked Haigh’s public self-presentation, the criminologist foregrounded a visual semiology of the celebrity’s public performance: the ‘richly dramatic details’ of Haigh’s confession, his ‘charming manner’, ‘smile’, ‘smart clothes’, ‘air of boredom’ and the ‘solving a crossword puzzle during his trial’. All these elements were regarded as ‘part of a well-thumbed script’, one fuelling a grandiose project of self-dramatisation.

As was shown earlier, the mass-media representations of the murder stories emphasised the escapist tendencies of the victims, while the expert opinion of the psychiatrist, turned their attention to Haigh’s escapist tendencies. Allen and Yellowlees discussed criminal practice and mass-media spectacle as homologous determinants in the pathological manifestations of the murderer’s psychic life. Employing the metaphors of ‘acting’, ‘drama’, and ‘script’, these two psychiatrists constructed an aesthetic notion of crime, emphasising the self-deception of the deceiver. Highly skilful practices of social

66 Dr Harold Dearden, ‘Haigh: Man or Maniac?’, *Sunday Dispatch*, 14 August 1949, newspaper clipping, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
manipulation and crime, such as the confidence trick and mass murder, were read as the external signs of the workings of Haigh’s inner life. Imaginary stardom, self-dramatisation and celebrity postures mixed the understanding of horror as a psychic phenomenon with the aesthetic conventions of the mass media. This idea of the criminal as an artist was not restricted to the expert language and debates of the psychiatrists. The following section will focus on popular and autobiographical understandings of crime as an aesthetic construction.

**Celebrity life and Self-Aestheticisation**

Yellowlees admitted during the trial that Haigh compared his ability to ‘diddle and hoodwink’ his fellow citizens, that is to say his confidence tricks, with the art of painting. These artistic metaphors echoed wider social understandings of criminal deviance. In Smith’s memoirs, the confidence trickster was graphically described as a charismatic performer:

Sit down and read the script of a famous play. However good it may be, it does not grip as intensely as does an actual performance, when the stage is set, the players are dressed for the parts and the scenery and the lighting create an illusion of reality which carries away the audience. It is the same with the classic confidence tricks. The “con men” trap their victims with great acting against a backdrop which lends veracity to their ingenious tales.\(^\text{68}\)

Smith’s account attested to popular perceptions of conmen as artists. His use of the terms ‘performance’, ‘scenery’, ‘dressed for the parts’, ‘audience’ ‘ingenious tales’

\(^\text{68}\) Smith, *Plutocrats of Crime*, pp. 11–12.
variously presented the criminal as a hypnotiser, an actor, a theatrical director, a myth-making storyteller and an illusionist magician. The trickster manipulated the imagination of his victims while controlling the ‘veracity’ of the surrounding social environment. It was in this way that Smith presented the confidence trick as a form of art, a streetwise spectacle, a mechanics of illusion, a type of sensory, emotional and intellectual distraction. Similarly, the tabloid dramatisation of Haigh’s story emblematised the representation of the confidence man as a charismatic individual. The murderer’s practices of socialisation, his self-presentational tactics, his techniques of killing and his frauds were depicted as miraculous achievements.

It was these practices that the psychiatrists discussed as forms of self-enchantment; if the criminal was a magician, then his spell primarily haunted his own psychic structure. On this account, the creative energy was primarily a mental activity. The criminal as artist reinvented his selfhood within his fantasy life. As the psychiatrists noted, Haigh imagined himself as scientist who denounced the violent ethics of Hollywood and posed as a celebrity star taking pride in his crimes. In this sense the criminal as artist produced multiple and incongruent models of selfhood. Under the influence of self-aggrandisement, the pathological subject oscillated between different and contradicting types of self-narrative. Seen in these terms, the psychiatric approaches underlined the irrational impulses lying beneath the surface of rational behaviour.

The portrayal of deceivers like Haigh as agents of self-deception was also a recurrent strategy of criminal representation in contemporary fiction. In the immediate post-war years, cinema, literature and sensation underlined the escapist disorders of dandified transgressors. The spiv cycle of films revolved around the Hollywood fantasies of petty
criminals and proletarian women. The psychological secrets of streetwise illusionists (spivs) informed the construction of cinematic illusion. Similarly, in the Haigh scandal, the psychiatrists, popular journalists and true crime literature did not merely reveal the truth about the emotional order of the murderer; they participated in the spectacular projection of crime.

In contrast to the cinematic spivs, however, the protagonist of the acid bath story was not a fictional hero. Haigh was a historical personality consciously participating in the fictionalisation of his persona. Indeed, what the psychiatrists described as a dialogue between the confidence trickster’s self-deception and the deceptive dynamics of crime, that is, the dialectics between psychic life and visual exhibitionism, was encouraged by Haigh’s active engagement with the mass media. The trickster’s ability to magically make things disappear and reappear was transformed into public performances of self-exposure and fictionalisation. Photographic snapshots, tabloid exposés and true-crime literature recorded Haigh’s engagement with the aesthetic possibilities of celebrity life, expanding the idea of the criminal as a fantasising subject and an artist. The *Daily Express* revealed, for example, to its readers that on the day before his execution Haigh has suggested that he should have a rehearsal on the gallows. As he told visitors who saw him recently in Wandsworth Jail: My weight is deceptive. I have a very springy tread. I would not like there to be a hitch.  

This newspaper portrayal presented Haigh as distant and familiar, ordinary and fantastic, vulnerable and stoic. Exhibiting a macabre sense of irony, the idea of a

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69 Haigh, ‘The Last Hours of a Condemned Man.’
‘rehearsal on the gallows’ marked the murderer’s self-reflexive stardom; a performer who understood his death as a spectacular commodity. His execution on 10 August 1949 attracted a large crowd of spectators outside the entrance to Wandsworth Prison, who were photographed by the press (see figure 5.6). Haigh’s request for a rehearsal seemed to reaffirm and advertise his leading role in this popular show.

Figure 5.6. ‘Children Wait at Jail as Haigh is Hanged’. News of the World, 13 August 1949, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.

An article entitled ‘To Madame Tussaud: My Green Suit and Red Tie’, published in the News of the World a few days before Haigh’s execution, featured a photograph of the murderer’s handwritten letter clarifying that one of his ‘last bequest[s]’ was that: ‘the green hopsack suit, the green socks, and red tie he wore throughout the magisterial proceedings should be passed on to Madame Tussaud’s to “adorn” the effigy of this
infamous killer’. Haigh’s fashionability framed the public ritual of his death; the murderer intervened as a curator of his self-image, incorporating it into the cultural heritage of horror.

Seen in this light, Haigh’s quest for museum status reinforced his search for self-stylisation in the face of death. The acid bath killer appeared to want to ‘curate’ his image as a site of cultural and collective memory. Transforming his effigy into a synecdoche of aestheticised death, the celebrity murderer’s gesture expanded the semiotic economy of a popular artefact. An illusionistic mimesis of the human form (a lifelike wax statue) overlapped with an indexical trace of self-imagination (Haigh imagining himself as a monument.)

These acts of vanity invoked and also transgressed the contemporary cinematic representations of dandified crime. While in gangster and spiv films the anti-heroes’ dramatic death usually exposed and shattered their illusions, in the acid-bath scandal the protagonist’s attitude explicitly celebrated the publicity of his fall as an episode of illusionist triumph (the rehearsal of death and the wax effigy). Actively participating in the fictionalisation of his life (the storytelling of his murder, the trial and his execution, etc.), Haigh inserted into the aestheticisation of crime a self-reflexive discourse on vanity. Interviewed by Stafford Somerfield, a News of the World reporter who wrote a true-crime book on the murder story shortly after the scandal, Haigh stated that:

‘I share with the prophet the view that all is vanity. Whether we deny it, or revel in it; whether we reveal our exhibitionism professionally as in the case of an actor, a preacher, a writer or an artist; we are all vain.’

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Alongside the various forms of media representation which endeavoured to decode what, in Sommerfield’s words, was the ‘baffling, intriguing, but frightening enigma’ of Haigh’s personality, the protagonist’s own voice explicitly admitted his commitment to exhibitionism, vanity and self-fantasy. The deviant celebrity publicly advertised his ultimate engagement with the art of illusion. The power of vanity, Haigh seemed to suggest, could deceive the fear of death. In this way, an art based on illusionist representation was transformed into an art based on ideas about the mechanics of illusions, a conceptual art that reflected on itself. As has been argued in Chapter 2, associations between criminal vanity and mass-media spectacle also heavily informed the narrative and visual economy of spiv films. Jules Dassin’s Night and the City markedly juxtaposed the art of a domesticated sculptor (Adam) with that of the confidence trickster, Harry Fabian, the latter being depicted as an ‘artist without art’.

The trickster’s art was linked to his ability to treat the city as a stage for stardom. Harry Fabian longed for press publicity and an imaginary celebrity life. Foregrounding this conception of criminal aesthetics as part of the cinematic representation of London’s night life, Night and the City attempted to adapt the cinematic conventions of Hollywood to the stereotypical features of British national character, especially understatement and restraint. Rather than directly representing the content of the hero’s dream life, the film addressed the hero’s mass-media fantasies through the orchestration of body language, verbal statements and a spectacular image of metropolitan space, which blended the traditional ‘landmarks’ of London with modern, noir visions of the city.

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72 Ibid., p. 14.
Paralleling Fabians’ cinematic character, Haigh’s self-presentation employed related forms of cultural hybridity, affirming but also transgressing the associations between national character, escapism and mass media. Indeed, the photographic snapshots of his public appearances, together with his correspondence and his tabloid-inspired autobiography, vividly revealed how his public persona wove together traditional notions of grandeur with a modern and especially cinematic sense of glamour. Dressed in his flamboyant hopsack suit (see figures 5.8–9) and, as a Daily Express article noted, with a haircut by the hairdresser of the ‘Grosvenor Hotel, Victoria,’ Haigh posed as star.73 ‘It’s not everybody,’ he noted in one of his letters to his parents, ‘who can create more sensation than a film star you know.’74 His tabloid autobiography added another

73 ‘Haigh Orders a Shampoo’, Daily Express, 30 March 1949, newspaper clipping, TNA, PRO, 45/2633.
cinematic metaphor: ‘Listening to the hearing before the magistrate was like seeing a film through twice.’

Figure 5.8. ‘Women Peer Through Windows at Haigh’, *Daily Express*, 12 March 1949, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.

While these elements of Haigh’s characterisation evoked the temperament of a Hollywood star, the light, semi-ironic and enigmatic smile on his face in the press photographs exemplified more stylised expressions of vanity. This aspect of his character was not grounded in Hollywood but in the self-restraint, control and snobbism of the English gentleman or aristocrat. Contemporary evidence revealed how the social codes of middle- and upper-class culture loomed large in Haigh’s value system. Replete with gossip relating to the royal family, the letters he wrote from prison

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75 John George Haigh, ‘The Last Hours of a Condemned Man’. 257
revealed that he was a devoted admirer of Princess Margaret, the king’s fashionable younger daughter.\textsuperscript{76} Drawing on testimonies of his fellow prisoners, Molly Lefebure, in her \textit{Murder with a Difference} (1958), noted that Haigh was a typical ‘snob’, whose ‘aim was to appear as a prosperous public-school boy type from a solid middle-class background, with pretensions to possessing more than average middle-class culture’.\textsuperscript{77} According to the same source, Haigh was politically ‘a staunch Tory’ and used to declare that ‘he should have been born in “more elegant days”’.\textsuperscript{78} Simultaneously, Haigh overtly condemned any form of religious respectability. In his tabloid autobiography, he wrote about the ‘pharisaic’ of religious fervour:

\begin{quote}
I have a reputation for fraud and forgery. But at least I am honest about it whereas they [the religious fanatics, the respectable] make an easy living under the cloak of religion. I can only laugh at them or I should say I cannot take them seriously.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

Denouncing religious morality, Haigh championed conservatism in aesthetic terms while condemning it in moral sense. Despite his taste for aristocratic elegance and high Toryism, his autobiography emphasised his lack of emotional empathy for the actual representatives of the upper class. While admitting, for example, that he appropriated many of the glamorous articles belonging to his victims (Dr Henderson’s square box and gold-rimmed spectacles), he also stated categorically that: ‘I never associated the people with the things themselves.’\textsuperscript{80} His appropriation of the material and visual codes of status was overtly disassociated from any social rationale. Class, in his word view,

\textsuperscript{76} La Bern, \textit{The Mind of the Murderer}, p. 90.
\textsuperscript{77} Molly Lefebure, \textit{Murder with a Difference} (London; Melbourne; Toronto, 1958), p. 49.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid.}, 50.
\textsuperscript{79} Haigh, ‘The Last Hours of a Condemned Man’.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}
seemed to overlap with spectacle; it was an art of self-presentation devoid of any ethical meanings.

Figure 5.9. ‘Women Crowd Court’. *Daily Herald*, 3 March 1949, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633

Figure 5.10. ‘Haigh Orders a Shampoo’. *Daily Express*, 30 March 1949, TNA PRO: HO 45/2633.
Persistently defending the morality of his ‘killings’, and noting that ‘nobody can convince me that I am wrong’, Haigh’s career presented restraint and self-control as sources of private anxiety and psychic damage:

I am afraid of scenes, and though often furious I remain quite superficially [sic]. Inside I am a boiling cauldron [...] I recall the stubborn silence with which I greeted punishment either by my parents or my tutors. I was always bitterly resentful. In later life I learned not to show my feelings, for I never wished it to be said of me that I was bad tempered.81

Discussing his temperament as an exercise in emotional discipline, Haigh presented a profile of himself as the ‘little man’ whose life had always been trapped by the regressive powers of social pretence and moral conservatism. His autobiography revealed to his readers the sordid and murderous secrets lying beneath his veneer of respectability and restraint. Endeavouring to solve the mystery of his ‘puzzled’ personality, Haigh unpacked a life that was wrought by intense psychological tension. All the murders were discussed as the product of irresistible inner impulses and dreams. Narrating, for example, his meeting with Dr Archibald Henderson in the Metropole Hotel, Brighton, Haigh noted that:

Archie [Henderson] complained that I was not paying attention to what he was saying, and I replied by saying that I was in what I called my “dopey” state. My mind was on something else. He suggested it was cerebral something, giving the condition a technical name. But by now I was seized with an awful surge. The dream cycle was in full spate. Once more I saw the forest of crucifixes which changed to trees dripping with blood. Once

81 Ibid.
more I woke with a desire which demanded fulfilment. Archie had to be the next victim.82

The extract guided the reader through Haigh’s inner state of mind at the moment during which a friendly social encounter was transformed into a desire for murder. Framing the dialogue scene by Haigh’s absent-mindedness (‘dopey’) and his religious vision, the autobiographical narrative presented criminal practice as a violent extension of daydreaming. Blurring the boundaries between waking and fantasy life, this trope of self-dramatisation depicted murder as an extension of Haigh’s inner life into the field of social life. Projecting the persona of a fantasy-driven criminal, Haigh positioned himself at the centre of a horror show, one that wove together confidence tricks, mundane forms of sociability and a tapestry of supernatural and gothic elements, such as crucifixes and vampirism.

An analogous blurring of the boundaries between imagination and ordinariness marked the social reception of Haigh’s story. An account of the murderer’s career was contained in a letter sent to Scotland Yard by a German named Emil Spardel. Preserved in the Metropolitan Police archives, the letter was entitled ‘Film becomes the most Gruesome Reality’. It contained photographs of Haigh’s coverage in the German press (figures 5.11–12.) and a three-page commentary. As the police investigator from the Met reported:

[Spardel] sees in the details of pictures, photographs, etc., hidden faces and forms which predict or signify events or interpretations in connection with them. Thus, in the press photograph of police officers searching the ground at the scene of the alleged Haigh crime, he sees, as

82 John George Haigh, ‘Death comes to the Hendersons’. 261
he has indicated by his red ink markings, the form of the presumed actor, that of the film actor Robert Newton, and a coffin. His letter is characterised by eccentric statements and theories such as: In Haigh’s case, it is not a matter of murder but of bluff, for [damaged] of a film which has been presented in vain for years and is still being declined. The producer and hypnosis-dictator in this gruesome murder drama is the chief actor Robert Newton [...] For the sake of a million pounds worth of business, he got everyone in his power, not only the author of the piece, but also the so called murderer Haigh. As can be seen, the result is that this unrealistic film has now become a world sensation. 83

Spardel’s letter multiplied the associations between imagination, crime and the power of the mass media. In what was publicly advertised as a murder sensation, the German correspondent saw a cinematic marketing device. While other contemporary commentators thought that Haigh emulated the style of the actor Ronald Coleman, Spardel argued that it was the actor Robert Newton who employed Haigh as a means of self-promotion. 84 Characterising Newton as a ‘hypnotiser’, Spardel’s letter drew attention to the deceptive dynamics of the murder story beyond the representation of Haigh’s confidence tricks. It was the publicity machine that was regarded as a devious confidence trick.

Detecting a secret system of meanings behind Haigh’s story, Spardel’s letter complicated the relationship between the representation of reality and the reality of representation. While Haigh transformed real crime into a semi-fictional representation of illusionism, Spardel saw in the illusionistic representation of murder the intrusion of

83 Translation [from the German], John George Haigh at South Kensington and Crawley, Sussex: bodies of six victims dissolved in sulphuric acid at Crawley, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/3128.
84 Phillips, Murderer’s Moon, p. 76.
fiction. Both protagonist and spectator conceived horror as a spectacular conspiracy of meaning. While for Haigh the only moral realities that existed beyond the visual and glamorous organisation of social life were the imperatives of dream life and vanity, for Spardel what was advertised as reality was an illusion within an illusion.

Figure 5.11. Spardel’s comments on Haigh, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/3128.

Shaped by social imagery of this kind, Haigh’s story was widely circulated as a dialogue between popular spectacle and criminality. The scandal brought to the fore a complex set of discourses on the workings of the psyche. Protagonist, expert opinion and the
reading public commented on Haigh’s ritualistic violence as a riddle of inner life. Embedded in a specific cultural and criminal context, these discursive negotiations echoed a wide repertoire of cinematic conventions. The Hollywood-led exhibitionism of spivs, the illusionistic manoeuvres of confidence tricksters and the psychopathology of the murder codetermined not simply an aesthetic idea of crime but also the criminal’s self-projection as an artist. Haigh was at once the performer in the gallows and the flamboyant-celebrity protagonist of a vampire-tabloid story.

If spiv cinema turned the rise-and-fall of Hollywood gangsters into the rise-and-fall of British proletarian fantasists, Haigh’s scandal depicted the criminal’s fall as the realisation of a dream. Criminal vanity set in motion a popular transformation of ethics into aesthetics. An evil dandy exorcised the fear of death by magically creating an artistic commodity out of himself. His performance reproduced but also expanded and complicated contemporary norms of criminal life and representation. In contrast to the other genres of deviance examined throughout the thesis, in Haigh’s case the self-reflective understanding of crime as a hedonistic form of escapism was rooted in the language of the protagonist. If in national cinema the figure of the daydreaming criminal covertly reconciled Hollywood stardom with British reserve, in the acid bath story, escapism became a manifesto. Haigh’s words, gestures and poses presented imagination as a way of life, a style of self-presentation and a form of pleasure. In those terms, the iconography of the acid bath murders emblematised the tense relationship between the criminal as an artist and the cultural atmosphere of late-1940s Britain. Merging Hollywood exhibitionism with English gentlemanliness, luxurious hotels with amusement arcades, and regressive Victorianism with fashion and technology, the spivs’, tricksters’ and murderers’ aesthetics of crime transformed the contradictions of British post-war modernity into an enigmatic, macabre and spectacular art of the self.
Figure 5.12. Spardel's comments on Haigh, TNA PRO: MEPO 3/3128.
Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis has been to explore the conditions under which popular culture constructed escapism as a way of life in late 1940s Britain. To answer this question, my research focused on a form of criminal lifestyle whose ‘undefined’, promiscuous and ambiguous nature was inexorably linked to the social and cultural experiences of imagination and cinematic spectatorship. The heterogeneous constructions of the spiv persona in the tabloid press, autobiographical literature and cinema centred on debates about the social, aesthetic and psychological meanings of the criminal imagination. Small-time racketeers, good-time girls and murderers were dramatically portrayed and discussed as fantasising subjects. These transgressive anti-heroes imagined themselves and posed variously as American gangsters, Hollywood stars, playboys and celebrities. The idea of criminality as a daily re-enactment of fantasy permeated intellectual discourses, mass cultural forms of representation and the popular traditions of London life. Under these conditions, the aesthetics of spivy overlapped with the contemporary conceptualisation of escapism as a form of social experience.

The comparative and interdisciplinary exploration of criminal subjectivity in texts and images has highlighted the connections between disruptive cultural practices. The aestheticisation of crime moved between sensational scandal and popular fiction, the cinema screen and the tabloid press, the criminal underworld of the 1930s and the post-war experiences of austerity and rationing. My use of the term ‘the aesthetics of crime’ has been designed to capture this blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, and public and private life. Based on the popular representation of crime as an episode in the psyche, cultural strategies of this kind echoed wider formations of subjectivity in political discourse and psychiatry, together with well-
established conventions of representation in cinema and popular literature. For these reasons, my excavation of the idea of the escapist criminal demanded a comparative examination of the interplay between the social experience of crime and the contemporary genres of fantasy.

Following this perspective, I argued that public perceptions of spivery as a form of psychic disorder were instrumental in the Attlee government’s ideological construction of the idle, irresponsible and unproductive citizen. At the same moment, though, the idea of the criminal imagination loomed large in contemporary journalistic, psychiatric and sociological studies of London’s deviant cultures. Fantasising crooks embodied both modern and highly traditional forms of transgression. They personified the moral dangers associated with the economic crisis of 1947, but they also pointed towards the criminal cultures and wayward lifestyles of the inter-war period. When in 1947 the official spotlight shined on spivery, its imagery linked distinctive cultural aspects of the 1930s with the very different social conditions of the 1940s.

A central feature of these discursive representations of the spiv was the description of the criminal as an artist. Intermingling in the wayward life of the tramp, the ‘magic’ wizardry of the confidence trickster and the dandyism of the gangster, 1930s autobiographical spiv narratives portrayed spivery as a street-wise art of deception. These artistic skills involved spivs’ ability to make a spectacle of themselves in the promiscuous settings of the urban underworld. Combining self-disguise, psychological manipulation and bohemian mobility, spiv criminals appeared to evade the normative constraints of class, morality and professional life. Under those terms, their lifestyles hedonistically violated and reinvented the meaning of ‘respectability’. Spiv aesthetics
was associated with the social, and psychological ability to transform cultural identity according to the imperatives of the individual imagination. These crooks lived in the world of fantasy while deceiving the fantasy of their victims. Alongside this everyday version of the deviant imagination, the public imagery of spivery endorsed more conventional forms of escapism. In particular, the literary and tabloid autobiographies of the transgressions transformed the street-wise spectacles of their life stories into objects of collective spectatorship.

The central argument of the thesis was that during the 1940s, these 1930s dialectics between the everyday forms of criminal illusion and the sensational representation of criminality in mass culture became mediated and refracted through Hollywood aesthetics. The spiv was largely represented as an agent and object of cinematic spectatorship in both crime films and murder scandals. The contemporary construction of spivery as a public spectacle exposed the criminal illusions of ordinary life. In other words, the aesthetics of cinema popularised the aesthetics of crime by unmasking the spiv’s techniques of deception and self-deception. Describing the spiv character as an ‘artist without art’, Jules Dassin’s *Night and the City* (1950) emphasised how the art of the criminal involved the capacity to transform the city into a symbolic surface of self-mirroring. The 1930s literary portrayal of the proletarian sculptor who shaped his imaginary artworks out the walls of a café was replaced by the filmic persona of the 1940s transgressive flâneur who continuously re-imagined the city as a mise-en-scène of glamour. Visualising the emotional, erotic and fantasy life of proletarian men and women, spiv films contributed to the transformation of crime into a popular and self-reflexive history of illusion. The anti-heroes’ ways of moving through the city, their tactics of erotic manipulation and their Hollywood-led postures foregrounded the links between 1940s criminal aesthetics and American idioms of visual imagination. In this
light, the art of the spiv entailed the charismatic skill to transform forms of everyday life into a genre of cinematic excitement.

Contemporary murder scandals expanded on these conceptions of spectacular criminality in important ways. The narratives surrounding the mass cultural representation of the cleft chin story encapsulated the popular portrayal of crime as a re-enactment of cinematic fantasy. Karl Hulten’s and Elizabeth Jones’ violent *flânerie in the city*, their erotic flirtation and cultural masquerade dissolved the boundaries between murder and cinematic spectatorship. The popular re-imagination of their story in the mass media played a decisive role in contemporary popular understanding of spivs’ aesthetics as a violent expansion of the pleasures of picture-going. In their case, escapism was not simply discussed as a way of seeing a film, but mainly as a way of experiencing one’s life as a film. John Haigh’s story produced the most complex portrayal of the criminal as an artist, a celebrity and a star. His criminal practices emerged as quotidian forms of illusion inscribed in spectacular modes of self-presentation, devious tactics of sociability and technological ingenuity. The sensational accounts of Haigh’s story in the popular press associated the trickster’s criminal magic with his ability to manipulate the escapist fantasies of his victims. Furthermore, the spectacular organisation of horror, the psychiatrists’ exploration the murderer’s subjectivity rationalised the idea of criminal fantasy as a creative energy. Haigh projected himself and discussed his criminal career as an artistic charisma, transforming his celebrity life into a performance of self-fictionalisation. These public rituals presented crime as an elegant re-enactment of the imagination.
In all these cases the public transformation of the criminal into an artist exemplified a dialogue between conscious human agency and wider cultural and social structures. For example, in the cleft chin case, Jones’ and Hulten’s self-confessions echoed normative ideas about sexual hygiene, everyday leisure and public morality. At the same moment, these characters articulated atypical ideas about the erotic dynamics of violence and spectatorship. In their accounts, murder emerged as a type of leisure homologous to cinema going. In a related vein, Haigh’s understanding of himself as an artist evoked accounts of the confidence trickster as an illusionist, an actor and a performer in popular culture. However, his autobiographical auto-analysis exhibited highly individualised and eccentric forms of rationality.

These encounters between social structure and transgressive agency have shaped my exploration of the aesthetics of crime as a charged record of mentalities. As was outlined in the introduction, Jacques Le Goff defined the history of mentalities as ‘the meeting point between the individual and the collective, the long term and the everyday, the unconscious and the intentional, the structural and the conjectural, the marginal and the general’. The thesis showed how the 1940s popular understanding of the spiv’s aesthetics as an escapist mode of life was the meeting point between, an enduring tradition of criminal and metropolitan tradition, on one hand, and the contemporary moral panics about the impact of Hollywood, on the other. These developments were influenced by wider historical conditions as well, most notably the economic crisis of 1947 and the growing professional and popular anxieties about crime during the immediate post-war years.

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Under these conditions, 1940s criminal aesthetics displayed a number of the contradictions of post-war British modernity. The dialogue between past and present, the ‘long term and the everyday’, were particularly visible in the conflicts between the perceived threat of Americanisation and British culture. If in John Worby’s *Autobiography of a Spiv* (1937) and Gerald Kersh’s *Night and the City* (1938) spivs were dressed or disguised as Americans, in the late 1940s, they imagine themselves as Hollywood heroes. The cinematic versions of spivs reproduced but also transgressed the 1930s representations of American criminals. Mixing the glamour of the cinema screen with the proletarian dandyism of London, the protagonists in spiv films evoked the stardom of American stars while being recognisably British. Similar contradictions marked the murder scandals of the late 1940s. While the cleft chin killing was widely discussed as a brutal Americanisation of national culture, the mass cultural iconography of the story largely associated the good-time girl with wider traditions of metropolitan life and the culture of the ordinary. Finally, Haigh’s celebrity image linked the posture of the Hollywood star with the reserve elegance of the English gentleman.

My thesis has emphasised how these cultural tensions were resoundingly played out as episodes of the psyche. The literary and tabloid autobiographies of spivs and murderers recurrently discussed sartorial style, vanity and egoism as forms of intellectual self-management, modes of pleasure and emblematic forms of subjectivity. The psychiatrist John Scott interpreted the ephemeral, cinematic and Americanised elements of the spivs’ self-display as the external manifestations of timeless sexual drives. On screen,
criminal fantasy and erotic desire orchestrated an alignment of the American crime genre with British national character. Framed through a body language of reserve, understatement and daydreaming, the cinematic version of spivery revealed that, in contrast to their US counterparts, the British criminals dreamed of glamour without ever becoming glamorous. Even in the most individual scenarios, these forms of representation reasserted signifiers of British mentality. Haigh’s modern-playboy persona was discussed as the other side of regressive Victorianism. The emphasis on the psyche as a source of truth and national particularity played an instrumental role in these dialogues between rationality and imagination. Psychiatric discourse and cinematic style presented the criminal as a megalomaniac. The sharp reasoning ability of the confidence trickster was inseparable from his irrational desire for self-grandeur. Criminal magic involved a complex psychopathological immersion into self-fantasy.

The focus on the psychological life as an instrument of social truth competed with popular images of transgression as the combined product of metropolitan decay and the traumatic experiences of the war. Urban understandings of criminality dominated the sensational columns of the *People* and featured in the *Daily Mail*’s coverage of Haigh’s story, while emphasis on the detrimental effects of wartime London also marked the representation of the cleft chin murder in the media. In these narratives, the topographies of the British metropolis, notably the cafés, the cinemas and Soho’s low-life settings actively shaped the re-enactment of the criminal imagination. These popular representations disrupted the hegemonic understandings of national identity, criminality and cultural space. In *Night and the City* Harry Fabian’s way of moving through the landmark and underground spaces of the city not only emphasised the American’s failure to negotiate London’s criminal cultures; it also echoed wider representations of the English capital as a space of disorientation, interclass sociability and
cosmopolitanism. The journalistic reports of Arthur Helliwell and the memoirs of Scotland Yard’s officer Percy Smith showed how the cultural masquerade of spivs and confidence tricksters transformed traditional London into a space of modern danger. While in those accounts American culture was described as an authentic part of contemporary metropolitanism, the negative reviews of Dassin’s film showed how conservative understandings of national identity marked the views of many cultural commentators.

These contradictions were very evident in Haigh’s story. Bridging the world of amusement arcades and South Kensington hotels, the black-market activities of spivery and highbrow culture, the conservative adherence to aristocratic style with a radical denouncement of middle-class moral values and worldviews, Haigh’s figure represented the unpredictability of the modern fantasising criminal in the city and the culturally promiscuous nature of escapism. In a related vein, spiv films exemplified an idea of criminality as a force of the imagination which intruded into the everyday lives of housewives and domesticated young women. In this way, spivery was not simply represented as an unregulated, wayward and ‘queer’ way of life. Richard Hornsey has suggested that the disobedient urban behaviour of spivs and the unruly erotic life of queers contrasted with the ordered vision of the town planners and post-war ideologues of reconstruction more generally. In contrast, my thesis has argued that the contemporary meanings of spivery were yet more complex. In Elizabeth Jones’ trial, for example, the meaning of ‘queerness’ was associated with the erotic excitement of the enigmatic, the fantastic, the ‘thrilling’. Good-time girls in contemporary popular

literature and cinema were implicitly and explicitly seen to live out homosexual experiences alongside mobile, promiscuous, hetero-normative and domesticated roles. The meaning of both queerness and spivery were implicated in cultural and psychological understandings of ordinary life. Erotic and criminal escapism was integrated in the symbolic iconography of social normality, it did not simply stay apart from it, as Hornsey suggests.

My understanding of the criminal imagination as an intrinsic part of popular understandings of everyday life was based on historical research about 1940s British culture. This approach, however, also owed much to the confidence tricksters and black marketers I encountered in Athens and London in 2004 and 2005. Their personas challenged my understanding of the meanings and historicity of erotic ‘queerness’. These latter-day tricksters moved interchangeably between erotic roles, social situations and self-representational strategies. Persistently advertising their capacity to seduce people who were not exclusively queer or proletarian, they discussed their social life and sexuality in ways that recalled the 1940s popular understanding of spivery. These themes raise a number of issues for future research. Are there any particular spatial, national and cultural continuities relating to the performative character of the confidence tricksters? What is the relationship between the aesthetics of crime and the queer aesthetics of austerity in the 1940s and now? What are the cinematic, theatrical and visual links between criminal and sexual deception? These are issues which will shape my new project in the poetics of criminal illusion and sexual deviance during the immediate post-war years and the twenty-first century.
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*British Film Institute*


Ph.D. Thesis


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