

**Richard Hornsey, 2008, The Queer (Spatial) Economies of *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 5 (1), pp. 38-52. ISSN 1743-4521.**

NB This is a draft version. Please quote only from the published article, as cited above. Figure 1 refers to the original film poster for the film; figures 2 and 3 refer to screen grabs. These have been reproduced here for copyright reasons, but can be found in the published article.

### **The Queer (Spatial) Economies of *The Lavender Hill Mob***

One of the most celebrated commentaries on the post-war Ealing comedies was provided by the head of Ealing Studios, Michael Balcon, in his 1969 autobiography:

In the immediate post-war years there was as yet no mood of cynicism; the bloodless revolution of 1945 had taken place, but I think our first desire was to get rid of as many wartime restrictions as possible and get going. The country was tired of regulations and regimentation and there was a mild anarchy in the air. In a sense our comedies were a reflection of this mood... a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses. (159)

Yet Balcon's concluding metaphor contains a striking ambiguity. With its twin appeals to thermodynamics and the founding opposition between social regulation and desire, 'a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses' strongly recalls Freud's notion of displacement as developed in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1976 [1900]). For Freud, displacement describes that psychic mechanism endemic to dreaming by which an unacceptable libidinal impulse finds expression through its attachment to an alternative, seemingly unconnected idea. If, on these terms, Balcon's Ealing comedies

did function as cinematic safety valves, then might the anti-social impulses to which they responded be far deeper and darker than those presented on the screen? In particular, might Balcon's own explanation of the mild anarchy within a film like *The Lavender Hill Mob* ("who has not wanted to rob a bank... as an escape to a life of ease?") work precisely to conceal, rather than to announce, the less acceptable desires that the film covertly articulates?

*The Lavender Hill Mob* was directed by Charles Crichton and released in 1951, the year in which the Festival of Britain and the fall of the Atlee government announced the closing of a period of intense cultural reconstruction. Central to this had been a foregrounding of ideas around town planning, as British policy-makers sought to address the devastation of the Blitz by imagining how a rebuilt urban environment might lay the foundations for a revitalised post-war social order. From the mid-1940s until the early-1950s, the British public was exposed to a plethora of books, films, pamphlets and exhibitions that all suggested how, after the end of the war, a reformation of Britain's towns and cities would ensure peace, prosperity and a renewed sense of national community. Important here was Patrick Abercrombie's two-volume plan for London (1943, co-written with JH Forshaw; 1945), the underlying principles of which provided a useful set of motifs that recurred within reconstruction programmes of public pedagogy (Mort, 2004; Matless, 1998; Gold and Ward, 1994). At the same time, showcase environments such as the Festival of Britain's *South Bank Exhibition* (celebrated by the *Architectural Review* as 'a highly successful exercise in the art of the town-planner' (Anon., 1951b: 80)) offered visitors a more affective experience of how well planned urban layouts could provide for better living in the decades to come. By 1951, therefore, British culture had become marked by a deep cultural investment within a specific set of relationships towards the

built urban environment (Hornsey, 2008). As the projected material basis for a harmonious national community, urban space had become something to be engaged with properly; that is, to be moved through, looked at, and socialised within according to the ordered prescriptions of its planners and designers.

The early-1950s also saw a sudden focus of public attention on the pressing social problem of male homosexuality. As the Metropolitan Police slowly returned to their pre-war levels of activity, the number of men apprehended for such offences rose exponentially in London (Houlbrook, 2005). This increase, backed by a series of high-profile arrests such as that of John Gielgud in October 1953, encouraged both members of the judiciary and the tabloid press to make a succession of vocal outcries about the urgent need to combat this malignant queer threat. Such concern reached its apex during the ‘Montagu trials’ of spring 1954, when Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Michael Pitt-Rivers, and the journalist Peter Wildeblood were tried and convicted of gross indecency with a pair of younger airmen. The accompanying tabloid frenzy, and the liberal counter-discourses which arose in response, contributed to the establishment of the Home Office Departmental Committee on Homosexuality and Prostitution, more generally known as the Wolfenden Committee, later that same year.

This moment of post-war moral panic has often been understood on ideological terms, as a defence of the reproductive family or of a type of British masculinity central to the security of the infant Welfare State (Pearce, 1981; Higgins, 1996). Yet these discourses also sought to demarcate the legitimate uses of urban space. Both contrived tabloid exposés such as the *Sunday Pictorial*’s three-part ‘Evil Men’ series (Warth, 1952a-c) and the more earnest lines of questioning pursued by members of the Wolfenden Committee (Mort, 1999) strove to produce a cartography

of homosexuality in London, not just through exotic place names such as ‘Soho’, ‘Mayfair’ and ‘Piccadilly’, but by cataloguing in detail how queer men operated within the built environment. Through feature articles and trial reportage, newspaper readers in particular became familiar with the ways that homosexuals moved around the city, with how they liked to loiter in places like parks and cafés, and with how they had their own special codes for making contact with others like themselves. Male homosexuality, such material insisted, had a complex urban geography all of its own.

Of course, such ways of using the city were deeply incompatible with those being imagined within the brave new neighbourhoods of Abercrombie’s London or amongst the pavilions, walkways and plazas of the remodelled South Bank. Male homosexuality in the early-1950s, therefore, was presented inextricably as both a geographical and a sexual form of deviance. Normative modes of urban engagement were implicitly sanctioned via this public vilification of how queers read, occupied and moved through urban space. Yet it is these illicit spatialities, I wish to argue, that provide the anti-social impulse at the heart of *The Lavender Hill Mob*. Through the criminal antics of its two central characters, Holland (Alec Guinness) and Pendlebury (Stanley Holloway), the film celebrates precisely those queer urban choreographies that were becoming more generally problematic at the time of the film’s release. The vicarious pleasures that it offered its audience, which were never quite thinkable but were none the less real, involve a direct engagement with the spatial operations of urban homosexuality as they were being mapped out in and across London in the post-war period.

### **Locating the queerness of *The Lavender Hill Mob***

This queerness at the heart of *The Lavender Hill Mob* operates on two levels, neither of which could be properly acknowledged by its producers or its audiences. On the one hand, there is a connotative queerness that bubbles just below the surface, although it never finds the terms of its own articulation. The film's protagonists, Holland and Pendlebury, are both middle-aged bachelors; Holland is meek, outwardly subservient and has a lisp, whilst Pendlebury is portly, jovial and prone to theatrical gesticulations. The film contains no suggestion that either has or ever has had a relationship with a woman. In fact, the only females to exist within its depiction of London are the elderly gentlewomen of the Balmoral Private Hotel and the pubescent girls of St Christopher's in Hendon; and whilst both are endowed with a comic perversity (Mrs Chalk is a connoisseur of salacious potboilers whilst schoolgirl June Edwards has a 'boyfriend' in the police) neither are sexually available to our protagonists. The only 'proper' woman to feature in the film is the pre-stardom Audrey Hepburn who appears briefly in the prologue. Here, in the exotic setting of a Rio café-bar, Holland is introduced as the triumphant thief in exile, although his awkward British manner marks him out within these louche surroundings. The scene shows him generously dishing out money to the local population before he begins to recount his story to an as yet unspecified interlocutor. During this sequence, Hepburn glides into shot and exchanges some brief words with Holland, before embracing him sexlessly and relieving him of some cash. Referred to by both dialogue and credits only as 'Chiquita', she is literally the token girl. Her function is to provide a comforting, if ultimately depthless, stamp of heterosexuality with which to frame the ensuing narrative, diverting the viewer from any queerer interpretations they might be tempted to make.

Once back in London, the real engine of the film is Holland and Pendlebury's comedic parody of heterosexual marriage. From their initial encounter at the Balmoral, via the flirtatious *double entendres* through which they negotiate their partnership, to the affectionate re-naming ceremony on the hotel stairs, much of the dramatic tension depends on a sense that this pair are in it together, for better or for worse, for poorer or for richer. The film's publicity poster clearly expresses this (figure 1), as the two men joyfully cling together amidst the chaos of the world around them. This deeply homosocial, if not downright homosexual, romance rushes in to fill the void left by its absent heterosexual counterpart, continuing with their Parisian pseudo-honeymoon after the ceremonies of the crime to Pendlebury's selfless final urge to "Run, Dutch, Run!" as he succumbs to the policeman's grasp.

Yet, in addition, the film enacts a much deeper articulation of homosexuality through the displacements contained within its basic narrative structure. The plot of the movie runs thus: Holland, a downtrodden bank clerk, meets Pendlebury, a small-time manufacturer of tatty souvenirs, at the Lavender Hill hotel at which they both lodge. Together they plot to hijack a vanload of gold bullion on its way from the dockside refinery to the vaults of the Bank of England, though first recruiting two professional working-class crooks, Shorty (Alfie Bass) and Lackery (Sid James). After stealing the bullion, the mob recast it as Eiffel Tower paperweights using Pendlebury's foundry, before smuggling the towers to France to be sold on the black market. Everything goes well until six of them are mistakenly bought by a party of English schoolgirls. Holland and Pendlebury's attempts to retrieve these towers lead to a succession of farcical episodes, before Pendlebury is finally arrested and Holland escapes to Rio.

The crime around which *The Lavender Hill Mob* revolves is thus one with a deep significance. Gold in its bullion form, safely lodged within the vaults of the Bank of England, is the necessary foundation on which the circulation of paper Sterling is premised. In stealing this gold on its way to the vaults, Holland and Pendlebury effectively mount an attack on the entire functioning of the national economy. Further, by melting the bullion down and recasting it as paperweight Eiffel Towers, this unique substance is profaned. The use value it derives from its function as the money commodity is lost, only to be mocked by its new incarnation as a holiday souvenir. No longer the transcendent enabler for the circulation of all banknotes, it is inextricably tied to the time and place of its purchase; that is, on vacation, from a small kiosk at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Acknowledging this structure allows us to uncover the central displacement at the heart of the film, for if we replace gold with sperm in the above diagesis, the Mob's crime becomes emphatically that of homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> Queer men, of course, hijack sperm on the way from its testicular refinery to the guarded vaults of the uterus, the necessary destination for its transcendent realisation as that substance which sustains the social economy. The queer orgasm, as tied to the moment of its expenditure as a souvenir to its point of purchase, inherently profanes this substance by denying it its unique and proper use value. *The Lavender Hill Mob* even endorses this reading. In Pendlebury's foundry, just as the first golden paperweight emerges from its cast, Holland and Pendlebury cradle it affectionately; Holland sighs 'Our firstborn' and the two men look into each other's eyes and smile. Here, then, the towers are explicitly presented as the barren offspring of a homosexual partnership, but one in which the audience is invited to take conspiratorial pleasure. A year later, by contrast, Douglas Warth (1952a: 15) would tell his readers of how any tolerance of

homosexuality would lead to an alarming fall in the birthrate and push Britain into decadence. Thus, whilst a vocal tabloid press was denouncing queer men for their anti-social failure to procreate, *The Lavender Hill Mob* was reworking this crime as the central premise of its comedic narrative.

With this in mind, the entire film can be read as a joyous, if unacknowledged, celebration of homosexual criminality, its illicit moments of pleasure and its subversive uses of urban space. That the film poses a wilful challenge to the normative dynamics of post-war urban planning is evident from the start. At the end of the Rio prologue, just as Holland begins his narrative flashback, the scene dissolves into a grimy shot of commuters trudging their way over London Bridge. Over the top, Holland intones how he was ‘merely a nonentity among all those thousands who flock each morning into the city,’ and the terms of the film’s London have effectively been set. In the following sequence, the film exaggerates two basic strategies endemic to reconstruction planning discourse (Hornsey, 2008). Firstly, urban space was being re-imagined as a patchwork of discreet functional zones in which quotidian activities such as work, residence, and shopping all coalesced within their own specified domain. This revealed not only a will to manage individual activities by fixing them within a co-ordinated spatial totality, but a desire to preclude other, more troubling forms of social practice by disabling them from quite literally taking place. In addition, planners and designers paid great attention to how individuals would circulate through these chains of monological spaces, plotting a series of imagined trajectories that would foreclose the eruption of the unexpected within their cyclical routines. These logics were fundamental to both Abercrombie’s London plans and the design of the Festival’s *South Bank Exhibition*. At the latter, for instance, visitors were marshalled around a designated path on the premise that only by following this



route would the content of the exhibition make sense. Consenting to the space's pre-planned circulations thus became a performative affiliation to the very national community propagated by the displays.

These modernist post-war visions were far from the decaying urban fabric on show in *The Lavender Hill Mob*, but the film responds to both these strategies in its depiction of the capital as a space of regimentation and routine. Holland's daily commute across London Bridge clearly bisects the City as a space of employment from the residential suburbs to the south, whilst the following sequences that guide us through the trajectory of Holland's typical day become a synecdoche of the previous nineteen years. Here, daily repetition has, on the surface at least, produced stasis, order and predictability. But from the start, the film invites a pleasure in the subversion of these conventions. Holland, we are told, has long harboured a secret set of criminal desires that have remained hidden precisely because of his adherence to the normative routines of his everyday existence. Thus, when Pendlebury fortuitously arrives at the Balmoral as a potential co-conspirator, these desires can become manifest and take on their own distinct urban geographies within the terms of the film's London.

### **The Geographies of Queer Criminality**

The pair's criminality puts them in immediate tension with this built environment and both the proscribed spatial practices and authorised circulations through which it is constructed. This is encapsulated towards the end of the film by the *Police at Work* exhibition at the Metropolitan Police Training School. Exemplifying those sites of civic participation and public cultural provision that were

endemic to the reconstruction, this exhibition recalls both the clusters of public buildings that Abercrombie placed at the centre of his imagined neighbourhoods and the more realised, if temporary, pedagogical spaces of the Festival of Britain. But whilst such spaces sought to invigorate feelings of national and local community by encouraging active participation in an ordered collective, *Police at Work* becomes only a site of terror, entrapment and exposure for our misfit protagonists. Amongst such cultural provisions, there is simply no place for the illicit activities of Holland and Pendlebury, and throughout the film they are forced to appropriate other spaces whilst supplementing the normative functions of these with their own, less acceptable social practices.

Happily for them, the London in which they operate is still one of bombsites and deserted derelict buildings. The conservative modernism of reconstruction planning has yet to take a hold and there remain plenty of sites available for use. Yet the key space of criminality in the film is less the disused warehouse in which they unload the van, but rather Pendlebury's foundry, which by night becomes no longer a site of legitimate commerce but a seething den of criminality as the mob recast their gold. Below street level and expressionistically lit, this space takes on the dynamics of a public toilet, as it is hastily reinscribed by this gang of criminal men as a site for their own illicit activities. This comes through strongest in the scene where Holland and Pendlebury conceal themselves in the shadows, patiently waiting for others to be tempted in by the apparent rewards on offer inside. Loitering out of hours in a space that should be used only for work, their lingering presence becomes itself a mode of wrongdoing. When, minutes later, they are disturbed by a passing policeman, Pendlebury hastily recasts this through the legitimating logics of business: 'Yes, thank you, Officer. My partner and I are busy stocktaking'.

Loitering recurs often within this film, always as a criminal practice with its own dialectic of exposure and concealment. Whilst waiting to hijack the van, Shorty must avoid suspicion by pretending to be a pavement artist, whilst Pendlebury's less skilful hanging around leads directly to an accusation of trying to steal a painting. Tellingly, when Holland and Pendlebury first decide to recruit professional crooks, their first recourse is to a Tube train, one of the few places in the city where loitering is required as a necessary condition of normative circulation. With its own peculiar dynamics of transience and lingering, the London Underground was important within the early-50s imagining of the urban homosexual and took its place alongside similar sites such as the café and the public park. The Underground's incessant flow of people suggested dangerous possibilities of anonymous encounter, whilst as an interstice between the more administrable zones of work, home and leisure, it lacked the kind of attendant social practice through which other urban spaces were being reimagined in this period. During the Montagu trials of 1954, for instance, much was made of how Peter Wildeblood had met the airman Edward McNally in the subterranean booking office of Piccadilly Underground Station. Both the Prosecution and the press found guilt in Wildeblood's lingering presence within a space designed only to be passed through. In court, Wildeblood's defence echoed that of Pendlebury three years earlier: he had, he claimed, just left the theatre without a raincoat and was sheltering from the rain (Anon., 1954c: 9).

In *The Lavender Hill Mob*, the protagonists' criminality is also made manifest by their trajectories through the city. During the reconstruction, as the spatial organisation of movement became an important marker of order, deviations from sanctioned pathways were often understood as an act of anti-social individualism. In Abercrombie and Forshaw's *County of London Plan*, the private motorist who came

off the prescribed traffic arteries to ‘zigzag’ his own way through residential sidestreets became a demonised figure of selfish irresponsibility (1943: 10). On the Festival’s *South Bank* site, such logics created a point of tension between the exhibition’s desire for collective spatial management and the traditions of British liberalism it purported to celebrate. The ‘Guide’ made it explicit that, this being a ‘free country’, visitors were at liberty to ignore the authorised pathway and ‘zigzag their way backwards’ from the end to the beginning (Cox, 1951: 8). But it also made clear that this would obscure the exhibition’s important narrative and, in so doing, it positioned such spatial disobedience as an implicit attack on the historic values of Britain and its people.

In *The Lavender Hill Mob*, this fusion of spatial and social deviation is figured by the hijacking of the van, as the mob force it off its regular trajectory and reroute it towards the derelict warehouse in which the gold will be unloaded. In a brief shot, framed reassuringly against the backdrop of an intact city church, the stolen van is shown ‘zigzagging rapidly down a winding hill’, in the words of the scriptwriter TEB Clarke (1952: 44) (figure 2). This sequence marks the brief eruption of the mob’s criminality onto the surface of the city, whilst inscribing it precisely in terms of an unconventional path. Yet in the same period, the guilt of men accused of persistent importuning was repeatedly inferred through just such trajectories. At the trial of Labour MP William Field in January 1953, for instance, the Prosecution recounted his evening walk around the West End, which, unbeknownst to him, had been recorded by a policeman. Presented as a catalogue of turnings, circularities and doubling backs, this path itself became an enigma that could only be explained through its criminal intent (Anon., 1953: 7). Within the imaginaries of the post-war spatial order, such deviations frequently became a slippery sign of anti-social impulses.

## **Of semiotics and sociality**

Yet within the context of this film, such explicit spatial deviations are rare. The protagonists' more general engagement with the city is one of outward compliance supplemented by a more selective awareness of what else is going on beneath the surface. This is again encapsulated in the Tube train scene, which implicates the audience within an excessive criminal mode of reading the city. Here, in their attempt to ensnare some professional thieves, Holland and Pendlebury enact a staged conversation about a broken safe at the latter's foundry, with Pendlebury loudly asking Holland if he will go over and fix it in the morning since he hates to leave the staff wages there so vulnerably overnight. The audience, cognisant that this is really a ruse to seduce conspirators, takes pleasure in their alternative reading of these words, understanding them (just as a potential criminal would) as an invitation to engage in illegal acts. Yet on the surface, this is simply a conversation about a broken safe and for the scene to work the majority of their fellow travellers must understand it in this way. The thrill for the viewer lies in their sudden and selective privy access to an illicit semiotic order.

Such secret sign systems were integral to the post-war imagining of urban homosexuality. At Wildeblood's trial, for instance, the exact status of his initial encounter with McNally in Piccadilly Underground Station was cast precisely in these terms. As a *Daily Mirror* headline put it: 'It all started "when two men met and smiled"' (Anon., 1954b: 6), and much was inferred about just what meanings this smile between two strangers had contained. Similarly, in 'Evil Men', Warth (1952a: 6) wrote of how 'homosexuals have their own private language' and of how 'they

recognise each other by the phrases they use.’ This idea of a secret Masonic language was a staple trope within the post-war construction of the hidden homosexual threat and derived much of its resonance from wider reconstruction pedagogies about how to read the urban landscape. During the late-1940s, campaigns of visual education persistently extolled the virtues of functional legibility as an inherent signifier of a controlled social order. The *Britain Can Make It* exhibition of industrial commodities, for instance, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington in 1946, taught visitors how to evaluate worthwhile objects by their semiotic fidelity. The questions to keep asking, its ‘Guide’ advised, were ‘Is it genuine or is it a sham?’ and ‘Does it look like what it is, or is it pretending to be something else?’ (COID, 1946). Such criteria of merit were made equally applicable to urban buildings: Victorian decorative excess was denounced in favour of a humanised vernacular modernism whose functional virtues would be evident to any casual observer who knew, properly, how to look.

This investment in semiotic fidelity was both exaggerated and subverted by *The Lavender Hill Mob*. Its London is overwhelmingly a city of uniforms, filled with city gents in suits and bowler hats, uniformed policemen and schoolgirls in blazers. Within this context, Holland’s adherence to sartorial codes is what repeatedly keeps him above suspicion, since no one can see beneath his suit to the criminal desires underneath. At the end of the film, it is through replacing his bowler hat and rejoining the stream of homebound commuters that he becomes instantly invisible to the police and thus is able to escape. Only the plainclothes inspector, the film’s other sham pretending to be something other than he is, is able to suspect him. In this, he expresses the same paradox as the plainclothes policemen that concurrently patrolled

London's public toilets; a privileged but deeply ambiguous party to a secret semiotic order supposedly invisible to the public.

Within the film, these semiotic structures comedically collapse at the top of the Eiffel Tower, just as the pair begin their ill-fated pursuit of the six erroneously sold golden paperweights. Running at speed down the spiral staircase, Holland loses his hat and Pendlebury discards his overcoat, two important synecdoches of their uniform-disguises. Now liberated, the pair experience a moment of blatant queer *jouissance* as they laugh uncontrollably and are suddenly unable to stop. At the bottom, they come spinning out of the tower into a frenzied chaotic collision that even implicates the camera in its radical instability. Yet suddenly trapped without their protective uniforms, the pair can no longer insert themselves inconspicuously into the circulations of the city. Failing to board the train, they are forced to take a private taxi to Calais where, again, they fail to board the ferry. This is due to their inability to master the flows of the ticket office, as instead they zigzag from window to window in a state of desperation. This sequence even begins with the pair trying to enter the office through its exit, a sudden spatial revelation of their sodomitic intent. Only when they get back to London, with coat and hat firmly back in place, can they once more rise above suspicion by reinserting themselves into the city's everyday routines.

Lastly, alongside its celebration of queer choreographies and excessive semiotics, *The Lavender Hill Mob* also challenges the restrictive terms through which urban sociality was being re-imagined in early post-war Britain. Throughout the reconstruction, planning documents and exhibitions endorsed a welfare statist ideology that emphasised harmonious national community against the divisive class antagonisms of the interwar period. Class itself was recodified as a diverse set of equitable occupations that all contributed, in their way, to the vitality of the British

social economy. Events like *Britain Can Make It* and the Festival of Britain worked towards this vision, not only through the ideologies they put on display but also through the classless inclusivity of their basic address, whilst at the same time refracting these through the oppressive hierarchies of bourgeois cultural taste.

Within this climate, male homosexuality became vilified for its own models of interclass relations, which had been dominant in queer urban subcultures since at least the late-nineteenth century (Sinfield, 1994; Houlbrook, 2005). A typical queer act, tabloids warned their readers, took place between an older middle-class ‘homosexual’ and a younger, better looking, working lad (Warth, 1952b: 12). The latter, ostensibly normal and otherwise destined for marriage, was tempted into vice primarily by the promise of cash or presents. The real threat of homosexual sex, therefore, was that young men would be corrupted into a debased lifestyle as excessive personal greed took hold and transmuted into an indelible sexual perversion. Yet such caricatures clearly reveal how the cross-class structure of homosexual relations mocked the ‘classless’ visions being propagated elsewhere in London at this time, providing an alternative model of interclass mingling based not on collective participation in sanctioned forms of civic culture but through economic self-interest and illicit sexual desire.

Male homosexuality thus provided a dangerous counter to hegemonic notions of social democracy and, in so doing, threatened to expose the hypocritical foundations on which the latter rested. Encounters between men were demonised both for their illicit economics and the concealed, and therefore anti-social, spaces in which they occurred. During the Montagu trials, much was made of how the defendants had lavished the two airmen with dinners and champagne, before inviting them on holiday to Montagu’s private beach house (Anon., 1954a: 5; 1954d: 7). Excessive



consumption by young working-class men could already count as proof of an amorphous immorality. Similarly, in April 1951, the *News of the World* luridly detailed the parties given by a certain Arthur Birley in his flat in Curzon Street, Mayfair, where young cavalry soldiers had cavorted with a number of ‘BBC officials’ in exchange for cash and presents (Anon., 1951a: 2). Yet at exactly the same time, *The Lavender Hill Mob* was inviting its audiences to relish such spectacles of masculine cross-class excess. To celebrate the successful castings, Holland gives his boys ‘a little surprise’ in the form of a lavish blow-out in a private dining room at the Threadneedle Restaurant (figure 3). Here, the sight of two middle-class bachelors indulging their working lads becomes not a concern, but something to be enjoyed. The film even mimicked the *News of the World*’s contrived sense of exposure by offering this spectacle through a half-open door, whilst simultaneously emptying it out of any anxious sense of scandal.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it is worth remembering Balcon’s description of the Ealing comedies as ‘a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses’. *The Lavender Hill Mob* could implicate its viewers within the dynamics of urban queerness because this isn’t what the film could ever have been about. The sheer unthinkability of the reading offered in this essay was, perhaps, the very reason why such motifs could be articulated. Perhaps more importantly, the film elsewhere reinforces the very normative social and spatial logics that its central narrative gleefully subverts. Holland and Pendlebury’s multiple transgressions are the exceptions that otherwise prove the rule. Elsewhere in this London, bank clerks work happily for their bosses

and everyone supports the police. Even Shorty and Lackery, the film's most troubling figures of anti-social thievery, follow a professional code of ethics and remain deferent to their 'Guv' throughout. Thus, as much as *The Lavender Hill Mob* may attack the normative addresses of the post-war reconstruction and revel in the mechanisms of oppositional queerness, this cannot ever become properly troubling. The anti-social impulses articulated within the film, it would seem, were never quite able to leave the cinema to dissipate and disrupt the spatial strategies being imagined within the wider metropolis outside.

---

<sup>1</sup> This substitution has a well-established history in Western culture. By at least the seventeenth century, usury and sodomy had become linked as illegitimate corruptions of monetary and sexual production respectively (Fisher: 1999). Such homologies were also prevalent during the nineteenth-century. Young men's popular education manuals, for instance, were saturated with a seminal economics that presented sperm as a finite resource not to be squandered on illicit or unproductive acts (Barker-Benfield, 1972). Similarly, Stephen Heath (1982: 14) has noted the significance of 'to spend' as a common Victorian euphemism for ejaculation and highlights a passage in Walter's *My Secret Life* (c. 1890) in which the protagonist fills a prostitute's vagina with eighty silver shillings. I contend that this conceptual homology was, in some form, being reworked within the narrative of *The Lavender Hill Mob*.

---

## References

- Anon. (1951a), 'Five troopers punished by court-marshall', *News of the World*, 29 April, p. 2.
- Anon. (1951b), 'The exhibition as landscape', *Architectural Review*, 110:653, p. 80.
- Anon. (1953), 'Police story of box and cox watch on MP in West End', *News of the World*, 18 January, p. 7.
- Anon. (1954a), 'Montagu: story of a party', *The People*, 24 January, p. 5.
- Anon. (1954b), 'It all started "when two men met and smiled"', *Daily Mirror*, 16 March, p. 6.
- Anon. (1954c), "'My social life" – by Wildeblood', *Daily Mirror*, 19 March, p. 9.
- Anon. (1954d), 'Wildeblood: it was a foolish letter to write', *Daily Herald*, 19 March, p. 7.
- Abercrombie, Patrick and JM Forshaw (1943), *The County of London Plan*, London: Macmillan.
- Abercrombie, Patrick (1945), *The Greater London Plan*, London: HMSO.
- Balcon, Michael (1969), *Michael Balcon Presents... a Lifetime in Films*, London: Hutchinson.
- Barker-Benfield, Ben (1973), 'The spermatic economy: a nineteenth-century view of sexuality', in Gordon, Michael (ed.), *The American Family in Social Historical Perspective*, New York: St Martin's Press, pp. 336-72.
- Council of Industrial Design [COID] (1946), 1d 'Guide' to *Britain Can Make It*, London: Council of Industrial Design.
- Cox, Ian (1951), *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells*, London:

---

HMSO.

Fisher, Will (1999), 'Queer money', *ELH*, 66:1, pp. 1-24.

Freud, Sigmund (1976 [1900]), *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth:  
Pelican.

Gold, John R and Steven V Ward (1994), "'We're going to do it right this time':  
cinematic representations of urban planning and the British New Towns, 1939  
to 1951', in Aitken, Stuart C and Leo E Zonn (eds), *Place, Power, Situation,  
Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 229-  
58.

Heath, Stephen (1982), *The Sexual Fix*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Higgins, Patrick (1996), *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Post-War  
Britain*, London: Fourth Estate.

Hornsey, Richard (2008), "'Everything is made of atoms": the reprogramming of  
space and time in post-war London', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 34:1,  
pp. 94-117.

Houlbrook, Matt (2005), *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual  
Metropolis, 1918-1957*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Matless, David (1998), *Landscape and Englishness*, London: Reaktion.

Mort, Frank (1999), 'Mapping sexual London: the Wolfenden Committee on  
homosexual offences and prostitution, 1957-7', *New Formations*, 37, pp. 92-  
113.

Mort, Frank (2004), 'Fantasies of metropolitan life: planning London in the 1940s',  
*Journal of British Studies*, 43:1, pp. 120-51.

Pearce, Frank (1981), 'The British press and the 'placing' of male homosexuality', in

---

Cohen, Stanley and Jock Young (eds), *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media*, London: Constable, pp. 303-16.

Sinfield, Alan (1994), *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London: Cassel.

Warth, Douglas (1952a), 'Evil Men', *Sunday Pictorial*, (25 May), p. 6 and p. 15.

Warth, Douglas (1952b), 'Evil Men', *Sunday Pictorial*, (1 June), p. 12.

Warth, Douglas (1952c), 'Evil Men', *Sunday Pictorial*, (8 June), p. 12.