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Michael Reeves (review)

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**Benjamin Halligan.
Michael Reeves.**

**Manchester University Press, 2003.
248 pages, \$69.95.**

Might-Have-Beens

Somewhere in the archives at Princeton, there is a tattered sheet of paper, half-filled with scrawled sentences. This is the final page of F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, and its blank half-page has a touch of magic. It teases us with the idea that, if he had lived, Fitzgerald might have come up with another novel as glimmering as *The Great Gatsby*.

Similar landscapes of possibility are opened up by truncated film careers. In a British context, these are especially powerful, because there have been few directors to rival the European and American masters, either in quality or quantity; British film was, and is, an unstable business, a matter of boom and bust. It is hardly surprising, then, that Brits like Robert Hamer and Seth Holt, directors who died prematurely and who left behind only the odd, glittering fragment, also possess the magic of blankness. If they had survived, the general feeling goes, then maybe, just maybe, British film might have been a more glorious affair than it turned out to be.

Michael Reeves was the youngest of these might-have-beens, a Chatterton who suddenly dazzled and just as swiftly fizzled out. When he died of a drug overdose in 1969, he was only twenty-five, but he had already managed to make three low budget feature films, the final one, *Witchfinder General* (1968, US: *The Conquering Worm*), being the reason for his reputation as a doomed master. For Benjamin Halligan, that reputation is rooted in the fact that Reeves' work was "entirely personal, entirely felt"; in *Witchfinder*, "the scenes he created were intrinsic to his whole being, only to be communicated through the very act of filming". It goes without saying, perhaps, that this biography-cum-critical study tells the story of what happens when art and some hungry inner need become fused too closely.

His background had a lot to do with it. Reeves was an example of that great British archetype, the private school rebel, poised between privilege (he had a private income) and deprivation (his father died when he was eight). This volatile brew supplied both the psychological impetus to achievement and the economic means to get ahead of the game. At school, Reeves created some innovative amateur films, and later he managed to make it to the lower rungs of the profession, helped, no doubt, by a posh, Byronic charisma. Halligan tells the story of how the aspiring filmmaker pursued the actor Stanley Baker in a kind of automotive version of doorstepping, and managed to persuade

the star to help him get his union card. This seems to have been typical of the young man's approach to work and life. He had the manic, high-octane energy of what was about to become Swing-ing London.

Thanks to this drive, success came early.

The mid-Sixties marked a time when the "sexploitation" horror film was at its height: after *making Revenge of the Blood Beast* (1966) in Italy, Reeves fell in with a tough Soho huckster called Tony Tenser, and directed *The Sorcerers* (1967), a tale of psychedelic mind control starring the elderly Boris Karloff. Halligan believes that this film marked the beginning of Reeves' Faustian bargain with his craft: "Mike had placed himself in *The Sorcerers* and allowed the film to access himself...the film had controlled and lived vicariously through him, drawing on his experiences to make it real...There was no going back." On the contrary, the director went deeper into the heart of darkness, and came up with his masterpiece.

Halligan paints a vivid picture of the genesis, and fraught production, of *Witchfinder General*. Set during the English Civil War, the film is, ostensibly, a Corman-like shocker with Vincent Price as Matthew Hopkins, an obsessed sadist who tortures, hangs and sometimes burns any Suffolk villager whom he suspects of practicing the forbidden arts. Yet, as Halligan shows, *Witchfinder* is a more complex and provocative film than its "sexploitation" surfaces suggest. It is, he believes, an investigation into the corrupting tendencies inherent in idealism, and into the violence that it can produce.

The detailed analysis of the film is one of the book's strengths, but the account of the production itself is the most fun. The shoot seems to have been a combination of haste, improvisation, less than respectable behaviour, and Vincent Price camping to excess. Halligan suggests that the master of menace may have accepted the leading role because he hoped for some bedroom pleasure with his director; Reeves' rejection did not help their relationship, nor did the young tyro's declaration that he had not wanted Price in the first place. The result was coolness, though Reeves was still able to coax his star into giving one of the best performances of his career. It cannot have been easy. For example, seeing a young actor on horseback, the man who became Doctor Phibes is said to have cried out: "Oh my God! Look at her! She's so damned pretty! She rides that damn horse so well! I hate her!" It is no wonder that Reeves felt the strain.

Despite these difficulties, and the inevitable tussles with the censors over the violence, the film was a critical and commercial success, but now depression set in. Reeves withdrew from another Price project, *The Oblong Box*, because he could not invest the script with his personal concerns; drink, drugs and psychiatry took hold of his life; the situation became so desperate that he underwent electroconvulsive therapy. Although Halligan proves that the director died accidentally, and did not commit suicide as some writers have claimed (Price among them), it is clear

that Reeves' gift for films was an essential part of his self-consuming quality as a man. This engaging book captures that human problem as well as offering thoughtful assessments of the work, and evoking the texture of those wild Sixties times. If he had lived, would Reeves have broken the British cycle of boom and bust, as Halligan implies? It is impossible to say. Besides, the fragmented career, like the incomplete page at Princeton, is the ultimate work of art. It promises everything, but wisely does not deliver too much.

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Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner.
Radical Hollywood:
The Untold Story Behind
America's Favorite Movies.

The New Press, 2002.

460 pages; \$29.95.

Sympathetic to the Left

Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, building upon the ideas introduced in their biography of leftist screenwriter and film director Abraham Polonsky, assert that many classical Hollywood studio films produced between the early 1930s and late 1940s, before implementation of the blacklist, constitute a body of work reflecting the progressive values of radical screenwriters often associated with the Communist Party. The authors, focusing upon such genres as the Western, gangster, horror, family, combat, and woman's films, argue that Hollywood screenwriters on the left were able to successfully incorporate into studio-era films storylines celebrating the triumph of common working people over the upper class and exploitive capitalist values. In developing this thesis, Buhle and Wagner, who are obviously sympathetic to the left, appear to support the accusations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and anti-communist cultural critics who maintain that Hollywood communists posed a subversive threat through their influence over film content.

Indeed, Buhle and Wagner reserve their harshest criticism for Hollywood liberals rather than right-wing politicians and



cultural figures. *Radical Hollywood* refutes the claim of studio executives and liberals that leftist screenwriters failed to control the means of production within the studio system and, thus, were unable to inoculate their political messages into the films upon which they worked. Buhle and Wagner, seeking to empower the screenwriters, such as Howard Lawson, Michael Wilson, and John Bright, upon whom *Radical Hollywood* focuses its narrative, insist that Hollywood's progressive writers were able to insert their politics into cinema. The authors, however, do acknowledge that studio executives often grafted Hollywood endings onto films, somewhat negating the issues of race, gender, and class raised by the writers.

Also, Buhle and Wagner insist that the Hollywood left was not comprised of hack artists who blindly followed the Communist Party line articulated by officials on the East Coast. In publications such as the *Hollywood Quarterly*, leftists in the film industry, along with academics, sought to articulate a film aesthetic which would incorporate more complex political ideas into popular film. In their political activities as well as film work, Hollywood communists supported the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt, unionism, and antifascism as embodiments of the popular front.

In addition, Buhle and Wagner disagree with film scholars such as Larry May who argue that New Deal progressive themes disappeared from Hollywood films during wartime. Instead, *Radical Hollywood* argues that World War II cinema, with its emphasis upon the contribution of common people to the war effort, "marked not the simple eclipse but the filmic coming-of-age of New Deal themes" (p. 205). Perceiving the war as a reactionary cultural period only seems apparent in hindsight with the Cold War and McCarthyism.

The cultural possibilities of the Hollywood left culminated in the film noir features of the late 1940s and early 1950s, as writers about to be banished from Hollywood employed the darkness and crime themes of noir to comment upon the "deeper issues of moral erosion and individual alienation in the midst of postwar prosperity" (p. 324).

Radical Hollywood is a provocative book. The leftist proclivities of Buhle and Wagner will infuriate some readers. For example, in their discussion of *Mission to Moscow* (1943), the authors recognize the film's failure to question the Stalinist purges and show trials. Nevertheless, they observe that critics of Hollywood politics ignored such an acclaimed film as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which "would be hard to beat as historic justification of a system vastly more widespread, brutal, and lasting than Stalinism" (p. 240). In establishing the connection between communist writers and films championing the common people, Buhle and Wagner tend to dismiss the notion that, as Gordon Wood suggests in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, concepts of the ordinary citizen demanding equal treatment with that of a more aristocratic element lie at the heart of the American experience.