

Alexander Mackendrick

Dreams, Nightmares, and Myths in Ealing Comedy

Claire Mortimer 

Alexander Mackendrick's Ealing comedies of the 1940s and 1950s, *Whisky Galore* (1949), *The Man In The White Suit* (1951), *The Maggie* (1953), and *The Ladykillers* (1955), are set in a world that is like but unlike the real world – a dream world, even a nightmare at times – where ineluctable forces operate against, or on the behalf of, the characters. The world of dreams, nightmares, and fables never seems far away in these films. These British comedies depict a society frozen at the cusp of fundamental change, unable to adjust to the downscaling of the Empire and the demands of a new world order – an in-between, liminal society, hovering in a moral and existential no-man's land. An ambiguity shades the characters and narratives reflecting a world view that is questioning and uncertain.

Mackendrick joined Ealing Studios at the start of its most celebrated period, marked by the string of postwar comedies which have come to define the work of the Studio. Diverse film-making talents converged on the Studio at the end of the war, attracted by the benevolent working ethos presided over by Michael Balcon. Balcon had worked in the British film industry since 1919, having taken over Ealing Studios with the aim to make films “projecting Britain and the British character,” as was later inscribed on a plaque to mark the closure of the Studios, reflecting his own deep patriotism. George Perry describes the Studio as “basically a middle-class institution of a mildly radical disposition . . . Balcon cast its members, for all their idiosyncrasies in his own mould” (Perry 1981: 111).

Charles Barr has observed that a typical Ealing comedy functions as a daydream being “a fantasy outlet” for “individual drives and desires for self-fulfilment” which are “rightly” inhibited by society, whereas Mackendrick's comedy is a dream,

playing out the conflicts as they in fact are (Barr 1980: 117). The comic safety net cannot be relied on in Mackendrick's films – as dream turns to nightmare, and the community is defended, at whatever cost. A trace of satire runs through the veins of his comedies, emerging most prominently in *The Man In The White Suit* yet being implicit in the social commentary within the other films.

Mackendrick inhabits the Ealing formula, delivering comedy narratives that superficially conform to its trademark themes, hinging on the unstoppable strength of the community and the triumph of the underdog. Yet he is a rebel who works to subvert the comedy in subtle ways, creating characters and narratives that reflect an ambiguous vision of the world. He harnesses the force of myth and dream to portray an enduring study of human frailties, straining the comic form to incorporate the nightmare, shadowing laughter with a sense of impending loss. Ultimately his comedies can be interpreted as contemplations on identity by a director whose own identity straddles different worlds.

Mackendrick brought a sensibility to Ealing Studios, which reflected the fractured times in the wake of World War II, with shifting populations having lost their roots and connections, seeking to forge identity and a future in the new postwar world. His parents were Scottish, yet he was born in Boston, Massachusetts. His father died when he was six, and his upbringing was handed over to his grandparents back in Scotland. Mackendrick later declared that his "blood is Scots, and the temperament is Scots and I feel Scots, although I am indeed one hundred per cent American" (McQuarrie 1986). Family, dislocation, identity, and the tensions between the community and the outsider were to become central themes in Mackendrick's films. Under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, his wartime duties required him to bear witness to the horrors of warfare and the devastation wreaked on communities, producing propaganda and documentary footage, including a film of the aftermath of a massacre in German-occupied Rome. Far from the reassuring comforts of many Ealing comedies, his films are distinguished by an ambivalent tone, rejecting consensus in favor of barbed, satirical and acerbic commentary on a nation that seems to be incapable of entering the modern era. The Britain at the heart of these comedies is in stasis, repelling change and the agents of change.

Each of Mackendrick's Ealing comedies summons up mythical references, building on the structures and references of fables and mythical characters in creating a framework for a comedy that reaches beyond the contemporary to embrace perennial themes and tensions. For Mackendrick the power of myth is central to storytelling, believing that "stories, even in the contemporary context of mass entertainment" are successful when they "fulfil . . . an archaic need . . . something that audiences may not even be aware of" comparing them to "the original function of rites and myths" (Mackendrick 2004: 10–11) in helping "the primitive mind take hold of a mystery." Mackendrick quotes Levi-Strauss in asserting that "art lies halfway between scientific knowledge and magical and mystical thought" (Levi-Strauss 1972: 22), seeing the original purpose of the myth

as functioning “as a poetic explanation of concepts that are beyond the limited intellectual capacities of the listeners to deal with” (Mackendrick 2004: 10). The myth articulates beliefs and truths in order to reassure and to educate the listener.

Myths and dreams lie at the core of the narrative of Mackendrick’s first film, *Whisky Galore*, contributing to a pervading sense of ambiguity in the comedy. Mackendrick was not the first choice for directing the project, for the adaptation was already in development under the leadership of producer Monja Danischewski. Another key contributor was Ealing director Charles Crichton who was volunteered to re-edit the film in order to “save” it, as a dismayed Michael Balcon did not believe the first edit was fit to be a feature film in its own right. Nevertheless Mackendrick was central to the creative process, making the film his own in re-working the screenplay in collaboration with Danischewski. The film proved to be a huge success for Ealing, primarily because of its popularity in America.

Whisky Galore is based on Compton Mackenzie’s novel inspired by real life events in the Scottish Isles. The remote island of Todday is in decline after running out of whisky – the life blood of the community. A ship carrying a cargo of whisky is wrecked close by, leading the islanders to go to elaborate lengths to rescue its cargo, in the face of opposition from Captain Waggett, an Englishman with a deep sense of duty, who wishes to return the cargo to the authorities.

Whisky Galore is typical of Mackendrick’s comedies in its evocation of a tension between myth and reality in the portrayal of the idyllic island community of Todday. In many respects *Whisky Galore* is true to Ealing values in using location filming and featuring actual islanders in many scenes. The key note is that of authenticity, made clear in the parodic documentary style opening of the film, accompanying the portentous voiceover with a montage to establish the nature of this isolated community. The tone of the voiceover creates the feel of a travelogue portraying the islanders as a remote, strange and fascinating people, before the seriousness is undercut by the bawdy implications of the “few simple pleasures” described as the camera slowly drifts from an ageing couple indulging in traditional occupations to the procession of children emerging from the doorway of their cottage. Gordon Jackson, who starred in the film, subsequently recalled that Mackendrick worried that he was “not making a comedy, but a documentary of island life” in a crisis of confidence three-quarters of the way through the filming (McQuarrie 1986).

The film may be rooted in a sense of realism, yet its narrative crosses over to the world of myths and dreams that coheres around this isolated community. Todday remains distant from 1940s’ Britain, as signified by its strict adherence to the Calvinist creed in respecting the Sabbath, even though they are desperate to rescue the whisky from the wreck. The opening of the film establishes a timeless feel to the narrative, depicting the islanders’ bucolic existence, with no sign of modern times. Repeated long shots of the sea, beaches and landscape emphasize the remote wildness of the setting, and a sense of the natural forces that drive the lives of the islanders. The film’s structure is punctuated by repetition of these

images, reiterating how the tension and conflict on the island is framed within eternal natural forces. In a literal sense these forces drive the narrative, a deep fog resulting in the shipwreck of SS Cabinet Minister, and thence bringing salvation to the island in the form of the cargo of whisky.

The narrative space of Mackendrick's films assumes the mythic resonance redolent of the "green world" of the New Comedy, as identified by Northrop Frye. Frye observed that comedy has a utopian dimension, hinging on the possibility of renewal in terms of the essential narrative cycle. For Frye "the theme of the comic is the integration of society" noting that Shakespearean comedy revolves around "the repressive and the desirable societies [making] a struggle between two levels of existence, the former like our own world or worse, the latter enchanted and idyllic" (Frye 1957: 43–4). Kathleen Rowe has noted that comedy represents "A world wilting under repressive law is liberated through a temporary movement into a dimension Bakhtin would call the carnivalesque, Victor Turner the liminal, and C.L. Barber 'the green world' of festivity and natural regeneration" (Rowe 1995: 47). The whisky becomes the means of rescuing a Todday which has been "wilting", although this merciful release is threatened by English bureaucracy in the form of Captain Waggett. Todday has the potential to be an "enchanted and idyllic" realm, but only by asserting its freedom from the "repressive" law of the outside world – the world of petty rules and austerity.

A mythical resonance pervades the narrative, touching on perennial themes and situations familiar from folk tales. Thus we have the lovers who need to prove their manliness in order to be rewarded with their brides, their quest being to rescue the whisky in order to revive the community. The brides' wily father manipulates the two young men in this respect, making clear to Sergeant Odd that no wedding can take place without a reiteach (betrothal), and the reiteach cannot take place without whisky. We have the foolish young man, George Campbell, who needs to defy his imperious mother in order to release himself from her shackles – redolent of Jack and the Beanstalk, except whisky is the reward, rather than golden eggs.

At the heart of the narrative is the misguided Captain Waggett, who resists the possibility of liberation by seeking to impose redundant strictures on the islanders, and who is ultimately removed from the island after his powers have been persistently eroded. Waggett is the villain of the piece in terms of seeking to block desires, but his villainy is dissipated by his foolishness, rendering him an ambiguous figure. Just as George is empowered by embracing the natural order and proving his manhood, Waggett is emasculated and exiled from the island. A residual sympathy for the hapless exile can be detected in the film, he becomes increasingly isolated by his stubbornness, abandoned even by his wife. Philip Kemp observes that "Mackendrick's moral universe is essentially relative" where there is no simple opposition between "unambiguous good or evil" (Kemp 1991: 28). In consequence the balance of sympathy shifts in the course of *Whisky Galore*, as in the other Mackendrick comedies, to the point where we ultimately want

the islanders to have the whisky, and for the couples to be married, but we also develop a lingering understanding of the plight of Waggett.

The central premise of the film is the mystical status of whisky for the islanders, being regarded as an elixir, the absence of which results in the decline of the island, even death. The voiceover informs us that “in Gaelic they call it the water of life, and for the true islander life without it is not worth living,” whilst seeing a despairing elderly man passing away, rather than face life without whisky; the camera gazes high into the heavens, showing the sun behind the clouds, suggesting a spiritual force dimmed by the absence of whisky.

The sense of the Western Isles being a magical, space which is outside of time and the “real” world, is not unique to *Whisky Galore*. The British horror film *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy 1973) is set on the remote Summerisle, which has its own pagan rituals and customs that ultimately destroy the God-fearing outsider for the greater good. Sergeant Howie is the outsider who comes to investigate the disappearance of a child but is being lured into a terrible trap by the wily villagers. Philip Kemp compares Sergeant Howie’s fate to that of Captain Waggett: “Howie is appalled by the islanders’ exuberant paganism. Like Waggett, he makes no attempt to explore their beliefs, which he treats as self-evidently misguided and immoral” (Kemp 1991: 39). Both figures represent the patriarchal structures of the “real” world, seeking to control and contain the “exuberant” energies of the islanders, fuelled by beliefs beyond their understanding.

Powell and Pressburger’s *I Know Where I’m Going* (1945) is a film that is overtly concerned with myths and dreams. Both films represent the Scottish isles as transformative spaces, taking the outsider away from the realms of reality, and testing their deepest selves. Tom Gunning declares in his essay about *I Know Where I’m Going* “Most commentators . . . note its echoes of fairy tales and the oneiric . . . The drama of transformation that takes place on the island of Mull . . . depends on invoking and – ultimately – overcoming the primordial force of dreams and myths” (Gunning 2005: 97–8). Gunning goes on to compare this “magical” space to the “dark forest that must be crossed in fairy tales and romances,” a space in which heroes are tested whilst endeavoring to complete their quest, taking them out of real time into “primordial space and time.” The earlier film is a love story, with a definite sense of resolution – the English heroine endures and overcomes the mythical to find true love on Mull – whereas Mackendrick’s film is a comedy with a more ambiguous ending.

Captain Waggett is defeated by the combined power of community and place, culminating in the breakdown of his marriage, whereas George and Sergeant Odd successfully complete their quests and are rewarded with enduring love. The final shot of the film, a bird’s eye view of Sergeant Odd and “his Peggy” walking across the beach, locates the distant figures back in the heart of their natural environment, now that conflict and obstacles have been overcome. This aspect of the ending carries the hallmark of the fairy story with requited love suggesting a happy ending, after the completion of the quest, but also fulfilling the essential



Figure 19.1 *Whisky Galore* (producer, Michael Balcon): The reiteach: euphoria and enchantment marks the return of whisky to the community.

commitment of all comedy in delivering the new society, with the promise of renewal after the removal of the blocking forces of the repressive regime.

Two other key sequences contribute to the oneiric nature of the film, combining a strong sense of ritual and mythology, and creating a dreamlike space within the narrative. These two scenes affirm the utopian dimension of this comedy, in common with the narrative dynamic of the New Comedy “the appearance of this new society is frequently signaled by some kind of party or festive ritual” (Frye 1957: 163). The public celebration of renewal and rebirth of the community is central to the comedy narrative, which forms a “cycle of renewal.” The mouth music (a Gaelic tradition, creating music using only the mouth, to replicate the sound of instruments) and reiteach scenes mark the return of the life-enhancing whisky to Todday, resulting in celebration and exuberance in contrast to the preceding scarcity and suffering. In these sequences the narrative is suspended, entering a surreal world beyond modern concerns, yet this is also the realm of the documentary, portraying indigenous traditions, and using actual islanders as extras. The mouth music sequence is a montage of images of glasses, bottles and euphoric drinkers, linked together by the strangeness of the mouth music itself, which rises from a murmur to a crescendo. The link between the whisky, the community, and the natural environment is made clear as the sequence cuts to images of the sea and the voiceover drunkenly declares “When the dawn rose that memorable morning it found a changed island . . . Todday was hardly recognisable!” (see Figure 19.1).

The reiteach is another scene of celebration, intensity and energy – verging on the hallucinogenic – the camera weaving around the dancers, fixing on

Peggy's blissful expression, drawing the audience into the heady euphoria and enchantment of the occasion. Just as Sergeant Odd is transported by his love for Peggy, and subsequent acceptance into this other-worldly community, the audience is also brought into the dance. The mouth music and reiteach scenes possess a mythic and utopian intensity, paying homage to ancient traditions and beliefs that are the bedrock of this community. Mackendrick wrote of the importance of "primitive magical rituals" in *On Film-making* when considering the origins of narratives, adding how "rhythmic movement, repetitive gesture and musical noise" helps unify and give clarity to "some otherwise disturbing and fearsome mystery" (Mackendrick 2004: 10–11). These rituals within *Whisky Galore* reveal the bonds and beliefs that bind together this community, shoring it up against adversity, or the intrusion of an interfering outsider like Captain Waggett.

Mackendrick's next film, *The Man In The White Suit*, also revolves around mythic resonance, again straddling two worlds, locating a fairy tale within a northern mill town. The timeless feel to *Whisky Galore* is enhanced by its remote setting, in a community that is essentially unchanged by the modern world, whilst, in contrast, *The Man In The White Suit* is set firmly within an industrial context, a satire that targets the contemporary concerns of scientific progress, industrial unrest and labor relations, delving into darker realms to make its point. The plot centers on maverick scientist Sidney Stratton, played by Alec Guinness, who invents a new textile that can never wear out or get dirty, but subsequently finds that the industry bosses and workers wish to suppress his invention, fearing that it threatens their livelihoods.

Whereas *Whisky Galore* relied on dreams and a strong sense of natural rhythms and traditions, *The Man In The White Suit* creates a nightmare world, full of sinister shapes, threats and deceit, suggesting the sinister forces that lie at the heart of industrial progress – the world of the satire, exploring folly and vice through humor. Indeed Mackendrick's films are characteristic of what Frye terms "ironic comedy" where the demonic world is never far away. The threat of disaster, or even death, is a constant presence, the comedy coming "as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero . . . and then reverses the action as quickly as possible" (Frye 1957: 178). Philip Kemp notes that the film doesn't fit "easily within the Ealing canon . . . the snarl shows too clearly beneath the grin" (Kemp 1991: 67). The satiric resonance of the film is reinforced by a sense of claustrophobia, with little of the open landscapes and freedom that prevails in *Whisky Galore*. Expressionist lighting, with pronounced menacing shadows, angular shapes and claustrophobic spaces help to create a dark, entrapping world. Daphne Birnley, the mill owner's daughter who befriends Sidney, speaks of her longing to escape: "I'm sick of the Birnley Mills and everyone connected with them and the sooner I leave home the happier I will be." At the end of the film Daphne has failed to leave, her fiancé has betrayed her, and Sidney was not the hero she hoped he would be; whereas Sidney does escape, wandering off to create more havoc in his pursuit of scientific knowledge. Daphne is stuck in her nightmare, yet Sidney still has his dreams.

Mackendrick intended the film to be a satire – not just of the textile industry: “Each character in the story was intended as a caricature of a separate political attitude” (Davies 1953). The characterization is structured as in a fairy tale, with characters fulfilling specific roles in developing the moral of the narrative. The thrust of the satire is embodied in the figure of Sir John Kierlaw, the sinister textile baron at the heart of the nightmares that encircle the world of *The Man In The White Suit*. Kemp observes how Kierlaw is “summonsed” by the mill bosses, driven to tap into “Mephistophelean” dark forces to overcome the threat posed by Sidney (Kemp 1991: 57). Mackendrick builds suspense as Kierlaw speeds his way north, constructing a sense of evil and menace around him. A low-angle shot builds the sense of impending doom as it shows the dark cars speeding through the night, with just a claw-like hand visible amongst furs, redolent of Gothic horror. A low-level shot tracks Kierlaw shuffling along the corridors towards Birnley, casting dark angular shadows to build the tension. Mackendrick builds a caricature of pure evil, weaving together fairy tale villains and nightmare imagery, withholding the image of Kierlaw’s wizened, death mask face in order to create a suspense that is prolonged to create comic effect. In this respect Kierlaw is a departure for one of Mackendrick’s comedies, in terms of being a character who is beyond any ambiguity in his evil. Despite Sidney and Kierlaw appearing to be polar opposites with conflicting goals, they are more than a match for each other in terms of their single-minded determination. Both of them will go to any lengths to obtain their goal – Kierlaw is disappointed when Sidney survives being knocked on the head during the tussle in the board room, and will happily use Daphne as bait to ensnare him.

Mackendrick subverts the expected character roles of the fairy tale. For example, Sidney is needed to be a hero, by both Daphne, and Bertha, the union representative, who each assign noble motives to his work, yet he fulfils the comic role of the trickster and exploiting the faith that the other characters place in him. Bertha believes he is heroic in his struggle with the bosses whereas Daphne compares him in his white suit to “a knight in shining armor,” explaining to the bemused Sidney that “millions of people all over the world living lives of drudgery, fighting an endless losing battle against shabbiness and dirt – you’ve won that battle for them, you’ve set them free! The whole world is going to bless you.” Daphne projects her desires and idealism onto Sidney, just as Bertha imparts her own socialist principles to him whereas Birnley is persuaded to bankroll Sidney’s experiments through the dream of gaining total domination of the textile industry.

Sidney’s suit possesses a strange magical and other-worldly luminescence, helping to enhance his status as a hero. Charles Barr observes that the sheer whiteness of Sidney’s suit symbolizes “purity, innocence and the disinterested truth of science” adding that “the suit is the emblem of Sidney’s angelic innocence” and that he “is an angel put down among the family of England” (Barr 1980: 135–40). Sidney certainly seems to have appeared from nowhere, unnoticed

whilst he ekes out a space for his experiments in the heart of the textile industry, just as he leaves the Mill ignominiously at the end of the film, although with the ominous suggestion that his experiments will not end there. He is a mysterious figure. The whiteness of his suit is symbolic of the strange innocence of Sidney's motivations in contrast to the dark suits and cars of the industrialists, who flock together to suppress his invention in order to preserve their wealth and power.

Mackendrick's comedy gathers a satirical force with the representation of Sidney as a persecuted messianic figure, who is turned on by the mob, with only Daphne and Bertha able to perceive his true worth. The climactic scene in which his suit is ripped apart by the furious crowd certainly builds on this, being the culmination of a nightmare with the alleyways of the town closing in on Sidney; his escape is thwarted, and he is unable to share his discovery with the rest of the world. Mackendrick takes the comedy to the verge of tragedy, creating a moment of genuine catastrophe and threat, the defining characteristic of Frye's "ironic comedy"; Sidney is cornered by the baying mob, yet strikes comic figure, left standing, exposed to the public, in his underwear. The film features many such scenes that draw on slapstick conventions, providing a comic energy that underscores the nightmare world of the satire.

Sidney is no messiah, although an undoubted genius, he is also a fool, whose only concern is to prove his scientific genius, not to make the world a better place. Consequently the film denies any narrative drive towards the happy ending associated with the romantic comedy, in the form of romantic union. Any suggestion of romance between Sidney and Daphne is an impossibility, since he cannot care for anything beyond his experiments. He exploits his landlady's generosity and Bertha's misguided goodwill, as one person after another makes sacrifices to aid his cause. Mackendrick creates comedy out of Alec Guinness's performance, wavering between the extreme lengths he is prepared to go to in order to develop his dream, and his innate dysfunctionality as he proves himself unable to engage with other people. Sidney does not understand anything beyond his experiments; everything he does is solely to promote his goal of creating the perfect fabric. Inevitably, his dedication to science causes mayhem, whether it be crashing into doors with overladen trolleys or steadily demolishing the laboratory with his experiments, incidentally inflicting minor injuries on anyone unlucky enough to be close by.

As a satire, the film forms a fable of greed and foolishness, that Mackendrick intended as an allegory for the nuclear industry, attacking "the so-called disinterested scientist, totally reckless and totally inconsiderate of the consequences of his action" (McQuarrie 1986). Far from being a hero, Sidney is a threat and a fool. He pursues his dream, only for it to become everybody else's nightmare, as the different factions realize the true implications of the invention. Momentarily it appears that Sidney can learn from his mistakes when his landlady, Mrs. Watson, confronts him: "Why can't you scientists leave things alone? What's to become of my bit of washing when there's no washing to do?" Sidney appears stunned by

her words yet finishes the film back where he started, deep in thought plotting his next attempt to develop his invention. Nevertheless, he is revealed as the fool he really is when he is finally caught by the mob and his suit disintegrates, proving his invention to be a failure.

The fool is a key comic archetype, figuring large in myths and fables, serving to test the values and moral fiber of the community. Andrew Stott asserts that the fool is a “symbol of contradictions and quandaries,” explaining how his role is to affirm the importance of folly in qualifying human pretension, and to be “an ironic and paradoxical identity assumed for the purposes of social commentary and satiric attack” (Stott 2005: 46–7). Sidney’s character encompasses a satiric attack on scientific solipsism alongside his role in exposing the duplicity and greed of others. Yet his character has shades of the trickster, another comic archetype, not far removed from the fool, serving the same purpose through trickery and practical jokes. The scene in which Sidney is cornered by the mob encapsulates the mythical resonance of the narrative, calling to mind Hans Christian Anderson’s satirical fairy tale *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. Two trickster tailors con the vain emperor by promising him the finest suit of clothes ever known to mankind, although with the twist that only people of merit and intelligence will see the clothes. The emperor is thus unable to confess that he cannot see the outfit, and is humiliated in public when sporting his new clothes, when a child calls out that he has no clothes on. *The Man In The White Suit* subverts the fairy tale as Sidney is both the maker of the clothes and the wearer – he is both the conman and the fool. He had convinced Birnley, the emperor, of his ability to create this magical cloth, but is humiliated in public when the suit disintegrates. Both Birnley and Sidney are punished for their pride and egotism – yet Sidney walks free at the end, just like the tailors in the fairy tale.

The catalyst of the action is a sought after substance with magical qualities – as is also the case in *Whisky Galore*. The cloth is magical, with its powers of indestructibility; the thread saves Sidney when it assists him in escaping from captivity in the Birnley mansion, only to betray him to the mob when they spy the luminous whiteness in the dark of the night (see Figure 19.2). In *Whisky Galore* the whisky restore harmony and even health, bringing the community together in happiness, whereas in *The Man In The White Suit* the cloth leads to a breakdown in order and threatens the stability and welfare of all echelons of society.

Sidney is not the hero but the harbinger of chaos, a false hero in seeming to bring the promise of great things, but turning out to be a threat. In this respect, the film steps firmly into the world of the satire, where dreams become nightmares, and where fools and tricksters threaten the community. There is no happy ending or sense of reconciliation at the end of the film – normality has returned to the textile mills yet there is uncertainty with Sidney still at large. Moreover, no one has attained their dream. The mill owners have retained their empires but their greed and foolishness has been exposed in their panic in the face of change. The narrative conforms to a “phase of comedy” identified by Frye, “in which the hero



Figure 19.2 *The Man In The White Suit* (producer, Michael Balcon): Sidney's suit possesses a strange magical and other-worldly luminescence.

does not transform a humorous society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before" (Frye 1957: 180). Frye elaborates that in this phase the hero is "usually himself . . . a comic humour or mental runaway" and that the central dynamic of the comedy can be that of the "clash of two illusions."

Mackendrick has portrayed another community that lies between two worlds, in this case creating a satire exploring the dichotomy between the interests of science and the community, and the workers and their bosses. These tensions are articulated through the medium of dreams and nightmares, myth and reality, and thus locates contemporary issues within a framework of perennial themes of greed, transgression and ambition. Sidney is the maverick who blazes a trail through normality, a purveyor of dreams and magic, which ultimately turn to nightmare and dust. The ensuing cataclysm exposes the true identities of all the protagonists: Sidney's fixated selfishness, Daphne's need to escape, the mill owners' capacity to do anything to protect their profits.

Whereas *The Man In The White Suit* was another box office success for Mackendrick, the response to *The Maggie* was more muted. Mackendrick returned to Scotland for his next Ealing comedy, *The Maggie*, a film that fuses the business world of *The Man In The White Suit* with the mythical Scotland of *Whisky Galore*. Both *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie* build an image of the Celtic world which echoes a "dream Scotland" in embracing a sense of otherness, mythical resonance and liminality – offering the promise of an alternative to the repressive reality of our own society, the promise of a new, free society which is the bedrock of the comedy format. Colin McArthur's critique of *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie* takes the position that both films are typical of the ethnic discourse he

labels the “Scottish Discursive Unconscious,” a highly ideological representation of Scotland, constructing “the Scots . . . as having an essential identity different from – indeed, and in many respects the antithesis of – the Anglo-Saxon identity exemplified by (a certain class of) Englishmen and Americans” (McArthur 2003: 8). McArthur goes on to observe that the discourse evokes “a dream Scotland which is highland, wild, ‘feminine’, close to nature and which has, above all, the capacity to enchant and transform the stranger” (McArthur 2003: 12). For McArthur the representation of Scotland in the two films is an ideological construct that has been widely perpetuated. *Whisky Galore* centers on a community situated at the far extremes of the British Isles, seemingly at the edge of the known world, in a liminal space where dreams and myths are woven with reality, ultimately shoring up communal identity against threats from the outside.

The narrative dynamic of *The Maggie* hinges on the collision between the old world of the Scottish coastal communities and the new world of global commerce and economic imperatives, embodied in the airline executive Calvin Marshall. *The Maggie*’s dual nature had a personal resonance for the director: “it’s very much about me . . . the story of the American who is an executive in industry and the story of the wee boy mucking about on the Clyde, both of them are myself” (McQuarrie, 1986). The audience is caught between a growing sense of sympathy for the American as his life disintegrates, and engagement with the mischievous innocence of Dougie the cabin boy, who battles to save his master’s livelihood.

Geoff King comments how the Ealing comedies are “a product of the time and national context, blending elements of comic fantasy and documentary-style naturalism to explore difficult postwar issues” (King 2002: 158). This is certainly true of *Whisky Galore* with its concerns with austerity and bureaucracy and *The Man In The White Suit*, dealing with scientific progress and labor relations. *The Maggie* reflects concerns about the swamping of indigenous culture and industry by the United States. This tension is articulated through the classic comedy dynamic of inserting the outsider as an interloper into an alien culture, creating a clash in values and consequent questioning of identity. Marshall needs to ship a valuable cargo to Kintyre, but his agent accidentally gives the contract to the crew of a dilapidated Clyde puffer, *The Maggie*. The American realizes the mistake and desperately tries to retrieve his cargo, only to be thwarted repeatedly by Captain Mactaggart and his crew. The comedy centers around culture clash, much like *Whisky Galore*, as the wily crew outwits the outsider, who descends from a state of confidence and self-assurance to self-doubt and despair.

The puffer transports the central characters away from the modern world through wild seascapes and timeless villages, back into the realms of myth and tradition, the oneiric world of *Whisky Galore*. This is the world which exists in parallel with the modern world, representing a simple agrarian lifestyle dominated by tradition and strong family and community values. Northrop Frye observes that the comic narrative is driven by the rebellion of “the hero’s society . . . against the society of the *senex* . . . the hero’s society is a Saturnalia, a reversal of social

standards which recalls a golden age in the past” (Frye 1957: 171). The world of the puffer, with its simple pleasures, traditions and close community stands in contrast with the bustle and pressures of the business world. The “green world” is characterized by carnival pleasures, representing release from the strictures of the normal world. The crew of *The Maggie* thus have a different agenda and time frame from Marshall, adapting their voyage to optimize the opportunities for drink and pleasure. As Mactaggart observes when Marshall makes yet another frantic telephone call: “I’ve never seen such a man for the telephone. It’ll be the American way, everything in a rush. Ay, but he’s not a man that’s at peace with himself.” The shortcomings of the modern world are epitomized by “the American way,” personified by Marshall’s brusque business dealings, his need to have control, and the assumption that money will solve any problem, even his marriage, as is made evident in the valuable cargo of household goods with which he intends to furnish the new house to surprise his wife.

Marshall is drawn into the heart of the Western Isles, trying to take control of the situation on board *The Maggie* only to find himself effectively hijacked by the crew. He becomes helpless in the face of invisible forces that test his resolve and resilience, drawing him into the “green world.” As in *Whisky Galore* even nature conspires against the outsider as the fog, tides and rocks impede his efforts to gain control. Marshall finds himself pulled into the very heart of the community when Mactaggart forces him into his friend’s 100th birthday party, in a celebratory sequence which serves to encapsulate the energy, strength and exuberance of the community and the power of ritual. Marshall is pulled into the dance, just as he has been pulled into the party and taken to the village against his wishes; the force of the community is unstoppable. The whole sequence echoes the carnival pleasures of the reiteach featured in *Whisky Galore*: the point of view shot positioning the audience in the heart of the dance, facing a pretty girl, the Gaelic tongue, the crowd shots in contrast to the isolation of Marshall, the whisky and the swirling traditional music. Marshall is offered refreshment, pleasure, and the admiration of a young woman, signaling the open generous nature of this timeless community; it is a dream world which could take him away from the cares of his normal life, in contrast to the broken phone call in the previous scene when Marshall begs his wife to come and meet him, only to have the phone put down on him. The everyday world has become a nightmare for him that he desperately tries to remedy, with his repeated attempts to communicate with his wife. Ultimately he is a trapped man who is returned to his nightmare at the end of the film as he trudges away to his broken marriage, having lost the contents of his new house. He turns his back on the dream-world of *The Maggie* and the broader community within which it sails, and thus it too becomes a nightmare for him, blocking his desires.

The Scottish isles offer a mythical world of pleasure and freedom in both *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie*. For Marshall the journey with *The Maggie* offers a way forward in his life, testing his values and making him reflect on his priorities.

This is made clear in the series of encounters with indigenous characters who are “true” to themselves in pursuing their desires: Mactaggart, Dougie the cabin boy, the girl at the birthday party. The opposing forces of the narrative reflect the dialectic at the heart of much film comedy: the opposition between the world of play, liberation and childish pleasures and the adult world of responsibilities and constraint. Marshall represents the world of the adult, in contrast to the world of Mactaggart, which centers on pleasure and childlike pursuit of gratification. He travels into a timeless world on the edge of reality, much as the film itself hovers between elegy for the director’s past and the material concerns of the present day, between adult and child, myth, and reality. Marshall’s journey becomes a journey into his psyche, leading him to question his own identity as he is forced to recognize he has no control over events in this “other” world. After *The Maggie* destroys the quay, removing all hope of him being able to transfer his cargo to another boat, he is asked by the captain if he is Mr. Marshall. Standing impassively, overwhelmed, and staring into the chasm that was once the quay, he replies, “I am no longer absolutely sure.”

Marshall’s identity wavers from this point onwards, as *The Maggie* become a floating communal island transporting the villagers and assorted animals to the birthday party. He continues to try to maintain contact with the outside world through repeated telephone calls, yet he changes his clothes at the next port, and starts to look like a crew member. For Marshall his plight becomes a nightmare, having to confront the fact that he has no alternative but to go along with *The Maggie* at the pace Mactaggart dictates, that he is in another realm where reason, business and money have no bearing on events, but community and tradition must be respected, or else the forces of nature will work against you. He becomes trapped on *The Maggie*, his attempts to get control being repeatedly blocked – to the extent that the Dougie, the cabin boy, believes that he has killed Marshall having rendered him unconscious after Marshall announced he had bought *The Maggie*.

Northrop Frye recognizes the similarities between comedy and tragedy, observing that “comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself” when the hero teeters on the brink of destruction as a result of his shortcomings, yet is transformed and reintegrated into the social fold by the end of the narrative (Frye 2002: 106). Marshall comes close to redemption but turns his back on the crew at the end of the film, a defeated man wandering off to an uncertain future. He is not transformed or reintegrated – he remains unchanged, in this respect being much like Sidney walking away at the end of *The Man In The White Suit*, although there is a sense that Sidney’s single mindedness renders him undiminished by his humiliation, whereas Marshall has seemingly lost his way. *The Maggie* emerges as the hero. It eludes its demise to gain a new lease of life, courtesy of Marshall having rescued it from the rocks and providing the money for its repairs. Certainly *The Maggie*, and its crew, come perilously close to destruction in the course of the film, most notably when the engine fails and it hits the rocks.

In common with the preceding two Mackendrick comedies, the film reaches an ambiguous conclusion, mainly due to the problematic nature of the character of Marshall. The clarity of the characterization of the “green world comedies” is subverted by Mackendrick’s vision, in which there is no clear dichotomy between good and bad, hero and villain; it is a world of ambiguities. Mackendrick set out to characterize Marshall as a hard-nosed, ruthless executive, who lets nothing stand in his way, but Douglas’s performance creates a more sympathetic character as he is constantly outmaneuvered by *The Maggie’s* crew. He is a man whose undoubted prowess in the business world has compromised his hopes for personal happiness, as he struggles to save his cargo, his marriage, and his dream of domestic bliss in the Scottish islands. For him the green world is a nightmare where he has no place, yet his life in the normal world is also a nightmare: he is a doomed man.

Northrop Frye’s analysis of Shakespeare’s comedies demonstrates how “the action . . . begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world” (Frye 2002: 107). The action of *The Maggie* commences in the heart of Glasgow, but then moves to the “green world” of the Scottish isles and coast. Here the action sees Marshall brought to the brink of transformation, yet the ending precludes any conclusive sense of metamorphosis; after having capitulated to the crew, he turns his back on them. In the course of the journey he has ultimately helped salvage the boat by sacrificing his valuable cargo and fixing the engine, proving an ability to think beyond his own interests. Yet there is no final sense of redemption and transformation for his character, when he trudges away from *The Maggie* and her crew, a diminished man who has paid a heavy price for his folly. Marshall shares Captain Waggett’s fate in *Whisky Galore* in that both characters are outsiders whose values are ultimately irreconcilable with this mythic world that lies beyond modern Scotland, and both are driven to turn their backs on the community, after paying a heavy price for their folly and temerity.

The story turns full circle in the final scene where we see the puffer returning to the normal world, making its way up the Clyde to ply for business once again. Much like Sidney at the end of *The Man In The White Suit*, Mactaggart and his crew remain on the loose, ready to take on new “victims,” both films having seen these hapless agents of destruction wreak havoc, taking on powerful yet flawed adversaries from the modern world of commerce. At the journey’s end *The Maggie’s* crew are triumphant. Having resisted Marshall and reached their destination, they have also saved the future of their boat, for the time being.

The puffer crew is proud and stubborn but, too often, “like children, they’re easily distracted by immediate gratification,” having to be saved by timely interventions from Dougie, the wily cabin boy, Mactaggart’s disgruntled sister and ultimately even Marshall himself (Kemp 1991: 98). The crew have much in common with Andrew Stott’s definition of the comic type of the “trickster,” “a shiftless opportunist” often responsible for “quasi-criminal” activities, testing

the limits of society and thus contributing to the process of social renewal and reconciliation (Stott 2005: 51). Geoff King notes how the trickster is often characterized by childlike “unsocialised, uncontrolled and apparently instinctual drives to gratify desires for food, drink and sex” (King 2002: 88). We see this in Mactaggart’s crew’s commitment to pleasure over business, each voyage being arranged around opportunities to drink and party. The trickster is not confined by boundaries and can travel between worlds, much as *The Maggie* plies her trade between the modern “normal” world of Glasgow and the “green world” of the Scottish coast and islands, the new world of postwar industrial Britain and the old world of traditional and a pastoral way of life.

The crew is wily, effectively conning Marshall, not bothering to correct the agent’s mistake in confusing *The Maggie* with a much more seaworthy boat and persisting in misleading and ensnaring him, even to the extent of letting *The Maggie* destroy the quay (due to be demolished anyway) so that he could not transfer his cargo. Dougie the cabin boy commits petty theft, poaching pheasant and committing assault on Marshall, knocking him out when he discovers Marshall’s intentions to buy the boat. Ultimately we are encouraged to regard them as benign tricksters, who exploit Marshall’s foolishness in order to preserve their way of life. The survival of *The Maggie* is their motivation, and with it the survival of an older way of life and community.

The Ladykillers was to be Mackendrick’s last film for Ealing, and it was the last commercial success for the Studio. The film takes the Ealing comedy to the extremes of its signature style, teetering on the cusp of fantasy in its characterization, narrative and *mise-en-scène*. Mackendrick commented: “I knew that I was trying to work on a fable. The characters are all caricatures, fable figures; none of them is real for a moment”, describing his film as “an enclosed, fabulous world” (Keating 1986). Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness), an eccentric criminal mastermind, rents a room from the unwitting elderly Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson). The professor’s disparate gang, masquerading as musicians to fool the old lady, use the room as a base for a heist. Mrs. Wilberforce accidentally discovers their crime, and ultimately the gang destroy themselves despite their efforts to kill her.

Here the tricksters become a threat to the community, in their plot to carry out their robbery and subsequently to dispose of Mrs. Wilberforce who inadvertently discovers their crime. As in *The Maggie*, the tricksters travel between worlds, in this case from the normality of 1950s’ London, into the ‘green world’ of Mrs. Wilberforce’s house - a relic from a bygone age, a true manifestation of Frye’s idea of a “golden age” that has been usurped by the “normal world”. The gang travels in a different direction from the trickster crew in the previous film. In *The Ladykillers* they are the outsiders who seek to impose their control on the green world, but are defeated, and destroyed. In this respect the gang has much in common with Waggett (in *Whisky Galore*) and Marshall: the intruders who cannot survive in this “other” world having dared to believe that they have the power to have their way.

Frye describes the green world of Shakespeare's comedies as containing "fairies, dreams, disembodied souls" adding that even though "it may not be 'a real' world . . . there is something equally illusory in the stumbling and blinded follies of the 'normal' world" (Frye 2002: 109). The world of *The Ladykillers* is the stuff of dreams, if not nightmares, populated by the lost souls of the gang, who have strayed away from their normal milieu into a world where unstoppable forces result in their destruction. The dark comedy of the film is typical of Frye's "ironic comedy," where the demonic world closes in, threatening death and destruction: "the fear of death, sometimes a hideous death, hangs over the central character to the end, and is dispelled so quickly that one has almost the sense of awakening from a nightmare" (Frye 1957: 179). Mrs. Wilberforce (her name suggesting righteous beliefs and goodness, evoking William Wilberforce, campaigner for abolition of slavery) is the channel for these powerful forces, her frail frame belying her indomitable strength of will and her fearsome belief in "doing the right thing." Once the gang cross her threshold they have entered this other world, never to leave alive.

Professor Marcus, sinking further into madness, realizes their fate towards the end of the film: "There were only five of us . . . But it would take 20 or 30 or 40 perhaps to deal with her, because we'll never be able to kill *her*, Louis. She'll always be with us, for ever and ever and ever, and there's nothing we can do about it." This sense of helplessness in the face of the force of innocence, community and bygone values is experienced by Marshall when *The Maggie* destroys the quay and his hopes of gaining control, and by Waggett in the face of the islanders' wiliness in hiding the whisky and repeatedly foiling his personal crusade to restore order.

"The stumbling and blinded follies" of the "normal" world are epitomized in the comic ineptitude of the police, the supposed representatives of order and authority. The film begins and ends at the police station, where the avuncular police, a benign yet incompetent presence throughout the film, steadfastly dismiss Mrs. Wilberforce's tales, to the extent of even transporting the gang's case of money back to Mrs. Wilberforce's house in total ignorance. The robbery takes place on the streets of the normal world, where we see a society rife with petty crime and foolishness, populated by caricatures such as the Irish thief with his silver hoard at the railway station, and the belligerent market trader whose argument with Mrs. Wilberforce snowballs, drawing in bystanders and destroying his stall.

Because the majority of the film takes place in the surreal decaying surrounds of Mrs. Wilberforce's house, a museum piece commemorating a bygone age, *The Ladykillers* takes the sense of an enclosed world even further than in the other comedies. Mackendrick wrote that it was important that the majority of the scenes should take place within the house in order to maintain a "comic tone" consistent with a film which "had to perch on the edge of fantasy." For him, the comedy of the film is situated in a liminal world where "all the main characters are exaggerated

cartoon-like characters and when set against natural backgrounds, interacting with real persons, they were in danger of losing conviction” (Mackendrick 2004: 207). The set design paid homage to an expressionist style in utilizing disorientating angles to create a surreal world.

The opening shot of the film is an extreme high angle shot of the house, a fairy-tale cottage marooned in an urban landscape, dated and isolated – much like Mrs. Wilberforce, and everything she represents. The house is claustrophobic; the gang struggles to find space within its cramped Victorian confines, comically jostling with Mrs. Wilberforce and her many “replicants” in the hallway, being overwhelmed by little old ladies. The gang is engulfed by the tiny house. Both house and owner are aged and fragile, yet simultaneously resilient and indestructible; the house leans precariously as a result of bomb damage, prompting One Round affectionately to christen its owner “Mrs. Lopsided,” yet she manfully wields a hammer to sort out the plumbing. The house suffers some peripheral damage whilst the gang self-destructs, yet nevertheless appears miraculously unscathed in the final aerial shot, much as its owner is also untouched.

Forces that work alongside the unwitting Mrs. Wilberforce to overcome the gang animate this “other” world. The film involves episodes of slapstick comedy with objects and physical entities undermining the gang at every turn. In the extended scene when the gang attempts to recapture the parrot, a chair entraps One-Round (Danny Green), Harry (Peter Sellers) is bitten by the bird, and Louis (Herbert Lom) gets stuck on the roof. The gang’s attempt to escape with the money is thwarted by the house itself, when the front door shuts on One-Round’s cello case strap, resulting in the case falling open and exposing the money to Mrs. Wilberforce. Finally Professor Marcus himself, having killed Louis, is foiled on the brink of triumph, when he is hit over the head by the railway signal and falls neatly into the passing goods wagon.

Kemp describes the film as “England reduced to the charm, and the cruelty, of a fairy-tale” (Kemp 1991: 119). Mrs. Wilberforce is the vulnerable old lady alone in her quaint cottage but protected by unassailable forces. Combining her innocence with an indomitable integrity, she remains oblivious to the terrible events that take place within her realm. Her fragility is emphasized in the high angle shots of her surrounded by the gang in the tight spaces of her cottage. As in a fairy tale, good is threatened by evil when the gang decides that the only way they can get away with the money is to kill Mrs. Wilberforce, thus the whimsical charm of a “sweet little old lady” is threatened by murder.

The clarity of this moral outrage is clouded by an ambiguity which is typical of Mackendrick’s Ealing comedies. Raymond Durgnat believed that the film has “a quality of moral paradox” due to “the to and fro of [Mrs. Wilberforce’s] invincibly ignorant benevolence, and [Professor Marcus’s] seething, impotent malice which we can’t but share” (Durgnat 1970: 38). The gang endears itself with its utter foolishness. Its perfectly formed plan disintegrates; the gang members are never a true threat to Mrs. Wilberforce. One by one they prove themselves

far from hardened criminals when confronted with the prospect of having to kill Mrs. Wilberforce. The gang is helpless and Mrs. Wilberforce is indestructible; we are positioned to understand the scale of their frustration and desperation in the face of such an apparently harmless foe. From the opening scene we have been shown the disruptive impact of the Mrs. Wilberforce on other lives; a baby screams when she peers into its pram, the police groan with despair faced with another of her eccentric visits, and later on we see the carnage resulting from her decision to upbraid the market stall holder for his treatment of the horse that has been eating his wares. The market stall holder is incredulous when he discovers that she is known to the police, and that they “let her out on the loose” after his stall was wrecked because of her intervention.

Mrs. Wilberforce’s house becomes a battleground whilst the normal world, in the shape of the criminals, struggles to extricate itself from this “other” world, a world of forces from which they cannot escape, as if the house is charmed. It is significant, and ironic, that Mrs. Wilberforce, seemingly charmed and thereby removed from the sordid crimes going on around her, sleeps through the night while the gang members gradually destroy each other. This is the world of black comedy, where laughter is conflated with death, the slapstick nature of each death negating horror in favor of humor. As darkness falls, a nightmare is unleashed in the shadows and darkness around the cottage, accompanied by periodic screeches of the steam trains. The film verges on horror with a sequence of desperate murders. One by one the bodies are thrown (or fall) into the goods wagons, towed away by the endless procession of steam trains, as if evil is removed from the world of Mrs. Wilberforce, and ceremoniously returned to the “normal” world. Frye observes that “the principle of the humor is the principle that unincremental repetition . . . is funny” (Frye 1957: 168). The excessive nature of the repeated deaths generates laughter, enhanced by the slapstick of the action; the threat of the demonic world is turned on itself, resulting in self-destruction. An impermeable shell of morality and principle surrounds this remnant of a bygone age, repelling any threat or suggestion of change which might dissipate the comic effect, and ensuring that “stable and harmonious order” will be restored.

The Ladykillers weaves together nightmares and dreams more than any of Mackendrick’s preceding comedies. William Rose, who wrote the screenplay, had conceived the original story in a dream. Mackendrick commented that “The fact that it was something that Bill had quite literally dreamed up really entranced me. Dreams are a marvellous source of imagery for movies” (Keating 1986). The narrative framework encourages the viewer to speculate about the possibility that the whole story of the gang is actually Mrs. Wilberforce’s dream, and that the police are actually correct in persistently disbelieving her. The repeated images of her sleeping whilst the night unfolds invite this interpretation, as does the opening scene in the police station where her reputation for delusion and fantasy becomes clear. She has come to explain the truth to the police behind her friend’s sighting of a spaceship in her garden: “She never saw it in the first place On Wednesday

in Children's Hour they were doing a little play called, errr, 'Visitors From Other Worlds'. Amelia had her wireless on . . . Well, it's obvious. She dropped off to sleep. The whole thing was just a dream. Amelia was so embarrassed she quite refused to come here and tell you herself." Amelia's experience, or her imagined experience, has clear parallels to what happens during the course of the film.

On one level it is absolutely typical of Mrs. Wilberforce to take it upon herself to assist her friend and carry out her duty in explaining the misunderstanding. Yet on another level it establishes a narrative framework of an elderly lady being visited by beings "from other worlds," who have dematerialized in the course of the night. Indeed Mrs. Wilberforce wonders aloud to the Sergeant whilst she is ushered off the premises: "I must say if there are any beings on other worlds, I can't think why they would want to come to our world, can you?" Her question becomes ironic in the course of the next scene when she sets out on her journey home, only to be stalked by a "being" from another world, who has trespassed into the innocence of the "green" world. The camera tracks Professor Marcus using evocative gliding movements to convey a sense of the supernatural and the surreal.

The disruption and threat represented by Professor Marcus is highlighted by the dramatic change in the weather conditions, signaling his intrusion into Mrs. Wilberforce's world. The apparition of his sinister silhouette is greeted by an abrupt downpour, which empties the high street, accompanied by an increasingly ominous soundtrack. Suspense mounts whilst he trails Mrs. Wilberforce back to her house, circling the building as if stalking his prey, whilst she remains oblivious to the threat. This sequence establishes the proximity of the nightmare world of the ironic comedy, juxtaposed with the innocence of the "green" world at an early stage of the film, employing conventions more familiar from darker genres, in particular the horror film. Frye notes how comedy typically has a "ternary form": "a stable and harmonious order disrupted by folly . . . and then restored" (Frye 1957: 171). He likens the middle action to winter. In *The Ladykillers* it is signified by the abrupt change of weather with the arrival of Professor Marcus. With restored order the sun returns to the world of Mrs. Wilberforce, the street becomes busy again and she is able to leave her umbrella behind at the police station.

Mrs. Wilberforce is untouchable, possessing powers that put her beyond any threat posed by the nightmare world. She lives within dreams of the past, constantly referring to her memories and past events, her consciousness hovering between reverie and reality. In this respect she is a manifestation of Victorian values that endure within the community. She is inviolable because she is beyond the reach of the present. Hence she is humored by the police whilst she weaves a trail of disruption within the community before retreating to her domain, her time capsule cottage at the far reaches of the cul-de-sac.

The mythic world of Mackendrick's comedies becomes a place where community and identity are tested, resulting in the revelation of the essential nature of the characters – whether it is the misplaced integrity of Captain Waggett in trying to enforce the rule of law, the greed of the bosses of the textile mills,

the personal crisis that lies behind Calvin Marshall's business success, or the indestructible moral certainties of Mrs. Wilberforce. The narratives result in the expulsion of agents of change in favor of retaining established values and social cohesion, yet Mackendrick leaves a lingering sense of uncertainty because our sympathies are skewed and resolution is undermined. The happy ending expected of film comedy is tempered by ambiguity, typically leaving a lingering sense of unfinished business. The status quo is maintained, but at a cost that borders on the tragic for some of the characters. For the audience the characterization can prove ambiguous, in the face of the expected polarity and clarity of the comedy: villains evoke sympathy while heroes are flawed and blinkered. Charles Barr goes so far as to describe the characters as "robustly Machiavellian . . . undermining the Ealing polarisation of nice and wholesome and harmless versus coarse, tough and brutal" (Barr 1980: 118). Philip Kemp wrote of Mackendrick's "dual vision, the split perspective of the half-assimilated outsider . . . the ambivalence of his regard that sets up the moral tensions within his films" suggesting that this essential ambiguity hinges on the director's own position straddling worlds: Scotland and America, within and without the war (Kemp 1991: 246).

Although Mackendrick was able to flourish as a director at Ealing he was never really comfortable within the benign constraints fostered by Michael Balcon's paternalistic regime. Mackendrick's Ealing films are permeated by a tension between nightmares and the Ealing vision of Britishness. His comedies increasingly subverted the Ealing spirit, veering away from the reassuring messages of unity and communal triumph, questioning consensus and social constraints, probing the nature of postwar Britain and ultimately taking comedy to the brink of darkness, with the satirical vision of *The Man In The White Suit* and the black comedy of *The Ladykillers*. The influence of his body of work continues to be felt, most explicitly in Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero* (1983), effectively paying homage to *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie* in its evocation of the Scottish idyll, and in the Coen brothers' remake of *The Ladykillers* (2004).

Mackendrick's time at Ealing was just an interlude in his career, spanning five films (including the melodrama *Mandy*) before he traveled to Hollywood. *The Ladykillers* finished Mackendrick's journey through the psyche of a nation. He moved back to his birthplace – America – and to the challenges of Hollywood, while Ealing Studios stuttered to an end. His first American film *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) was a critical and box office success that he struggled to build on, ultimately becoming an acclaimed film teacher and author of an influential book *On Film-making*.

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Further Reading

- Barr, C. (1998) *Ealing Studios*, 3rd edn, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA. Barr has been deemed the absolute authority on Ealing Studios since the original publication of this study, back in 1977. This survey of the life and times of the most celebrated of British film studios is informed by inimitable research, involving interviews with key players and authorities on the subject, many of whom have since passed away. It is a very accessible account, giving a wider social and cultural context to the films.
- Frye, N. (2000) *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. The third essay “Archetypal criticism: theory of myths” provides a critical framework for the study of comedy. Frye develops a framework for literary criticism, aligning comedy with spring, and satire with winter. Frye’s schema offers fascinating insights into the mythic potential of comedy.
- Kemp, P. (1991) *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick*, Methuen, London. The first, and only, comprehensive study of Mackendrick’s work, extending beyond Ealing to cover his Hollywood career. This is an indispensable guide to Mackendrick, informed by interviews with Mackendrick, his colleagues and family.
- King, G. (2002) *Film Comedy*, Wallflower Press, London. King gives a very useful overview of the comedy genre, including a chapter on satire and a section on the representation of Britishness in Ealing films. This is a wide-reaching study of the forms, and socio-historical contexts of film comedy.
- Mackendrick, A. (2004) *On Film-making*, Faber & Faber, London. Frequently acclaimed as the greatest book on filmmaking, this is a distillation of Mackendrick’s teachings from his quarter of a century at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. Mackendrick makes reference to his own films, giving invaluable

insights into his vision and techniques. The foreword is written by Martin Scorsese. The editor, Paul Cronin, maintains a website dedicated to Mackendrick's work, <http://www.thestickingplace.com/alexander-mackendrick/> (accessed May 4, 2012), and is working on a follow up to *On Film-making*, putting together further writings and interviews.

McArthur, C. (2003) *Whisky Galore! & The Maggie*, I.B. Tauris, London. McArthur's guide to Mackendrick's two Scottish films develops a detailed analysis of the wider socio-cultural context, alongside insights into Ealing Studios and the contemporary reception of the films. McArthur's perspective is critical of the representations of Scottishness in the films, offering a "rethink" of the films.