

**Review: *On Film-making* by Alexander
Mackendrick, Edited by Paul Cronin.
Foreword by Martin Scorsese. London:
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“It is a film I have mixed feelings about today, and I am writing about it here to illustrate some of the problems in the structure of a screenplay, not because I mean to claim that it is an important work. It isn’t” (119). The film under discussion is *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), a ferocious dissection of show business ruthlessness and fourth estate mendacity, written by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, and directed by the author of the above caveat, Alexander Mackendrick. When *Sweet Smell of Success* was first released, its iconoclastic attitude toward the entertainment industry, and harshly anti-romantic style toward life in general, exemplified by a title dripping with bitter irony, coupled with the fact that its unsavory leading characters were played by two of Hollywood’s biggest commercial stars—Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis—confused “mainstream” critics and repelled “popular” audiences. Yet in the wake of this manifest failure, success rose phoenix-like in the form of a quickly acquired “cult” status—sharply underscored in Barry Levinson’s 1982 comedy-drama *Diner* set in 1959 Baltimore, where *I Vitelloni*-like youths quote lines from the film as if it were a sacred text. That was just the beginning of Mackendrick’s renaissance as a filmmaker of note. For since then, *Sweet Smell of Success* has gone from mere “cult” to absolute “classic” status—memorialized by its being turned into a Broadway musical in 2004. So what, then, was Alexander Mackendrick’s problem?

Well, one might say “problems.” For while *Sweet Smell of Success* ranks as one of that very special group of films such as *Whiskey Galore!* (1949), *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), and *The Ladykillers* (1955) that made Mackendrick’s fame, earning him a very particular place on honor in the history of the cinema, the man himself had no use for accepted standards of achievement, be they “cult” or “mainstream.” He had his own ideas, and he stuck to them with more than mere resolve in the course of “three” careers—the first with Britain’s fabled Ealing studios, the second in Hollywood in the wake of the studio era, and the third as a teacher of the director’s craft at CalArts in Valencia, California. It’s from that third career that *On Film-Making*, an exemplary selection of Mackendrick’s lectures and notes, has been culled. And its beating heart is an examination of the film towards which Mackendrick felt so ambivalent.

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“[*Sweet Smell of Success*] was much too costly,” Mackendrick recalls, “chiefly because it was made under rather chaotic circumstances: Odets had so badly underestimated the time he would need for revisions of Lehman’s script that I had to start shooting while he was still working on scenes to come, and on a couple of occasions filming had to be halted” (119). In other words, Mackendrick not only disdains the notion of ultimate directorial power promulgated by the “politique des auteurs,” but he isn’t about to accept credit for himself where he feels it isn’t due. This becoming modesty sits oddly amidst a form of artistic expression legendarily dominated by raging egos (coupled with widely varying degrees of talent), as exemplified by such diverse artists as Erich Von Stroheim, Charles Chaplin, Orson Welles and Michael Cimino.

“Sandy” Mackendrick (1912–1993) was American-born but Scotland raised. A student of the Glasgow School of Fine Arts, he got his start in commercial advertising before beginning work in film as an animator, then a director of documentary short subjects, and finally a screenwriter. In a sense this was his principle craft, as he consistently underscores in his lectures the notion that screenplays must be rewritten and rewritten until they finally achieve their ultimate brilliance. Clearly, Mackendrick saw his job as a director as one of an organizer, bringing together the efforts of many. This was undoubtedly the reason for his success at Ealing Studios, a cooperative enterprise if there ever was one, in which producers, directors, actors and screenwriters contributed to the creation of works that bear an overall “stamp” and attitude, yet at the same time can be broken down in terms of very individual contributions.

Theoretically, this would have made him an ideal Hollywood craftsman like George Cukor or Charles Walters. Unfortunately, he arrived on the American scene just as the studio system was breaking up. On the one hand this resulted in the sort of newfound freedom that made *Sweet Smell of Success* possible. On the other the new Hollywood lacked the organizational solidity he’d grown accustomed to at Ealing. Moreover, there was no career follow-through. Mackendrick’s subsequent projects, such as *Sammy Going South* (1963) and *A High Wind in Jamaica* (1965) were far from routine, yet neither captured press or public fire. His last film, the California surfer-culture comedy *Don’t Make Waves* (1967), reunited him with Tony Curtis, but wasn’t equipped to prove the sort of quasi-allegorical incisiveness found in *The Ladykillers*—though it did inspire “Malibu Barbie,” named after the character played by Curtis’ soon-to-be-doomed co-star in the film, Sharon Tate. After trying and failing to get his interpretation of the story of Mary Queen of Scots off the ground, Mackendrick threw in the towel on Hollywood. Yet as this volume shows, at a certain level he never stopped being a filmmaker, bringing to his students everything he’d learned—not simply as theory, but as actual practice.

Anyone looking for tips on focal length, camera technique, special effects, or even editing nuts and bolts won’t find them in this volume. Rather it’s a work of literature that’s largely “about” literature—principally the stuff of drama. Mackendrick makes this clear in his examination of Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949), arguing that it’s not simply a great piece of film-making, but that the film’s success is a result of the fact that Graham Greene wrote its script first in story form, before reconceiving it in terms of dialogue and specified scenes. This, for Mackendrick, is the essence of the filmmaking process. And that’s because filmmaking for Mackendrick is centered on a dramatic narrative. One is almost tempted to say conventional dramatic narrative, were it not for the fact that that concept has been largely abandoned in recent years, in favor of special effects—chiefly explosions. No characters are necessary with works that consist of things blowing up.

Mackendrick, by contrast, is fascinated by character and incident, examining in one passage (165–178) how the familiar tale of the judgment of King Solomon can be dramatized

effectively through selection and emphasis, and in another (76–85) how the otherwise very different stories of Cinderella, Hamlet and Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) share complimentary character and dramatic needs. This is part and parcel of what Mackendrick means when he says of *Sweet Smell of Success* "what Clifford Odets did was dismantle" the script that Ernest Lehman wrote (125)—which largely consisted of dialogue that could have been performed on a stage.

Framing it within a real world of dark city streets, glamorous nightclubs and seedy offices, Odets helped Mackendrick create a work that was far more than the sum of its otherwise disparate parts. In recasting a series of exchanges between the film's principle characters and a trio of minor ones utilized in one key nightclub scene, where the brutal Hunsecker advises a corrupt politician to drop both his girlfriend and his press agent, Mackendrick declares "marvelous screen writing" is the way Odets brought to vivid life what was only of "potential" (156) interest in Lehman. And it is why, Mackendrick's misgivings to the contrary, that the film and the dedication of its director, has and will continue to be a film directing touchstone. *On Film-making* only serves to emphasize that fact, putting practice back into theory at the service of practice yet to come.

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