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**A Movie Full of Arsenic: Evolving Reception and Canon Formation  
through *Sweet Smell of Success***

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**A Movie Full of Arsenic: Evolving Reception and Canon Formation  
through *Sweet Smell of Success***

**by**

**Katrina Gray Margolis**

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## **Dedication**

To my mom, who willingly listened to me talk about *Sweet Smell of Success* for far too long, and to my dad, who indoctrinated me into Burt Lancaster fandom early on.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to first and foremost thank my advisor, Kathy Fuller-Seeley. This project was initially conceived of during my first semester at UT in her class, and she has supported me through all of its various iterations. Kathy's commitment to her students and genuine kindness are a huge part of this thesis being a largely positive experience. I would also like to thank Tom Schatz for his support, time, and editing expertise. This project would not have been possible without such a supportive committee.

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## **Abstract**

### **A Movie Full of Arsenic: Evolving Reception and Canon Formation through *Sweet Smell of Success***

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This thesis examines how and why a film's reception can change over time, focusing on the case study of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster's *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). In investigating the film's production, this project aims to demonstrate the shared and dispersed authorship of the film. Utilizing trade journals, popular press, archival materials, and biographies and memoirs, this project traces the reception of the film from its initial release to the present, focusing on the period of the Hollywood Renaissance when *Sweet Smell of Success* was re-evaluated by audiences. To this end, the project additionally investigates the notion of canon, interrogating how canons are made and the ways in which they evolve. Drawing from work in production studies and reception studies, this project aims to understand the importance of historical context and resonance in a film's cultural placement, and the implications this has on film canonization.

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## Introduction

When *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) first previewed at the United Artists theater in San Francisco, in June 1957, star and producer Burt Lancaster scooped writer Clifford Odets into his arms and waltzed him around the lobby floor, delighted with the film Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions (HHL) had produced. Meanwhile, co-producer Herald Hecht stood in a corner, muttering, “I hate, hate, hate this picture!” He was sure that HHL had just produced a financial failure.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the public of 1957 fell in line with Hecht’s predictions, rejecting the film for its acidic characters and unapologetically cynical world view. Losing \$1.6 million at the box office, the film nearly ruined HHL. Despite this initial rejection, however, the film was eventually rediscovered by audiences and filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s, and it secured a place in the Hollywood film canon, inducted into the National Film Registry in 1993.

The reasons behind the film’s initial box office failure, and the factors that led to its popular re-discovery, were reduced to simplistic explanations both by reviews at the time of the film’s release and writings published in subsequent years. The main reason given for the film’s failure was that audiences were shocked by the off-casting of Burt Lancaster and co-star Tony Curtis. Finding their expectations subverted, audiences rejected the film, not only for these performances but for the film’s tone. This cynical tone is then cited as the main reason for the film’s rediscovery. Too far ahead of its time, *Sweet Smell of Success* resonated with audiences after the arrival of the Hollywood

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Buford, *Burt Lancaster: An American Life* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

renaissance, a movement which worked against classical Hollywood, subverting and playing with classic Hollywood themes and genres. While I agree that these reasons are contributors to the film's reception, they are too often reduced to simplistic overstatements. Neither statement fully answers the question of why the film experienced its unique lifecycle. Through this research project, I aim to uncover a more complex and nuanced story of the film's evolving reception.

I center my investigation around *Sweet Smell* as it is one of the more often cited examples of a "rediscovered" film, yet it is niche enough to have not been granted thorough scholarly investigation, leaving room for discovery and intervention. Additionally, I have chosen *Sweet Smell of Success* due to the dates of both its release and the era of its rediscovery. Both the 1950s and 1970s were transitional moments in Hollywood, leading to complications in regard to questions of authorship, style, and genre. The rise of independent production companies in the 1950s disrupted the concept of studio authorship in the classical era. The arrival and popularity of the auteur theory in the US in the 1960s changed notions of authorship and shifted evaluative criteria for many film critics. Both periods present moments of changing values and expectations from American audiences. The loosened grip of the Production Code Administration in the late 1950s eventually resulted in the creation of a ratings system in 1968. The importation of films from Europe began to tick upward in the 1950s, which culminated in a growing culture of art theaters and movie retrospective programs in the 1960s to 1970s. While vastly different in some ways, the two periods echo each other in certain aspects, making the position of *Sweet Smell of Success* a particularly effective case study.

My main research questions ask: how and why did the reception of *Sweet Smell of Success* change from its release in 1957 to its rediscovery in the 1970s, and how has that reception changed in subsequent years? What can this narrative tell us about the process of film canonization? In order to answer these questions in full, my sub-questions are: How did the production culture of *Sweet Smell of Success* complicate the film's authorship, thereby impacting its initial and subsequent receptions? How can we determine a film's reception utilizing cultural intermediaries, and which of these resources are most helpful and/or reliable? What are the different factors contributing to the concept of canonization and how and why are certain films able to achieve "canon" status? My research thereby draws on production studies, reception studies, and historical research to address these inquiries.

#### **CONTEXT: ACADEMIC AND HISTORIC – LITERATURE REVIEW**

My project draws on work in the fields of production studies and reception studies, as well as work on the topic of film canonization.

#### **1. Production Studies**

As outlined by John Caldwell, production studies focuses on a cultural study of media industries, acknowledging that off-screen media production work worlds have cultural expressions and sociological activities in their own right.<sup>2</sup> This framework utilizes interviews, ethnographic field research, textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts, and economic or industrial analysis, to understand the final text as a product of a

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<sup>2</sup> John Caldwell, "Cultures of Production: Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures," in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 199 – 210.

unique production culture.<sup>3</sup> Caldwell's work focuses primarily on below-the-line workers and contemporary projects. His categorization, however, of "artifacts and rituals into three registers: fully embedded, semi-embedded, and publicly disclosed 'deep texts'" is more broadly applicable to historical research.<sup>4</sup> Work within production studies has focused primarily on contemporary projects due to a focus on ethnographic methodologies, thereby privileging the impact of production upon below-the-line employees over the details of the production process. In contrast to a political economic approach, which would focus on the broader structures at play, thereby overlooking individual projects, production studies works from the bottom-up, exploring the worlds of those on set. In this thesis, I explore the culture of production with a focus on above-the-line figures. My objective in this is not just to understand the culture of production but to observe the impact that these interactions and processes made on the final form of the film, focusing my purview on the culture of one particular film.

My approach to production history is framed more specifically by Thomas Schatz's concept of a film industry studies analysis.<sup>5</sup> Schatz narrows this production studies approach, carving out a space for the specific study of the film industry. The key tenets of this approach are film style, authorship, and mode of production. Film style is defined as "the narrative, technical, and formal-aesthetic norms that prevail at any given moment (or period) in industry history, the ways in which these norms are evident in

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<sup>3</sup> Caldwell, "Cultures of Production," 201.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schatz, "Film History Studies and Hollywood History," in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 45 – 57.

specific films, and what constitutes stylistic innovation.”<sup>6</sup> Authorship can best be understood in terms of the creation of each individual film, and mode of production “considers the ‘machinery’ of the film industry.”<sup>7</sup> While Schatz argues that this approach is necessary now more than ever due to the global and conglomerate nature of Hollywood, his underlying objective of tracing the general development of the industry and “assess its current configuration” makes this analytic approach ideal for my own investigation.

To address the issue of authorship, I augment these approaches by turning to Michelle Hilmes’ work. Within humanities-centered work, the concept of the author, the text, and the reader are central to understanding the culture itself. A media industries studies approach addresses these in problematic ways for traditional humanities scholars. Media forms including television, radio, music and film do not conform to “comfortable analytical paradigms.”<sup>8</sup> I build, in particular, on her approach to media authorship, which does not privilege a singular figure but is dispersed among a host of productive sites, including writers, actors, technicians, directors, advertisers, and many others. Industry study, therefore, is “the translation of authorship into a dispersed site marked by multiple, intersecting agendas and interests.”<sup>9</sup> I narrow this scope to look at the agendas, interests,

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<sup>6</sup> Schatz, “Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History,” 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle Hilmes, “Nailing Mercury: The Problem of Media Industry Historiography,” in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 22.

and agency of *Sweet Smell of Success*'s creative figures and Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions.

In order to better understand the film's culture and mode of production, I turn to the work of Denise Mann, who traces the rise of American independent film production studios in the post-war era, using Hecht-Hill-Lancaster and *Sweet Smell of Success* as case studies.<sup>10</sup> Mann combines political economy with textual analysis, situating her case study texts in relation to their industrial settings. To do this, the larger themes she focuses on are the anti-television debate, the "anti-'organization man' ethos," and the opportunities and dilemmas which arose during this era for "politically liberal, artistic-minded filmmakers."<sup>11</sup> In tracing the production of *Sweet Smell of Success*, Mann offers an overview of the culture cultivated by HHL, particularly focusing on the film's ideological parameters, notably the film's self-reflexivity. Drawing from a range of industry insider accounts, her work offers valuable historical information regarding the creation of the film.

After outlining the film's production, Mann provides a formal reading of the film's subversive representation of managerial positions and power relations, which she argues was particularly distressing in 1950s America. Imposing a Brechtian aesthetic on to the characterization of Sidney Falco, Mann argues that *Sweet Smell of Success* conflates individual psychology with the power dynamics of the artist/business relationship. Building from the work of Michel Foucault, Vivian Sobchack, and Dana

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<sup>10</sup> Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents: The Postwar Talent Takeover* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Polan, Mann takes a highly theoretical approach to her reading of the film. Helpful to my own work is the acknowledgement of the film's reflexive techniques, as well as her brief discussion of this film as a postwar precedent for the Hollywood renaissance. However, her approach to reception is largely dismissive of an actual, physical audience, and her use of para-texts, such as reviews and articles from trade journals, are minimal at best.

## **2. Reception Studies**

Audience research has been conducted for decades and can be traced back to the Frankfurt School. In the post-World War II era, however, we begin to see an analytical focus on the direct relationships between media messages and individuals. Much of this early research was rooted in the social sciences, such as Karl Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton's use of a mechanical device in order to graph responses to radio programs. It was not until the 1970s that more nuanced methodologies emerged from the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model moved away from the notion of audience as passive observer and began to investigate the ways an individual could respond to media, including accepting or rejecting the dominant hegemonic position being told to them by the text. While this may seem obvious today, Hall's theory was important in inspiring a wave of qualitative audience research.<sup>12</sup>

This began to open up an increasing variety of approaches to audiences. David Morley and Charlotte Brunson, also a part of the CCCS, conducted research into a

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, *Television Studies* (Medford: Polity, 2012), 60.

popular news program, *Nationwide*, combining analysis of the show's textual strategies with focus groups. In the 1980s, we begin to see the rise of feminist media studies, including Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and the theoretical and psychoanalytical approach of Laura Mulvey.<sup>13</sup> In the late 1980s, fan studies began to emerge, re-evaluating fans from passive dupes to intelligent consumers, able to resist messages, as well as producing their own materials (fan fiction, fan art, fan songs, etc.).<sup>14</sup> Henry Jenkins' work focuses on fans as co-authors and co-producers, paying particular attention to fan productivity. The rise of the internet played an interesting role in the continuation of fan studies, particularly with sites such as Tumblr and hosts of fan fiction. Traditional tools, such as ethnography, begin to migrate to virtual spaces, investigating large multi-player games and alternative virtual worlds.

Conducting historical audience research presents its own set of challenges. Ethnographic approaches, focus groups, surveys, or interviews are not viable approaches for me due to both the historical period of the film, as well as the time restrictions of this project. In my own reception research, I build on approaches to reception established by Janet Staiger and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley. Staiger's approach to historical reception contextualizes viewership, placing an emphasis on the importance of the interplay between the text, the viewer, and historical and societal influences at play. Inspired by a tradition of literary reception, this work includes textual analysis of the film, but privileges wider contexts surrounding the text of the film, attempting to reconstruct

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 67.

historical audience expectations. This is achieved through discourse analysis of press reviews, interviews, articles, and letters to the editor. These are defined by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley as cultural intermediaries, in which she includes such diverse texts as “reports of movie theater managers and newspaper and fan magazine columnists, to material culture studies of advertising and marketing ephemera.”<sup>15</sup> Fuller-Seeley also explores the utility of paratextual evidence, expanding Caldwell’s definition to include “industrially produced ephemera” such as souvenirs and advertising tie-ins given out by studios, theaters, fan magazines, and third-party companies.<sup>16</sup>

In order to understand audience expectations more fully, I engage with the work of James Naremore, Peter Lev, and Mark Harris to investigate historical norms and societal influences in the 1950s and 1970s. Aesthetically, *Sweet Smell* falls in a liminal space; the movie draws from the *noir* tradition, though after the height of *noir*’s popularity, as well as European art cinema, which grew to be more influential in the late 1960s and 1970s. James Naremore explores the nuances of film noir, tracing the style from its peak in a post-World War II world, stemming from anxieties about masculinity and capitalism, and its subsequent definition by cineastes of the French New Wave, who were looking back at this period in American cinema.<sup>17</sup> The strength of this work comes

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<sup>15</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, “Archaeologies of Fandom: Using Historical Methods to Explore Fan Cultures of the Past,” in *Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Suzanne Scott and Melissa Clark, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

from the variety of approaches Naremore offers to *noir*, which he acknowledges when he says the book could be called “seven different ways to look at *noir*.”<sup>18</sup>

While Naremore provides an excellent overview of the *noir* style aesthetically, Peter Lev’s work, *The Fifties*, volume 7 in the *History of the American Cinema* series, provides societal and cultural history of the 1950s, outlining the rise and challenge of television, the impact of the House Un-American Activity Committee hearings, the changes in censorship and content, and the increased importance of foreign markets. To gain perspective on the Hollywood renaissance, and the cultural context of the rediscovery of *Sweet Smell of Success*, I turn to the work of Mark Harris.<sup>19</sup> Harris’ argument is focused around the five films from 1967 nominated for Best Picture at the 1968 Academy Awards. Following the production narratives of each of the five films nominated for best picture, Harris pinpoints this year as one of major transition within Hollywood, from old to new.

### **3. Canon**

In discussing the formation of canon, I have pulled from a wide breadth of sources, aiming to discuss a variety of approaches to the concept of film canon. Janet Staiger’s essay on the politics of film canons presents an excellent history of canon formation. In exploring the politics of admission, selection, and the academy, Staiger

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

argues that not all film canons are tied to the political sphere, but rather attempts to make canonical politics evident, drawing attention to the centers of these canons.

To augment Staiger's work, I bring in Philip Gillett's *Movie Greats: A Critical Study of Classic Cinema*, in which Gillett outlines three different models of canon: the market model, the consensus model, and the time model. The consensus model is predicated on the idea that if taste-makers and people of influence arrive on the conclusion that something is great, then it must be great. The time model proposes that if a piece of work manages to survive throughout the ages, then there must be something about it that is great. The market model focuses primarily on a film's financial earnings, both through box office returns as well as home video markets, etc. Utilizing Gillett's models as a structural tool, I order my investigation into canons through different types of consensus and time models (the market model is useful but limited in its scope).

Within the consensus model, I explore the *Sight & Sound* list, drawing on Paul Grainge's notion of nostalgia and to help explain why certain films maintain their canonized status. This is supplemented by Richard Schickel's numerical breakdown of the American Film Institute's 100 Greatest American Films List, in which he explains the results through emotional attachment during a viewer's formative years. One disruption to the consensus model is the concept of cult film. The criteria for what constitutes cult (much like canon) is debated, however I.Q. Hunter offers a comprehensive list of criteria, which include marginality, suppression, economics, transgression, cult following,

community, quotation, and iconography.<sup>20</sup> The benefit of this definition is the wide breadth he leaves in qualities attributed to the content of the film. Ernest Mathjis and Jamie Sexton provide a broad overview of the different types of cult film, from camp to international cults. Even while *Sweet Smell of Success* is a post-classical film, I utilize their definition of Classical Hollywood cult in order to explore the transitional narrative of films now considered classic, such as *Casablanca*. In discussing audiences' desires to experience an idealized past, their work augments that of Grainge in his exploration of nostalgia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this project I utilized production studies and reception studies in order to address issues of authorship, historical resonance, and canonization as they relate to a singular Hollywood film. For my first chapter, I drew on biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and historical accounts to understand the film's production. These works were augmented by documents located in the Ernest Lehman Collection within the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities.

This project required extensive archival work, in both physical archives and online. The Ernest Lehman Collection at the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities was a valuable resource, containing what Caldwell calls fully-imbedded deep texts which would have otherwise been impossible to find. This includes correspondence between writer Ernest Lehman and producer James Hill, director Alexander Mackendrick, and

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<sup>20</sup> Ian Q. Hunter, *Cult Film as a Guide to Life: Fandom, Adaptation, and Identity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Lehman's agent; numerous copies of the film's scripts as it underwent revisions and re-writes; notes on the film from both Lehman and Mackendrick; and original treatments done by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. In addition, the collection includes publicity related to the film, such as critical reviews, advertisements, and news in trade journals. One of the most valuable aspects of this collection are the notes Lehman wrote on many of the objects, offering his perspective and what he remembers contextually about the document or text. Analyzing these documents augmented my understanding of the film's production, gave me insight into Lehman's thought process and opinions, and added to my understanding of the film's reception at its initial release.

In my online archival research, I performed textual analysis of each of the 54 articles in *Variety* mentioning *Sweet Smell of Success* from 1957 to 2016. This includes reviews, news, obituaries of the key players, and miscellaneous articles. These were joined by textual analysis of 22 articles which mention the film drawn from *American Film*, *Picturegoer*, *The Independent Film Journal*, and *Film Bulletin*, ranging in date from 1956 to 1983. I was able to locate these documents through the Media History Digital Library. These objects allowed me to understand how the film was portrayed in the trade journals specifically—notably, how the film was advertised and promoted to Hollywood insiders. I also used Newspapers.com to gather 102 articles mentioning *Sweet Smell of Success*, ranging in dates from 1956 to 2018. Similarly, these pieces include reviews, retrospective articles, and news. These objects came from the popular press and were a main source of information in tracing the evolving reception of the film. In the selection of these articles, I attempted to choose pieces from different parts of the

country, including perspectives from the *Akron-Beacon Journal*, the *Detroit Free Press*, *The Tennessean*, and many others. The majority of these articles were written the year of the film's release. After the release of the film, the phrase "Sweet smell of success" entered the popular lexicon, making the search for relevant articles particularly difficult. I chose to select about one dozen articles per decade, including eight from the 1960s, 15 from the 1970s, 12 from the 1980s, and nine from the 2000s.

These findings were utilized in my second chapter, in which I build on Kathy Fuller-Seeley's notion of cultural intermediaries to trace the reception of *Sweet Smell of Success* over time. In this chapter I also engage with a formal analysis of the text of the film itself, addressing the film's self-reflexive techniques, as well as the performances of its two stars, Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

This thesis employs three approaches to *Sweet Smell of Success* to understand the narrative of its production, reception and position in film history. I begin with the film's production, and how the film's authorship was dispersed among its key creative players. This first chapter traces the film from its origin as a short story, to the marketing campaign by United Artists. My aim is to show that *Sweet Smell of Success* cannot be considered an auteurist film and is in fact the product of multiple sites of authorship, both collaborative and in contention. I investigate the inside culture at Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions, outlining the debauchery and financial irresponsibility that was rife within the organization. I address the role Ernest Lehman played in the film's creation, the shift

to Clifford Odets as screenwriter, and question each of their roles as author. Moving to the culture of the film's production, I outline the fraught relationship between the director, Alexander Mackendrick, and its star and producer, Burt Lancaster, in order to discuss how the tensions on set influenced the product of the final film. In addition, I explore the authorial role held by the cinematographer, James Wong Howe. Finally, I look at how the film was positioned as a "studio" film in the advertising, attributed to HHL over any other figure.

The second chapter begins with the film's release, tracing the evolution of the film's reception from box office failure to rediscovered classic. I begin by providing discourse analysis of news of the film's production before its release, the film's marketing and advertising campaigns, and its critical reviews. I provide a formal analysis of the film, focusing on the performances of Lancaster and Curtis. In doing so, I aim to show that the reason these performances were rejected by audiences was not that they were so very different from each stars' persona, but rather that they subverted each persona and exposed the manipulation involved in acting. Placing the film within the context of the 1950s, I outline *noir* and the problem picture, as well as provide social and historical context for its release. Utilizing textual analysis from my sampling of newspaper articles, I trace the evolution of the film's reception, touching on the importance of television syndication, as well as the advent of the Hollywood renaissance.

In my third and final chapter, I explore the notion of film canonization from a multiplicity of angles, addressing along the way how *Sweet Smell of Success* has navigated these avenues. In this chapter I aim to demonstrate the precarious nature of

canons, despite the perception of lists such as *Sight & Sound* as steadfast and immovable. After giving a brief overview of the history of the film canon, I begin to explore why certain films are consistently at the tops of these lists, focusing on elements of emotional connection and nostalgia. From there, I explore the different concepts of cult film, providing insight into the complicated dichotomy between a denigrated object that is revered, as well as positioning *Sweet Smell of Success* among the world of cult film. To further explore the concept of canon, I give overviews of the ideas of visibility and timelessness, two concepts that have been used as criteria for the situation of a film within the canon. In conclusion, I offer some alternatives to the traditional canon and discuss the role of the canon as we move forward. Overall, my project asks what impact historical context has on a text's resonance in order to understand the historical process of canon formation.

## Chapter One: Production and Dispersed Authorship

“Sometimes hysteria in production problems can be communicated successfully as energy up on the screen.”<sup>21</sup> - Alexander Mackendrick

After the release of *Sweet Smell of Success* in July 1957, the key figures pointed fingers at one another in assigning blame for its failure. Star and producer Burt Lancaster blamed writer Ernest Lehman for leaving early on in the film’s production, while producer Harold Hecht blamed new partner (and also producer), James Hill. As this was a deeply personal project for Lancaster, he was bereft at the negative critical response, whereas Hecht was both furious and frightened about the financial implications for the young production company. The differing reactions of these two men demonstrate their vastly different investments in the film. These conflicting reactions are also indicative of the clashing ideologies of those in charge of the film’s creation. While most independent production companies at the time were run by one or two figures who were mostly aligned, Hecht-Hill-Lancaster was run by a chaotic mix of three principals. In the creation of *Sweet Smell of Success*, these three were joined by the key creative players on the film: the director, Alexander Mackendrick, the cinematographer, James Wong Howe, and two writers, Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets.

As Michelle Hilmes notes, media authorship is dispersed among numerous sites, marked by “multiple intersecting agendas and interests.”<sup>22</sup> Understanding the ways in

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<sup>21</sup> Philip Kemp, *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick* (London: Methuen, 1991), 142.

which authorship on this project was dispersed is an important aspect in understanding the film's initial reception and *Sweet Smell of Success*'s specific narrative of canonization. I will explore the role of authorship through the film's production culture, the narrative of which exemplifies myriad sites of authorship, both collaborative and in contention. Using John Caldwell's production studies framework, I investigate the production culture of *Sweet Smell of Success* to parse out how the variety of forms of authorship and assumptions about control shaped the film's production. Working from trade and popular journals, archival materials, interviews, and memoirs, I explore a mixture of fully-embedded, semi-embedded, and publicly disclosed deep texts in order to assess and discern the culture on the film's set.<sup>23</sup> I aim to demonstrate that *Sweet Smell of Success* cannot be positioned as an auteurist film, a characteristic which I argue was a hurdle it had to leap in gaining canonical status. To do this, I build on Thomas Schatz's film industry studies analysis, which focuses on style, mode of production, and authorship. Schatz explains style as the prevailing narrative, technical, and formal-aesthetic notions at any given period in his film industry studies analysis, leading me to present an analysis of the ways the film differs from the status quo and parse out who may have been responsible for those decisions. The third aspect I will examine, mode of production, is the machinery of the industry from a macro- and micro-perspective.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hilmes, "Nailing Mercury," 21-34.

<sup>23</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, "'Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History,'" in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 199 – 213.

<sup>24</sup> Schatz, "Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History," 45-57.

The film's positioning in contrast to auteurism can be seen not only through production, but also in the ways *Sweet Smell of Success* was promoted and advertised. It was attributed to Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions far more than to the director or either of its writers, resulting in corporate authorship over artistic authorship. In order to show this, I will outline the narrative of the film's conflicted production, beginning with its literary origins as a short story. In examining the film's production as a site of struggle, I will assess the contributions made by each of the primary "authorial" figures. I will then explore how each figure claimed (or rejected) the film after its release, as well as how the movie was marketed as the product of a particular studio.

#### **"TELL ME ABOUT IT TOMORROW": THE ORIGINS OF *SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS***

The original story on which the film is based was written by Ernest Lehman and first appeared in print in the pages of *Cosmopolitan* in 1950. Retitled by magazine editors to "Tell Me About It Tomorrow," the story is narrated by Sidney Wallace, an ambitious press agent who has attached himself to Harvey Hunsecker, chief columnist at the New York *Globe*.<sup>25</sup> The story covers about ten hours in a New York City August. Hunsecker's sister, Susie, is dating a man named Steve Dallas, whom Hunsecker hates. On his instruction, Wallace spreads rumors about Dallas, including that he is a Communist and a marijuana smoker. After completing these tasks, Sidney returns to Harvey's apartment to wait for him. Harvey is not home yet, but Susan is. Knowing that Sidney set Steve up,

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<sup>25</sup> Sam Kashner, "A Movie Marked Danger," *Variety*, April, 2000, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2010/04/movie-marked-danger-200004>. The editor of *Cosmo* at the time did not want the word "smell" to appear in a headline in his magazine.

Susan tricks him into coming into her bedroom, rips her clothes, and screams for help as Hunsecker arrives. The story ends with Hunsecker attacking, and perhaps killing, Sidney.

The tale was based on Lehman's own experiences as a press agent in New York, working for Irving Hoffman, a close associate of the columnist Walter Winchell. In the 1930s and 1940s, Winchell was one of the most famous men in America; the popularity of his radio show exceeded that of Bob Hope or Jack Benny. By 1950, his popularity was beginning to diminish, however he was still a substantial force.<sup>26</sup> When the story was first published, Lehman was shunned not only by Hoffmann, but by every studio in Hollywood. No one would touch the property—the character of Hunsecker too closely resembled Winchell. Two years later, in 1952, Hoffman and Lehman were reconciled, and Hoffman wrote a column praising Lehman's talents, suggesting that there was no other man able to write the types of stories Hollywood wants besides Lehman. Incidentally, Lehman himself had ghost-written the column; nevertheless he received a call from Paramount right away. They were not interested in *Sweet Smell*, but the publicity jumpstarted Lehman's screenwriting career.

In 1953, Lehman received interest about *Sweet Smell* from two companies: studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and production company, Hecht-Lancaster (HL). Lehman agreed to meet with MGM and they did a treatment of the story. In a series of notes, MGM relayed their biggest concerns, focusing mainly on Sidney Falco's character, now named Stanley. Their first question asked, "How did Stanley get the way he is?" followed by "Why doesn't Stanley put up more of a fight against Hunsecker?" They

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<sup>26</sup> James Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11.

wrote that “the most important added value” Lehman could provide would be to show that Falco is desperately trying to break away from Hunsecker. Perhaps MGM knew that the unapologetic cynicism of these characters would not be tolerated by a 1953 audience. They may have been looking out for themselves as well; in the early 1950s, a second investigation of Hollywood was launched by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the height of the blacklist spanned from 1952 to 1956. Hunsecker’s character was clearly based on Walter Winchell, and the strong criticism of Winchell and his alliance with Joseph McCarthy could have brought criticism upon the studio itself. The memo ends on a final concern: “We don’t want to imply that all columnists are like Hunsecker.”<sup>27</sup> Feeling that all of this compromised the integrity of the story, Lehman and MGM could not come to terms.

That same year, James Hill sent Lehman a letter from HL inquiring about the rights to the property.<sup>28</sup> Whereas MGM had reservations about the story, Lehman had reservations about Hecht-Lancaster Productions. In 1953, HL had yet to add its second “H,” James Hill, and was in its beginning stages. In their early years, they produced very few films. At the time of the letter, HL had just released *The Crimson Pirate* (1952) and Lehman didn’t want the “risk of having [his] story done by those people who did pirate pictures.”<sup>29</sup> While the film was one of Lancaster’s most popular worldwide, it is a

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<sup>27</sup> Treatment done by Lehman for MGM and producer Charles Schnee, 1954, Container 96.10, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from James Hill, December 10, 1953, Container 99.3, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX. Lehman’s own note on the letter reads, “This letter led, eventually, to our getting together to make ‘Sweet Smell of Success.’”

<sup>29</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 178.

tongue-in-cheek comedy-adventure set on a fictional Caribbean island. Financially, the film was a success, making close to one million dollars domestically. However, in Lehman's eyes, the film was not thematically appealing. Choosing to protect what he considered to be a very personal story, Lehman decided to pass on HL's offer.

### **HECHT-HILL-LANCASTER FINDS ITS FOOTING**

Despite their relatively slow start, HL grew into one of the largest independent production companies in Hollywood over the next few years. Throughout this time, they both grew in financial stature while also cultivating their corporate brand. In 1954, they released *Apache* and *Vera Cruz*. Both these films went significantly over budget but did well enough at the box office to cover production overhead costs. Made for \$1,240,000, *Apache* earned \$6,000,000.<sup>30</sup> *Vera Cruz* was made for a costly \$3,000,000 and brought in \$9,000,000 domestically and \$11,000,000 globally.<sup>31</sup> These were followed by *Marty* (1955), which was the first film HL made that did not star Burt Lancaster. Produced for a mere \$350,000 and based on the anthology TV drama of the same name, the picture opened to rave reviews. It was the first American film to win the Palme d'Or at Cannes and took home four Academy Awards in 1956, including Best Picture.<sup>32</sup> Shortly after the 1954 Oscars, *Variety* reported on the "largest independent motion picture deal in Hollywood history."<sup>33</sup> United Artists agreed to give HL \$40 million over three years, and

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<sup>30</sup> "Apache." IMDb. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046719/?ref=mv\\_sr\\_5](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046719/?ref=mv_sr_5) (accessed December 12, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> "Vera Cruz." IMDb. [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047647/?ref=mv\\_sr\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047647/?ref=mv_sr_1) (accessed December 12, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company That Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 147.

<sup>33</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 170.

they announced a lineup of films including *Separate Tables* from a stage play by Terrence Rattigan, *The Ballad of Cat Ballou* from a novel by Raymond Chandler, and *The Hitchhiker* by George Simenon, in addition to many others.<sup>34</sup>

The company was thriving financially, however the relationships between HL's founders were rocky from the beginning. These tensions only grew as time passed and the company expanded. Harold Hecht was Lancaster's former agent, who transitioned into being a producer so they could both go independent. Lancaster brought with him a bankable star persona while Hecht had experience with the inner workings of the industry, a handle on the financial side of things, and necessary connections. The relationship between Hecht and Lancaster was fraught from the onset. One story which was regularly circulated detailed Lancaster lifting Hecht into the air and threatening to throw him out a window.<sup>35</sup> After Hecht testified at a 1953 HUAC session and named names, Lancaster began to refer to him as "the Mole," which he played into by answering the phone, "Mole speaking."<sup>36</sup> Whether this was an attempt to take ownership of this joke or simply an acquiescence to Lancaster, it is hard to say.

While both men wanted to make quality commercial films, Hecht had his eye on money, cars, yachts, and respect—apropos since he was in charge of the finances. Lancaster, on the other hand, had his sights set more on the quality of the work, wanting to pursue projects that he considered fulfilling. He continued the pattern he had

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>36</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 178.

established a few years earlier: “Make one movie for the bank, one for your art.”<sup>37</sup> In addition to their differences regarding material, Lancaster was the opposite of Hecht physically. He knew this and used it to his advantage. “People were frightened of Burt,” Hill said. “And he never did anything to make people un-frightened of him.”<sup>38</sup> Years after the making of the film, Mackendrick described the experience of Lancaster entering a room: “The pulse speed of everybody in the room goes up. You have a sense that you are in a room with something wild.”<sup>39</sup>

James Hill provided a buffer between Hecht and Lancaster, who were often at each other’s throats. Screenwriter Julius Epstein called Hill “Lancaster’s boy” and he was considered under the thumb of the star.<sup>40</sup> In exchange for Lancaster finding women for Hill to sleep with, Hill went about finding information for the benefit of the company. He loved to engage in power-mongering, such as when he pretended to be drunk to extract information from reporter Ezra Goodman and photographer Sam Shaw.<sup>41</sup> The culture of madness can be best synthesized through Lehman’s description of the first time he met Lancaster at the HHL offices:

I was sitting with Harold Hecht. The door opened and in walked a towering, impressive figure. He was zipping up his fly and smiling proudly saying, “She swallowed it.” That was my introduction to Burt Lancaster. I called my agent and said, “I’m not going to do this picture. Get me off of it.” Harold Hecht pleaded

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>38</sup> Sam Kashner and Jennifer MacNair, *The Bad and the Beautiful: Hollywood in the Fifties* (New York: WW Norton, 2002), 223.

<sup>39</sup> *Mackendrick: The Man Who Walked Away*. Directed by Dermot McQuarrie. Scottish Television, 1986.

<sup>40</sup> Kashner and MacNair, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 201.

with me. He got down on his hands and knees and said, “Please don't leave, or Burt will blame me.”<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons the film could only have been made by HHL was that the levels of debauchery and the power dynamics mirrored some of those within *Sweet Smell of Success*. The relationship between Lancaster and Hecht was even described as being like that of Hunsecker and Falco. To many in the industry, HHL was defined by its wild egos, flagrant disrespect for women, and outrageous spending.

The company's predilection for wild spending would become a point of contention with United Artists. Arthur Krim, head of UA with Robert Benjamin, said he felt at

great disadvantage in this relationship. We must find out such things as what money they are spending for purchase and development of other properties; what money they are spending on personal withdrawals for themselves; what money they are spending unnecessarily on overhead.<sup>43</sup>

Kate Buford details some of the absurd spending going on, including thick “wall-to-wall carpeting” and the executive washroom, which cost \$15,000 and had a “purple velvet sofa, onyx fixtures, gold plumbing, and ‘HL’ embroidered in real gold thread on special hand towels.”<sup>44</sup> Due to their history of disregarding budgets, UA worked out a special deal with them. UA would stop covering HL's \$5,000 weekly operating cost and expected them to exercise more discipline and plan better. If they did not, any amount

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Balio, *United Artists*, 148.

<sup>44</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 169.

that went over budget came out of their own pockets.<sup>45</sup> In May of 1956, UA had approved the budgets for four upcoming projects, two low-budget and two mid-range. The two low-budget films were *Bachelor Party* at \$500,000 and *Sweet Smell of Success* at \$750,000. *The Devil's Disciple* was budgeted at \$2,500,000 and was set to star Laurence Olivier, Montgomery Clift, Burt Lancaster, and possibly Elizabeth Taylor. Set to begin filming after *The Devil's Disciple* was *Elephant Bill*, budgeted at \$2,200,000 and starring Jimmy Stewart (“probably”), Sophia Loren, and Ernest Borgnine, in color.<sup>46</sup>

Independent though they might have been, HHL was emulating the majors more than any other independent production company at the time. Lancaster boasted they were the “most important independent production organization in Hollywood.” By the release of *Sweet Smell of Success*, HHL had branded itself publicly as a producer of quality entertainment, particularly with the combination of *Trapeze* and *Marty*. ““Somewhere in between Hollywood’s so-called ‘blockbuster’ entertainment and the quickie-type melodramas and westerns,”” said Hecht, ““there lies what should be a sterile field.’ The great middle area was thought to be where ‘the classes and the masses are in step,’ where intelligent movies with an emotional heat cross over into art.”<sup>47</sup> So far, HHL had done a successful job at targeting and filling the gap Hecht saw.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>46</sup> H-H-L Fact Sheet, March 30, 1959, Container 82-046, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, WI.

<sup>47</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 172.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF A POWER WAR

By the time HHL acquired the rights to *Sweet Smell of Success*, Lehman had worked on a number of significant projects including *Sabrina* (1954) and *The King and I* (1956), in addition to a handful of teleplays. *Sweet Smell of Success* was not only an original story by Lehman but also based on his actual experiences. Lehman felt a connection to this material that he hadn't in the past. Due to the personal nature of the project, and the debauchery demonstrated by HHL, he wanted to be in control of as much of the film as possible. To achieve this, Lehman only agreed to sell the rights to HHL if he was brought on as director.

Despite the trepidation Lehman felt in working with HHL, his position as director seemed promising at the beginning. However, once Burt Lancaster was cast opposite Tony Curtis, the film's dynamics changed. Coming off of the success of *Trapeze* (1956), which had also starred Curtis and Lancaster, a first-time director seemed like a risky choice. Lehman was told that UA had reservations about first-time directors after Lancaster's directing debut, *The Kentuckian* (1955), did not go well. However, it is very possible that UA never intended to let Lehman direct, bringing him on just for the story rights and then pushing him out. The closest Lehman ever got to directing was a screentest on May 23, 1956 for "an actress for the feminine lead . . . It was, I thought, a good test, but she did not get the role, and I did not direct the picture."<sup>48</sup> Alexander Mackendrick believes it was this screentest that was the end for Lehman, who made "the mistake that a first-time director sometimes makes, of directing a screen test. It gives

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<sup>48</sup> Call sheet from a test directed by Lehman, May 23, 1956, Container 99.8, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX.

others a chance of seeing that director in action.”<sup>49</sup> Whatever the ultimate reason, Lehman was stripped of his directorial duties and handed a producer credit as compensation.

Over the next few months, Lehman began to develop an ulcer, which he attributes directly to the environment at HHL. When he was told by HHL that there would need to be a number of re-writes done on location, Lehman consulted his doctor about a trip to New York. After being hospitalized, his doctor “phoned the producers and told them that under no conditions would he permit [Lehman] to return to ‘Sweet Smell’.”<sup>50</sup> Leaving the project, Lehman gave up his producer credit, and went on to vacation in Honolulu and Tahiti while HHL went on to New York. Alexander Mackendrick was brought on as the new director, and the script was passed on to Clifford Odets.

Originally slated to direct a version of George Bernard Shaw’s play, *The Devil’s Disciple*, Mackendrick asked to be released when that project was indefinitely shelved.<sup>51</sup> Hecht promptly reminded him that he was under contract, and the British director was moved to *Sweet Smell of Success*.<sup>52</sup> Mackendrick had begrudgingly come to Hollywood after the demise of Ealing Studios, where he directed *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), *Mandy* (1952), and *The Ladykillers* (1955), among others. Mackendrick’s background was in design and before working at Ealing, he was a “wunderkind” for J. Walter

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<sup>49</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> Mackendrick notes, August 31, 1956, Container 97.2, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX.

<sup>51</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 139.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

Thompson.<sup>53</sup> His directing style was meticulous, and he was used to extensive storyboarding and a certain level of control which he was afforded in Europe. Despite the freedom afforded to HHL by United Artists, Mackendrick would come head to head with Lancaster, both *The Star* and *The Producer*. The tension generated between these two men led to a chaotic and stressful atmosphere on set. These tensions would result in some of the film's energy, shaping the film's final form.

It was Mackendrick who asked for Odets to be brought on to the project, which some say was a way of giving Odets “a way of striking back at what had been a public humiliation.”<sup>54</sup> The once prominent playwright felt he had sold out to Hollywood. In addition, Odets had testified in a 1952 HUAC hearing which had a particularly detrimental psychological impact. Elia Kazan explained,

[Odets] gave away his identity when he did that; he was no longer the hero-rebel. It choked off the voice he'd had. I believe he should have remained defiant, maintained his treasured identity, and survived as his best self. He was to die before he died.<sup>55</sup>

The story of *Sweet Smell of Success* offered him the opportunity to expiate his past, to work on a project that denounced “whistleblowers” like Winchell.<sup>56</sup> James Naremore says that, as far as he knows, it is the first film to deal with McCarthy-style manipulation of the press.

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<sup>53</sup> Kashner and MacNair, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, 228.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>55</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 200.

<sup>56</sup> Aubrey Malone, *The Defiant One: A Biography of Tony Curtis* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 60.

Once brought on, Odets said the job would take him two to three weeks to complete. Four months later he was still working; he had rewritten nearly the entire thing. Overall, the essentials of the plot remain close to Lehman's story, and the characterizations are nearly the same. One of the biggest changes Odets made was to cut out the majority of background information given to the audience about Falco. In the original story, Falco has a mother in Forest Hills and a younger brother to whom he sends money for college; both of them refuse Falco's help, feeling disgust for his profession. Removing these figures erases a great deal of the psychological reasoning behind the way Falco acts, something critics would find fault with when the film was released. However, the removal of this background does make Falco the embodiment of the American dream, a true individual climbing his way up the ladder, willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top. In terms of the screenplay's structure, Mackendrick describes the changes Odets made: "What Clifford did, in effect, was dismantle the structure of every single sequence in order to rebuild situations and relationship that were much more complex, had much greater tension and more dramatic energy."<sup>57</sup> In regard to the dialogue, Odets would "devise patterns of three, four, and five interacting characters. In particular, he often managed to make it a pattern of five—a 'quintet of voices.'"<sup>58</sup> Due to the largely static nature of the script, this lent energy and excitement to scenes that may otherwise have been flat with just two characters. The dismantling of each scene, however, was

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<sup>57</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 139.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

incredibly time consuming, one of the reasons Odets was still writing throughout the production.

Perhaps Odets' incessant re-writing was due to the fact that he felt a connection to the material, excited by the chance to take on the same type of people that had broken him earlier. Or perhaps it was a deep neurosis that drove him to re-write every scene multiple times. It could have been a combination of both—the nervousness of having his name attached to a movie so clearly attacking both Walter Winchell and McCarthy-ism led to extensive re-writing. The situations and characters remained Lehman's, but the dialogue was all Odets. We can see the brilliance of Odets at work in the use of four main motifs throughout the film's dialogue. These include an animal motif, a motif of grotesqueness and violence, a food motif, and an ironic Biblical motif. The animal and food motifs generally connote contempt or disgust. Falco is likened to a dog multiple times within the first few scenes of the film, in addition to being told he has the "scruples of a guinea pig." Due to the Production Code, swearing wasn't allowed, but the violent imagery Odets embeds into the dialogue gives it a unique shock value. Falco spits out lines such as, "Watch me run a 50-yard dash with my legs cut off." The brutality of this world comes through in instances such as these. There are even two lines that reference the death sentence. One occurs in the first scene at the Twenty One club; after Hunsecker has hung up the phone on a client, Falco leans over and informs the others at the table that "a man has just been sentenced to death." Hunsecker may operate in words, but we are shown that his weapon of choice is no less dangerous than a smoking gun.

Considering the vast changes Odets made, the question remains: whose story is this? The characters and overall structure belong to Lehman definitively. However, the memorable and now often quoted dialogue was written by Odets. Additionally, the removal of Falco's backstory changed the reception of his character. Changes such as these alter the very ethos of the story. In her introduction to the film, Denise Mann makes a clear differentiation between the two writers: "The final screenplay was written by Odets, based on a short story and first screenplay-draft by Lehman."<sup>59</sup> The specification of "final screenplay" draws attention to the timeline of the film's creation, placing emphasis on the fact that Odets was the last one to contribute to and work on the story.

Despite the fact that Lehman made no contributions to the script after his departure to Tahiti, it is important to note that he was sent a rough cut of the film while the movie was in post-production. "Sandy Mackendrick, the director, showed me a rough cut of 'Sweet Smell' when he had assembled the film," wrote Lehman.<sup>60</sup> On March 29, 1957, Lehman watched the film with a secretary at his side, detailing comments to her as he watched. There is no indication of whether Mackendrick read these notes, or in fact even asked for them. However, there are certain elements Lehman opposed which were left in the film. Because of this, these notes indicate both an acknowledgement of Lehman's authorship by Mackendrick and also demonstrate Lehman's continued lack of agency. For example, Lehman wrote, "I hate '...very slimy trade,'" a line delivered by

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<sup>59</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Notes from Lehman to the Director, Alexander Mackendrick, after viewing the first screening, March, 29, 1957, Container 99.6, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX.

Lancaster in reference to Curtis' character's work as a press agent. This line remains in the film in its final cut. Lehman additionally does not think the through line of Otis Elwell (David White) continually trying to figure out where he knows Rita (Barbara Nichols) from is effective, writing, "can reference to Havana be cut? And Palm Springs, too? This running gag doesn't really work."<sup>61</sup> Once again, Lehman's complaints were ignored and this gag does appear in the film. Despite the fact that the film was not changed in accordance with Lehman's objections, the action of sending him a rough cut does acknowledge a degree of authorial respect.

#### **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A STAR HAS DIRECTOR ENVY?**

While Odets wrote furiously, Mackendrick and Lancaster were feuding on set. Some of the tension between the director and producer/star grew from Lancaster's fear that Mackendrick would not be able to capture the appropriate feeling of New York, due to the fact that he was an "outsider." Having grown up in Harlem, the film had personal roots for Lancaster. "More than anyone else, he had an idea of this picture," Curtis said. "He wanted to direct the movie. And he was an important producer, he didn't lay back."<sup>62</sup> Mackendrick and Lancaster clashed on set due to the fact that they each had a vision of what the film should be. One example of their on-set tension is exemplified by the filming of the first scene in the Twenty One club. Originally, the scene had been blocked so that Falco had access to the table and Hunsecker moves over when Falco arrives to let him in. Lancaster did not think this was realistic. He didn't believe that Hunsecker would

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 181.

move over for anyone, especially not Falco. According to Curtis, “Burt went apeshit. He got up and pushed the table over, sending all the plates and glasses and food crashing to the floor.”<sup>63</sup> Incredibly, Mackendrick did not entirely back down, and a compromise was reached: Hunsecker doesn’t move over but instead Sidney pulls up a chair so he is sitting beside Hunsecker, still removed and slightly behind JJ. While Falco’s positioning may seem like a small change, I discuss in the next chapter the importance of Falco and Hunsecker sitting side by side, a blocking decision that resulted from a clash between Lancaster and Mackendrick, which crucially shaped the tone and meaning of the scene.

The tension between the two figures was not helped by the fact that Mackendrick’s meticulous style drove Lancaster crazy. Used to working in Europe, where he was afforded more freedom, Mackendrick was meticulous about every set up. Since Lancaster was not only the star but a producer, Mackendrick’s style had not just artistic implications, but financial ones as well. In a documentary on Mackendrick years later, Lancaster detailed how the director worked on set:

He'd set up shots on the soundstage for a scene that would play six minutes... The camera moved continuously. ... We rehearsed all day, until four in the afternoon, just to get the technical part down. The head grip and the rest of the crew were sweating, knowing that if they missed one mark, the shot would be ruined. But we did it, clicked it all off. Sandy called “Cut. Print.” Then he'd stop, waiting. I'd say, “Something the matter, Sandy?” “No, it went fine, you all did it fine... let's do one more.” So we went through it again. Again, fine. Cut. I was delighted. We had six minutes of film, a good day's work - and done in the most interesting style. But he still wouldn't be satisfied. He'd shake his head and say, “I don't like it, we've got to change it - change everything.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> James Naremore, “Commentary.” Disc 2. *Sweet Smell of Success*, Criterion Collection. DVD. Directed by Alexander Mackendrick. City, CA: United Artists, 1957.”

<sup>64</sup> Robyn Karney, *Burt Lancaster: A Singular Man* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 108.

Not surprisingly, Mackendrick remembers this differently. The way he tells the story, Odets' dialogue was beyond Lancaster's capability as an actor. "He's a great figure, but his skills in acting are somewhat narrow. So he stopped the performance and said, 'No, no, I'm not going through with this. Get Clifford back to give it another go.'"<sup>65</sup> The accounts from both men were given years after the making of the film, allowing resentments to build and fallacies to blossom. The true reason for delays in filming is not as important as the underlying power struggle between the men. Decades after the film's release, each man placed blame on the other, attempting to reject this element of authorial responsibility, giving some implicit recognition of the ways the culture on set, and the tension between the two of them, shaped, and perhaps harmed, the film.

It was during the filming of the final scene that the tension on set climaxed. This scene was re-written more than any other in the film as they struggled to find an ending they felt worked. Lehman's original story ended with the Sidney character dead, attacked by Hunsecker. Odets wrote one version that ended with Susie committing suicide. Another has her mention a suicide attempt a year before after she and Sidney had a tryst, implying that they had been involved. There was one version where Sidney confesses to Susie what he has done, shows her the note JJ gave him to set up Steve, and walks out without any violence. In addition to these options, there were six additional endings considered. Mackendrick knew that once Susie left, the tension was gone. All that JJ cares about is his sister, and so when she is gone, the movie is over.

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<sup>65</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocent*, 159.

The events that transpired in relation to the ending quite clearly demonstrate the lack of control Mackendrick held as the director, which moves him firmly away from the status of an “auteur,” and indicates the dispersal of authorial control. During the filming of this scene, the film’s editor, Alan Crosland, told Mackendrick that HHL was going to recut the ending however they wanted and Lancaster was insistent that the film had to end with a scene between the two male leads. Distressed, and desperately desiring the ending he had envisioned, Mackendrick went to Hecht and told him he would stay on to help with the editing free of charge. Hecht allowed it but warned him that they probably wouldn’t listen to him. As shooting continued, Mackendrick began to set up the blocking so that Susie was visible in every scene, making it impossible to cut her out and change the ending. Lancaster got suspicious and asked what he was doing. When Mackendrick told him, Lancaster said, “All right, but you're crazy, ‘cause it won't work. In a movie, you've got the last scene between the two stars. You can't bring in a two-bit actress to play the last scene with us.”<sup>66</sup> After shooting had wrapped, the company tried the ending that Burt wanted. After seeing that it did not have the effect they desired, they played Mackendrick’s version and realized that this was the only ending the film could have. “It was one of the most delicious moments of my life,” Mackendrick said.<sup>67</sup> Even though Mackendrick’s ending was chosen for the film’s final version, it was a decision made by UA and HHL, one which Mackendrick had very little ability to influence.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

## **FURTHER TENSIONS ON SET ABOUND**

The difficulties on set were not solely due to the relationship between Mackendrick and Lancaster. Due to Odets' copious rewrites, Mackendrick and the others were working without a shooting script for the majority of the production. "The pages used to come to my room straight from Clifford's typewriter and I had to shoot them that day," Mackendrick explained. "After I'd finished shooting, I'd give them to Bernie Smith, the script editor, and he'd put them into the script. So we cut the script there on the floor...."<sup>68</sup> Despite the time table, Odets seemed to thrive under the pressure, writing some of the film's most quoted lines on the spot. "I remember," said Tony Curtis, "it was about three or four in the morning, and it was cold, bitter, and miserable. Between shots, I was strolling around, and I heard this *tik-tik-tik* coming from inside the prop truck. So I go in, and there's Clifford Odets, sitting in an overcoat, huddled over his typewriter. ... I see he's just typed out, 'The cat's in the bag, and the bag's in the river.' It took my breath away."<sup>69</sup>

Odets may have felt out of his element, but the entire shooting schedule was revolving around him. His inability to stop re-writing (or over-writing) drove the direction of the film and created some of the chaos Mackendrick mentioned. Shooting on location in New York City did not help the production's chaos. "We started shooting in the most terrifying circumstances that you can imagine," Mackendrick said. "In New York, in Times Square, in rush hour, with a crane, at twilight... and three pages of script.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>69</sup> Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success*, 35.

I was so scared out of my wits that I had no time to be worried about anything except just getting it done.”<sup>70</sup> The film’s location shooting later was a large part of the marketing campaign by UA. One of the syndicated news items about the film declared, “‘Sweet Smell of Success’ Filmed Where It Happened!” The piece explained that the crew spent “some three weeks of location shooting on Broadway and its tributaries, utilizing a host of familiar, but curiously enough, rarely photographed settings.”<sup>71</sup>

Instead of utilizing the more typical day-for-night, which was more cost-effective, all of the film’s night scenes were actually shot at night.<sup>72</sup> While difficult, it certainly allowed Howe to capture a specific New York image and energy. The film has a palpable energy to it, encompassing the ethos of New York City itself. This is due in part to the speed at which they were shooting, working in some of the busiest neighborhoods of New York. The chaotic nature of the set also lent incidental energy to the film, while purposeful energy came from the scene construction and the nature of the dialogue. Mackendrick worried that the dialogue was too stagey and didn’t feel real enough. Odets said to him, “If you’re worried that my dialogue is overblown, too flowery and purple-passagey—well, *don’t* worry... Play it fast, and don’t pay attention to the words—just play the action, and it’ll work.”<sup>73</sup> Some of the overblown dialogue includes lines such as, “I’d hate to take a bite out of you, you’re a cookie full of arsenic,” and “Son, I don’t relish shooting a mosquito with an elephant gun, so why don’t you just shuffle along?”

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> “‘Sweet Smell of Success’ Filmed Where It Happened.” *The Indiana Gazette*, August 10, 1957.

<sup>72</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 213.

<sup>73</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 144.

Lines like these would be praised by the New York Times as “high-toned street vernacular that no real New Yorker has ever spoken, but that every real New Yorker wishes he could.”<sup>74</sup> Despite the stagey feel of these lines, Odets’ instruction worked. Much of the dialogue is visceral, and the rapid pace allows the viewer to feel the emotional dimension of the words without focusing too closely on what is actually being said.

### **THE FILM’S AESTHETIC AND VISUAL AUTHORSHIP**

One of the less controversial elements of authorship is attributing the look of *Sweet Smell of Success* to its cinematographer, James Wong Howe. Howe and Mackendrick had one of the few relationships on set not riddled with strife. This duo can be given authorial credit for the film’s visual aesthetic, ironically in part due to the fact that Lancaster chose to go after Mackendrick, leaving Howe to his own devices. Before the film began shooting, HHL allowed Mackendrick and Howe to spend several days in New York scouting locations. It was during this time that they created the “formula of starting scenes in exteriors, beginning them with short passages of dialogue on the street outside... before following characters into the interiors.”<sup>75</sup> This lent enormous energy to the film and reduced some of the concerns Mackendrick had about the script being too dialogue heavy.

Howe was centrally responsible for the film’s aesthetic as well as some of its most memorable formal aspects. It was Howe’s idea, for example, to have Lancaster wear

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<sup>74</sup> Malone, *The Defiant One*, 65.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

his glasses, which he then smeared with Vaseline, making it difficult for Lancaster to see so that his face was perpetually one of frustrated focus. Lit closely from a high angle, the glasses would “deepen his eye-sockets and lend a taut, skull-like aspect to his face.”<sup>76</sup>

The film has a relatively uncommon use of lenses, a technique which Mackendrick and Howe worked on together. Sydney Pollack explains the way they used them:

They reversed the normal shooting concept. They shot almost every master shot with long-focus lenses, from very far away, in order to pack the buildings...in tightly behind people. Then they shot their close-ups with wide-angle lenses, to keep the background in focus, and again, an awareness of the buildings.<sup>77</sup>

This technique allows the audience to feel the oppression of the city, effectively capturing the frantic, claustrophobic feel of New York. The two men also agreed on using dynamic low-angle compositions, shooting the characters so that they are always shooting up through the air, poised for action.

While skilled in a number of styles, Howe was primarily known for his realist aesthetic. The previous year he had won an Academy Award for his work on another Lancaster vehicle, *The Rose Tattoo* (1956). Earning the nickname “low-key Howe,” he was one of the first proponents of plausibly motivated lighting and the crab dolly, both of which are used skillfully in *Sweet Smell*. The location work Howe did for the film deliberately evokes the “New York School” of street photographers in the 1950s and ‘60s, which gives the film its distinctive noir aesthetic.<sup>78</sup> The pace of the film, as discussed before, is helped by the constant movement of Howe’s camera; restless, much

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>78</sup> Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success*, 47.

like the character of Sidney Falco himself. The combination of the dialogue and the camera work lend the film its rapid-fire speed, arguably the heart and the soul of the picture.

Although all of the exteriors were shot on location in New York, the interiors were shot back in Los Angeles, on Stage 8 of the Goldwyn Studios.<sup>79</sup> The company spent \$25,000 just recreating the Twenty One Club; the set was built two feet off the ground in order to install smoke machines underneath for atmosphere and included movable walls to make way for Howe's camera.<sup>80</sup> Howe was able to accentuate Hunsecker's power, even while seated indoors, through the use of a low-angle camera and wide-angle lens. In addition, Howe washed the walls with oil to achieve a "glitter" effect, as he called it, wanting the feel of the rain-washed nocturnal streets to resonate indoors as well.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps due to Lancaster's focus on characters, Howe was able to implement his vision for the look of the film without much interference, creating a film that was able to truly capture the city of New York.

### **THE RELEASE**

Ultimately, the film lost \$1,645,000 at the box office, with HHL responsible for \$900,000.<sup>82</sup> Even immediately after the film was released, the key figures sensed that they had just created a financial failure. Due to the negative reaction of audiences, blame

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<sup>79</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 181.

<sup>80</sup> Kashner and MacNair, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, 230.

<sup>81</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 148.

<sup>82</sup> H-H-L Fact Sheet, March 30, 1959, Container 82-046, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison, WI.

was thrown around between a number of the primary figures. Lancaster blamed Lehman for leaving, which implicated Odets in the failure as well. At a party after the film's preview, Lancaster threatened Lehman: "He said, 'You didn't have to leave—you could have made this a much better picture. I ought to beat you up.'" Lehman replied, "Go ahead—I could use the money."<sup>83</sup> Hecht put the blame on Hill, who remembered that the night of the preview: "Harold said to me, 'You know you've wrecked our company? We're going to lose over a million dollars on this picture.'"<sup>84</sup> Lancaster would call it the best failure HHL ever made, and Curtis would say that Falco was the role he most identified with for the rest of his life, but Mackendrick disavowed the film, calling it a "piece of absolute hokum and melodrama."<sup>85</sup> Since *Sweet Smell of Success* was an anomaly in the wider breadth of Mackendrick's work, it is often discussed within this framework. Many of the reviews at the time prefaced their praise of Mackendrick's work with the fact that he was known for more light-hearted British comedies such as *The Ladykillers* (1955) or *The Man in The White Suit* (1951). Though they may have followed this up by saying he was able to capture New York well, there was subtext implicit in this that read, "for a Scotsman."

Despite the fact that *Sweet Smell of Success* ultimately led to the demise of HHL, Lancaster loved the film. Years later he expressed his disappointment that he was pigeonholed by audiences. Even though the performance was an anomaly for Lancaster at the time, it is nearly always included in retrospectives honoring him and it is cited as one of

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 162.

Tony Curtis' best performances frequently. While Curtis did not seem to have any overt power struggles with those on set, his performance gives the film life. The constant wringing of his hands or biting of his nails, in addition to the non-stop movement, represent the energy at the film's core. He is able to embody the emotional cache of an entire industry and relay all of that back to the screen. It would change the course of Curtis' career, forcing the industry to see him as more of a serious actor. His subsequent roles in *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959) would not have been possible if not for his performance in *Sweet Smell of Success*.

In their marketing, United Artists' positioned Hecht-Hill-Lancaster as the main authorial figure. Building on their success from *Marty* and *Trapeze*, HHL promoted their brand as a prestige studio that also offered entertainment. In addition to HHL, the marketing highlighted the pairing of Lancaster and Curtis. One advertisement that appeared on the back cover of the *Motion Picture Herald* was bifurcated diagonally with the words, "That Hecht, Hill and Lancaster have another towering triumph destined to be up there with *Trapeze*!" The brand being sold was the company which paired Lancaster and Curtis in a circus film about a love triangle—far from the grimy, greasy underside of New York City. One advertisement in particular included no information about the director, writers, or any of the individual figures involved in production. "Hecht, Hill, and Lancaster" was written right above the big and bold names of Lancaster and Curtis. Some of the other actors were mentioned, but there was nothing beyond that. In the majority of the publicity materials, HHL and the two star's names were second only to the title of the film in size. Although UA clearly wanted the film to be primarily associated with the

company, its tone and themes were so different than the HHL films that came before that it was really an anomaly in the company's creations.

The film's marketing was so focused on HHL, Lancaster and Curtis, that United Artists forgot to include Lehman's name on much of the advertising. On May 1, 1957, Lehman's agent sent a letter to the Music Corporation of America to confirm that moving forward, Lehman will receive credit "in all possible advertising, that is to say on advertising which had not already been processed past its deadline."<sup>86</sup> The film premiered on July 4, meaning Lehman's name was only officially added to the publicity two months before the film's release. Odets may have changed dialogue, but the underlying structure and world of the film are Lehman's. At the time, Lehman found issue with the ordering of his and Odets' names in the advertising and in the film's credits, feeling as if Odets was being positioned as the primary writer. If Lehman felt that his name was not properly or overtly connected to the film at the time, the location of the film's materials today show that his fear of losing authorship was unfounded in the long run. All of the script drafts, including those written by Odets, are housed in the Ernest Lehman Collection at the Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities. Lehman's early departure from the set gave him little to no agency in the film's ultimate creation, but a substantial portion of authorial credit is placed with Lehman today, lending him agency as time has passed.

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<sup>86</sup> Letters re: oversight of Lehman's name on some publicity, May 6, 1957, Container 99.4, Ernest Lehman Collection, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX.

## CONCLUSION

The singular author approach to media has many advantages, following well-worn paths of understanding traditional creative production, but even self-professed “dyed in the wool” auteurist James Naremore confesses that *Sweet Smell of Success* is not an auteur’s film.<sup>87</sup> As indicated above, authorship is dispersed among the key creative players: Burt Lancaster, producer and star; Ernest Lehman, writer; Clifford Odets, writer; James Wong Howe, cinematographer; Alexander Mackendrick, director; and the company of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions itself. In utilizing Caldwell’s production cultures to approach authorship, I shift away from his primary focus on below-the-line workers including craftsmen, practitioners, “poorly paid mentees, overworked assistants, assistants to assistants, and unpaid interns.”<sup>88</sup> Ultimately my goal is the same: to investigate how the cultural activities of producers fit into and influence the broader industrial and economic trends of the industry. This can be achieved through an investigation of the social and cultural interactions of the above-the-line contributors as well. I would argue that in exploring artistic and industrial authorship, the pertinent figures are those above-the-line. This is augmented by Schatz’s film industry studies approach, which I also reposition from an approach to conglomerate Hollywood and convergence culture to an historical lens. While the importance of investigating authorship, mode of production from a micro- and macro-level, and film style is

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<sup>87</sup> Naremore, “Commentary.”

<sup>88</sup> Caldwell, *Production Cultures*, 201.

important in the context of the New Hollywood, they are equally vital to understanding the interplay of mode of production and film style in any era of Hollywood.

Each of the figures or entities involved with the creation of *Sweet Smell of Success* had differing effects on or contributions to the film, further complicated by the uneven power dynamics at work. Lancaster's position as star and producer, as well as his sheer physical prowess, afforded him two different types of power. He held the ability to fire any of the key players (something Mackendrick was keenly aware of) and even make artistic decisions, but he also used his literal physical power to scare people into acquiescing. The man who wrote the story, Lehman, had little agency in the film's creation after he was made physically ill by the stress of working with HHL and had to vacate the project. Working under the radar, Howe was able to accomplish much of what he wanted for the film without too much push-back or conflict. While not actively asserting his power on set, he was afforded the power of creating his artistic vision.

Overall, the production of this film does not reflect the majority of independent productions in the 1950s. While there are certainly stories of tense or harrowed sets on other films, the vast differences in ideology and irresolvable questions of power are exceptions to the independent production company rule. Many of these other companies ran with only one or two figures at the head, operating on a much smaller scale, and therefore were ideologically and collaboratively sound. The fact that *Sweet Smell of Success* is constructed as well as it is, is in itself a bit of a miracle.

In its initial release, audiences would have had a particular expectation for a Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Production starring Lancaster and Curtis. Part of audience's

rejection of the film were due to the fact that *Sweet Smell of Success* fell outside of the company's usual purview and featured the two actors in atypical roles. As the film was rediscovered, different elements of its production have been upheld and praised. For movie-insiders and cinephiles, the film's most defining feature may be its aesthetic. Martin Scorsese is said to have been influenced by the film's look, particularly in making *Taxi Driver* (1976). For others, it's the dialogue that makes this film so memorable. Barry Levinson plays tribute to the sharp, quippy lines in his film *Diner* (1982), in which there is a character who speaks solely in lines from *Sweet Smell of Success*, dropping in and out of scenes with little to no explanation. For more casual movie watchers, Burt Lancaster is often the film's defining figure, his name the most prominent and arguably most famous, of the collaborators. In each of these examples, the film is viewed as authored by a different entity. This dispersal of authorship is only complicated as time goes by and the film is re-situated within the contemporary context.

Ultimately, Lehman was spot on when he said that only Hecht-Hill-Lancaster could have made the picture. The film was authored by Mackendrick and Odets and Lancaster, but it was also authored by the tensions on set, the pace of shooting, and the neurosis of its script writer. While not tangible figures, these elements of production are just as responsible for the film's final form as the human figures who were physically on set.

## Chapter Two: The Evolution of Reception

“Why the hell is Burt Lancaster doing that?”<sup>89</sup> – Burt Lancaster

The most prominent narrative surrounding *Sweet Smell of Success* is that it was a box office failure upon its release in July 1957. The blame for this failure is most often placed on the off-casting of its two stars, Lancaster and Curtis, who shocked audiences by playing characters that were very different than their established star personas. While this is certainly an aspect of why the film did poorly, it was not the only reason. The film was rejected by the American public not only because of the atypical casting of its stars, but because *Sweet Smell of Success* was in many ways ahead of its time in its prominent use of self-reflexivity, disruption of the classical Hollywood style, and depiction of extreme cynicism. While off-casting was not uncommon, particularly in earlier *noirs*, *Sweet Smell* was positioned as a mainstream star vehicle for two of the industry’s most prominent actors. The film occupied a liminal space; it opened past the peak of the *noir* style which it was channeling, but before the arrival of a more liberalized New Hollywood. This year was the end of the blacklistings in Hollywood and it was the first film to tackle McCarthy-style whistleblowing in the press.

*Sweet Smell of Success* faced additional challenges brought on by the advertising campaign put together by United Artists, critics and members of the press who were personally offended by the film, as well as other films critiquing the media industry

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<sup>89</sup> “Burt Lancaster: Letting the chips fall.” *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 26, 1976.

concurrently. In order to understand the nuanced reasons for the film's rejection at the time of its release, I employ cultural intermediaries as defined by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley. These intermediaries can range from "reports of movie theater managers and newspaper and fan magazine columnists, to material culture studies of advertising and marketing ephemera."<sup>90</sup> Regarding the film itself, I provide close textual analysis in order to parse out why exactly the performances of Lancaster and Curtis were so disliked upon the film's initial release. I propose that the reason these performances were so distressing to audiences was that these roles subverted the stars' personas, making sinister the charm and charisma of previous roles. Whereas the the characters of JJ Hunsecker and Sidney Falco are still despicable today, as an interest with anti-heroes grew and the world has become more cynical, what drove audiences away at the film's initial release is found fascinating by audiences today. Additionally, as these two actors faded from the limelight, their performances can be viewed as distanced from their star personas during the peak of their careers.

In combining these approaches, I consider the film's reception in more well-rounded way. After investigating the initial reception, I go on to trace the film's rise in popularity beginning in the late-1960s. The film was afforded widespread visibility after United Artists sold the rights for syndication on television. Resonating with audiences as the years passed, the film was a favorite of many of the self-consciously auteur directors of the 1970s, including Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdonovich, and Barry Levinson. Its

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<sup>90</sup> Fuller-Seeley, "Archaeologies of Fandom," 31.

cynicism and acidity finally found resonance, and in 2019 the film's themes are perhaps more pertinent than ever.

#### **ADVERTISING AND THE FILM'S PUBLIC IMAGE**

According to *Film Bulletin*, the spot concentration for *Sweet Smell of Success* was the heaviest ever undertaken by United Artists. The campaign included 4,600 radio spot announcements in “25 key market areas broadcast by a total of 113 radio outlets.”<sup>91</sup> Ernest Lehman's book was re-issued with cover images from the film and featured in 6,600 retail outlets throughout the country. UA spent \$106,000 on a national magazine advertising campaign for the film, including “full-page insertions in seven leading publications with a combined readership of 90,650,000.”<sup>92</sup> Barbara Nichols and Elmer Bernstein were sent on a road tour, and Lancaster went on Ed Sullivan to promote the film. A particularly amusing publicity stunt was to showcase one million dollars in cash in the window of an LA drugstore. The stunt ended up costing UA \$1,000 in insurance, \$1,000 in interest to the bank, and \$700 for armored transport service and guards.<sup>93</sup> When it came to visibility, no expense was spared to promote *Sweet Smell of Success*.

Just as Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions emulated the approach of the major studios for representation of authorship as a “studio,” their approach to marketing similarly looked to models which worked effectively during the studio era. Ultimately the film was marketed as a standard Hollywood release, which undoubtedly misled audiences

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<sup>91</sup> “UA's '60 Showcase Into Syndication.” *Variety*, July 7, 1962.

<sup>92</sup> “Promotional Campaign for ‘Success’ Into High Gear.” *Film Bulletin*, July 8, 1957.

<sup>93</sup> “Promotional Stunt for Sweet Smell.” *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, July 26, 1957.

expecting a Lancaster-Curtis HHL picture. To compete with television, the film's marketing sold sex and seduction—little of which actually appeared in the film. Much of the advertising focusing on the sex appeal of Barbara Nichols and Susan Harrison. While this made sense for Nichols, a scantily clad cigarette girl, the same cannot be said for the marketing around Harrison's role as Susie, JJ's sister. Though an important narrative piece of the film, Harrison receives relatively little screen time when compared with Lancaster and Curtis. The character of Susie Hunsecker is a woman overpowered by the men around her, nervous, uncertain, and meek. In order to publicize the film, UA focused on Harrison's physicality, trying to sell her as a "sexy" newcomer and overnight sensation. Harrison even did a spread in *Cavalier Magazine*, a pin-up style men's magazine, including nude photographs. Part of the film's original press book includes a story titled "Lancaster's Leading Lady," featuring a picture of Harrison with ample cleavage, pursed red lips, and tousled hair.<sup>94</sup> While this version of Susan Harrison may have existed somewhere in Los Angeles, it was not this version that appeared in the film.

The pairing of Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster highlighted much of this campaign, playing off of their recent success in HHL's *Trapeze*, the story of a mentor and his protégé who fall in love with the same woman. *Trapeze* was a box office success for the company, returning \$7.5 million in North America alone.<sup>95</sup> Many of the advertisements for *Sweet Smell* contained lines such as, "Together for the first time since

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<sup>94</sup> United Artists Press Book, 1957, [https://www.ebay.com/itm/BURT-LANDCASTER-TONY-CURTIS-SWEET-SMELL-OF-SUCCESS-ORIG-1957-MOVIE-PRESSBOOK/381257012351?hash=item58c4b0547f%3A%3ArNQAAOSweW5VUPRC&\\_nkw=%22sweet+smell+of+success%22&\\_from=R40&rt=nc](https://www.ebay.com/itm/BURT-LANDCASTER-TONY-CURTIS-SWEET-SMELL-OF-SUCCESS-ORIG-1957-MOVIE-PRESSBOOK/381257012351?hash=item58c4b0547f%3A%3ArNQAAOSweW5VUPRC&_nkw=%22sweet+smell+of+success%22&_from=R40&rt=nc).

<sup>95</sup> Buford, *Burt Lancaster*, 262.

their record shattering teamwork in ‘Trapeze!’”<sup>96</sup> The heavy reliance on *Trapeze* was problematic due to the vast differences between *Trapeze* and *Sweet Smell of Success*. Audiences who had enjoyed the story of a love triangle set in a circus were in for quite a shock at seeing the two stars in these unsympathetic roles. Comparing the ad campaigns of the two films highlights the way *Sweet Smell* was treated as a traditional Hollywood release. Both campaigns focused heavily on sex appeal, an approach which makes sense for the more typical Hollywood release, *Trapeze*. The ad campaign for *Trapeze* capitalized on Gina Lollobrigida, one of the first international sex symbols to emerge from post-war Europe, and the physical beauty of all three of its stars.<sup>97</sup> The poster most commonly used to advertise the film is horizontally bifurcated by the bodies of Lancaster and Lollobrigida kissing in mid-air, as Curtis dangles behind them, his legs and arms outstretched as to highlight every gleaming muscle.

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<sup>96</sup> United Artists Press Book, 1957.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

## THE WONDER SHOW OF THE WORLD!



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Illustration 1: Promotional poster for *Trapeze* (1956).

A former circus performer himself, Lancaster performed nearly all of his own stunts.

*Trapeze* is an excellent example of what the two stars' current personas were at the time:

Curtis a maturing teen heartthrob and Lancaster an All-American hero. In some places,

*Trapeze* was still playing when *Sweet Smell of Success* was released, which hurt the

latter. Another Lancaster vehicle then in circulation was *Gunfight at the OK Corral*

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<sup>98</sup> “*Trapeze* (Film),” Wikipedia, accessed April 25, 2019, [https://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trapeze\\_\(film\)](https://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trapeze_(film)).

(1957), released a few months earlier. Co-starring Kirk Douglas, *OK Corral* was a more typical role for Lancaster. Seeing these films side by side could not have helped the jarring effect of seeing him as JJ Hunsecker, or Curtis as Falco. Later in life, Lancaster himself expressed frustration at audiences not being able to accept him in a variety of roles. “It’s a terrible thing about the public not wanting to see you in things they don’t identify you with,” he said in a 1976 interview. “...[E]veryone said, ‘Why the hell is Burt Lancaster doing that? He just finished *Gunfight at the OK Corral*.’”<sup>99</sup>

The outdated mode of publicity used for the film was acknowledged a short two years after the release of *Sweet Smell*, in an article that appeared in *Variety* criticizing the state of film ads. Basing his argument on the fact that film ad copy writers were having trouble finding jobs with other types of ad agencies, Arnold Hirsch wrote, “Movie ads haven’t had a dozen fresh ideas injected into them in 30 years. The format is the same, the art work is the same, the words, basically, are the same.” Howard Pearl, of United Artists, retorted this idea, pointing to the ad campaign for *Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), which he called a “trailblazer in advertising art.” In contrast, Pearl pointed to the “dignified, straight-laced approach” that was taken in order to publicize *Sweet Smell* and the financial disaster which occurred. Pearl recognized that traditional film advertising was ineffective. Hirsch continued his argument, pointing to two “outstanding” films that did not do well in Detroit, blaming the advertising for focusing too heavily on one angle of the film, such as sex or violence.<sup>100</sup> While I’m sure the failure of those two movies in

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<sup>99</sup> “Burt Lancaster: Letting the chips fall.” *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 26, 1976.

<sup>100</sup> “Det. Times Writer Sneers at Film Ads; Gets Retort from UA’s Howard Peal.” *Variety*, June 3, 1959.

Detroit was not entirely the fault of the advertising, the faux pas Hirsch described of focusing too heavily on one angle may have been true for the publicity for *Sweet Smell*.

In addition to the calculated visibility from UA, there were a handful of stories in the press which brought negative attention to HHL and the film. On November 13, 1956, the New York *Daily News* reported on a new movie shooting in New York starring Lancaster, Curtis, Ernest Borgnine, and newcomer Susan Harrison. One week later, a syndicated story appeared across the country stating that Borgnine would be refusing the insulting “walk-on” role he had been offered and had won a restraining order against HHL, ordering them to suspend his contract. After starring in *Marty* (1955), Borgnine said that he was only paid \$35,000 for two loan-out roles while HL got \$150,000 for loaning him.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, some of the earliest stories about the film in the popular press were centered around HHL being sued. Closer to the film’s release, Lancaster overreacted to a critique of the film, bringing more unwanted publicity. In a routine taping session during the promotional tour, “femmecaster” (*Variety* slang for a female television interviewer) Patty Cavin told Lancaster she did not like *Sweet Smell of Success*. According to Cavin, he grabbed the tape, told her she was “not a critic” and ordered her out of his hotel room.<sup>102</sup> In 1953, Lancaster was accused by *Confidential* of attempted rape of an actress reading for a part. Advised not to sue to avoid bringing more publicity to the story, his interaction with Cavin was not the first instance of whisperings of

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<sup>101</sup> “Ernest Borgnine Refuses Role.” *Arizona Daily Star*, November 20, 1956.

<sup>102</sup> “Inside Stuff – Pictures.” *Variety*, July 17, 1957.

violence and aggression around Lancaster when it came to women.<sup>103</sup> The attempts by United Artists to capitalize on what they believed audiences most wanted to see were in some ways negated by circulating news stories around the film, broadcasting a negative aura of production to the public.

### **THE FILM'S CRITICAL RESPONSE**

Speculating about its release in the summer of 1957, *Film Bulletin* predicted that *Sweet Smell* would open big and “ride high on strong word-of-mouth.” These predictions included the idea that the film would be a “smash in the general urban-suburban market, though it’s tone may be a bit too brash and brassy for the rural areas.”<sup>104</sup> Initially, this upbeat outlook was confirmed. The film set a United Artists record at its New York premiere, with a first day gross of \$7,261 at the Loew’s States Theater on Broadway.<sup>105</sup> However, it would soon prove to be a false prediction and the film’s financial performance worsened.

One of the key reasons people did not go see the film was its reviews. Negative reviews present an obvious obstacle to box office success, but even the reviews which praised *Sweet Smell* stood in its way. Critics were shocked at the unexpected roles for the two stars, but even those who ultimately praised the work of Curtis and Lancaster wrote about the film with such aggressive language that praise for the film became buried. One reviewer from Pittsburgh wrote that the characters were “loathsome but fascinating. Ugly

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<sup>103</sup> Bill Kelley, “Lancaster engrossed in ‘Scandal’.” *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, January 21, 1985.

<sup>104</sup> “‘Sweet Smell of Success’ Smells of Box Office Success.” *Film Bulletin*, July 14, 1957.

<sup>105</sup> “‘Sweet’ Sets Record.” *Motion Picture Daily*, July 1, 1957.

and monstrous, but just try and walk away. The movie is a witches' brew of deceit and degeneracy, a repugnant and completely spellbinding safari into the dirty jungle of the dog eat dog."<sup>106</sup> This critic also said the picture was "meritorious" and "well-acted," but these descriptors come after the initial label of "acid." In many reviews, mention of the film's merits was buried under at least one or two paragraphs discussing its "unsavory" nature and the "throat-slicers and backbiters" played by its stars. After this setup, many of the critics went on to praise the cinematography of Howe and Odets' dialogue, as well as the performances of both Lancaster and Curtis. A review in the *Los Angeles Times* ended, "'Sweet Smell' may be unfair to columnists, but it will be relished by all those who seek confirmation of, and take vicarious delight in, the depravity of others. And that includes an awful lot of us."<sup>107</sup> Even if this fascination and enjoyment were widespread, it does not seem likely that there were many who would want to admit to this fact. Lines like this would have alienated potential viewers through their accusatory tone. In addition, many of these positive reviews had titles that were either ambiguous or made their review seem like a heavy indictment of the film. A review in *The Boston Globe* praised the film as "strong and exciting" as well as "sharp, intense and intriguing drama."<sup>108</sup> Yet the title of the review read, "Lancaster and Curtis Co-Stars But Success Is Odious," indicating that the critic is denouncing the film. What reason was there to read the rest of what

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<sup>106</sup> "The New Film: Lancaster, Curtis at Penn in 'Sweet Smell of Success.'" *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 4, 1957.

<sup>107</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, "Gossip Columnist Receives Black Eye in Burt Lancaster Film." *The Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1957.

<sup>108</sup> Marjory Adams, "Lancaster and Curtis Co-Stars But Success Is Odious." *The Boston Globe*, July 19, 1957.

Marjory Adams had to say if she stated front and center that the film is “odious”? The film did have mixed critical reception, receiving positive reviews from a number of critics; however, the organization and formatting of these reviews served as a roadblock to the film’s success.

One of the most influential and highly regarded film critics of the day was Manny Farber, who disliked the film. In *The Nation*, he equated the makers of the film with “a school of ‘hard-working mediocrities’” whose work gave off the feeling of “a high-powered salesman using empty tricks and skills.” He added that Tony Curtis “breaks the Olympic record for fast acting, leaving the viewer with a buzzing head, plus the feeling that the jingle-jangle of hard-sell cinema is a long way from the complicated art of simple picture-making.”<sup>109</sup> Farber disliked anything that might have been considered a liberal social-problem picture. His review was probably the most damning response to the film, particularly since more sophisticated viewers would have valued Farber’s opinion.

Another factor impacting the film’s critical response was that members of the press were personally offended due to *Sweet Smell’s* heavy critique of their industry. Feeling personally attacked, several critics made sure to defend their honor alongside their review of the film. A reviewer from Abilene, Texas, who genuinely liked the film, added this statement to the end of his assessment: “If a West Texas reporter can comment, let it be said the world of columnar intrigue shown in ‘Sweet Smell of Success’ is a world the press outside the inner-most bounds of Manhattan never knows.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success*, 102.

<sup>110</sup> A.C. Greene, “‘Smell of Success’ Fishy, Entertaining.” *Abilene Reporter*, July 21, 1957.

Another review, which was overwhelmingly positive towards the film, made sure to end with the line, “We think that most of our field behave rather like Frank D’Angelo... the only decent representative in the movie today under discussion.”<sup>111</sup> One agent’s anger even became its own news story, the headline reading, “Agent Angry at Curtis’ Acting in ‘Sweet Smell’.”<sup>112</sup> Dan Boutyette, the press agent in question, was infuriated by Curtis’ portrayal: “In the movie, Curtis plays one of the most despicable characters seen on the screen in some time. At no time is he pictured doing a legitimate publicity chore.” A columnist in Orlando said her readers had started asking her if she engaged in any of the unsavory activities shown in *Sweet Smell*, such as receiving kick-backs for column mentions. “Scour the inside of my mouth with red peppers and dispatch me to Russia should I ever stoop so low as to do such a despicable thing,” she responded. Despite all of this, Lancaster publicly found the whole thing funny, one bulletin reading, “Burt Lancaster’s quietly amused by some columnists’ blasts at ‘Sweet Smell of Success’ – it’s going to be a big money-maker.”<sup>113</sup>

Walter Winchell, the columnist on whom the character of JJ Hunsecker is based, reportedly stood across the street from Loew’s States the night of its release, pacing back and forth, waiting for a verdict. He took his time in reveling in the film’s failure, waiting until his December column to gloat that “Hecht, Hill, and Lancaster, the sponsors, will lose \$500,000 on it.... MGM turned down the fable years before.... One of its concocters

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<sup>111</sup> Herbert G. Luft, “As We See It.” *Bnai Brith Messenger*, June, 28, 1957.

<sup>112</sup> “Agent Angry at Curtis’ Acting in ‘Sweet Smell.’” *The Argus Leader*, July 14, 1957.

<sup>113</sup> *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, July 11, 1957.

is reported mending from another collapse.”<sup>114</sup> This last line was a jab at Lehman, Winchell not having forgotten where the story originated. The feud between these two entities was even reported on by other outlets. In October of 1958, *Variety* reported that “Walter Winchell is still taking potshots at Hecht-Hill-Lancaster—since this indie outfit turned out ‘Sweet Smell of Success,’ which was about an unsavory columnist. Latest Winchell barb is that HHL will have three losers in a row if ‘Separate Tables’ fails.”<sup>115</sup> Ironically, Winchell probably lent the production company publicity it would not have otherwise had in his obsessive battering. Regardless, Winchell was not letting go of this grudge, and despite the fact that his influence was waning, it was not completely gone.

#### **SUBVERTING THE STARS’ PERSONAS**

From the critical reception of the film I now move to a textual reading of the film and its performances in order to understand the source of some of the initial critiques, as well as the reasoning for distress among audiences. The way the film subverts and disrupts the traditional classical formula was appreciated by later audiences; however, the liminal space the movie occupied explains how it accomplished some of these functions and yet was met by poor audience reception. While off-casting was not uncommon in *noirs*, *Sweet Smell of Success* was a mainstream star vehicle, making the off-casting of stars of the caliber of Lancaster and Curtis more shocking. I propose that the reason these performances were so disturbing to audiences is not their removal from each star’s

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<sup>114</sup> Walter Winchell, “Walter Winchell: Broadway and Elsewhere.” *The Indianapolis Star*, December 15, 1957.

<sup>115</sup> “Walter Winchell taking hits at HHL,” *Variety*, October 22, 1958.

previous work, but precisely the opposite. The same charm and charisma that Curtis used as a heartthrob is that which makes the slimy press agent Sidney Falco so effective at his job. The physicality of Lancaster is ever present, the kinetic potential of his physical frame transformed from a lively spectacle to be gazed upon into a prowess turned against us, threatening and harrowing. This power mirrors and accentuates the social power of columnist JJ Hunsecker. *Sweet Smell of Success* pulls back the curtain to reveal the tactics of deception and engagement that are used on an audience, leading not only to a repulsion of the individual characters, but a disgust within audiences for having fallen into the trap so obviously set for them. In the following analysis, I write about the way these performances make audiences feel. When the film was first released, the performances were shocking enough that the effect was one of rejection. As time has passed, and the shock value has reduced, I believe these performances still instill a feeling of disgust, however it is much subdued from how an audience member would have reacted in 1957, resulting in a greater sense of fascination and appreciation for the actor's performances.

Working from Max Weber's definition of charismatic leadership, Kyle Stevens develops a notion of charisma in relation to acting. "In role-playing games," he explains, "charisma is an attribute that determines a character's effectiveness. In social interactions, charm is cast by a character in order to bring a target under one's influence."<sup>116</sup> Curtis utilizes this charisma in his role as Falco, turning on his charm when

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<sup>116</sup> John Bruns, "Tony Curtis in 'Sweet Smell of Success.'" In *Close-Up: Great Cinematic Performances*, eds. Murray Pomerene and Kyle Stevens (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 126.

he needs someone to be brought under his spell and turning it off just as quickly when he has no need for the people around him. This same charisma was the reason teenaged girls were swept under Curtis' influence; the same quality which led James Naremore to describe him as a "duck-tailed heart-throb for teenage girls."<sup>117</sup>

Dudley Andrew's theory of adaptation helps to explain how these same performances can be transformed from engaging to repulsing. Andrew points out that in a strong sense, "adaptation is the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text."<sup>118</sup> Because of this, every cinematic rendering "will exist in relation to some prior whole lodged unquestioned in the personal or public system of experience."<sup>119</sup> This can be directly applied to star performances, where expectations are formed on the basis of previous work, the genre these stars work within, and their presentation in these films. Andrew goes on to outline three different modes of relation between film and text: borrowing, intersecting, and fidelity and transformation. He defines intersection as the opposite of borrowing, where the original text is preserved to such an extent that it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation, leading to a "refraction" of the original.<sup>120</sup> While the performances Curtis and Lancaster give are assimilated into *Sweet Smell of Success* in the sense that they do not appear out of place or inappropriate for the rest of the film, they do lead to a refraction of their performances. In a way, these performances are adapted from

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>118</sup> Dudley Andrews, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 463.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 465.

genres such as action, comedy, and drama, and placed into neo-noir, changing their effect, their reception, and their response from audiences.

Beginning with Curtis' performance, I propose that the reason his charisma transforms so completely from endearing to odious is the behind-the-scenes view of his profession the audience is offered. As the targets of this charisma, the subject Curtis attempts to bring under his influence, it is easy to fall into the spell of his pretty face without trepidation. However, when the curtain is pulled back and the process of manipulation that is involved with this charisma is revealed, the audience pities not only the characters Falco targets, but themselves, angry and embarrassed to have fallen for the same exact tactics. The charisma utilized by Falco, and subsequently Curtis, is addressed directly in *Sweet Smell of Success* when Falco joins Hunsecker at the restaurant, Twenty-One. To try to draw attention away from himself, Senator Walker, seated across from JJ, asks if Mr. Falco is an actor. The girl with Walker follows up, asking the same question. When Hunsecker asks how they would have guessed, she responds, "He's so pretty, that's all." The film directly draws attention to the physical beauty Curtis himself uses in order to engage and enthrall audiences, particularly women.

Hunsecker, however, is quick to appropriate this notion of Falco as an actor, replying that he is a man of forty faces, not one. When asking how she could have known, the camera cuts back to a shot of the three figures across the table (Fig. 1). We see the senator and agent Manny Davis with apprehensive looks on their faces, sensing the danger they have possibly put Falco in. However, the girl, seated in between these men, is focused on Falco's prettiness, engaged in the same way a fan would be with

Curtis. Despite the question being addressed to Falco directly, Hunsecker is the one who answers. The camera cuts back to Hunsecker and Falco in a medium shot (Fig 2). While Falco sits straight up with perfect posture, he is still dwarfed in comparison to Hunsecker, who is slouched down a bit, hunched over the table. Even in his most upright position, Falco is unable to match the power of Hunsecker. As JJ continues to describe Falco's many faces, including that of the charming street urchin, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Falco (Fig. 3), his face in the middle of the frame, a rather sincere grin upon his lips as he listens to the description. Cutting back to both Hunsecker and Falco (Fig. 4), the grin on Falco's face has elevated from a slight grin to pure amusement. Not only is he smiling along to the rather awful description Hunsecker is giving him, he is amused by it, perhaps out of a recognition of its truth.



Figure 1: From left to right: Manny Davis (Jay Adler), Linda James (Autumn Russell), and Sen. Harvey Walker (William Forrest) sit opposite Hunsecker and Falco.



Figure 2: Falco sits behind Hunsecker, subordinate even in stature.



Figure 3: Falco basks in Hunsecker's description of him as a press agent.



Figure 4: Falco continues to grin, amused by the awful description Hunsecker gives.

While Hunsecker's description of Falco is in relation to him being a "hungry press agent," the deconstruction of the use of charm and different faces in order to fully utilize the tricks of his slimy trade can be applied to the role of an actor as well.

Particularly since the conversation begins with a comment on how pretty Curtis is, the recognition that we, as the audience, are the subjects of this self-serving masquerading is what makes Curtis' character so despicable. Gilles Deleuze restates Eisenstein, who suggested that "the close-up was not merely one type of image among others but gave an affective reading of the whole film."<sup>121</sup> The scene in *Twenty One* with Falco presents an excellent example of this. Removing the off-screen narration from Hunsecker, Falco's face tells the story of his entire character, and, ultimately, of the entire film. The smug look on Curtis' face is an indication of his recognition of his participation in this deception, not apologetic or upset, but amused by his ability to trick those he desires to.

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<sup>121</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87.

While Curtis' duality and falsity are described to us by Hunsecker at Twenty One, we are also offered a direct look at Falco's transitions between roles. After the scene at the restaurant, he returns to his office, which doubles as his apartment, reminding us how much of the self is staged and rehearsed.<sup>122</sup> The role Falco plays in the outside world is dropped, but not for a sweet and likable demeanor. His authentic self is opportunistic and self-aware of the way he takes advantage. "I'm nice to people where it pays me to be nice," he says to his secretary. "I do it enough on the outside so don't expect me to do it in my own office." He says this standing in his bedroom, looking into his vanity as he changes. The door between his bedroom and his living room/office should act as a threshold, a divider between personal and private, but there is none (Fig. 5). When Falco asks Rita to come over after her shift as a cigarette girl, his bedroom is where he convinces her to sleep with another press agent so that the agent will do Falco a favor (Fig. 6). The other agent waits in the office space, but the real work Falco does is in his bedroom where Rita is. Later on, when Steve comes to the office to confront Falco about a smear he believes he placed in the paper, their confrontation takes place in his office (Fig. 7). However, after Steve leaves, Falco takes his phone, runs the line under his bedroom door, and calls Hunsecker (Fig. 8). Though he closes the door to his office, it is a false gesture, one performed out of social decorum rather than sincerity. Falco's home, the place where he should let go and be himself, reveals that his sincere self really is the sleazy opportunist we want to believe is just an act.

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<sup>122</sup> Bruns, "Tony Curtis", 129.



Figure 5: Falco's work space and personal space have no separation.



Figure 6: Falco convinces Rita (Barbara Nichols) to do him a favor in his bedroom, mixing his private and public life.



Figure 7: Falco puts on a front for Steve Dallas (Marty Milner) and his agent in his office.



Figure 8: Falco returns to his bedroom to call Hunsecker and reveals the real work at play.

Despite the fact that we should dislike Falco for his deceptive nature, we also feel for him, developing a certain level of empathy as Hunsecker chastises him brutally throughout the film. John Bruns recognizes this inability to fully hate Falco as an additional reason for the repulsive reaction we have to his character. He “remains

somewhat enigmatic, neither entirely villainous nor entirely likable, or both at the same time.”<sup>123</sup> There were plenty of despicable characters in *noir* films that did not generate nearly the same amount of hatred among viewers, but watching Falco generates a hatred directed at ourselves, and a fear that we do not in fact completely hate him but find some level of interest and sympathy while watching.

In part, this reaction comes from the film’s violation of the implicit promises made by classical Hollywood, particularly in regard to explicability, legibility, and clarity. Thus, audience expectations at the film’s release versus expectations at later viewings are a large factor in the transition from a rejection of these characters and the film, to an appreciation and fascination with the performances. One of the film’s major goals is to unearth and expose the artifice and manipulation behind any great performance, which classical Hollywood cinema works to obscure and de-emphasize. Robert Ray discusses the formal and thematic paradigms of American cinema in the classical era, at the forefront of which is the “systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie’s narrative.”<sup>124</sup> Classical Hollywood was committed to the idea of the invisible style, which centered around *mise-en-scène* and editing. The goal of much of this was to draw the viewer in to become engrossed in the world of the film, and Hollywood worked hard to make sure that anything which drew attention to the film as a film was smoothed over and eliminated. One of the clearest violations of this trope in *Sweet Smell* is the dialogue. The director, Alexander Mackendrick, felt the script was far

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>124</sup> Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 32.

too literary, the lines bringing attention to the fact that they were written.<sup>125</sup> The New York Times praised the film for its ““high-toned street vernacular that no real New Yorker has ever spoken, but that every real New Yorker wishes he could.””<sup>126</sup> Some of the film’s most iconic lines are obviously reflexive in the fact that they could not possibly be improvised. This includes Hunsecker’s insult to Falco, that “I’d hate to take a bite out of you. You’re a cookie full of arsenic.” Another particularly self-aware instance is the policeman calling out to Falco: “Come back here, Sidney. I want to chastise you.” Only in this literary, highly composed world would a cop, characterized by his thuggish behavior in every other sense, intimidate someone in this way.

#### **LANCASTER’S PHYSICALITY AS SOCIAL POWER**

Lancaster’s star persona is similarly subverted and apparently was just as off-putting to audiences as Curtis’ was at the time. The physical strength Lancaster demonstrates in his earlier films, such as *The Crimson Pirate* (1952) and *From Here to Eternity* (1953) morphs in *Sweet Smell* into political and social power. However, Lancaster’s performance as Hunsecker is no less focused on his body, even without any shot of the star’s shirtless chest. While Curtis shows his nerves through fidgeting—wringing his hands, biting his nails—Lancaster shows his power through stasis and certainty. No move Hunsecker makes is uncalculated, both physically and socially. In the scene I previously mentioned when Falco calls JJ from his bedroom, JJ is sitting when he

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<sup>125</sup> Aubrey Malone, *The Defiant One: A Biography of Tony Curtis* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 62.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

receives the call, his body is relaxed, shoulders bent, arm rested on his leg (Fig. 9). However, when Falco suggests getting Steve his job back, a notion that Hunsecker does not like at all, his body language changes. His figure goes from relaxed to poised for action in a matter of seconds (Fig. 10).



Figure 9: Hunsecker, relaxed on the phone.



Figure 10: Hunsecker immediately repositions his body when he hears news he doesn't like.

With one arm on the back of his chair, his torso bent forward, the other arm rested bent on the table, in a different outfit he would be the perfect image of a track star, waiting for the starting gun to go off. There is a multitude of kinetic energy, the potential for movement evident. His displeasure with Falco and the social power he has to destroy him if things go wrong is mirrored directly in Lancaster's physicality.

This matching of social power with physical power is in full display when Steve and Susie arrive at the set of JJ's TV show. The scene begins with an angled shot of Hunsecker looking at Steve from the ground standing on stage, Hunsecker's body directly in the middle of the screen, his figure forbidding (Fig. 11). While this shot is not directly the view from the ground floor, it is reminiscent of the imposing figure Steve, Susie, and Steve's agent see when they come down the aisle. The camera cuts to a shot

from behind Hunsecker, looking over the auditorium (Fig. 12). His back is to the camera, but it takes up half of the screen. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of Steve who looks nervously at Susie, both of them in motion while JJ remains still (Fig. 13). The camera cuts in a reverse shot back to Hunsecker from the same perspective as the first, tilted up from below. He slowly descends towards the group that has come to meet him, gracing them with his presence. When he finally reaches their level, his figure takes up nearly one third of the screen, the other four characters squeezed into the remaining frame. As Hunsecker and Steve talk, JJ puts his hands on his hips, moving his suit jacket back and pushing out his chest, a display of physical masculinity and power, even as he talks circles around Steve (Fig. 14). Steve's shoulders remain hunched, his body cloaked in his overcoat, his hands in his pockets. Once again, the power Hunsecker possesses is mirrored by his physical presence. His movements are deliberate, unlike those of Falco. After talking for a bit, JJ says to Steve, "Now you do me a favor." These words are accompanied by three hand gestures, no hesitation or trepidation. He points to Steve on the word "you," himself on the word "me," and once again towards Steve on the word "favor." His gestures have forethought and come across as self-consciously choreographed. His power over Susie and the world is displayed not only through his speech but through his physical comportment and power. While the other actors considered for the role may have looked more like Winchell, Lancaster is able to be the physical embodiment of violence, giving a visualization to the violence of Hunsecker's words.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Naremore, "Commentary."



Figure 1: Hunsecker stands as an opposing and foreboding figure.



Figure 2: Looking out over Hunsecker's domain.



Figure 3: Dallas is nervous and apprehensive seeing this figure above him.



Figure 4: Hunsecker pushes out his chest in a show of masculinity.

In comparison to Lancaster's roles in *Trapeze* and *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, the subversion of his physical strength from desirable to intimidating was a stark contrast.

Audiences viewing the film years later would not have had such a fervent image of Lancaster in their minds. In addition to growing cultural cynicism and an interest in anti-heroes, Lancaster's performance as Hunsecker can be viewed without such a high-level of shock value but instead with fascination and appreciation.

### **THE FILM'S USE OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY**

Shifting from the actors' performances to the film as a whole, including its editing, cinematography, and plot, I explore the film's use of self-reflexivity, fracturing and subverting the classic "invisible" editing, and the subordination of everything else to narrative. These techniques were praised by audiences in the late 1960s and 1970s who looked back fondly on the genre of *noir*. At the time of the film's release, however, these same techniques were off-putting for audiences expecting another Hollywood star vehicle. One of the film's most ideological reflexive moments comes when Falco pretends to make a call to Hunsecker, showing off false influence over the columnist in order to get himself hired as Herbie Temple's press agent. The scene begins with Falco telling the men that he isn't there to con them: "I'm not here to try to sell anything and I'm not going to peddle anything. But, when I tell a client I can get him space in Hunsecker's column, it's not talk!" Technically, since Falco knows Temple is going to be in the column already, he isn't lying about his name being there—just that he was the one to do it. Falco moves away from the two men into the phone booth to prove himself after his claim. The first shot of him sitting in the phone booth places him in the middle of the screen, flanked by the telephone on the right third of the screen, and the left third filled

with two showgirls (Fig. 15). The showgirls are symbols of glitz and fantasy; their costumes are meant to entice and enhance, creating a fantasy to be eaten up by the audience. These showgirls mirror the telephone in this scene, indicating the telephone as prop for Falco. Just as the showgirls rely on their costumes (these two half-in and half-out of their performance uniforms), Falco is relying on the phone as a prop to get himself this job. In addition, in this shot, Falco is farthest from the camera, emphasizing the incredible lack of deep space he has. Not only does he not have any deep space, he is positioned past the wall, inside of the booth. His actions place him in such tight position, that he has even less than deep space; his debt to Hunsecker appears to be growing and growing. The position of the booth also demonstrates what Falco is willing to do to get a client. He moves beyond any reasonable tactic to commit such acts of deception that they are beyond what most would even consider in order to do business. The camera cuts back to Herbie and his manager, worried that they will have to pay Falco (Fig. 16), who reassures them, “Relax, lump. I told you, I wasn’t peddling any fish today.” This line is said after the camera cuts to a close-up of Falco, phone to his ear (Fig. 17). The camera cuts to his office, where Mary, his secretary has answered the phone (Fig. 18). The shots are connected by a sound bridge of Falco’s voice. At first confused, she soon realizes what Falco is up to and puts down the phone. As she places it down on the desk, the camera follows the phone, leaving her behind.

The camera cuts back to Falco in the phonebooth, this time from inside, looking out—an impossible shot (Fig. 19). The comedian and his manager stand behind Falco, the backstage looming behind the two of them, the curtains open to see the larger theater.

Behind them is a great amount of deep space. While we as the audience know Falco's lies, the pair of them seem to be getting a real deal, and are offered a decision to make: do they hire Falco or don't they? In reality, it is a false deep space, a decision based on lies and deception. This shot of Falco lasts a full 35 seconds, and as we have seen there is no one on the other end of the call, it becomes a brilliantly deceptive monologue. As he "talks" to Hunsecker, he puts his fingers to his temple, trying to think of the right words to say, editing as he goes along. Of course, the line he comes up with he read from the early edition of the column, but he puts just the right hesitations and corrections into his speech that he sells it to the comedian, who begs his manager to speak to Falco. Once he hangs up the phone, the camera cuts back to Temple and his manager (Fig. 20), the camera pulling away to include Falco within the shot as he walks away from the two men (Fig. 21). Despite his precarious bet, Falco does have the power here, and he pulls the camera.



Figure 5: Falco pretends to make a call to Hunsecker's office.



Figure 6: Herbie Temple (Joe Frisco) and his agent are nervous they will have to pay Falco.



Figure 7: Cut to a close-up of Falco reassuring them as he makes the call.



Figure 8: Cut to Falco's office, where his secretary answers the phone, not Hunsecker.



Figure 9: Cut to an impossible shot, looking out of the phone box, behind Falco.



Figure 10: Cut back to Temple and his agent.



Figure 11: The camera is drawn by Falco and pulls back until he is in the shot.

The reflexivity in this scene is multi-fold. Denise Mann points out the allusion the scene makes to behind-the-scenes Hollywood deal making, which is one manner in which it pulls back the curtain. It is also an instance of Falco doing to Temple what Curtis is doing to the audience. Falco puts on a performance that he has crafted for years, pretending to have influence over Hunsecker, and maneuvering his proto-clients with it. He even has some of his lines written for him, despite the fact that he is pretending that he is improvising. In the same way, Curtis puts on a performance for the audience he has been crafting for years—not only acting in general, but his charisma and manipulation. His lines are written for him, delivered as though made up on the spot, given to us as though he truly is Sidney Falco. Stylistically, Mann addresses the disruption of the classical Hollywood “invisible” editing through the subversion of the shot-reverse-shot combination. She explains:

in its classical context it is intended to bind character and viewer together in a seamless, identificational nexus. Here, however, the falsity of the situation reveals the fallacy of the formal device. Discontinuity rather than continuity is the upshot of Falco's 'phony' call, a discontinuity which is extended spatially when Falco's secretary...sets the phone on the desk while going about her job.<sup>128</sup>

Instead of creating identification with his character, this scene pushes the audience even farther away. Without being able to see the reverse shot, the audience is implicated in the reverse. We look on from an impossible perspective, the implication being that we are who is on the other end of the phone. The reverse shot cannot happen because we cannot look at ourselves. The goal, perhaps, is to make the audience feel as if we are in on the ploy, we are connected to Falco through the phone, answering and passively accepting what we know is a complete lie. Instead of feeling closer to Falco, we push ourselves away from this, feeling disgust at being witness to this interaction. By doing so and distancing ourselves from Falco, we feel as though we are being lied to and taken advantage of, moving the viewers even farther away from the character. This subverts the invisible editing of classic Hollywood as far as possible without crossing the line into experimental or "art" cinema.

#### **PLACING THE FILM WITHIN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

*Sweet Smell of Success* operates in a number of ways as a film ahead of its time. This includes the prominent self-reflexivity, which disrupts the traditional classical formula. While these aspects of the film were appreciated by audiences later on, the transitional moment in which the film was released explains how the film was able to

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<sup>128</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 220.

employ these elements but was received poorly by audiences. Due to the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings and the Cold War, the early 1950s stripped away much of the progressive and socially critical work being done in Hollywood. Combined with the rise of television and a declining movie audience, studios were concerned with making pure entertainment, relying on color and CinemaScope to bring back viewers. Lev writes that as popular genres changed, *Sweet Smell of Success* drew on the noir style not to “reassure but to astonish and even discomfort us.”<sup>129</sup> In drawing on European influences, as well as pushing the boundaries of cynicism and subversion, *Sweet Smell* is one of the predecessors for the New Hollywood.

By the early 1950s, the Production Code had begun to come into conflict with audience interests as well as industry conditions. After World War II, American audiences were more worldly and, due to the rising popularity of psychoanalysis, sexuality was no longer quite as taboo as it had been. As early as 1953, United Artists decided to release a film without the seal of approval from the Production Code Administration (PCA), resigning from the MPAA to do so. Otto Preminger’s *The Moon is Blue* had a limited release but was critically praised and broke box office records where it was able to be shown.<sup>130</sup> What audiences desired no longer aligned with the morals of the PCA.

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<sup>129</sup> Peter Lev, *History of the American Cinema: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), 217.

<sup>130</sup> John E. Semonche, *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 121.

The fading power of the PCA can be seen in the various interactions *Sweet Smell* had with the Production Code. Before Lehman's original story was even published, his agent, George Wilner, circulated the manuscript among Hollywood producers. On May 16, 1949, Joseph Breen of the PCA sent a letter to three producers who had shown interest: Robert Lord of Santana Pictures, Robert Vogel of MGM, and Samuel Bischoff of Regal Films. He explained that the story was unacceptable due to the hints of incestuous love, the use of marijuana cigarettes planted on an innocent party, and the final scene when Hunsecker murders Sidney and is not punished. In 1949, Breen was successful in shutting down development for any film utilizing the story. However, in 1954, Breen retired from the PCA, handing the reins to Geoffrey Shurlock, who was more flexible than Breen. This explains how despite the existence of a substantial folder on *Sweet Smell of Success* within the PCA archives, the film was still given the seal of approval. In fact, the same three elements Breen pointed out were still judged unacceptable and an additional concern arose with the representation of the police through the character of Kello. The PCA wanted to add something to the film saying that he was not typical of the police force and would get his comeuppance. All of these concerns were ignored—all three elements still appear in the final film, and there is no indication that Kello will face any consequences for his actions. It was a precarious time for the Production Code, as a number of independently produced films pushed against the Code. In order to maintain some control, the Code became more liberalized, which is evidenced by much of the material which remained in *Sweet Smell*. These instances,

when paired with the violent and abrasive dialogue written by Odets, may have been the cause of some audience members' shock and rejection of the film.

The year *Sweet Smell of Success* was released it followed two other movies focused on exposing and attacking media demagogues: *The Great Man* (1956) and *A Face in the Crowd* (1957). While *The Great Man* tackled radio and *A Face in the Crowd* took on television, many of the reviews for *Sweet Smell* began by saying it was yet another in a series of exposés. The review in the *Los Angeles Times* plainly stated that despite *Sweet Smell* being “quite effective, as it was with Andy Griffith in ‘A Face in the Crowd’—now, between the two [films] we have had it.”<sup>131</sup> *A Face in the Crowd* was released just one month before *Sweet Smell*, and was still playing when *Sweet Smell* was released. Next to the reviews of *Sweet Smell* in nearly all of the New York papers were advertisements for *A Face in the Crowd*. Not only was Lancaster competing with himself, as *Trapeze* and *Gunfight at the OK Corral* played at the same time, he was competing with a film containing overlapping themes and criticisms.

Whereas Hecht-Hill-Lancaster balanced its artistic pursuits with more financially secure projects, such as *Trapeze*, Newtown Productions, the company behind *A Face in the Crowd* and Elia Kazan's production company, allowed Kazan to focus on films he believed in, regardless of box office prospect. Kazan and writer Budd Schulberg represented themselves as artists rebelling against the system “all the way,” in contrast to

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<sup>131</sup> Philip K. Scheuer, “Gossip Columnist Receives Black Eye in Burt Lancaster Film,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1957.

HHL.<sup>132</sup> While Lancaster and Curtis were cast against type, *A Face in the Crowd* followed a string of other socially-conscious films including *On The Waterfront* (1954), from both Kazan and Schulberg, and *East of Eden* (1955), from just Kazan. Kazan and Schulberg's latest socially critical project was right on brand for the pair. Audiences had some sense of what to expect from the writer/director team, and Andy Griffith was a newcomer to the screen after making a name for himself on Broadway. While Griffith may have been pigeon-holed later on in his career, in 1957 he was free to play a womanizing manipulative alcoholic without any preconceived notions from the audience. The film received mixed critical reviews, however this was mostly due to the actions of Kazan, who voluntarily testified in the HUAC hearings in 1952, promptly publishing a piece in the *New York Times* explaining in detail why he had named seventeen people as communists, including a "detailed political defense of each of his plays and films."<sup>133</sup> The right-wing press attacked both the film and its creators for being anti-American, while the left-wing press praised the film in addition to attacking Kazan.

Box office figures for *A Face in the Crowd* are elusive; however, the film may have been more palatable for audiences than *Sweet Smell of Success* for a number of reasons. Most prominently is the construction of the narrative, in which we are shown the progression of Lonesome Rhodes from harmless drunk to manipulative demagogue. A review in *Variety* noted that *Face* probes deeper than its predecessor *The Great Man*, unmasking not only the fraud that is Rhodes, but also "the influences in America that

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<sup>132</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 233.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

make an unknown a national hero overnight.”<sup>134</sup> One of the main complaints from critics writing about *Sweet Smell* was that the audience is given no indication as to why Falco acts the way he does. Since this was the beginning of a more adventurous period in Hollywood regard to genre-bending and pushing Production Code boundaries, many viewers had difficulty in interpreting the unusual characters on screen, expecting what they had previously been given. Ray discusses the need for explicit character development in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Jim Stark’s (James Dean) behavior is accounted for through the absence of a strong father.<sup>135</sup> In *A Face in the Crowd*, we witness the changes in Rhodes’ character and are shown the forces that push him towards his downfall. This provided the kind of back story that critics and audiences found lacking in *Sweet Smell*’s characterization of Sidney. Aubrey Malone argues that the film was “too far ahead of its time in its evocation of sleaziness,” part of the reason being audiences’ inability to understand Falco’s behavior. “Critics tried in vain to relate this Tony Curtis to the one they knew and loved from previous movies,” she writes. “Was there something in Falco’s childhood that could explain his ‘unscrupulous drive’?”<sup>136</sup> These questions are reminiscent of the concerns MGM had in their original treatment of the story.

The audiences’ need for a motive was not isolated to Falco’s behavior. A review in the *Vancouver Sun* complained that we are “never told precisely WHY the glitter-eyed

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<sup>134</sup> “Picture Reviews: *A Face in the Crowd*,” *Variety*, May 28, 1957, 3.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>136</sup> Malone, *The Defiant One*, 64.

Hunsecker is so over-protective toward his sister.”<sup>137</sup> Falco’s acidic nature and Lancaster’s unsavoriness were not yet features of society people wanted to see on screen in a Hollywood film. Without a reason, without a clear way to understand why Falco acted the way he did, he is simply a product of the worst parts of American culture. With regard to Hunsecker, the incestual undertones are clearly stated, but reviews repeatedly reiterated a desire to understand the psychological reasoning for this sort of behavior. Without any sort of sociological explanation, these two figures are frightening. It becomes more difficult for an audience member to distance themselves from the characters. They are not able to rationalize the differences between their own upbringing or family life and that of those on screen. Ray discusses Octave Mannoni’s proposal that belief in an illusion rests on identification with some element of that illusion. One of the more obvious cases for this in film are the characters, and classic Hollywood urged the spectator “to merge himself with the movie’s heroes or heroines.”<sup>138</sup> Without a reason as to why Falco or Hunsecker are the way they are, identification with them is an unnerving prospect. As previously discussed in the phonebooth scene, not only does the viewer not identify with Falco, but rejects any sense of identification.

While both films are cynical takedowns of media personnel, *Sweet Smell* embodies a noir aesthetic in a way *A Face in the Crowd* does not. In fact, *A Face in the Crowd* utilizes lighter humor throughout the film. As the audience we are able to enjoy moments of Rhodes’ TV show at face value, laughing along with the rest of America

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<sup>137</sup> Clyde Gilmour, “Sweet Smell of Success Has Remarkable Odor of Decay.” *The Vancouver Sun*, July 25, 1957.

<sup>138</sup> Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 38.

before diving back into the complications behind the screen. This is missing from *Sweet Smell*, which is more entrenched within the *noir* style. The peak of *noir* was from 1941 to 1958, so by 1957 its popularity had dwindled.<sup>139</sup> Much of the *noir* feeling in *Sweet Smell of Success* comes from the film's cinematography, as well as the jazzy score by Elmer Bernstein. The film does embody *noir* themes but bends them, such as the film's portrayal of violence. James Naremore discusses the way *noir* replaces melodramatic "combat of arms between hero and villain, with a richly elaborated 'ceremony of killing.'"<sup>140</sup> The majority of violence in *Sweet Smell* is not physical, and yet the combination of Lancaster's embodiment of violence, discussed above, and the violent nature of the dialogue give the film a brutal undertone. The film as a whole can be seen as a story about the death of Sidney Falco, fulfilling the concept of ceremonial killing. Part of the film's *noir*ness comes from the theme of McCarthy-esque whistleblowing. The congressional hunts for communists in Hollywood were themselves a kind of *noir* scenario, Naremore argues.

After 1947, when the hearings began, many of the leftist filmmakers were treated as outlaws, making some of their best pictures "from the point of view of criminals."<sup>141</sup> This point of view foreshadowed the films of the 1960s and '70s. For example, *Gun Crazy* (1950) directly influenced *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). In many of the films of the period, the atmosphere of disillusionment had little to do with the nation as a whole, but more to do with a specific community that "could no longer maintain its Depression-era

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<sup>139</sup> Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success*, 2.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

faith that America would someday evolve into a socialist democracy.”<sup>142</sup> It is during this era, and within these films, that the feasibility and reality of the American Dream was challenged. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, many of the key creative figures working on *Sweet Smell* had been deeply affected by the HUAC hearings, including Lancaster, Hecht, Elmer Bernstein and Odets. Naremore discusses *Sweet Smell of Success* as part of a group of films that involved a victim of the HUAC hearings returning to the “scene of the crime,” such as Rossen’s *Hustler* (1961). In working on *Sweet Smell*, Odets was able to obtain some form of revenge. The film directly addresses not only McCarthyism, but also the downside of the American Dream, the consequence of what occurs when one has too much power. Philip Kemp comments that it is “remarkable” for this film to have come out of the middle fifties, “when the prevailing tenor of American movies, as Nora Sayre observes, was ‘that ours was a splendid society, and that one ought to cooperate with it rather than criticize it.’”<sup>143</sup>

It is difficult to discern the specific effects of the Cold War atmosphere, the blacklist, and other industrial and social changes, such as the rise of television and declining audiences. It is telling that during this period Frank Capra’s career took a downturn; it was difficult to market “populist fables” in a Cold War era that was sensitive to anything that looked like social criticism.<sup>144</sup> Some of the results of these changes included a concern with America’s presentation abroad, an urgent struggle because of the Cold War struggle for world dominance. The Motion Picture Service (MPS), a branch of

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>143</sup> Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, 148.

<sup>144</sup> Lev, *History of American Cinema*, 77.

the United States Information Service (USIS), was in charge of producing and distributing documentary films that would be shown in USIS posts in 87 countries, as well as recommending films for showing in Eastern Europe and international film festivals. USIS went so far as to “blacklist” certain films from distribution in 12 countries (Burma, Chile, Indonesia, Israel, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, Spain, Formosa, Turkey, Vietnam and Yugoslavia). *Sweet Smell of Success* was included among the 82 banned films, presumably due the fact that the film presents a negative image of America.<sup>145</sup> Unlike some of the more traditional film noirs, *Sweet Smell* is not only revealing the seedy underbelly of American culture, but attacking and critiquing the way Americans receive their news—entertainment related or otherwise.

*Sweet Smell of Success* can be thought of as noir, but it can also be thought of in relation to the “problem pictures” of the day. Ray outlines the concept of the social problem picture, films which arose during this period that dug into some of the more serious issues in the US and abroad: anti-Semitism, class divisiveness, drug abuse, and racism, to name a few. While these films may seem to be in contrast to the pure entertainment the studios were focused on, they followed some of the basic tropes of classical Hollywood, offering abrupt resolutions that were usually unrealistically optimistic. These endings were difficult for audiences to accept, especially as the depictions of the “problems” became more realistic and more troubling.

While not a problem picture in the traditional sense, *Sweet Smell of Success* does present a problematic view of power and manipulation in the entertainment industry. The

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 100.

film offers an unrealistically optimistic ending for Susie that is unsatisfactory not only for its un-believability but also for the fact that it does not solve any of the major issues the film investigates. The ending of the film finds Falco punished for his behavior through physical violence, and Hunsecker punished for his behavior through his sister's rejection of him once and for all. This ending is problematic for a number of reasons, the first being the unrealistic nature of Susie mustering up the courage and strength to turn Hunsecker against Falco and then walk out of his life. Throughout the entire picture, Susie has been subordinate to men—first her brother and then her fiancé, Steve. Despite the fact that she wants to be with Steve and is forced to be with her brother, she is shown to be an incredibly weak personality. The amount of manipulation and confidence it would take to trick Sidney into coming over to the apartment, fake a suicide attempt, and then turn this against Sidney once JJ returns home is not a personality trait that we have seen from her in any instance of the film. While she is able to turn Falco out on the street without JJ's protection and attain a "happy ending" in the sense that she is able to walk out of her brother's life, its lack of believability dampens the effect, leaving audiences feeling unsatisfied. A notice in the *Hollywood Reporter* asked for even more optimism at the end of the film, believing that "this mood of unrelieved ugliness could have been lightened by a final scene between Miss Harrison and Milner. It would not have harmed the honesty of the picture and would have heightened the happy note that is already implicit."<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Mann, *Hollywood Independents*, 233.

This is not the only problematic aspect of this ending. While Falco is punished by the police, presumably—but not definitively—taken to jail, the manipulative power structures that Hunsecker has enacted that allow him to operate the way that he does are still in place. JJ may be distraught over his sister for the moment, but there are an abundance of questions after the last shot of the film. Will Susie really be free of JJ? Will he be able to use his influence to find her again? Will any of this change JJ’s behavior? Or will he go on manipulating people’s lives just as he had before? The film is a fascinating study of the power columnists held in the era, but there is no satisfying resolution, simply a reconciliation that is “transparently mythological,” or quite evidently implausible.<sup>147</sup> By the late 1950s the boundaries of genre had begun to break down, and Hollywood production had entered its postclassical era. Navigating this experimentation while still producing a film that was potentially financially viable required holding on to certain elements of the classic Hollywood style, such as the film’s positive ending. Ten years later, the success of films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), clearly indicated that an unresolved ending had become more accepted by audiences, particularly as they had been exposed to the alternative poetics of European art films of the 1950s and 1960s. It is in this New Hollywood era that unapologetic cynicism and ambition could be more accepted in characters.

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<sup>147</sup> Ray, *A Certain Tendency*, 153.

## FINDING NEW LIFE IN A NEW HOLLYWOOD

The initial commercial and critical failures quickly pushed *Sweet Smell of Success* from public view, but this was just the beginning of the film's life cycle. Moving into a new era of Hollywood, the sorts of antiheroes that drove audiences away in the 1950s began to appear more often. Film societies and art cinemas opened in cities and college towns across the United States, and their programming revisited films from decades before with a sense of nostalgia and new-found appreciation. From widespread visibility due to television and a changing national zeitgeist, *Sweet Smell of Success* was re-discovered by filmmakers and audiences, its reputation changing from complete failure to one of the most effective encapsulations of 1950s America.

One indicator of this is the reversal of the phrase itself. Before 1957, the phrase "Sweet smell of success" appeared in newspapers around the country only in reference to pre-production news for the film. After its release, the phrase appears thousands of times in use with no relation to the film. "I can still remember that phrase popping into my head," Lehman reminisced in an interview from 1972. "I was in my apartment one Saturday afternoon, writing that episode where the press agent visits the columnist's home for the first time. The guy's overwhelmed by the opulence around him—the fragrance of the rich, the sweet smell of success. I remember thinking at the time that might not be a bad title."<sup>148</sup> In 1977, he commented on the phrase's popularity once again: "I tried to have it put into 'Bartlett's Familiar Quotations'," he said, "but I was told

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<sup>148</sup> Harry Haun, "Lehman's 'Complaint' Couldn't Be Sweeter." *The Tennessean*, July 2, 1972.

no future editions were planned.”<sup>149</sup> Whatever can be said for the film’s initial cultural impact, the phrase assertively found its way into the popular lexicon.

The film’s present ubiquity came not only through the popularity of its title. By the late 1940s, non-network time on television was dominated by B-films made by the minor studios. Due to the industry’s reliance on recorded material and the need to fill weekly programming schedules, daily broadcasts of old theatrical films was standard practice at nearly every television station. In December 1955, RKO sold their pre-1948 film library to the C&C TV corporation, and by the end of the 1950s nearly all of the majors were releasing the majority of their pre-1948 libraries for television consumption. In the early 1960s, channels began to schedule in time for movies as a part of their programming, beginning with NBC’s *NBC Saturday Night at the Movies*.<sup>150</sup> Afraid that the material pre-1948 might bore audiences or further lower the perceived quality of television, networks began to seek out post-1948 material, making a series of lucrative deals with the major studios. In 1962, United Artists packaged 33 post-1950 films to sell to television, including *Sweet Smell of Success*.<sup>151</sup> While the film ran into a few bumps—ABC rejected *Sweet Smell* and *The Defiant Ones* (1958), stating they were not suitable for TV audiences—the film did appear on TV with regularity. In 1963, *The Vancouver Sun* recommended *Sweet Smell* as the best option among those available on late night televised film. Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, the film was being shown frequently on television on dozens of channels and was back in the public eye, allowing

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<sup>149</sup> Jerry Buck, “Screenwriter-author likes the bad guys.” *Austin-American Statesman*, September 18, 1977.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>151</sup> “33 Post-1950 UA Pix Packaged for TV Sales.” *Variety*, July 11, 1962.

audiences in the rapidly changing culture of the Sixties and Seventies to reassess its distinctive qualities.

We can see the transition of the film's reception through an article from 1973 published in the *San Francisco Examiner*. The author of the piece was shocked that *Sweet Smell of Success* had initially been a failure, comparing it to successful '50s milestones *The Robe* (1953) and *Love Is A Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), which now "seem just a bad dream." The film "acquired a devoted following and an increasing reputation as an oasis of cynical brilliance," William S. Pechter wrote. The reason for the newspaper write-up was a showing at the Cento Cedar, accompanied by the film version of an Odets' play, *The Big Knife* (1955). However, it was *Sweet Smell of Success* that received most of the attention. The film began to appear more often in retrospectives and film festivals, honoring the cinematography of James Wong Howe or the best of *film noir*.

While the film may have been released past the prime of noir, the concept of film noir was not widely appreciated or discussed in the US until the 1970s. Looking back at these films from the vantage point of the '70s, it was easier to see that the films of the '40s and '50s had a particular style. As the world grew darker, film noirs of the 1940s and '50s would not have seemed shocking anymore, but they were still able to capture a mood of despair and "bitter disengagement," as James Naremore puts it.<sup>152</sup> Paul Fussell observes that writers struggle to describe a new war by borrowing motifs from the previous one. In this case, it would be filmmakers of the 1970s trying to grapple with the

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<sup>152</sup> Naremore, *Sweet Smell of Success*, 34.

Vietnam War by taking motifs from World War II. While the themes of these earlier noirs may not have been directly pertinent to the current historical situation, the mood and tone of the films were spot on.

As the culture of “film buffs,” film societies, and art theaters steadily grew, viewers looked back on this period with nostalgia. The 1960s were the golden age of US art theaters, and many of the European films that first came over, and were successful, were still in black and white—Ingmar Bergman’s *Seventh Seal* (1957), Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Aventura* (1960), and Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* (1963), for example. While Hollywood was for the most part transitioning to color, these European films gave black and white an air of artistic integrity. Naremore believes that black and white still maintains an aura of art and authenticity because moviegoers born in the 1950s and 1960s have nostalgic memories of classic Hollywood.<sup>153</sup> While the cinematographic work of Howe in *Sweet Smell of Success* was appreciated at the time to an extent, audiences in the 1970s and later were looking back at a black and white film such as *Sweet Smell* with nostalgic eyes, heightening an appreciation for the *noir* aesthetic Howe so masterfully conveys. Historical film noir was already a rebuke to classic Hollywood’s dominant ideology, evident in *Sweet Smell* in its self-reflexivity, but moving into neo-noir of the 1970s and ‘80s, there was a nostalgia for films of the 1940s and ‘50s. While some of these films such as *Chinatown* (1974) take these basic genre characteristics and subvert them to show their inadequacy, it is possible that a film like *Sweet Smell of Success* was

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<sup>153</sup> Naremore, *More Than Night*, 190.

appreciated due to the fact that it was already working in some of these ways.<sup>154</sup> As the result of its late entry into the world of noir, it does not submit to many of the same generic functions such as a retreat to nostalgia. *Sweet Smell* was ahead of its time in its exposure of genre conventions and its overt critique of media power structures. These elements, in combination with a nostalgic appreciation for noir, would have been lauded by audiences of the 1970s.

The influence of the film can be seen in its appreciation by prominent filmmakers of the early 1970s and 1980s, including Martin Scorsese and Barry Levinson. In the Spring of 1978, the *New York Daily News* relayed a recommendation from Scorsese: “Film buff-turned director Martin Scorsese, up for some Friday night flick-hitting, chose an oldie-but-still-goodie: Alexander Mackendrick’s ‘Sweet Smell of Success.’”<sup>155</sup> He has praised the film as “vibrant, alive, the images of New York, the location work were all brilliant.”<sup>156</sup> In the introduction to Alexander Mackendrick’s book *On Film-Making*, Scorsese calls *Sweet Smell* “one of the most daring, startling, savage [films] ever made about show business and power in this country.”<sup>157</sup> The film’s aesthetic was influential in the making of *Taxi Driver* (1976). Cinematographer Michael Chapman said in an interview that when he and Scorsese began work on the film, they looked at a variety of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>155</sup> Harry Haun, “Glitterland: Arrivals and Departures.” *Daily News*, May 16, 1978.

<sup>156</sup> Kashner and MacNair, *The Bad and the Beautiful*:238.

<sup>157</sup> Martin Scorsese, “Foreword,” in *On Film-Making: An Introduction To The Craft of the Director*, by Alexander Mackendrick (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

old movies including “New York movies, *film noir*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, things like that.”<sup>158</sup>

While Scorsese paid tribute to the film’s aesthetic, Barry Levinson commemorated *Sweet Smell* in his movies directly. A character in the film *Diner* (1982), set in 1959, speaks solely in lines from the film, skulking around, reciting some of the more memorable dialogue. In *Rain Man* (1988), Dustin Hoffman’s character walks in on his brother (Tom Cruise) fooling around with a woman. Playing on the television in the background is *Sweet Smell of Success*. Peter Bogdanovich has described it as “a riveting strangely disturbing masterpiece of mood, malice and menace with mythic overtones.”<sup>159</sup> Faye Dunaway had plans to re-make the movie in the early 1980s, playing the Hunsecker role herself.<sup>160</sup> Richard Blackburn called it “one of the most important and underrated films ever made,” noting that fans of the film included prominent figures such as Scorsese and Pauline Kael.<sup>161</sup> Since then there have been tributes to the film by *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*. The titles of episodes two and three from the first season of *Breaking Bad* are titled “Cat’s In The Bag...” and “...And The Bag’s In The River.” The show’s creator, Vince Gilligan, has said that *Sweet Smell of Success* is his all-time favorite movie. *Law & Order* paid homage to the film in an episode titled “Contract,” featuring a gossip columnist clearly based on JJ Hunsecker.

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<sup>158</sup> Naremore, *More Than Night*, 192.

<sup>159</sup> Jay Boyar, “The Revenge of ‘Success’.” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 14, 2002.

<sup>160</sup> “Faye and pal sniff the ‘Sweet Smell’.” *Daily News*, December 6, 1981.

<sup>161</sup> Richard Blackburn, “Flashback: Bullies of Broadway,” *American Film*, December 1, 1983.

Throughout the episode, other characters quote lines from the film, making the connection overt.

A new print of *Sweet Smell of Success* premiered at the 2002 Florida Film Festival, prompting Jay Boyar to write about the revenge the film has acquired on audiences that once snubbed it. Boyar was aghast that *Sweet Smell* was completely snubbed by the Oscars. “Not only didn’t it win an Academy Award, it didn’t receive a single nomination (not even for cinematography!),” Boyar lamented. Kate Buford speaks to the staying power of the film: “Now, it looks just absolutely modern and contemporary. People are much more ready to laugh with and take at face value a film as honest and cynical as this one. . . . People consider it *the* hip American movie.”<sup>162</sup>

Another indication of *Sweet Smell’s* revival was its selection for preservation in the National Film Registry (NFR) in 1993. The National Film Preservation Board works to “ensure the survival, conservation and increased public availability of America’s film heritage.” Each year, up to 25 films are added to the Library of Congress NFR which are “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.”<sup>163</sup> The registry began in 1989, meaning *Sweet Smell of Success* was selected for preservation relatively early on. Each film preserved is accompanied by an essay, the one for *Sweet Smell* penned by Andrea Alsborg, who describes it as one of the “films that take risks and explores previously taboo subjects made by intelligent visionary artists who created a road map for the better

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<sup>162</sup> Boyar, “Revenge of ‘Success’.”

<sup>163</sup> “About This Program.” National Film Preservation Board. <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/about-this-program/> (December 15, 2018).

known ‘indies’ of the 60s and 70s.”<sup>164</sup> The work of Lancaster and Curtis “turned the studio driven Hope/Crosby, Abbot/Costello buddy film on its head in favor of the new anti-hero illuminating the underside of post-war America: unbridled ambition and greed.”

One lingering criticism of *Sweet Smell*, rather humorously, is the offense journalists and reporters take at the film’s representation of the press. “The first time I saw ‘Sweet Smell of Success,’” recalls Bobby Zarem, “I thought about suicide. I thought, ‘Good God! Is this the life I’ve carved out for myself?’” In 2002, a film titled *People I Know* had just been released, focusing on a New York press agent dealing with a scandal. Despite the 46 years since *Sweet Smell of Success* was released, Juan Morales said that it “remains the standard against which all screen depictions of publicity reps are measured.” The biggest change was that Zarem says that his friends would joke that *Sweet Smell* was made about him, chuckling at the prospect of being compared to Sidney Falco instead of being repulsed. Seventeen years earlier, a piece in the New York *Daily News* detailed “How Newspapermen Are Shown In Movies,” beginning with the lament: “Good grief, what did we ever do to Hollywood that was so terrible?”<sup>165</sup> While the writer admitted that some of the sleazy journalists, like JJ Hunsecker, have been some of the screen’s most memorable characters, the overall tenor of the piece was a disappointment with films for portraying press agents and newspapermen in a negative light. While there are still

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<sup>164</sup> Andrea Alsberg, “Sweet Smell of Success.” National Film Registry. [https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-film-preservation-board/documents/sweet\\_smell\\_success.pdf](https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-film-preservation-board/documents/sweet_smell_success.pdf) (December 15, 2018).

<sup>165</sup> Terri Minsky, “How Newspapermen Are Shown in Movies.” *Daily News*, June 15, 1986.

complaints about the nature of representation, the distance of decades does seem to have created some levity in the depiction *Sweet Smell of Success* portrays.

As the years pass, *Sweet Smell of Success* feels disturbingly more relevant than ever. Emphasizing this point is a piece from the *New Statesman* titled, “How film noir explains Trump,” by Douglas Kennedy. Of course, of all the *noir* films to choose from, Kennedy turns to “that ultimate McCarthy-era shot of cynicism *Sweet Smell of Success*.” Sixty years after its premiere, the film’s “vision of our media-driven, fame obsessed culture remains as pertinent and unsettling today as when it was released in 1957.”

Because of the moral issues the film tackles, and yet never tries to answer, the film is,

perfect for the age of Trump. Though never mentioning McCarthyism or the blacklist, the film is completely attuned to the way a demagogue can gain traction in American life, just as it shows how sex, money, and blackmail are always the weapons of choice in the quest for power.<sup>166</sup>

In the film we see the end of Sidney Falco, and a possible set-back for JJ Hunsecker, but the power structures put in place that allow for a figure such as Hunsecker to thrive are not dismantled or damaged. These structures are the precursor for those we see today—media outlets with strong ideological biases, unquestioned by consumers. While the phrase “fake news” had not yet been coined, Hunsecker was a master of manipulative content creation, not only focused on entertainment but garnering political influence as well. As these infrastructures harden and cynicism grows, Hunsecker appears less and less as a caricature but as the portrait of a demagogue possessed.

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<sup>166</sup> Douglas Kennedy, “How film noir explains Trump,” *New Statesman*, November 3, 2017, 42 – 45.

## CONCLUSION

The resounding failure of *Sweet Smell of Success* upon its release was just the beginning of the film's reception history. In the same vein as *Ace in the Hole* (1951), the film was too far ahead of its time in its depiction of sleaziness. In its historical moment, the film did not resonate with audiences. The lightening of the production code allowed the film to push boundaries in new ways, and audiences were shocked by the horrible characters and the extent to which they were able to get away with their actions (particularly in the case of Hunsecker). Despite a heavy ad campaign, the advertisements themselves focused on misleading elements of the film, giving audiences false expectations. Antagonizing the press did not help the film's publicity or reviews, and even the positive reviews were written in such a way to impede the film's success. The subversion of classical Hollywood norms, and the film's self-reflexivity may have driven audiences away, unnerved by the prospect that all media, even this film, was manipulating them in some way. After a few years away from the public eye, the film returned to television after the rights were sold by United Artists, leading to widespread visibility. By then audiences had become more cynical and the world darker, thus *Sweet Smell of Success* resonated in a way it previously did not. Filmmakers of the 1970s and '80s such as Scorsese and Levinson name the film one of their favorites, paying tribute to it aesthetically in their works. The film continues to have staying power, resonating with pertinent themes in the media today. Ultimately, after a rough start, the film has secured a place in the American film canon.

### Chapter Three: Canonization and Its Many Variants

“Sixty years after its premiere—when it was a critical success and a box-office failure—*Sweet Smell of Success* remains one of the key films in the American cinematic canon. Its vision of our media-driven, fame-obsessed culture remains as pertinent and unsettling today as when it was released in 1957.”<sup>167</sup>

As evidenced by the narrative presented in my last chapter, the reception of a film is never static; influences and factors such as historical context and the criteria of tastemakers change how a film is viewed. Now, 60 years after its initial release, *Sweet Smell of Success* is included on “Best Of” lists and referenced in other filmmaker’s work, achieving canonization status in US film culture. In understanding the narrative of *Sweet Smell of Success*’ journey to canonization, I argue that the constant flux of canon formation is revealed. To look at the first ten or twenty films on *Sight & Sound* or the American Film Institute’s list of best movies would at first support the narrative of an unchanging pantheon. However, beneath these steadfast choices lies an undercurrent of a canon in constant flux. These hundreds of films are indicative of the myriad criteria for merit held by each and every film-watcher. Additionally, the case study of *Sweet Smell of Success* illuminates the breadth of cultural tastemakers’ choices. In tracing which figures and/or institutions have validated the placement of *Sweet Smell of Success* within the canon, I demonstrate the ever-shifting balances of power in regard to taste.

In exploring the concept of canon and the process of canon formation, I begin by giving a brief overview of the history of the film canon before moving on to different ways and reasons films can be canonized. I begin by discussing the concept of nostalgia

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<sup>167</sup> Kennedy, “How film noir explains Trump,” 42.

and the importance of emotional attachment, drawing on the work of Paul Grainge. From there, I address the status of cult films, and the complications that cult brings to the notion of canon and the criteria of consensus. I then move to the importance of visibility, which includes visibility not just of the actual film but as a cultural artifact and reference. To demonstrate, I offer a formal analysis of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) to show ways in which *Taxi Driver* was aesthetically influenced by *Sweet Smell of Success* and the cinematography of James Wong Howe. Before discussing alternatives to canons, I dissect the notion of "timelessness," an elusive term that appears time and time again in discussions of canonized films.

#### **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CANONS**

The history of canons goes back to the beginnings of English literature, so to trace that here would be beyond the scope of this project. However, I will summarize a brief history of the emergence of the film canon. Much of the early work published about films was by journalistic critics and theorists from other disciplines, since Film Studies was not an academic area of study until the 1960s. Many of these early writings had a clear goal: to legitimize film as an art form. This was, as Janet Staiger names it, a "politics of admission," characterized by the basic assumption that some "moving pictures ought to be included in the group of objects that the cultural elite terms aesthetic."<sup>168</sup> Underneath were economic and social contexts as well, an attempt by some writers to establish film

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<sup>168</sup> Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1985), 5.

as a worthy product for consumption, trying to draw the attention of a middle-class audience already spending money on other established art forms.

As film studies grew, selection became necessary for practical reasons. One purpose this served was that of efficiency. A practical tool for writers and readers alike, a writer could assume that the reader was familiar with a particular group of films so they would not have to recap a story extensively.<sup>169</sup> One approach to selection is that of evaluative selection, a rationale that Andrew Sarris appealed to when he published *The American Cinema* in 1968. In following with the auteurist theory developed by the writers and critics of *Cahiers du Cinema*, Sarris' decision to rank directors was to "establish a system of priorities for the film student" since he was "disturbed by 'the absence of the most elementary academic tradition in cinema.'"<sup>170</sup> In order to be accepted into a larger artistic discourse, films were treated as art objects with a distinct author. His attention, as well as the attentions of the French critics, focused most closely on Hollywood directors considered to be neglected, but whose "individuality and personal signature shone through the confining Hollywood machine."<sup>171</sup> At this time, the auteur theory benefitted Film Studies, elevating films to the level of other art objects, allowing them "admission" into the academy.

Early film scholars were located in university humanities departments and utilized a modified auteur theory. However, auteurism's influence waned rapidly by the early

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>171</sup> Jonathan Lupo, "Loaded Canons: Contemporary Film Canons, Film Studies, and Film Discourse," *The Journal of American Culture* 34, no. 3 (2011), 221.

1970s when academics began to move away from critics' evaluations and towards analyzing films within specific social, historical, and political contexts. In general, Film Studies as a field has not been heavily invested in contributing to the creation of an overt canon. This is in part due to the concerns surrounding the hegemonic nature of canons, their power to "represent and validate dominant values as 'universal' and 'timeless' at the expense of nondominant cultures."<sup>172</sup> While there are implicit canons which circulate within the field, any sort of definitive canon forming has been left to nonacademic institutions, mainly journalistic critics and the film industry itself. Since there is no definitive "authority," the criteria for what determines the "greatness" or "worthiness" of a film is in constant contention.

Philip Gillett outlines three different models for attributing greatness: the market model, the consensus model, and the time model. In my investigation of the concept of canon, I will be focusing on exploring the consensus and time models. While the market model is prevalent, particularly for the film industry itself, it is rather self-explanatory in that a film's worth is determined by how much money it made at the cinema box office and other distribution methods. I will begin with the consensus model; this model is predicated on the idea that if taste-makers and people of influence arrive on the conclusion that something is great, then it must be great. The majority of "Best of" lists fall under the consensus model to some extent.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 219.

## WHY CERTAIN FILMS TOP THE LISTS – EMOTION & NOSTALGIA

One of the most widely circulated and respected canons is compiled by the magazine *Sight & Sound*. Published by the British Film Institute, the bimonthly magazine was founded in 1932. Beginning in 1952, they have published a “best of” list every ten years. Interestingly, there are no explicit criteria given to participants in the poll by the journal. Simply told to name the top ten films of all time, participants are allowed to include a rationale for their selections but are not given instructions or direction in how to compile their selections.<sup>173</sup> The lack of criteria makes the list’s relatively static nature even more interesting. Beginning in 1992, the lists of the critics and filmmakers were split, creating two top-ten rankings. The critic’s lists from 1992, 2002 and 2012 are acutely similar. While *Citizen Kane* (1941) lost its top spot to *Vertigo* (1958) in 2012, all three lists additionally feature *Tokyo Story* (1953), *Rules of the Game* (1939), and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The *Sight & Sound* list falls under what Adrian Martin deems the “Citizen Kane” canon; this list clings to the flourishing of the art house and New Wave in the 1950s and ‘60s.<sup>174</sup> Martin splits canons into three types; the other two are the “Star Wars” canon, which is made up of populist and commercially successful films, and what he calls the “Kiarostami” canon. This canon is the “antidote” to the biases and omissions of the other two and includes a dearth of experimental and avant-garde cinema. While the beginning of *Sight & Sound*’s list is conservative, overall, 885 films were

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>174</sup> Donato Totaro, “The ‘Sight & Sound’ of Canons,” *OffScreen*, January, 2003, [https://offscreen.com/view/sight\\_sound](https://offscreen.com/view/sight_sound).

suggested for the *Sight & Sound* list, making what lies beneath the top 10 more akin to a Kiarostami canon.

If beneath the seeming monolith of the *Sight & Sound* top 10 lies this undulating current of films, the question of how and why these handful of films maintain their status remains. One answer is the simple, yet powerful, draw of nostalgia. Films are an emotional medium—our reactions to films are first felt, then dissected and analyzed. The films we watch during our formative years, between the ages of 10 and 20, have a particularly strong influence on our understanding of film for the rest of our movie watching years. Richard Schickel addresses this by breaking down the American Film Institute’s 100 Greatest American Films list. The final list consisted of 15 films from the 1930s, 31 from the 1940s, 21 from the 1950s, 17 from the 1960s, 19 from the 1970s, six from the 1980s, and eight from the 1990s. To create this list, AFI made an effort to seek out the most influential opinion-makers, which explains why the bulk of this bell curve is in the fifties. These films represent the judgments of current “establishment people” who grew up in the fifties watching films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *On the Waterfront* (1954). The second highest groups, from the sixties and seventies represent the “slightly younger Hollywood players, people whose impressionable years were passed in those decades.”<sup>175</sup> While the reigning establishment remains those who formed their earliest film connections during the fifties, these same films will remain positioned

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<sup>175</sup> Richard Schickel, “Mind slips: Remembering and Disremembering Movies,” *Film Comment* 34, no. 5 (Sep/Oct 1998), 15.

on “Best Of” lists, theoretically shifting to later films as the prominent opinion and taste-makers become those who connected to films in the ‘70s and ‘80s.

We can see this at work in the introduction to James Naremore’s *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*. To setup the rest of the book, he first writes about his own experience with the *noir* genre. After saying that he will be addressing noir in a series of historical frames and contexts, he goes on to explain that “One of the most important of these contexts...is undoubtedly my own personal history, and I should perhaps acknowledge that determinant here at the beginning, before proceeding with my critical and scholarly concerns.”<sup>176</sup> Naremore discusses his adolescent years in the mid- to late-1950s before his family had a television, and his fond memories of heading to the theater in town, taking in the “fetishized details—Lizabeth Scott’s unreal bloneness and husky voice in *Dark City*,” as one example.<sup>177</sup> He goes on to explain that as his artistic interest in the field developed, he found himself drawn to the black-and-white photography and “melodramatic danger.”<sup>178</sup> These formative years in Naremore’s life have shaped not only his film taste but even the focus of his scholarly work. Additionally, he incidentally mentions that one of his favorite films was *Sweet Smell of Success*, which he describes as “a dark satire about an influential Broadway columnist and sleazy press agent.”<sup>179</sup> As one of the films that Naremore says made an impression during first-run viewing, it seems less than coincidental that he would write the book accompanying

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<sup>176</sup> Naremore, *More Than Night*, 2.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

*Sweet Smell* for the BFI. Naremore serves as an excellent example of the deep and lasting influence films have on us when we see them during a certain time in our lives.

Paul Grainge also discusses the notion of nostalgia, important in relation to why certain historical films have influence. He begins by arguing that nostalgia has developed into a cultural style, “a consumable mode as much as it can be said to be an experienced mood.”<sup>180</sup> Thinking about nostalgia as a culturally specific mode (as opposed to a mood, an approach that focuses on critical analysis of the basis and politics of nostalgia) we can understand the stylistic form and significance of nostalgia “in a world of media image, temporal breakdown and cultural amnesia.”<sup>181</sup> Grainge outlines the work of Fredric Jameson, who posits that postmodernism involves a “waning or blockage of historicity” which is replaced by this nostalgia mode. This mode is “realized through stylistic connotation and consumed as pastiche... the nostalgia mode satisfies a desperate craving for history, while reinforcing the past as ‘a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum.’”<sup>182</sup> The factual and historical past is replaced by “pastness.” The affinity for this mode can be seen through films such as *American Graffiti* (1973), *Body Heat* (1981), and *Boogie Nights* (1997), films which replace the past with cultural stereotypes of that same past. In essence, “periods are plundered for style.”<sup>183</sup> The emergence of this type of nostalgia, for Grainge, developed at a moment in which textual traces of the past can be circulated, accessed, and reconfigured in “new and dynamic

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<sup>180</sup> Paul Grainge, “Nostalgia and Style in Retro America: Moods, Modes, and Media Recycling,” *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures* 23, no 1, 27.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

ways” which has “generally disjoined nostalgia from any specific meaning located in the past.” While some theorists suggest that nostalgia is a symptom of “cultural amnesia,” Grainge argues that the rise of the nostalgic mode represents a “new kind of engagement with the past, a relationship based fundamentally on its cultural mediation and textual reconfiguration in the present.”<sup>184</sup>

In examining the films which have topped the *Sight & Sound* or *AFI* lists, we can see the influence of nostalgia, as defined by Grainge, at work. Both *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Vertigo* (1958) are highly stylized works, capturing the essence of their respective decades through their aesthetic symbolism. This applies to *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) as well, which is listed at number five on the *Sight & Sound List*. This film is in and of itself a fable or fairytale, almost as if it were made with the concept of nostalgia in mind. One great example of this is *Singin' in the Rain* (1951), a film that serves nostalgia to us on a silver platter. The era of the emergence of sound, Hollywood in the late 1920s and 1930s, is dissected and symbolized for us, from the perspective of the 1950s. We are given set pieces reminiscent of the Ziegfeld follies, and others which pay direct homage to the work of Busby Berkeley. There are multiple layers of nostalgia at play in *Singin' In the Rain*, perhaps one of the reasons that it appears on both the *AFI* and *BFI* lists.

In contrast to these films which continually top the lists, the hundreds of films beneath the top few can be explained in large part by a rise in accessibility. Whereas those who formed their opinions before the age of home video were limited by what was

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 33.

being shown on television or in retrospective theaters, the limits of access have drastically changed since then. This is one of the reasons, Ian Christie suggests, that 885 films were suggested for the *Sight & Sound* list in total. The advent of home video, DVDs, and now copious streaming services permits a tailored and individual journey through film. Some of this combats the hegemonic nature of the canon. While access allows for a wider range of films to enter people's lives during their formative years, the authority awarded the canon itself pushes these films down to be secondary choices. *Citizen Kane* has been in the top 10 since the beginning of *Sight & Sound*. Even dissenting voices may stop to ask how they could possibly be the ones to remove it from its place. This doubt feeds into the time model, which I will discuss later on. By being at the top of the canon, the main reason for *Kane*'s canonization may at this point be the novelty of its longtime status as the bedrock of the canon.

#### **CULT AS A PRECURSOR TO CONSENSUS AND THE COMPLICATIONS OF "CULT"**

The notion of cult presents complications to the concept of canon and to the consensus model. For a film to reach canonical status through consensus, a certain number of people need to agree, as well as certain types of people. Those with cultural authority need to be in agreement in order for a film to be considered canonized widely. However, there are a number of films that have consensus in smaller numbers and by different groups of people. In achieving "cult film" status, a film does still need to have a certain level of consensus. There are a number of films that begin as cult and transition into the mainstream canon, a transition I argue was successfully made by *Sweet Smell of*

*Success*. Grainge's notion of nostalgia provides an excellent lens through which to examine the anachronistic popularity of *Sweet Smell of Success*, particularly in how the film relates to the concept of cult. The excess of historical style and distillation of the 1950s makes *Sweet Smell of Success* a nostalgic film. The "camp" that this might otherwise suggest is balanced out by the film's heavy dose of cynicism. The nostalgic elements, however, do overlap with the notion of cult film.

Cult film is outlined by Mathijs and Mendik in two ways: ontological and phenomenological. An ontological approach attempts to determine what makes a cult film, utilizing aspects of a film's form specifically such as genre, style, and recurrent themes. A phenomenological approach focuses on a film's appearance within cultural contexts, specifically how it was produced and received. These approaches are situated within a number of different definitions of what actually constitutes a cult film. The definition I find most useful is that of I.Q. Hunter. This definition outlines eight different qualities a cult film should contain or adhere to. The benefit of Hunter's definition is the wide breadth he leaves in qualities attributed to the content of the film. Cult film spans from campy science-fiction horror to Hollywood classics such as *Casablanca*, making it difficult to pin-down exact parameters for what constitutes a film as "cult." The eight qualities outlined by Hunter are:

1. *Marginality* – The content falls outside general cultural norms.
2. *Suppression* – The content was subject to censorship, ridicule, lawsuit, or exclusion.

3. *Economics* – The film was a box office flop upon release, but eventually profitable.
4. *Transgression* – Content breaks social, moral, or legal rules.
5. *Cult following* – The film generates a devoted minority audience.
6. *Community* – The audience is or becomes a self-identified group.
7. *Quotation* – Lines of dialogue become a common language.
8. *Iconography* – The film establishes or revives a cult icon.

In addition to this definition, Hunter points to Mathijs and Sexton’s discussion of the cinephile in relation to cult, and the deep connection between cinephilia, which is a personal love of cinema itself rather than a specific film or kind of film, and the cult. Willeman discusses the “cinephiliac moment,” which describes moments within a film, even details in the image, that catch the attention of a cinephile’s eye. Hunter defines the cult film more broadly as “those films that allow for the maximum number of cinephiliac moments.”<sup>185</sup>

There are a number of these qualifiers that apply to *Sweet Smell of Success*. The film’s cynicism and negativity fell outside of the norms of mainstream Hollywood films at the time of its release. Economically, *Sweet Smell* was a “box office flop” upon its release. By ignoring some of the directives of the Production Code, the film broke moral rules and expectations. Odets’ dialogue is highly quotable—one of the clearest pieces of evidence being the character in Levinson’s *Diner* who speaks only in lines from the film. And finally, the figure of JJ Hunsecker has been included on lists such as “Greatest

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<sup>185</sup> Mathijs and Mendik, *The Cult Film Reader* (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 6.

Villains of All Time,” and written about by journalists and columnists for decades after the film’s release, qualifying him as a cult icon. Examining the audience, however, we do not have the same sort of identification as those who are fans of, say, *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). If we view the audience of a film like *Sweet Smell of Success* as cinephiles, does that make the film “cult”? Or does it move the film into simply “classic” territory? At what point does a film cross this line?

Classical Hollywood cult, a sub-genre of cult film, demonstrates the constant flux of canons and the label of “classic.” *Sweet Smell of Success* falls in the post-studio era, but Mathijs and Sexton discuss the cult movies Hollywood produced during the classical era. While there is no clear-cut definition of a classical Hollywood cult film, Danny Peary explains that the difficulty in a typical Hollywood product becoming a cult film lies in the fact that it is perceived in the same way by a majority of moviegoers. He uses the examples of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Star Wars* (1977), explaining that “once these two pictures join such films as *All About Eve*, *Singin’ in the Rain*, *Casablanca*, and *The Wizard of Oz*—all popular with the mass audience but today distributed primarily for their hardcore fans—on repertory theater schedules and on the midnight movie circuit, they, too, will be classified as legitimate cult movies.”<sup>186</sup> In some instances, films gain classical Hollywood cult film status along an inverse timeline of the broader cult film—instead of initially failing and then gaining popularity among a select group of people, films such as *Gone with the Wind* were huge box office successes that are eventually remembered and appreciated by a select group, transforming them into cult.

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<sup>186</sup> Mathijs and Sexton, *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*, 184.

This is not true for all classical Hollywood cult films though, such as *Casablanca* (1942) or *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Unlike *Gone with the Wind*, which was from the beginning an *important* picture, Roger Ebert said, “no one making ‘Casablanca’ thought they were making a great movie. It was simply another Warner Bros. release.”<sup>187</sup> Its status as a classic has been a narrative woven around it by viewers, as other classical Hollywood cult films have had done, combining a “high degree of exceptionalism in production and reception with presentations and conditions of labor deemed unusual for the Hollywood system.”<sup>188</sup> Mathjis and Sexton attribute this reframing to nostalgia, the desire to create an idealized past, subsequently allowing the narratives surrounding these films to tell the story of one-time exceptions, oddities that arose from the Hollywood studio system.

There are few who today would call *Casablanca* a “cult film” as the phrase is colloquially understood. Today, it sits as a steadfast classic, perched among the branches of the canon. But what the film’s history shows us is that even the films that seem “ever-green” are not completely concrete. The changes may come slowly, but the ebb and flow of taste and understanding of classic is constantly in flux.

#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF AND VARIANTS ON VISIBILITY**

Part of the canonization equation includes the “omnipotence” of a film, referring not only to a film’s visibility but also accessibility. “Films which appear regularly on

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<sup>187</sup> Roger Ebert, “Casablanca,” September 15, 1996, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-casablanca-1942>.

<sup>188</sup> Mathjis and Sexton, *Cult Cinema*, 187.

television, have had a long shelf life on home video formats, and screen regularly at repertory theaters, art houses and school classrooms have a huge advantage over those that do not,” explains Donato Totaro.<sup>189</sup> *Sweet Smell of Success* benefitted from widespread visibility on television during the 1960s and 1970s, as I discussed in the previous chapter. While this is certainly one aspect of visibility, another includes a film’s visibility in other works—references, homages, or quotations. *Sweet Smell of Success* has benefitted from this type of visibility as well (The “quotations” in *Diner* and *Rain Man* are key examples). While Levinson makes direct references, other filmmakers have referenced the film in more subtle ways. Director Martin Scorsese, for instance, has mentioned *Sweet Smell of Success* in a number of interviews as an influence on some of his films, most notably *Taxi Driver*. While there are no direct quotes or overt references to *Sweet Smell of Success*, the film is invoked through aesthetic inspiration and homage. This allows for another dimension of visibility, incorporating elements from the 1957 film into more contemporary contexts, thereby allowing these elements to be re-contextualized and re-furbished by another era. I propose that this makes the earlier film more digestible to modern audiences, as they are able to understand elements of the film in an aesthetic closer to what they are used to, allowing *Sweet Smell of Success* to feel more contemporary than other films from the era.

Cinematographer Michael Chapman directly referenced *Sweet Smell of Success* in an interview regarding the aesthetic of *Taxi Driver*: “We looked at all sorts of New York movies, *film noir*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, things like that.” The influence of *Sweet*

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<sup>189</sup> Totaro, “The ‘Sight & Sound’ of Canons.”

*Smell's* aesthetic can be seen particularly in the way Chapman captured New York. In its attempts to capture the ethos and energy of the city, some of James Wong Howe's techniques were quite innovative. One of these, which we can see in *Taxi Driver*, is positioning the camera close to the ground in order to get a sense of the city's height and claustrophobia.



Illustration 2: James Wong Howe positioned the camera low to the ground to capture the claustrophobia of New York City.



Illustration 3: In *Taxi Driver*, we see low-angle shots to get a sense of the height of the buildings.

We also get a sense of the movement of the city in both films. This includes not only the movement of people and cars, but the energy that the city's lights purvey and the movement that they offer. The opening credits of both films follow a vehicle moving through the city. While *Taxi Driver* offers a more pointedly abstract depiction of the city, the images we get behind the credits in *Sweet Smell of Success* are expressionist in their own way, heightening the *noir* style, transforming the city into something sinister. Both sequences display for us a world view that is not quite clear or objective. We are seeing New York through the eyes of Travis Bickle and JJ Hunsecker, respectively.



Illustration 4: The opening titles of *Sweet Smell of Success*.



Illustration 5: The opening titles of *Taxi Driver*.

In fact, in order to demonstrate the subjective nature of each film, the first images we see of both JJ Hunsecker and Travis Bickle are their eyes.



Illustration 6: The eyes of JJ Hunsecker open *Sweet Smell of Success*.



Illustration 7: *Taxi Driver* opens with the eyes of Travis Bickle.

The direct references made by both Scorsese and Chapman to *Sweet Smell* underscore a direct visual homage to the film and the work of James Wong Howe. Howe's influence

can also be seen in *Raging Bull* (1980); the black and white realism shot with similar lighting and extensive use of dolly shots. By integrating these visual elements into other contexts, they are introduced to a new set of audiences, entering their visual repertoire. As the elements of the film are updated, they are more easily digestible to modern audiences, making a film like *Sweet Smell of Success* seem more contemporary.

### **UNDERSTANDING THE NOTION OF “TIMELESSNESS”**

As an alternative to the consensus model, the time model Gillett outlines proposes that if a piece of work manages to survive throughout the ages, then there must be something about it that is great. From this often stems the notion that a canonical piece of work is timeless, whether that is film or artwork. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve saw classics as “works that are contemporary with every age.”<sup>190</sup> In explaining Charlie Keil’s definition of greatness, Gillett says “however worthy a film, whatever skills and money are lavished on its production and whatever the critical reception, what ultimately matters is the response of the audiences.”<sup>191</sup> It is true that certain films may always be praised for their innovative work or artistic elements within a vacuum, but a film’s reception, and thereby historical endurance, can have more to do with its canonization than the object of the film itself. *Sweet Smell of Success* is the ultimate example of this. As detailed, when first released the film was rejected by audiences. However, as the cultural climate changed, the film began to resonate with audiences, garnering a positive reception.

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<sup>190</sup> Phillip Gillett, *Movie Greats: A Critical Study of Classic Cinema* (New York: Berg, 2008), 10.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 22.

This historical context applies not just to a specific film but to the canon itself. As I have previously mentioned, the beginnings of film canons were focused on the auteur theory, privileging directors with multiple works who were believed to be the artistic genius behind the film's form. Staiger outlines the differences between auteur critics and "ideological" critics. The auteur critics focused on three main criteria in regard to films and directors. These were a film's "universality" and "endurance," implying a transcendence of history; the film as an expression of an individual's "personal vision of the world"; and finally, the auteur's ability to be "consistent and coherent in statement."<sup>192</sup> In upholding these criteria, auteur critics have tended to ignore historical, class, and social issues, implying that these few canonized figures have knowledge, wisdom, and truth that is universally understood. Not only does this ignore historical or social contexts but privileges a Western worldview.

In contrast to this, ideological critics evaluate films on the basis of "the film's ideological effect."<sup>193</sup> In exploring the rejection of the criterion of universality, Staiger explores the arguments of Noël Burch. Burch argues that "nonstandard practices are avant-garde," thereby dividing film into two categories, dominant and not dominant cinema. Around the same time Burch published *Theory of Film Practice*, the editorial stance of *Cahiers du Cinema* changed and in 1970 their articles became more devoted to ideological analysis of cinema. Connected to a more Marxist strain of politics, the *Cahiers* writers began to critique dominant filmmaking practices in that they supported

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<sup>192</sup> Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," 13.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

and reinforced bourgeois capitalism. Staiger breaks this argument down to explain that “standard filmmaking practices promoted an ‘illusion of reality’ because the system was so normative that the fact films were produced by work were not apparent.”<sup>194</sup> This illusion played into capitalism’s politics because spectators did not question the source of the film in human labor. These filmmaking practices promoted passive consumption, and “thus, a perpetuation of the status quo rather than class struggle.”<sup>195</sup> The alternative canon *Cahiers* promoted included films because their formal procedures drew attention to the process of representation and explored “exploitation of certain classes and cultures.”<sup>196</sup> This political analysis fits well with Burch’s project, as he incorporated this ideological critique into his own argument, creating a new canon of works that formally and discursively engage in reflexivity and break with the dominant “codes of representation and narrativity.”<sup>197</sup>

As I discussed in my first chapter, *Sweet Smell of Success* cannot be positioned as an auteurist film. This would have been an obstacle to the film’s canonization in the 1950s. Mackendrick had a relatively short-lived career, his work often forgotten (in my research I have found only one book dedicated to Mackendrick’s work). Certain films are able to benefit from attachment to a director with certain cachet. Even the “bad” films from auteurs gain visibility from their connection to these figures. For example, *Under Capricorn* (1949), a Hitchcock-directed film with a 57% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, has

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

been written about extensively by scholars, is available for purchase on Blu-ray and available to stream on Amazon. While speculative, the film's availability and scholarly interest derive in some part from its director. Interestingly, *Sweet Smell of Success* benefits more in regard to visibility due to the work of James Wong Howe, and not Mackendrick. In my research I have found *Sweet Smell* included in a number of retrospectives or festivals honoring cinematography, or the performances of its stars. I have encountered no comparable screenings for direction.<sup>198</sup>

With the rise of ideological critics, a film's self-reflexivity would have awarded it newfound appreciation. Burch's project also attacks the concept of universality as his evaluation of "alternative practices indicates that segments of a society do not uniformly value the same works."<sup>199</sup> Not only is this true for certain segments of society, but the whole of society over time. At the time of publication, reception studies was a blossoming approach, and Staiger mentions the goals of "recent" reception studies which focuses on "historical communities of readers and interpretive strategies" to "question the notion of *the* interpretation of a text, concentrating instead on how institutions and ideologies have established appropriate methods of understanding a work."<sup>200</sup> The second chapter of this thesis provides extensive evidence for the validity of this approach.

Due to the prevailing, hegemonic nature of the top of the canon, *Sweet Smell* remains part of a larger canon, one of the films which lies in the canon's undercurrent,

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<sup>198</sup> This, of course, does not mean retrospectives honoring Mackendrick do not exist, but they are not as publicized or visible as these other screenings.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 17.

gaining relevance and significance as the times, and audiences, change. The film has actually had some resurgence recently due to the current political situation. The comparisons made between current sociopolitical conditions and the McCarthy era have urged a re-examination of *noir*. Douglas Kennedy from *The New Statesman* claims, “[*Sweet Smell of Success*] is now the perfect film for the age of Trump.”<sup>201</sup> He goes on to ascribe to the notion of the timeless canon, explaining how “sixty years after its premiere...*Sweet Smell of Success* remains one of the key films in the American cinematic canon. Its vision of our media-driven, fame-obsessed culture remains as pertinent and unsettling today as when it was released in 1957.” While I support his argument about the film’s pertinence, it is the political and societal context surrounding the film which allows it to remain within the “American cinematic canon,” as he claims. Without current reminiscences of the McCarthy era or media/political demagogues, we may continue praising the film’s cinematography and writing, but it would not hold the same relevance or cultural value.

### **SOME CANONICAL ALTERNATIVES AND MOVING FORWARD**

The desire and inclination to create canons will continue, and the debate surrounding their necessity or purpose will no doubt accompany them. In assessing the current trends and conversations, a select number of alternatives and solutions present themselves. One of these is the National Film Registry (NFR). In 1988, Congress created a National Film Preservation Board to combat the physical deterioration of films and

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<sup>201</sup> Kennedy, “How film noir explains Trump,” 43.

provide an archive for preserved ones. Managed by the Library of Congress, in 2005 the US government formed a public advisory board to counsel the Library of Congress. This board, made up of forty-four members, looks over nominated films and adds twenty-film films per year to its canon. In contrast to *Sight & Sound*, the NFR “is a canon that grows rather than changes.”<sup>202</sup> While the NFR does have criteria, they are broad: selected films must be “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant,” produced in the United States, and must be at least ten years old.<sup>203</sup> While this canon does not address international films, it does include short films, experimental films, newsreels, and early amateur films. Because it is a canon that grows, these types of films are not included at the expense of well-known classics, but alongside them. *Sweet Smell of Success* was selected for inclusion in 1993, solidifying it as an American film of aesthetic, cultural and historical significance. The films within this canon are able to be acknowledged without the exclusion or privileging of other films.

Today it would seem that canons are emerging and shaping the way we encounter and see movies at an incredibly rapid rate. Streaming services are a huge shift in the dynamic. Can we consider the libraries available on Netflix or Hulu a type of canon? Even if not a canon in their own right, the availability and accessibility of films shape what is included in canons. The recent death of the streaming service FilmStruck sparked much debate about this issue of accessibility. It is not so much the importance of the service itself, but rather the vast differences in reactions to its decline that are worthy of

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<sup>202</sup> Lupo, “Loaded Canons,” 230.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

discussion. Founded by Turner Classic Movies in November of 2016, the service hosted classic, foreign, arthouse, and independent cinema, in addition to serving as the exclusive streaming home of the Criterion Collection. Upon news that the service was struggling to stay afloat, a number of prominent figures in the movie industry spoke up to try to save FilmStruck. The list included such figures as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Christopher Nolan, Paul Thomas Anderson, Karyn Kusama, and many more. Two letters were sent to Warner Media, the first of them coming from Anderson, James Brolin, Damien Chazelle, Alfonso Cuaron, and a host of others. Addressed to Warner Bros. Picture Group chairman Toby Emmerich, the letter states: “The FilmStruck service was (IS) the best streaming service for fans of cinema of all kinds: classic studio movies, independent cinema, international treasures. Without it, the landscape for film fans and students of cinema is especially bleak.” It goes on to argue that FilmStruck helped to preserve and make accessible the rich history of film, which benefits the public. In addition to these two letters, a petition arose to save FilmStruck, garnering 103,853 signatures.<sup>204</sup>

In a stark contrast to this, Katherine Groo, professor of film and media studies at Lafayette College, wrote a piece in *The Washington Post* positing that FilmStruck was actually not that good for movies, and we should not mourn its demise. Making sure to remind readers that FilmStruck was a paid service, and not a public good, Groo goes on to state that “FilmStruck never offered access to anything close to film history. It sold a

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<sup>204</sup> “Keep FilmStruck Alive,” Change.org, <https://www.change.org/p/warnermedia-keep-filmstruck-alive>.

sliver of ‘classics’ and masterpieces that has always masqueraded as the whole.”<sup>205</sup>

Despite being lauded for its diverse collection, including films by people of color, women and queer artists, “feature-length narrative cinema made by mostly white male auteurs dominated the collection.” Many of these films make up the film canon; they are films that have wide circulation already and are available via DVD, Amazon, or other streaming services. *Sweet Smell of Success* is included within this grouping. The film is a part of the Criterion Collection and can be streamed through rental or purchase on Amazon. While these may not be available all in one place, they can be found with relative ease. Ultimately, Groo believes we rely too much on history, and that the idea that we need to immerse ourselves in film’s past in order to continue to make images is a falsehood. Her argument does not propose a new or alternative canon, but the total elimination of a canon, and that “preserving a different film future might just require that we kill a few hundred films—or finally let them die.” While certain elements of her argument hold weight (FilmStruck was only around for two years and so to be terrified that the end of its run would mean the end of film history does seem a bit alarmist), her turn to a complete rejection of history *is* alarming. To let these films die would seem to me to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As Janet Staiger argues, “selection by evaluation can be made less dangerous to marginalized groups if such a selection is made with an awareness of the politics of the chosen criteria and with a politics of eliminating

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<sup>205</sup> Katherine Groo, “FilmStruck wasn’t that good for movies. Don’t mourn its demise,” *The Washington Post*, December 3, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/03/filmstrucks-demise-could-be-good-movies/?fbclid=IwAR0yX2M5iQg9W89LmRtehFWqd6GQyFyeugS4eb6dl8erG156WgK\\_rUUZTpE&utm\\_term=.758ff6e44222](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/12/03/filmstrucks-demise-could-be-good-movies/?fbclid=IwAR0yX2M5iQg9W89LmRtehFWqd6GQyFyeugS4eb6dl8erG156WgK_rUUZTpE&utm_term=.758ff6e44222).

power of some groups over others, of centering at the expense of marginalizing classes, genders, sexual orientations, or cultures.”<sup>206</sup> Further, there is the seeming impossibility of discarding canons completely. As mentioned, there are benefits to canons, such as ease of reference. What exactly does a world without a film canon, or without canonized film history, look like?

## CONCLUSION

Tracing the narrative of *Sweet Smell of Success*'s critical reception helps to understand the myriad ways in which canons are formed and are constantly changing. There are certain types of canons which do not include *Sweet Smell of Success*, such as the market model or a canon formed around auteurs. While the film has been canonized through its induction into the National Film Registry and its inclusion in the Criterion Collection, these are relatively recent developments, as the film's critical stature has waxed and waned. The film has benefitted from attention given by certain types of people, including prominent directors whose opinions are revered by fans and cinephiles. The film has been honored by film festivals celebrating James Wong Howe's cinematography or the performances of Tony Curtis. In addition to resonating with later cultural climates, *Sweet Smell* has benefitted from accolades given by cultural authorities and institutions which have weight in more widespread contexts.

The proliferation of canons will continue and there are benefits to this, despite Groo's argument that we should leave the pantheon of classic film behind. As Staiger

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<sup>206</sup> Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," 18.

mentions, canons aid in academic writing, providing known examples and a shorthand of sorts. There is value in understanding references made to previous films and understanding the lineage and evolution of style and influence. However, the hegemonic nature of canons needs to be interrogated. Canons do change over time, but they are not changing fast enough on their own and as Groo says, current canons such as Criterion or *Sight & Sound*'s list are made up of films primarily created by white men. In analyzing varying strands of ideological critics, Staiger outlines the position of feminist film critics. Addressing the issues that current canons pose, they have made a number of proposals for solutions. While their focus may specifically be on gender, the proposals can really be applied to wider issues, including other marginalized groups. One proposal is “to revise the criteria for canon selection so as to include works that previously were marginalized because of male-dominated institutionalizing practices.”<sup>207</sup> Another solution is to “employ an ideological critique of the ‘classics’ via a process such as ‘reading against the grain’” which would expose the assumptions of “authority” and “value” in previously canonized texts.<sup>208</sup> While these solutions pose theoretical and practical difficulties, the rejection of a canon all together poses other difficulties. The most obvious of these is the human tendency to categorize, rank, and evaluate. Even within the academy, we are creating canons, whether intentionally or not.

*Sweet Smell of Success* is, of course, also a part of this white male canon. However, through the narrative of the film's critical evolution, we can also see that there

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

is perhaps no way to know what objects will become classics, remaining a part of the canon or breaking through. It is easy to point to allusive terms such as “timelessness” or label films “great” due to innovation, however rarely does a film appear on one of these lists for one or two reasons alone. Most importantly, it is not necessarily the object of the film itself. The text cannot be examined in a vacuum, void of social or cultural context.

## Conclusion

Since the proliferation of VHS and DVDs, audiences have had the chance to move away from a reliance on particular cultural tastemakers and explore titles of their own accord. Previous generations' reliance on art cinema houses or syndicated showings on television created a uniform culture, with audiences being fed what was deemed important or classic by networks or theater managers. The "classic" status of films such as *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) emerged from their time on television, becoming cultural phenomenon across audiences. With more options for viewing, there is no need to rely on a handful of cultural tastemakers for exposure to films. The New York Post reported in 2018 that millennials don't care about classic cinema, and they are rejecting and overlooking "classics" like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *The Sound of Music* (1965). Joseph Clark embraces this as a good thing, as he sees his students expand their film knowledge beyond what they are *supposed* to be watching, discovering films that align with their own interests and sensibilities, not just what the AFI tells them they should watch. The notion of "classic" is always changing, which Clark hammers home when he states that *Gone with the Wind* "isn't just a sweeping epic featuring lavish sets and moving dialogue—it is an artful piece of racist propaganda that sentimentalizes the Civil War and nostalgically evokes the days of slavery."<sup>209</sup> The social and cultural resonance of a film is just as important as its artistic and aesthetic merits in regard to its placement within the canon.

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<sup>209</sup> Joseph Clark, "Millenials Have Killed the Concept of 'Classic' Cinema. We Should Thank Them," *The Tyee*, March 20, 2019, <https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2019/03/20/Millennials-Killed-Classic-Cinema/>.

The intention of this thesis has been to interrogate one film's reception narrative in order to complicate grandiose notions of "timelessness" and "greatness." I hope to have brought attention to the complicated process of canon formation, as well as disrupted the idea of canon as steadfast, in addition to demonstrating that a film cannot be understood fully without its social or cultural context. As such, I also hope I have brought attention to the artistic merits and creative pursuits of a tumultuous and often dismissed period in Hollywood. *Sweet Smell of Success* does not fit within a market model of canonization; it does not appear in the top 50 best films as decided by *Sight & Sound* or the AFI; and it does not have a definitive authorial figure. However, the film has had influence on filmmakers decades after its release; it has been sanctioned by cultural tastemakers such as the Library of Congress; and its themes continue to resonate with the current political climate in the United States.

In tracing the reception of *Sweet Smell of Success* from its initial release to the present day, I have been able to demonstrate the importance of historical context in relation to a film's resonance with audiences. While the film was too far ahead of its time in its evocation of sleaziness in 1957, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the film appealed to more cynical worldviews. Gaining status as a cult film, eventually *Sweet Smell* was able to enter the Hollywood film canon. This trajectory, while not unique to *Sweet Smell of Success*, demonstrates the tumultuousness of the canon, despite the seemingly steadfast status of a handful of films. This film serves as a particularly illuminating case study due to its placement in history. The late 1950s were a period of great change and disruption in Hollywood; the studio system had begun its demise and

independent production companies began to appear in larger numbers than ever before. Often thought of as a period devoid of artistic worth, the cultural capital *Sweet Smell of Success* now holds shows that among the Biblical epics and over-produced musicals, the seeds of the Hollywood Renaissance were being planted. Films were being produced which pushed the boundaries of classical Hollywood filmmaking, engaging with self-reflexivity and more European sensibilities.

In beginning with the film's production, I explored the possible complications that arose from independent production. The clashing personalities of Harold Hecht, James Hill, and Burt Lancaster were joined by Alexander Mackendrick, Ernest Lehman, Clifford Odets, and James Wong Howe. Through an investigation of the culture of production leading up to the film, on the film's set, and in post-production, we see the influence that this culture had on the film's final form. This includes the film's energy and pacing, the film's dialogue, and its ending. The complications on set also raise questions of authorship. I find myself asking an abundance of questions, contemplating alternative circumstances. What would the final version of *Sweet Smell of Success* have looked like if Lehman had directed the film? How would the film have looked if Odets have never been brought in for re-writes? While it is impossible to know these things, these questions do draw attention to the influences of the key players and their roles, highlighting the effect each of these figures had. Additionally, my time spent with the Ernest Lehman collection lends a perspective to this culture that has been omitted from other histories about *Sweet Smell of Success*. Reading through Lehman's notes on the documents, I came across one annotation on the top of a *Variety* which declared, "I stole

this from the star's dressing room!" Looking to the mailing label, I found Tony Curtis' name printed in the lower left-hand corner. This small act of theft and deviancy is a reminder of the impact even small actions can have on a set, of the agency each of these figures had, and of their humanity. With such historical distance it can be easy to create impersonal distance between these figures and us, forgetting that they were just as fallible and human as we are.

Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions was not typical of other independent production companies. The strong desire to emulate the majors, and the relative success which they achieved in doing so, was unique to HHL. Others, such as that of Elia Kazan, were headed by only one or two figures who were ideologically aligned—many of which strove to create outside of the realm of the studios, creating films which otherwise would not have been made. The HHL mindset of one for money and one for art was definitely in line with how the studios had operated, relying on tentpole films to carry the others. The extreme financial risk of doing this in an independent setting was ultimately the downfall of HHL who would make their last film in 1962. This narrative highlights the specific elements needed for the studio approach to work.

The story of the reception of *Sweet Smell of Success* has been distilled over time, culminating in a narrative which focuses on the shock audiences felt at seeing Lancaster and Curtis in uncharacteristic roles. However, looking more closely, I have demonstrated that the reasons for the film's box office failure were nuanced and plentiful. This includes the film's *noir* aesthetic, which was no longer in vogue, sensitive, and recent, subject matter, and alienation of the press. The film's harsh critique of American life was

particularly striking in an era of Patriotism. The film's marketing campaign capitalized on the past success of HHL, setting up false expectations for audiences, not only through an emphasis on *Trapeze* but by focusing on the sex appeal of the film's female stars—both of which have definitively secondary roles in the film, and one of whom has no sex appeal. The resurgence of the film as a valued cultural artifact is a narrative that is just as multi-faceted. *Sweet Smell's* syndication on television introduced the film to new audiences at a time when Hollywood, and the culture at large, was re-examining cultural values. As the Production Code fell away, and more films pushed the boundaries of sex and violence, the cynicism present in *Sweet Smell of Success* no longer seemed so abrasive or shocking. Further, events such as the Vietnam War opened up criticism of the American government and American culture to a new extent; and criticism of the press was particularly rampant.

*Sweet Smell of Success* is not a perfect film—the secondary characters are weak and forgettable, and the conclusion feels a bit forced. However, Tony Curtis gives the best performance of his career, even overshadowing the excellent Burt Lancaster. James Wong Howe's cinematography is a masterclass in low-key lighting, city location shooting, and crab-dolly work. The theatrical dialogue by Clifford Odets is sharp and biting, even violent, and results in one of the most memorable and quotable scripts in Hollywood's oeuvre. From these elements alone, I would argue the film deserves a place among the Hollywood canon. However, the aesthetic and artistic merits are only half of the equation. These same elements, which are now considered artistic achievements, were originally seen as transgressions. Straddling the liminal space between the height of *noir*

and the rise of the Hollywood Renaissance, the film coupled European influences with a noir aesthetic to achieve a final product which bypassed the current national zeitgeist, foreshadowing the cynicism, violence, and brashness of the next era of films to emerge.

The film's narrative demonstrates the constant changes in what is culturally and artistically valued, and thereby, the constant flux and changes that occur in the film canon at large. While the canons built and perpetuated by tastemakers and authorities such as *Sight & Sound* and AFI seem steadfast, underneath the surface is a sea of films, constantly churning in regard to appreciation and merit. Interrogating these lists is important in understanding and dissecting how film is taught and consumed. Without questioning what is visible and privileged, the hegemonic nature of these canons will prevent the re-evaluation of film, which impedes re-evaluating important issues such as representation. While these changes do occur naturally over time, by bringing the tenuous nature of canons to light we can more adamantly and purposefully address the problems in prevailing narratives such as the "Great Man" history, or a history which ignores the contributions of minorities to film, in order to present fuller, richer narratives, filled with the stories of myriad and diverse figures and not just one or two greats. *Sweet Smell of Success* and its narrative privilege white men, however in my investigation I have seen some of the issues which arise in the presence of unmitigated masculinity. While of course these narratives should not be erased from history, it is vital that they are contextualized and criticized in order to understand how far we have come and how far we have to go.

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