



*“Can this hell perhaps be Jules Dassin’s London,
which is certainly not the London
that belongs to you and me?”*

*Critical responses to depictions of London
in The Blue Lamp and Night and The City*

by Jenny Stewart

ABSTRACT: 1950 was a pivotal year in the production and release of British London-set films. Ealing studios released *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950) in January 1950, while Ealing’s *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951) and *Pool of London* (Basil Dearden, 1951) went into production in the same year. Then, in June 1950, Twentieth-Century Fox released Anglo-American production *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950). For critics, *The Blue Lamp* sealed Ealing’s reputation to capture a recognisable London, rooted in specific districts with ‘ordinary’ inhabitants with a community ethos. *The Blue Lamp* set the barometer for London-set films to follow. Indeed, British critics derided *Night and the City* as an inauthentic depiction of London, one created by ‘outsider’ Jules Dassin, in comparison to Ealing’s ‘familiar’ London. This paper firstly examines of archival documents of the production of location shooting in *The Blue Lamp*, to demonstrate how the film sealed Ealing’s reputation to capture a recognisable London, rooted in specific districts with ‘ordinary’ inhabitants with a community ethos. It then examines and compares the critical reception of *The Blue Lamp* and *Night and the City*, to explore discourses around ‘home-grown’ versus ‘outsider’ perceptions of London in the immediate postwar period.

KEY WORDS: Postwar; London; Ealing; Dassin; Dearden; British cinema



London emerged from World War II victorious yet beleaguered, as vast swathes of urban residential districts, the Docklands and the City of London were destroyed in the Blitz of 1940-1 and 1944-5. Pre-war issues, such as the need for new, modern housing to replace slum terraces, acquired a new urgency after World War II, particularly as there was now a severe shortage of housing. However, the rebuilding process was slow due to scarcity of materials, thus much of the London landscape in the subsequent postwar years was one of bombsites, ruins and wastelands. The citizens of London celebrated victory while contending with recent memories of night-raids, austerity, continued rationing and a perceived 'crime wave', as the black market flourished. Postwar, inner London districts were "essentially Victorian" with predominantly working-class demographics, as by the mid-1930s, middle-class areas of inner London shrunk due to the expansion of the suburbs in outer London (White, 2001: 7&22). As London was broadly a collection of villages, each district of inner London developed its own distinct character. Railways cut through and defined the geography of each district. Residential housing merged with industry and commerce, before the slow decline of industry from the mid-to-late 1950s onwards.

This London, typified by residential working-class districts, bustling central areas and ruins which exposed the remaining Victorian, pre-war city, offered its own photogenic beauty, one that was exploited by filmmakers. British filmmakers were particularly attuned to the postwar London landscape and character, partly due to the major British film studios' proximity to inner London and filmmakers skilled in documentary filmmaking who resided in London. *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950) and *Night and The City* (Jules Dassin, 1950) were two films, released just months apart in 1950, which made use of the photogenic postwar London landscape, featuring extensive location shooting in the city streets. *The Blue Lamp* was produced by Ealing, a British studio with a growing reputation during the late 1940s for realistic location shooting in inner London districts. Here, Ealing utilised the residential and commercial areas around Paddington Green and the Edgware Road for a story about 'bobbies on the beat'. Anglo-American production *Night and the City* offered a darker, noir depiction of an American hustler in London whose plans go awry, set amidst a wide range of familiar London landmarks and the Soho district.

This article details British critics' responses to these two differing portrayals of postwar London. It compliments Charlotte Brunsdon's extensive analysis of representations of London, from 1945 to present day, in her seminal monograph *London in Cinema* (2007). Brunsdon's distinction between 'local', London, "a realist London" of "terraced houses, blocks of flats, high streets, corner shops" and, a 'landmark', tourist



London, are used in conjunction with archival research to consider the films with their production and critical reception contexts (2007: 53).

This article firstly contextualises *The Blue Lamp* within the development of Ealing's 'local' London, one that was highly regarded by British critics. It discusses *The Blue Lamp*'s unique production history, as the film was the first commercial feature film to be fully endorsed and supervised by the Metropolitan Police. This production history reveals how Ealing, with the aid of the Metropolitan Police, were able to integrate an authentic local London, using real locations, into a commercial feature film.¹ While Brunson argues that the actual locations used in films are unimportant, as "cinematic place has no necessary relationship to location shooting" (2007:166), for the film historian, a consideration of why particular locations were chosen enables an assessment of the extent to which filmmakers were committed to an authenticity of location.

Secondly, this article discusses British critics' mainly negative and hostile responses to Dassin's depiction of London in *Night and the City*, a film now canonised as a classic British film noir. As *Night and the City* was released in Britain just five months after the hugely successful *The Blue Lamp*, critics judged the film's depiction of London against Ealing's local London. A comparison of critics' responses of the two films enables an understanding of the discourses around what, for critics, defined an 'authentic' London in the postwar period. This comparative approach reveals British critics' creation of a dichotomy between what they perceived to be Ealing's 'insiders' London of residential districts, shot in a restrained, naturalised manner, and Dassin's 'outsiders' vast, downbeat and overtly-stylised London.

EALING STUDIOS' LONDON

From 1939 until 1956, under the direction of Michael Balcon, Ealing Studios produced a number of commercially and critically successful London-set films, spurred on by the studios efficiency through a tight-knit team and Balcon's policy for shooting in real locations. In Ealing's most successful period between 1947 and 1951, the studio produced eight contemporary-set films which featured location shooting in inner-London.² Four of these were original London-set stories, penned by Ealing's most prolific screenwriter T.E.B. Clarke: *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947), *Passport to Pimlico*, *The*

¹ *The Blue Lamp* was made with full supervision of the Metropolitan Police as a result of Scotland Yard's appointment of Percy Horne Fearnley in 1945 to the new role of Public Information Officer. Fearnley's role was to improve the public image of the police by liaising with filmmakers, journalists and advertisers.

² The eight contemporary London-set films were: *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947); *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947); *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949); *A Run for Your Money* (Charles Frend, 1949); *The Blue Lamp* (Basil Dearden, 1950); *Dance Hall* (Charles Crichton, 1950); *Pool of London* (Basil Dearden, 1951); *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951).



Blue Lamp and *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951). Clarke drew on his own experiences in London during World War II, firstly, as a journalist for *Hue and Cry* and secondly, as a war reserve policeman for *The Blue Lamp*.

The documentary tradition was one which was prevalent in British cinema in the 1930s and then during World War II, as British filmmakers documented the war both away and on the home front. Directors at Ealing, such as Charles Crichton and Basil Dearden, developed their craft working on drama-documentary films for Ealing during World War II, and were thus adept at directing 'authentic' portrayals of London in their postwar output. Ealing's corpus of London films therefore combined the aesthetics of the documentary tradition by shooting in real locations in a naturalistic manner, with commercial mass entertainment.

British critics generally favoured this authenticity and realism in film, even if audience tastes were for populist, escapist fare. By 1951, Ealing had gained a reputation among prominent British critics for authentic depictions of the London scene. For Dilys Powell (*Britain Today*), Ealing studios had "expanded and elaborated" the documentary tradition in the immediate postwar years in *The Blue Lamp*, *Hue and Cry* and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947), noting, "there has been an attempt to re-create what one might call the human background: to weave with fictional characters the texture of London street life with its barrow boys and hawkers; its shouting and its pubs" (April 1950: 36). In 1951, critic C. A. Lejeune (*Observer*) declared,

The family at Ealing seem to be at home in any sort of British scene [...] but their happiest playground is London. Their London is not the visitors' London, [...] but an older and more indigenous London: City streets, docks, inner suburbs, school crossings, faded crescents (1 July 1951: 6).

London, with its familiar landmarks, was a selling point for films aimed at British audiences and also for key lucrative foreign markets, including the USA. Ealing's ethos of depicting the British way of life in real locations was therefore a savvy selling point, as Michael Balcon stated in 1952,

If you do well locally, you do well nationally... and I believe that the indigenous film is the truly international film. This, I suggest is the reason for our success with stories of London and Londoners – we know the heart and mind of the people (quoted in Butler, 2004:90).

The success of films such as *The Blue Lamp* and *Passport to Pimlico* in the USA are therefore testament to Balcon's awareness of the potential overseas appeal of a truly 'indigenous' film.



THE PRODUCTION AND CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *THE BLUE LAMP*'S LOCAL LONDON

Ealing's corpus of postwar London films culminated in the release of *The Blue Lamp* in January 1950. *The Blue Lamp* concerns police officer Andy Mitchell (Jimmy Hanley) who is paired with older police officer George Dixon (Jack Warner) to patrol the streets around Paddington Green Police Station. Their routine is interrupted by juvenile delinquent Tom Riley (Dirk Bogarde), who shoots PC Dixon during a bungled robbery. As a popular commercial film, *The Blue Lamp* combines a classic realism associated with Classical Hollywood Cinema, with linear narratives and spectator identification, and a surface realism with the use of real, recognisable locations. The film is notable for its extensive location shooting in the streets around Paddington and the Edgware Road. Here, Ealing capitalised on the success of previous inner London set films *It Always Rains on Sunday*, *Hue and Cry* and *Passport to Pimlico* which were all praised by critics for their authentic evocations of postwar London. *The Blue Lamp* proved to be Ealing's most successful London-set film – it earned £246,000 at the British box office and was awarded the 1950 British Film Academy Award for Best Film.

The MEPO files reveal how *The Blue Lamp*'s original screenwriters, Jan Read and Ted Willis, wrote the film's first treatment for Gainsborough Pictures, conceiving *The Blue Lamp* as an East End police-drama film. Read originally set the film in Lehman Street Station (Read 21 September 1948). Read envisaged that *The Blue Lamp* should be 'semi-documentary' in style, with considerable location shooting. Semi-documentary films were a feature of wartime propaganda production in Britain, featuring fictional, yet believable 'ordinary' characters in real locations, discussing key issues and messages pertinent to citizens. Indeed, Read's intentions and Ealing's ethos of shooting in actual locations demonstrates British filmmakers' impetus to incorporate elements of the British documentary tradition into fiction film. This reflects how, while documentary filmmaking in Britain waned after World War II, a commitment to realism of location was incorporated in some fiction films.

The original opening sequences for *The Blue Lamp*, as visualised by Reed and Willis in original 1948 screenplay, would depict Commercial Road, Whitechapel, as police follow a couple to tenements on nearby Settles Street. The wish for an 'everyday' London was evident in Jan Read's description of the final chase sequence in the revised treatment:

We now go back to the chase, which can, I think, be more effective if carried out against the everyday background of back-yards, sun-lit crowded streets, public houses and railway stations, than in the usual ultra-romantic surroundings of warehouses and docks by night (21 September 1948).

While Read originally developed the treatment so that "it can be shot among the streets and in the houses, shops and Police Stations of Greater London", Read eventually



conceded that much of the film would have to be shot indoors due to Gainsborough's severe financial difficulties (Read 21 September 1948). Unfortunately, Gainsborough's financial problems continued to escalate throughout 1949, resulting in the cancellation of a number of projects, including *The Blue Lamp*. Michael Balcon then offered to develop and produce the film at Ealing, seizing the opportunity to replicate the recent successes both at home and abroad of American films produced with the cooperation of the police, such as *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948). As Ealing were developing a reputation for extensive location shooting in particular districts of London, with previous successes *Hue and Cry*, *It Always Rains on Sunday* and *Passport to Pimlico*, the studio was therefore ideally positioned to produce *The Blue Lamp* in line with Read's original semi-documentary intentions.

Balcon decided to change the setting of the film from Whitechapel in the East End, to Paddington in West London, much to the initial dismay of the Metropolitan Police who had already put much work into this 'East End' film. Balcon then entrusted T.E.B. Clarke to rewrite the script and remove the East End dialogue. Clarke was the natural choice for scriptwriter, having spent time as a war reserve police officer in S Division, Hammersmith, from 1939 to 1943. Clarke vividly recollected 'working the beat' on the streets of Hampstead and it is evident that his experiences informed the script (1974: 128). While there is no archival record of why Balcon chose to change the film's setting to Paddington, the area's working-class residential profile, and notable buildings including the Metropolitan Music Hall and Coliseum cinema in close proximity to Paddington Green station, certainly met the demands of the narrative.

Filming on *The Blue Lamp* commenced in June 1949, with two camera units, one in Ealing studios and another in exteriors in the West End and Paddington Green. Production was completed on 12 August 1949, on schedule for Ealing's annual fortnightly break. According to producer Michael Relph, the ability to shoot so much of the film on location was due in part to the facilities and help given by the Metropolitan police; "using enormous lamps, we could do night shots, and we were able to shoot all around the Edgware Road and surrounding district, which would otherwise have been difficult" (quoted in Burton *et al* 1997: 246).

The Metropolitan Police supervised location and studio filming during production and ensured that studio sets accurately reflected real police stations. Ealing and the Met's dedication to authenticity of locations is evidenced by interior shots of Paddington Green Station, which were studio sets based on photographs of the real station and visits made by Ealing personnel. Paddington Green Police Station, located at 325 Harrow Road, serves as a focal point for several scenes within the film, a space of order and congeniality, in contrast to the spaces of leisure frequented and used by delinquent Riley to plot and commit crimes. Exteriors of the Coliseum cinema, located next door to Paddington Green station, and used as the cinema where Riley commits the robbery and shoots Dixon, were shot at the cinema itself, with some studio work used for the foyer



interior.³ As the Coliseum was closed in 1958 and eventually demolished, and the Metropolitan Music Hall was demolished in 1963, these scenes are since imbued with a historical resonance. This use of recognisable actual buildings located on the Harrow Road and Edgware Road, including Paddington Green Police station, the Coliseum Cinema and the Metropolitan Theatre, were also a key selling point in publicity materials, released during pre-production and early stages of production.

The Metropolitan Police were keen to foster a positive public image and use *The Blue Lamp* as a recruitment and training tool. Thus, the film must appear accurate, realistic, yet positive in its portrayal of the 'bobby on the beat'. *The Blue Lamp's* opening sequences immediately establish this message that the bobby on the beat is a necessary and reassuring figure, at one with the local streets. The use of naturalistic lighting further enhances the film's authenticity. In the opening sequences, a series of dissolves depicts police officers on the beat in the city streets. Low angles and eye-level shots give the impression of both authority and familiarity and are anchored with the voice over of a Judge at the Old Bailey stating, "I have no doubt the best preventatives of crime is the regular uniform officer on the beat". When PC George Dixon is first introduced he is giving directions to a passer-by who asks, "Paddington Station?" Dixon replies, "Yes, Sir. Straight across the green, turn left over the iron bridge and you're there", immediately signalling a familiarity with the area only a "veteran" (as stated in the voice over) like Dixon could know. The film reinforces the belief that figure of the bobby on the beat was invaluable. Indeed, sociologist John Barron Mays noted in his study of police work in working-class areas of Liverpool that "nothing could replace the constable moving on foot in a limited area, knowing the alleys and back-ways where patrol cars could not penetrate" (quoted in Kynaston, 2007: 361).

The Blue Lamp depicts the familiar trope of a younger officer's journey, as PC Andy Mitchell transforms from a rookie who is yet to learn the beat, to an accomplished officer. In the film's final sequence, PC Mitchell is able to give directions to a passer-by, providing a neat circular narrative through the mirroring of Mitchell and Dixon. *The Blue Lamp* ends in typical long shot, as Andy patrols the now-familiar Harrow Road, with a sense of belonging and reassurance of law and order, emphasised through the camera pan upwards to the familiar police station sign.

The Blue Lamp's focus on policing in the streets of Paddington served to depict the area as one blighted by the perceived postwar 'crime wave', yet one that was protected through the familiar routines and belonging of the bobby on his beat. For Brunson, this familiar London is a "little London" as Paddington Green is represented as a place "where children get jam buns at the police station and old ladies are excused their overdue dog licenses" (2007: 66). The film's narrative and characters also ties in with historian Frank Mort's description of Paddington in the immediate postwar period as one of London's "twilight or transitional zones [...] squeezed between the established infrastructure of

³ The name of the cinema was changed from the original Majestic in the shooting script to the Coliseum during production, in keeping with the film's use of real locations to authenticate the fiction.



the metropolitan core and the settled residential communities of the Victorian inner suburbs”, with “dislocated communities”, including prostitutes and runaway teenagers (2006: 109).

Although *The Blue Lamp* focuses mainly on the work of the Metropolitan Police, the film also deals directly with the juvenile ‘problem’ through the character of juvenile delinquent Tom Riley. The opening sequences depict images of young men in a coffee bar in London’s West End, anchored by the voice over, “These restless and ill-adjusted youngsters have produced a type of delinquent which is partly responsible for the postwar increase in crime.” *The Blue Lamp* depicts London’s West End as a place of excitement and transgression for postwar delinquent youth. The jazz score and bright flashing lights that accompany runaway Diana as she walks along Shaftesbury Avenue, demonstrates the appeal the West End had for young people looking for escape and excitement away from the home. A voiceover posits Diana as a girl who shows the “effects of a childhood spent in a broken home and demoralised by war.”

Film historians have analysed how character and locations in *The Blue Lamp* were used to illustrate the oppositions between the ‘restless youth’ and the stable, routine-led bobby on the beat; Sue Harper and Vincent Porter note the contrast between the “controlled” Dixon and his wife and insecurity of the delinquents (2003: 60). Steve Chibnall contrasts the settled home of PC Dixon with Diana’s aimlessness along Shaftesbury Avenue (1997: 206), while Andrew Spicer posits Tom Riley’s sensation-seeking in West End milk bars and amusement arcades and his seedy bed-sit with an intrusive railway, as a clear contrast to the stable Dixon home (2001: 133). For Charlotte Brunson, *The Blue Lamp*,

is most interesting in the way in which the rhythms and practices of a local London, most strong associated within the film with George Dixon himself, are asserted against the deracinated, Americanised urban violence represented by the three young villains (2007: 66).

Brunson notes how the ‘little’ London is contrasted with the excitement of West London, depicted as “London the City” (2007: 66). Frank Mort describes Soho in the first half of the twentieth century as a site of pleasure and danger, with spaces of leisure such as cafes as pubs as conveying,

the optimistic possibilities of the modern city, produced through consumerism and the leisure activities, and a negative, deracinated idea of urban impurity, rootlessness and disorder (2006: 109).

Indeed, Riley and Diana embody this ‘youthful consumerism’, drawn to the disorder and leisure offered in Soho.

The Blue Lamp’s use of newspaper headlines, such as “stolen car strikes women in West End crash”, directly tackled the wartime and postwar ‘crime wave’, as a weakened



wartime police force and spivs operating on the black market resulted in an increase in crime. For critics, *The Blue Lamp* was in the tradition of British films which dealt with salient urban social problems, such as poverty, crime and delinquency. Critics praised the correlation between lawlessness and the postwar environment; Paul Holt (*Daily Herald*) noted how the film “plays out against the background of lawless, restless, confused, over-crowded, poverty-racked and bomb-torn, post-war London” and that “it is the Harrow Road that is the real villain” (20 January 1950). *Evening News* stated how the film “stars the streets of Paddington and the daily life thereof. Its job is to ‘look in’ on the relentless processes whereby Scotland Yard attacks the new London gangster problem” (19 January 1950).

In December 1950, two women were stabbed on Edgware Road, the same section of the Edgware Road where *The Blue Lamp* was filmed, then in February 1950 a robbery took place at the Coliseum, just one month after the release of *The Blue Lamp*. For the press, these incidents further enhanced the film’s authenticity and served to perpetuate the notion that the area around Paddington Green was synonymous with crime; in June 1950, *Gloucestershire Echo* even referred to the streets around Edgware Road and Paddington Green as “*The Blue Lamp* streets” (12 June 1950: 1).

For American critics, *The Blue Lamp* succeeded in replicating the success of urban American thrillers within a British context. The *Washington Post* compared the film to Jules Dassin’s *The Naked City*, a police procedural drama shot in documentary style in New York City, while praising *The Blue Lamp*’s ability to retain its “national characteristics” (12 April 1951: 9). British critics were also keen to emphasise *The Blue Lamp*’s ‘national characteristics’. For Dilys Powell (*Britain Today*), British crime cinema of the period, while influenced by the realism of location in American 1930s gangster films and then-recent American crime films, were rooted in the traditions of British documentary films (April 1950: 36). Frank Enley (*Sight and Sound*) considered *The Blue Lamp* as typical of both British cinema at the time and of Ealing studios, where Britishness is synonymous with bravery, and continuing the Ealing tradition of tributes to institutions in British life (April 1950: 76). The *Evening Standard* positioned *The Blue Lamp* within a ‘family tree’ of Ealing London films, alongside *Dance Hall* (Charles Crichton, 1950), *It Always Rains on Sunday* and *Pool of London* (22 February 1951).

Critics praised *The Blue Lamp*’s depiction of an authentic postwar London. For Dilys Powell (*Britain Today*), *The Blue Lamp* was “sharply native” and “peculiarly successful in its amalgamation of the real and the reconstructed”, with characterisation which “admirably conveys the feeling of London life” (April 1950: 36). Powell was particularly impressed with how *The Blue Lamp* depicted London, which for her captured the essence of the city:

The camera has selected and composed just those fragments from the great mosaic of London which can best communicate the sense of sprawling, dirty, bleak areas outside the smart West End: the music-hall in Edgware Road, the forbidding residential streets to the West, the back lots by the canal. I have rarely seen a film



which so vividly evoked London: not the rick London of the tourist of the prim London of the well-to-do resident, but the raw, smoky London in which the huge undistinguished mass of people live. (April 1950: 36)

This critical response demonstrates how British critics highly regarded British commercial fiction films with a realist aesthetic, which dealt with social issues and depicted a local, non-tourist London. For British critics, this 'vividly evoked London' of *The Blue Lamp*, would set the benchmark for subsequent films which used extensive shooting in inner-London. Indeed, this was the case with Anglo-American production *Night and the City*, released in Britain in June 1950, just five months after *The Blue Lamp*.

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO DASSIN'S 'OUTSIDERS' LONDON IN *NIGHT AND THE CITY*

Night and the City was produced by Twentieth-Century Fox due to Anglo-American film agreements, where British films were financed by American dollars and given fair distribution in the USA, an agreement critic Dilys Powell (*Sunday Times*) regarded as "hopeful" at a time of shrinking finances in the British film industry (18 June 1950). Audrey Leonard (*Sunday Graphic*) argued that *Night and the City* was typical of Anglo-American productions which were British thrillers "gingered up by American gangsterdom" and produced to primarily appeal to an American audience (18 June 1950). The film was directed by Jules Dassin, an émigré and exilic filmmaker, recently blacklisted in Hollywood and working in Europe. American writer Joe Eisinger penned the screenplay for the filmic version of *Night and the City*, based loosely on the 1938 novel by British author Gerald Kersh. The film's plot concerns American hustler Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark), whose ambition leads him into a Soho underworld of wrestling promoters and shady nightclub owners.

Stylistically, *Night and the City* adopts a noir aesthetic with chiaroscuro lighting, oblique angles, mainly night-time settings, and a flawed anti-hero. The film lacks the restrained, naturalistic cinematography associated with British films of the period, with British cinematographer Max Greene depicting a picturesque, if downbeat London. In contrast to the local London of *The Blue Lamp*, *Night and the City* provides the spectator with a vast array of familiar London landmarks, including: London Bridge, Waterloo, Petticoat Lane, Piccadilly, Mile End Arena, Strand and Regent Street. The noir low-key lighting use of cinematic landmark locations in long shot contrasts to the more 'ordinary', naturalistic British style evident in *The Blue Lamp*. The film also lacks the continuity, repetition and reassurance of *The Blue Lamp* which was shot in a limited number of streets in close proximity to one another.

Brunsdon locates the two Londons in *Night and the City*; 'landmark' London with recognisable icons and 'underground' Soho, London (2007). For Brunsdon, *Night and the City* is an example of how the West End is reconstituted as a dark place in British thrillers



(2007: 94). Frank Mort described London's "polarised geography" and spatial layout as one which stimulated scandal and eroticism, as Soho was characterised by narrow streets and alleys just off the grand thoroughfares of Leicester Square (2010: 12). Depictions of Soho in British film as a seedy, dangerous place thus enhanced Soho's reputation as, as Arthur Tietjen described in 1956, a "breeding ground of crime and hotbed of vice" which provided an "internal fascination" for the criminally minded with its "labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys, its underground clubs" (1956: 145). As a result of this dark depiction of Soho, *Night and the City* is now considered by film historians as a key film in the corpus of British film noirs. For Robert Murphy, *Night and the City* marks the end of the British Spiv cycle of 1945-50, films notable for their seedy underworld Soho settings and black-market activity (1989). *Night and the City's* evocation of a macabre, seedy London reflects British postwar spiv films set in Soho, which, according to Murphy, continued the tradition of 1930s British crime thrillers, with a darker atmosphere and in a postwar context (1981: 131).

Twentieth Century Fox's publicity sheets stated that the film was shot in sixty-four London locations, filmed over fifty-three working days and nights, and in just fourteen interiors. The heavy location work was also an opportunity for Twentieth Century Fox to capitalise on American director Jules Dassin's previous successful urban location shooting in *The Naked City* (1948). *Night and the City's* production in London locations was therefore newsworthy in light of the success of American urban thrillers in city locations, such as *The Naked City*. For instance, Stephen Watts for the *New York Times* reported how Dassin planned to make "dramatic use of London as an integral foreground, rather than background, of the film" (2 October 1949). While 'local' London was a selling point for *The Blue Lamp*, for Twentieth-Century Fox, the wide variety of locations used in *Night and the City* were easily marketable. This reveals how both a local, insiders London and a vast, tourist landmark London were both considered saleable commodities.

Night and the City utilises a creative geography of London (Brunsdon 2007). In the film's climatic moments, Harry Fabian sprints across London, a scene which covers over six miles and takes in as many familiar London locations as is possible, including St Paul's Cathedral and the Hammersmith Bridge. British critics were particularly cynical about these sequences. Audrey Leonard in *Sunday Graphic* describes the scenes as an "Olympic sprint by Richard Widmark from one photogenic setting to the next" (19 June 1950), while *Daily Telegraph* thought the chase was "unreal" and the "geography of the chase confusing" (19 June 1950). For British critics, *Night and the City* could easily have been transplanted onto any large city; for Joan Lester (*Reynold's News*), "those shadowy shots might well have been Manchester" (18 June 1950).

While *The Blue Lamp* evokes an insiders London, where characters are rooted in their community and one with the local streets, in *Night and the City*, Harry Fabian is an outsider looking in. For Dimitris Eleftheriotis, such characters reflect Dassin's own exilic status, where "a person is simultaneously a member of a vast community and an



outsider" (2012: 349). Eleftheriotis notes how, "In Dassin's films cities become a palimpsest of people living in an urban space that is once shared yet also separate and individualised" (2012: 348-349). Indeed, the characters in *Night and the City* regularly refer to 'London' rather than particular areas, perhaps reflecting Dassin's and American audience's unfamiliarity with London's distinct districts. Dassin, when interviewed for the British Film Institute's DVD release in 2005, recalled that British critics thought that the London he depicted was 'made up' and asserted that the London on screen was the real London. This assertion is partly correct; British critics were quick to point out that Jules Dassin was an 'outsider', as he was not a native and unfamiliar with London, rather than having 'made up' the city.

Eleftheriotis' analysis of Dassin's "cosmopolitan authorship" evident in Dassin's films, with foreign 'outsider' characters, was one that British critics did not easily accept (2012: 340). *Manchester Guardian* noted that "in making a realistic film there is no substitute for knowledge of place and people – Mr. Dassin quite obviously did not have the time to know London and Londoners" (17 June 1950). Indeed, Dassin had spent six weeks in London prior to production and the *New York Times* claimed that Dassin found the vastness of the city "frightening" (2 October 1949). Twentieth Century Fox's publicity materials for *Night and the City* addressed Dassin's unfamiliarity with the city with a quotation from Dassin stating,

it would be absurd to claim that I have done more than touch the fringe of London when I came here to look at it. I set out to discover some of the most beautiful and striking locations suitable to the story [...] But I don't pretend that I shall show London to filmgoers as if I knew it intimately.

Andrew Pulver suggests that negative reviews of *Night and the City* were due to British critics' fear of a Hollywood invasion of the British film industry (2010: 41). While this may have been a factor in critic's responses, other factors, such as the use of American leads in a British-set film, most infuriated British critics in the national press.⁴ For critics, the use of American lead actors also added to the films lack of distinct British style. Mary (Gene Tirenay) exudes a Hollywood glamour, while the English character Helen (Googie Withers) is glamorous, ruthless and ambitious in-keeping with the American femme fatale, a character far removed from the down-to-earth East Ender Rose Sandigate played by Googie Withers in *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947).

British critics were, however, quick to praise Greene's cinematography for its beauty, perhaps in a nod to one of the few above-the-line British talents on the film.⁵ For Dilys Powell, (*Sunday Times*) Dassin's depiction of London, with squalid characters, American stars and a "conglomeration of night-clubs, thieves' kitchens, all-in wrestling

⁴ Critics who criticized the use of American leads include *Evening Standard*, 20 July 1949.

⁵ See, for instance, Dilys Powell, "Night and the City", *Sunday Times*, 18 June 1950, Anon, *Evening Standard*, 15 June 1950.



and river-rats", "will do the British cinema nothing but harm" (18 June 1950). The *Daily Herald* claimed the film is a "gross misunderstanding" of London, in which the city is made "incredible, which she never was" (16 June 1950). However, it is evident that the critic for the *Daily Herald* took umbrage with an American version of London as "I was offended by this film, for I do not mind being told that London is wicked but I hate to be told by a friendly foreigner that she is absurdly so" (16 June 1950). Some critics also displayed a highly emotional response to Dassin's depiction of London; Roy Nash (*Star*) argued that "this film insults London" and "will hurt the pride of every Londoner" (13 June 1950).

The differences in the mode of address used in British critic's reviews of *The Blue Lamp* suggest a sense of belonging and familiarity as opposed to *Night and the City*, where British reviews refer to "the Americans". Alan Exley (*Evening News*) addressed the Londoner directly, claiming that for a Londoner *The Blue Lamp* "is partly your film [...] It is shot in your street, even in some of your homes." (10 August 1949). The *Star* contrasted *Night and the City* to "our own" *The Blue Lamp*, arguing that in *Night and the City* "the backgrounds are there but the real flavour of London is missing" (16 June 1950).

After the bombing raids during World War Two, bomb damage exposed existing areas of the city. Surviving iconic landmarks such as St Paul's Cathedral therefore acquired a new significance in the nation's mind-set. As architectural historian Robert Thorne states, "seen across bomb sites, St Paul's appeared to be the pre-eminent symbol of national resistance and sacrifice. In popular eyes, it was the country's chief war memorial" (1991: 118). In *Night and the City*, St Paul's appears in one scene as a photogenic backdrop. However, in contrast Ealing's portrayals of St Paul's in films such as *Hue and Cry*, where it appears as a symbol of heroism and victory, in *Night and the City*, St Paul's is in cast in darkness, in full silhouette. The critic at the *Evening Standard* was most perturbed by such a portrayal and the portrayal of London generally, arguing that, London was a "pre-eminently gentle city" one of

serenity and stability. But my view is obviously not shared by the people who make pictures. To them London is sinister, evil and cruel. The dome of St Paul's and the tranquil Thames are not symbols of beauty, but a shadowy background for mayhem, murder and the macabre (15 June 1950).

Although reviews from the national London-based press were mainly negative, some provincial critics in the south of England were generally positive in their reviews of *Night and the City*. Elizabeth Winters at *Gloucester Journal* thought the film was realistic, capturing "the authentic atmosphere of Piccadilly, Trafalgar-Square and Thames-side" and indicative of the "documentary technique" which "has successfully been adapted for purely fictional films" (24 June 1950: 15). *The Cornishman* (14 December 1950: 14), *Portsmouth Evening News* (1 July 1950: 4) and *Chelmsford Chronicle* (7 July 1950: 13) were all positive in their reviews of the film. Here, they focused on the film's drama, with *Chelmsford Chronicle* praising the film for being "entertaining and exciting" and the



Portsmouth Evening News describing the climax as “gripping”. These reviews suggest that in general, critics outside of London were not so focused on the importance of a geographically accurate London.

Night and the City fared poorly at the British box office, yet has since gained a reputation as a classic film noir, partly due to the reassessment of film noir by French film critics and filmmakers in the late 1950s, and subsequent canonisation of Dassin as an auteur. Robert Murphy defends the film’s “marvellously evocative impression of London at night” and suggests that the film was not commercially successful due to changes in public taste, as evidenced by the huge success of *The Blue Lamp* (1989: 142). For Murphy, the liberties Dassin takes with London geography are insignificant compared to Reed’s treatment of Belfast and *Odd Man Out* (Carol Reed, 1947) and Vienna in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). While Pulver acknowledges *Night and the City* as straddling two traditions of American underworld crime films and British spiv films, Pulver ultimately locates *Night and the City* as “a product of a distinctly British cultural tradition - one that relies heavily on its setting, the central London district of Soho” and positions *The Third Man* as a ‘partner’ film to *Night and the City* (2010: 71 & 89).

Analysis of *The Blue Lamp* and *Night and the City*’s critical reception reveals that, for postwar British film critics, an ‘authentic’ London was a local and recognisable London, with a continuity which somewhat matched the actual geography of the city. Exterior shooting in specific districts and in real London streets and buildings contributed to this authentic London, and as a result, critics praised *The Blue Lamp*’s ability to capture the ‘essence’ of London. An analysis of the production history of *The Blue Lamp* reveals how this local London was inscribed in the film’s development and production, continuing the semi-documentary traditions of British cinema. The Metropolitan Police’s involvement in the film ensured the film’s realism of location and the routines of the bobby on the beat. For British film critics, *The Blue Lamp* sealed Ealing’s reputation to capture a recognisable London, rooted in specific districts with ‘ordinary’ inhabitants with a community ethos. As a result, the ‘outsiders’ London of *Night and the City*, with its creative geography and doom-laden noir aesthetic, was judged negatively against this standard.

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