



Sweet Smell of Success

Directed by: Alexander Mackendrick

©/Production Companies:

Norma Productions, Curtleigh Productions

Production Company:

Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions

Produced by: James Hill

Production Manager: Richard McWhorter

Assistant Director: Richard Maybery

Screenplay by: Clifford Odets,
Ernest Lehman

From the novelette by: Ernest Lehman

Photographed by: James Wong Howe

Editorial Supervision: Alan Crosland Jr

Art Director: Edward Carrere

Set Decorator: Edward Boyle

Costumes Designed by: Mary Grant

Make-up: Robert Schiffer

Music Scored and Conducted by:

Elmer Bernstein

Songs by: Chico Hamilton, Fred Katz

Music Editor: Lloyd Young

Sound Recording: Jack Solomon

Effects Editor: Robert Carlisle

Cast:

Burt Lancaster (*J.J. Hunsecker*)

Tony Curtis (*Sidney Falco*)

Susan Harrison (*Susan Hunsecker*)

Marty Milner (*Steve Dallas*)

Sam Levene (*Frank D'Angelo*)

Barbara Nichols (*Rita*)

Jeff Donnell (*Sally*)

Joe Frisco (*Herbie Temple*)

Emile Meyer (*Harry Kello*)

Edith Atwater (*Mary*)

The Chico Hamilton Quintet (*themselves*)

Joseph Leon (*Joe Robard*) *

David White (*Otis Elwell*) *

Lawrence Dobkin (*Leo Bartha*) *

Lurene Tuttle (*Laurie Bartha*) *

Queenie Smith (*Mildred Tam*) *

Autumn Russell (*Linda James*) *

Jay Adler (*Manny Davis*) *

Lewis Charles (*Al Evans*) *

John Fiedler (*barman*) *

Fred Katz (*himself*) *

USA 1957©

96 mins

35mm

* Uncredited

Moviedrome transmission date: 3 Sep 1989

New 35mm print made with funding from
the National Lottery

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Moviedrome: Bringing the Cult TV Series to the Big Screen

Sweet Smell of Success

The screening on Sunday 6 July will be introduced by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox

'What is a cult film? A cult film is one which has a passionate following but does not appeal to everybody. Just because a movie is a cult movie does not automatically guarantee quality. Some cult films are very bad. Others are very, very good. Some make an awful lot of money at the box office. Others make no money at all. Some are considered quality films. Others are exploitation.' From 1988 to 2000 *Moviedrome* was presented by Alex Cox and then Mark Cousins. Across that time, more than 200 features were shown, and generations of movie fans and filmmakers would be informed and inspired by the selection, alongside the wit and wisdom of the introductions that preceded each screening. *Moviedrome* was a portal into the world of weird and wonderful cinema. This two-month season features some of the most notable titles screened and wherever possible they are preceded by the original televised introduction.

Nick Freand Jones, season curator and producer of *Moviedrome*

Alex Cox: *Sweet Smell of Success* is the story of a sleazy press agent called Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis), and his life's work currying favour with the sinister and powerful newspaper columnist J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster). Both Curtis and Lancaster are great. Lancaster's character seems to be modelled on the powerful media personality Walter Winchell; he's a friend of senators and big-time mafiosi. Curtis is always snapping at his heels, barking for scraps. It's a fantastic film, but almost unknown in the United States.

It was directed by Alexander Mackendrick who was born in Boston, Massachusetts but educated in Scotland. The director of some of the finest Ealing comedies, including *Whiskey Galore* and *The Ladykillers*, this was his first American film, an incredibly funny indictment of the media and advertising and human relationships and just about everything else. Maybe it was Mackendrick's ex-patriot background that helped him cut through all the bullshit and make a great American film. Other 'foreign directors' who spring to mind are John Schlesinger with *Midnight Cowboy* and Miloš Forman with *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Or, flowing the other way, Stanley Kubrick came to Britain and made *Clockwork Orange*, a pretty good movie about us.

Sweet Smell of Success was written by Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets who did a similar hatchet job on Hollywood with *The Big Knife*. *Success* was photographed by James Wong Howe, one of the great Hollywood cameramen. We need heroes and villains, and this film has two of the latter. In the words of Sidney Falco: never forget, 'it's in a man's nature to get out there and hustle and get the things he wants'.

Alex Cox's original introduction for *Moviedrome*. Also published in *Moviedrome: The Guide* (BBC, 1990). With thanks to moviedromer.tumblr.com

Franc Roddam on 'Sweet Smell of Success'

Sweet Smell of Success is a film that is sympathetic to the anger that I feel about the way in which the public is bamboozled into believing half-truths and downright lies by politicians and the press and the narrow artistic confines that Hollywood imposes on filmmakers.

The hero changing destiny is the major simple utopian notion behind most American cinema. You don't have to have much insight and socio-political experience to realise that more often than not, the opposite is true: the corrupt are in control of destiny. But it takes a great amount of courage to make this your theme as Alexander Mackendrick did in his sensational film, *Sweet Smell of Success*.

The film was made in 1957, in the wake of the McCarthy witchhunt. From a short story by Ernest Lehman, *Sweet Smell of Success* is a valiant attempt to stand up to the corrupt and jealous, striking a blow for artists and filmmakers alike whose lives were forever changed by McCarthyism.

Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) is a starving publicity agent who is being shunned by the all-powerful Broadway columnist, J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster). In order to get his

Moviedrome: Bringing the Cult TV Series to the Big Screen

Welcome to the Moviedrome

Fri 4 Jul 18:30

The Wicker Man (Final Cut)

Fri 4 Jul 20:45 (+ intro by Alex Cox and Nick Freand Jones) Fri 18 Jul 18:00;
Mon 28 Jul 21:00

Walker

Sat 5 Jul 15:10 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox);
Tue 29 Jul 20:40

The Fly (1958)

Sat 5 Jul 18:30 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones); Sun 13 Jul 15:20

The Fly (1986)

Sat 5 Jul 20:55; Sun 13 Jul 18:20

The Great Silence Il grande silenzio

Sun 6 Jul 12:10 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox);
Tue 15 Jul 20:40

Sweet Smell of Success

Sun 6 Jul 18:00 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox);
Mon 21 Jul 21:00

An American Werewolf in London

Mon 7 Jul 18:30; Sat 26 Jul 21:00

Get Carter

Mon 7 Jul 20:45; Thu 17 Jul 20:30;
Tue 22 Jul 18:10

Les Diaboliques

Tue 8 Jul 20:35 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones);
Sat 12 Jul 11:35

Two-Lane Blacktop

Wed 9 Jul 20:45 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones);
Sat 19 Jul 18:20

Witchfinder General

Fri 11 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Reece Shearsmith); Mon 14 Jul 20:50

California Dolls (aka All the Marbles)

Sat 12 Jul 15:10; Wed 23 Jul 20:40 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones)

Shaft

Sat 12 Jul 18:20; Sat 19 Jul 20:50

Scarface

Sat 12 Jul 19:50; Sun 27 Jul 14:10

Exotica

Mon 21 Jul 18:10; Wed 30 Jul 20:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by filmmaker Atom Egoyan)

La Haine

Fri 25 Jul 21:00; Thu 31 Jul 18:00

Clockers

Sat 26 Jul 18:00; Thu 31 Jul 20:20

With thanks to

Bob Cummins and Sharon Maitland

publicity handouts into J.J.'s column, Falco becomes Hunsecker's whipping boy, prepared to carry out any task, no matter how dastardly. Hunsecker demands that Falco breaks up a relationship between his younger sister and a young jazz guitarist by accusing him of being a marijuana smoker and a card-carrying Communist. When this fails, Falco agrees to plant drugs on the musician and then inform the police.

Hunsecker's abuse of power and Falco's willing complicity bring together two of the main themes of film noir – alienation and obsession. Unlike the early noir films, where the protagonists are moved on through some notion of a realisation of their flaws, Falco and Hunsecker are readily absorbed and consciously at ease in their corrupt and morally bereft world. That the corrupt change destiny and not the hero is the film's sad reflection on American social and political life.

When I first saw the film in 1970, at the end of my years at film school, I was blown away by how superbly it was made. It has so many outstanding qualities that it is difficult to rate them in any order. The dialogue, written by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, is exceptional – perhaps the wittiest and most cutting speech in any film ever made. It rattles along with such speed and insult that sometimes you almost can't believe what you have just heard. The setting is Broadway at night – black and white: glittering with light and menacing with chiaroscuro contrasts. The streets are packed with people and cars. The clubs are full of punters, petty gangsters, goodtime girls and crooked politicians. The wardrobe is sharp, flashy and urbane. The camera work by James Wong Howe is magnificent – low-key lighting, fast-moving camera, powerful framing and distinctive angles. Most of the film takes place at night, and even in the daytime you sense the oppression of the city and the alienation of the citizens.

The editing is as fast and as pacy as the dialogue. From the very first frame, with its wide shot over Broadway and the magnificent Elmer Bernstein score, you are immediately thrust into the world of the film's habitués. Editor and composer work brilliantly well together. The mostly jazz score serves many functions: to put you in the world of showbiz and night life; to give you the emotional swing of the big city; and to pace up the film and accentuate a plot point. The combination of camera-work, editing, music, and direction and dialogue all serve completely to immerse you in the characters' world.

Burt Lancaster was never better as the sinister, monomaniacal Hunsecker. Even though we don't see him for the first 15 minutes, he dominates the film through the other characters' preoccupation with him. In a brilliant touch, when we first come into contact with him, we hear his voice on the telephone dismissing Falco's desperate request to be included in his column: 'You're dead, son – get yourself buried.' Hunsecker sees himself as almost God-like. He actually does say at one point (to a bent politician): 'Go now and sin no more.' He controls the hearts and minds of his 60 million readers; he is the most powerful man on Broadway and wants to control everything that comes into his path, including his younger sister. Their dark relationship with its hints of incest is truly chilling. It is a great relief when the young guitarist, Steve Dallas (Marty Milner), reminds him and us that Hunsecker is no more than a parasite; a morally corrupt parasite feeding on the artistic world.

Tony Curtis is equally brilliant – pretty, dishonest, ambitious and desperate, he will go to any lengths to survive. He is both smart and pathetic at the same time. As gutless as he is, he is not afraid to trade verbal punches with Hunsecker. All the minor characters are wonderfully cast and portrayed. The corrupt and dangerous cop, Kello, is particularly frightening.

All this has been put together with a magnificent objectivity by Mackendrick. He is smart enough to walk us through this corrupt world, leading us towards some moral clarity and yet still make these dark and dangerous characters entertaining, human and familiar. 'I love this dirty town' says Hunsecker to Falco. And we can see his point.

Mackendrick's defence of the artist and the individual, against a corrupt and malevolent press and its metaphor for corrupt government, remains ever pertinent. It's a bold film, made by a bold filmmaker. Mackendrick was briefly my teacher at the London Film School. I had not yet seen his film and remember him as a rather attractive, self-possessed and distracted man. Little did I know then that he had made one of the greatest films in the greatest era of cinema.

Franc Roddam, *Sight and Sound*, January 1997