

The Man in the White Suit, dir. Alexander Mackendrick (1951)

The Man in the White Suit (TMITWS) is rarely mentioned in relation to design practice, beyond its relevance to “smart fabrics,” but every design professional should see this cautionary tale of an individual battling an industry. [1] The film’s obsessive protagonist, Sidney Stratton (Alec Guinness) works as a cleaner at Corland textile mill while secretly pursuing chemical experiments. Upon discovery, he is sacked and moves to Birnley mill where his technical expertise gains him access to the research lab. Birnley’s daughter (Joan Crawford) persuades her father to give Stratton a contract and facilities. He no longer needs to improvise his experiments on borrowed bench space and is granted exclusive use of lab facilities, to avoid industrial espionage. The dangerous nature of his experiments (and his disregard for personal safety) ensures that the physical destruction of his workshop serves as a visual manifestation of the fate of his invention. His fabric, which never gets dirty or tears, can mimic a range of existing applications. Its durability threatens the entire textile industry and it is opposed by trade unions and mill owners alike. The title suggests both savior (as Stratton’s champion/love-interest Crawford sees it) and madman (The Man in the White Straightjacket?): ultimately, Stratton’s determination to realize his invention remains undefeated. [2]

Adapted from a play by Roger MacDougall, TMITWS was released in the UK in 1951 by the celebrated Ealing Studios in the year that the Festival of Britain promoted understanding of British design, culture and industry. In depicting Stratton at the centre of competing forces, the film exemplifies Ealing’s realism and critique of “post-war restrictions and institutions”. Indeed, Sarah Street notes that TMITWS was “made in the same year that a manufacturer’s cartel opposed the production of long-life light bulbs”. [3] While TMITWS was well received on release [4], BAFTA-nominated for Best Film and Best British Film and for best screenplay at the 1953 Oscars, it has since been criticised for typifying Ealing’s characteristically middle-class outlook in deriding the cooperation of working class unions and upper-class mill owners. [5]

Like *Tucker, the Man and his Dream* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1988), TMITWS exemplifies the individualist narrative which dominates popular representations of designers, inventors and scientists, even though it is completely at odds with the realities of team work, cooperation and compromise common to these practices. This inaccuracy has been criticized by Robert A. Jones, who notes that in TMITWS “the stereotype of the artist is used as a model for the scientist because of the lack of familiarity with the nature of scientific creativity.” [6] Notwithstanding this mismatch, and Stratton’s downfall, he has been described as the “patron saint” of plucky inventors such as Clive Sinclair (of

Spectrum computers and the C5 electric vehicle), James Dyson (of the eponymous vacuum cleaner) and Trevor Bayliss (who invented a wind-up radio). [7] TMITWS, like other individualist narratives, reminds designers of the need for optimistic determination even as it ultimately bolsters cynicism about industry support. In tracking the competition over ownership, control and suppression of Stratton's invention, TMITWS offers designers a tragic-comic case study of intellectual property, the economics of creativity and market forces. [8] While TMITWS has been described as a "battle between inventor and capital" fitting the Hollywood genre of "entrepreneurial success story", in which creative eccentrics transform corrupt organizations, it is emphatically not a Hollywood movie and – crucially - its protagonist is economically naive. [9] As Street concludes, "the conflict between technical invention and traditional commercial interests" is resolved not through inventive genius, but by "recognising the tenacity of economic, social and bureaucratic obstacles." [10] Ultimately, Stratton's experience is a warning for designers of the need to balance individual creativity with market forces.

NOTES

[1] *The Journal of the Minerals, Metals and Materials Society*, vol. 56, no. 11 (November 2004), pp. 6-11; John Emsley on perfluoropolyethers, *Molecules at an Exhibition: the Science of Everyday Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 94-95.

[2] The British Film Institute's excellent Screen Online resource has a synopsis at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/441408/synopsis.html> See also Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios: a Movie Book*, Berkeley: University of California Press, new edition, 1999 and Alexander Mackendrick, *On Film-Making*, ed. Paul Cronin, London: Faber, 2004.

[3] Street, Sarah, *British National Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 67, p. 69.

[4] Review, *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, British Film Institute, vol. 18, no. 212 (September 1951), p. 326.

[5] Rattigan, Neil, 'The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s' in *Re-Viewing British Cinema, 1900-1992: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 143-154, p. 152; Hunt, Martin, "New Labour, New Criticism: A Contemporary Reassessment of Ealing and The Archers" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 2002), pp. 261-269.

[6] Jones, Robert A., 'The Scientist as Artist: a Study of The Man in the White Suit and some related British Film comedies of the postwar period (1945-1970)' *Public Understanding of Science*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1998), pp. 135-147, p. 135; Castanho, Miguel

A. R. B., 'Pop Science: Facts or Fiction? Friend or Foe?' *Interciencia*, vol. 28, no. 11 (November 2003), pp. 665-668, pp. 666-7.

[7] Marshall, Bethan, 'Creating Danger: the place of the arts in education policy' in *Creativity in Education*, ed. Anna Croft, Bob Jeffrey and Mike Leibling, London: Continuum, 2001, pp. 116-125, p. 116.

[8] Leet, Don and Scott Houser, 'Economics Goes to Hollywood: Using Classic Films and Documentaries to Create an Undergraduate Economics Course' *Journal of Economic Education*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Fall 2003), pp. 326-332; Phillips, Jeremy, 'A film with an overt IP theme...' *Journal of Intellectual Property Law and Practice*, vol. 2, no. 4 (April 2007), p. 266; Swan, Peter, L., 'Market Structure and Technological Progress: the Influence of Monopoly on Product Innovation' *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 84, no. 4 (November 1970), pp. 627-638.

[9] Hassard, John and Ruth Holliday, 'Introduction' in *Organization-Representation: Work and Organizations in Popular Culture*, ed. John Hassard and Ruth Holliday, London: Sage, 1998, pp. 1-16, p. 8. Also discussed are *The Secret of My Success* (1987), *Big* (1988) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994). On Hollywood, Contrary to what Laurence S. Moss states in his 'Film and the Transmission of Economic Knowledge: A Report' *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. XVII (September 1979), pp. 1005-1019, p. 1011.

[10] Street, 1997, p. 69.