Directed by Alexander Mackendrick  
Produced by Michael Balcon and Seth Holt for Ealing Studios  
Written by William Rose  
Original music by Tristram Cary  
Cinematography by Otto Heller  
Film Editing by Jack Harris  
Art Direction by Jim Morahan  
Costume Design by Anthony Mendleson  
Sound supervisor: Stephen Dalby  
Runtime: 97 mins  

Leading players  
Alec Guinness  Professor Marcus  
Cecil Parker  Major Courtney  
Herbert Lom  Louis, ‘Mr Harvey’  
Peter Sellers  Harry, ‘Mr Robinson’  
Danny Green  One-Round, ‘Mr Lawson’  
Jack Warner  Police Supt Dixon  
Katie Johnson  Louisa Wilberforce  
Philip Stainton  Police Sergeant  
Frankie Howerd  Barrow boy  
Kenneth Connor  Taxi Driver  

Synopsis  
‘Professor’ Marcus is the leader of an unlikely gang of bank robbers, including the conman Major Courtney, hapless boxer One-Round, mysterious Louis and teddy-boy Harry. The Professor rents the upstairs room of an isolated Victorian house that backs onto the railway line near Kings Cross station. He tells the landlady Mrs Wilberforce that the gang are a string quintet who are meeting to rehearse. Their real intention is to plan a robbery. The gang do not know that Mrs Wilberforce is well known at the local police station as a mild eccentric. The gang play records to fool the old lady whilst planning the robbery. During one planning session, the parrot, ‘General Gordon’, escapes and the gang, without the guiding hand of the Professor, cause havoc trying to re-capture him. The robbery is staged without delay. The gang steal four cases of money in a carefully staged roadside attack on a security van. The money is swiftly transferred to a trunk that is immediately delivered to the Kings Cross parcels office where Mrs Wilberforce has been directed to pick it up in all innocence. This she does but on the way back to her house she stops the taxi to berate a stall-holder hitting a horse that is eating his wares. Mayhem ensues as the gang watch helplessly. Eventually order is restored and the police unwittingly deliver the trunk to Mrs Wilberforce’s house. The gang transfer the money to their instrument cases and leave the house, but One Round’s cello case gets caught in the door and as Mrs Wilberforce opens the door, notes spill out of the case. The gang hurry back into the house to the bewilderment of Mrs Wilberforce. She is pleased, however, that now they can stay to tea with her group of ladies. Mrs Wilberforce sees a newspaper headline about the robbery and makes the connection. The gang realise that they must ‘dispose’ of her before she gives them away, but in the meantime they are forced to socialise with her group of ladies. After the party, the gang try to persuade the old lady to keep quiet because she is also implicated in the robbery. A police officer arrives to reassure Mrs Wilberforce about the outcome of the incident over the horse. The gang induce her to keep the robbery secret. But she insists that the money must be returned and that the gang should give themselves up. The gang draw lots for the task of killing the old lady. The Major draws the short straw, but he attempts to escape with the money. Chased by the others he falls to his death from the roof – the money falls back to Mrs Wilberforce who locks it away. Harry is the next to try to escape with the money. One Round finds the old lady seemingly dead and pursues Harry, killing him. Louis then disposes of Harry. Finally the Professor disposes of Louis but at his moment of triumph a railway signal hits and kills him. Mrs Wilberforce goes to the police, who don’t believe her story and tell her to keep the money.
Introduction
The *Ladykillers* has been selected as a ‘focus film’ for the WJEC AS Film Studies Unit FS3, ‘Messages and Values: British and Irish Cinema’. The specification does not indicate which specific critical approaches candidates are expected to adopt in relation to the film. However it is not difficult to recognise a number of possible approaches that will be explored in this pack:

- as an example of one of the most consistently popular British genres, the ‘social comedy’;
- as a product of a small independent studio with a distinctive approach to ‘British’ production;
- as a film by an acknowledged ‘auteur’;
- as a film with a star performance;
- a range of representations, especially of class, age and London

In broader terms, the film provides a case study for a contextual analysis of British film production in the early 1950s in terms of both the industry itself and its representation of social reality.

Production background: Ealing in the 1950s
Ealing Studio was founded in the early years of the twentieth century by Will Barker but it was not until the 1930s and the construction of sound stages by Basil Dean’s Associated Talking Pictures – the first purpose built studios for sound cinema in Britain – that Ealing became a major ‘player’. Ealing produced a range of different genres, but the biggest successes came with the ‘low comedies’ of two great Northern stars, Gracie Fields and George Formby. Fields and Formby were the most popular stars in Britain at the end of the 1930s when a new studio boss, Michael Balcon, took control. Balcon’s reign from 1938 through to the sale of the studio to the BBC in 1955 (just as *The Ladykillers* was released) covers the period when Ealing produced a stream of films that made the studio world famous.

Ealing did well during the Second World War, producing comedies and realist dramas that perfectly suited the period. After the war the slate of dramas and comedies broadened, but it was generally the social comedies such as *Whisky Galore* and *Passport to Pimlico* that proved most successful. *The Ladykillers* was seen by many critics as the last ‘great’ comedy off the Ealing production line. Ealing did continue making films for another four years, using production facilities elsewhere, but in 1959 the final production was a thriller made in Australia.

Charles Barr (1977) argues that the success of the studio in the 1940s and early 1950s was based on three factors – the strong foundation laid down by Basil Dean in the 1930s, the influx of documentary filmmakers in the early 1940s and the skills and experience of Michael Balcon, arguably the most successful British producer to date.

Ealing’s strengths were Balcon’s feel for the market and his support for a team of brilliant writers and consummate craftsmen and women. Ealing’s best films were generally ‘small and exquisitely formed’. Budgets were modest and *The Ladykillers* was only the second comedy filmed in colour (the first was *The Titfield Thunderbolt*).

Ealing had a distribution deal with the Rank Organisation that gave the studio access to a circuit release in the biggest cinemas throughout the country (usually Odeons, but also Gaumonts). Ealing films were able to compete with Hollywood at home and to gain a limited American release through Rank’s links with Universal.

In the instantly recognisable ‘Ealing comedies’, critics were presented with a definable genre, but these were complemented by a larger number of Ealing dramas, many of which also tuned into the same sense of British social life. Barr opens his book length study of Ealing with an overview that identifies Ealing’s successful period with the war years and the immediate aftermath of war, the years of austerity and recovery that ended with the defeat of the postwar Labour government in 1951. Barr suggests that the ethos of Ealing was that of the ‘herbivores’, Michael Frayn’s term for the ‘liberal left’ or ‘the radical middle classes’, the readers of the *Guardian*, the *Observer* and the *News Chronicle* (a mid-market newspaper that supported the Liberal Party) – Balcon told Ellis in an interview that the Ealing creative staff were mainly middle class people who had voted Labour for the first time after the war. The herbivores were supporters of the new National Heath Service, the BBC and public service. The apogee of the herbivores’ success was the festival of Britain in 1951. From then on the ‘carnivores’, typified by the *Daily Express* and the incoming Conservative government would be dominant throughout the 1950s, signalling the return of competition, ‘glamour’ and the commercialism of
ITV (which began broadcasting in 1955). Barr sees Ealing unable to respond to the new ‘Elizabethan age’ (the new Queen came to the throne in 1952) with the radicalism of the herbivores giving way to a nostalgia for the 1940s and a failure to contest the new definitions of Britain and the British. The Ealing comedies that had so effectively represented wartime and austerity Britain became seriously out of touch with the new Britain. The Ladykillers could be seen as backward-looking, but redeemed by its blackness.

John Ellis (1975) takes a similar approach to Barr, portraying Ealing as a group of middle class intellectuals making films about and for a working class cinema audience. They achieved this in the 1940s when values were widely shared, but increasingly failed to understand how working class audiences changed in the 1950s, exemplified by Ealing’s attitude towards television and in 1957 to the death of music hall in Davey. Where John Osborne’s play, The Entertainer (1959) presented the decline of music hall as a family business as a metaphor for Britain’s decline as an imperial power, Davey validated music hall as a family business threatened by both high art (opera) and American commercial culture. It is important to ‘read’ The Ladykillers in this context of a studio losing its sense of audience.

Alexander Mackendrick (1912–93)

‘Sandy’ Mackendrick was an American raised in Scotland and one of the more distinctive creative talents at Ealing during its ‘golden’ period. He trained originally at Glasgow School of Art and in the 1930s worked for the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson. Undoubtedly skilled as a painter, his interest was always more in scenic design and his early interest in theatre and cinema was evident in his layout work for advertising strips. In 1935 he wrote a film script with his cousin Roger MacDougall (writer of The Man in the White Suit in 1951). The idea for the film was inspired by Fritz Lang and it was sold to Associated British. Mackendrick then worked on several animated cinema advertisements with the Hungarian George Pal. During the Second World War he became involved in propaganda films for the Ministry of Information and progressed to a leading position in overseeing Italian film production at the time of the liberation by Allied forces.

After the war, Mackendrick was taken on by Ealing as a scriptwriter and ‘sketch artist’. He played a supporting role on the production of two Ealing films before gaining full directorial credit for Whiskey Galore (1949). This was a great success and was followed by The Man in the White Suit, Mandy (1952), The Maggie (1954) and The Ladykillers. In 1956 Mackendrick went to Hollywood to make the critically acclaimed The Sweet Smell of Success for Burt Lancaster’s company. This was the high point of his career but he did not get on in Hollywood and only made a further three features Sammy Going South (1963, UK), A High Wind in Jamaica (1965, US), and Don’t Make Waves (1967, US). He did work briefly in television, but the main part of his latter career was spent as Dean and then Fellow of Film School at CalArts, the California Institute of Arts in Los Angeles.

Mackendrick as auteur

Two features of Mackendrick’s work are recognisable across his five Ealing films. The first is his status as an ‘outsider’. Philip Kemp (1991) refers to Mackendrick’s sense of always being on ‘enemy terrain’. He remained an American citizen, but acted and felt like a Glaswegian working in London or Los Angeles. His two films based in Scotland are anti-establishment comedies, pitting traditional rural communities (islanders and the crew of the ‘puffer’, the tramp steamer in the Western Isles) against ‘ incomers’ (British and American). His three English-based films are, in their different ways, all detached, outsiders’ views of English society.

The Man in the White Suit is a brilliant and sustained attack on the vested interests of both management and workers in the textile industry, coupled with a critique of the ignorant view of science.

Mandy is a moving melodrama about a failing middle class marriage explored through the metaphor of the deafness of the couple’s young daughter. The attack is upon both the English class system and traditional attitudes towards education.

The second striking feature of Mackendrick’s work is the meticulous design and visual and aural flair. Mackendrick’s heroes clearly include Lang and Hitchcock and examples of the use of shadows and camera angles are easy to spot in The Ladykillers (e.g. Professor Marcus’ first appearance at Mrs Wilberforce’s door, reminiscent of Hitchcock’s The Lodger (1926)). Less obvious perhaps is Mackendrick’s attention to the use of sound (a Fritz Lang strength). Mackendrick worked with the highly inventive Stephen Dalby who in The Man in the White Suit created an extraordinary ‘motif’ of ‘found sounds’ mixed to create an unwordly accompaniment to the chemistry experiments.

William Rose (1918-87)

The second major creative force on The Ladykillers was also an American in voluntary exile in the UK. Rose had come to Britain to fight for the Canadian Army in the Second World war and stayed to become a highly successful writer of comedies. In 1954 he was responsible, with the ex-Ealing director Henry Cornelius, for the smash hit Genevieve about two couples taking part in the London to Brighton vintage car rally. He had worked with Mackendrick on The Maggie, but the ‘Sandy’ Mackendrick was the most ‘cineliterate’ of Ealing’s directors with each shot carefully designed to make best use of locations and sets – as here in the closing sequences in which the gang dispose of each other.
two men were equally abrasive and stubborn and Rose vowed not to work with Mackendrick again. However, Mackendrick reputedly heard Rose talking about the idea behind *The Ladykillers* and pressed to make the picture. The twin ‘outsider’ perspective on what is otherwise a very backward-looking story, coupled with the tension between director and writer, perhaps goes some way to explain the darker and sharper tone in *The Ladykillers* compared to other Ealing films of the mid-1950s.

**Alec Guinness (1914-2000)**

As many of the obituaries for Alec Guinness in 2000 noted, his contemporary fame rests on his appearance in *Star Wars* in 1977, but he was a major star of British cinema in the 1940s and 1950s, specifically as a ‘character star’—someone who played very distinct and sometimes grotesque characters, rather than ‘playing himself’ in each role as in the Hollywood norm. He was strongly associated with Ealing following his tour de force as eight different members of the d’Ascoyne family, murdered by Dennis Price in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* in 1949. He had already worked with Mackendrick (who he described as “intelligent, an enthusiast with a strong political line (McFarlane 1992)) on *The Man in the White Suit*.

Kemp reports that the original casting idea for Professor Marcus was for Alistair Sim, but Michael Balcon decreed that it should go to Guinness who was considered bigger box office. The badly fitting teeth, maniacal grin, startling eyes and ingratiating manner of Professor Marcus do indeed suggest Guinness performing as Sim, but also point towards the darker comedy of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Guinness puts in a bravura performance, but not one so large as to unbalance the film. All the other ‘characters’ including Ealing regular Cecil Parker are allowed space to make their mark. Danny Green had been known to Mackendrick for many years, but Peter Sellers in his first film role and Herbert Lom as Louis were inspired casting. Lom was an established serious actor with a style quite alien to Ealing, making Louis a thoroughly disturbing character.

**Reading The Ladykillers**

By comment consent, *The Ladykillers* is a ‘fable’, a vision of England, specifically the triumph of traditional Victorian values under threat from antisocial forces. At the start of the film, Mrs Wilberforce tells the police that her friend (or is it herself) has dreamt about aliens landing, but it was just a dream—perhaps the whole story of the film is a dream? *The Ladykillers* is a ‘social comedy’. The most definitively ‘British’ comedy genre, social comedy creates conflict through the clash of opposing ideas about how people live. It is based upon class, gender, generational and political differences.

Mackendrick’s comedies, as illustrated in Barr’s (1975) chart below, pit a single ‘innocent’ against a community led by a single ‘strong’ character. In *The Man in the White Suit* it is the Alec Guinness character, Sidney is the scientist struggling against the ‘community’ of the cotton industry led by the industrialist Kierlaw. In *The Ladykillers*, Mrs Wilberforce is the innocent struggling against the community of crooks led by Professor Marcus. The two sides have opposing aims—the crooks to steal the money and Mrs Wilberforce to maintain the status quo, the ‘right way’ to do things. The reactionary message of *The Ladykillers* comes from the aims of Mrs Wilberforce. In *Whisky Galore* and *The Maggie*, the innocent is a disruptive outside force and in *The Man in the White Suit*, possibly the strongest social comedy of the quartet, there are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>‘innocent’ location</th>
<th>‘innocent’ community</th>
<th>respective aims</th>
<th>chief manipulator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whisky Galore</td>
<td>Waggett</td>
<td>English officer</td>
<td>preventing salvage of whisky</td>
<td>Maccoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebridean island</td>
<td></td>
<td>islanders</td>
<td>salvaging it</td>
<td>senior islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man in the White Suit</td>
<td>Sidney</td>
<td>research scientist</td>
<td>development of everlasting cloth status quo</td>
<td>Kierlaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancashire cotton town</td>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>Cotton industry</td>
<td>status quo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Maggie</td>
<td>American tycoon</td>
<td>English assistant</td>
<td>efficient transport of furniture</td>
<td>Macaggart (Captain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish coast</td>
<td>+ Pusey</td>
<td>boat crew</td>
<td>keeping the job for themselves</td>
<td>+ Dougie (young crew member)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ladykillers</td>
<td>Mrs. Wilberforce</td>
<td>landlady</td>
<td>status quo</td>
<td>Professor Marcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Pancras</td>
<td>criminal gang</td>
<td>tenants</td>
<td>wages robbery nearby</td>
<td>gang leader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Charles Barr’s diagram showing the structuring principles of Mackendrick’s Ealing comedies (from Screen Vol 15 No 2)*
clear arguments for and against each side. But the community of crooks in The Ladykillers represents the complete failure of modern Britain to overcome the Victorian certainties of Mrs Wilberforce.

Barr suggests a ‘fanciful reading’ in which the crooks are seen as the postwar Labour government, taking over the ‘house’. On the surface they are genteel, but beneath they are plotting robbery. They fail because of their own internecine squabbles and the ‘natural charisma’ of the governing classes represented by Mrs Wilberforce. Richards and Aldgate (1983) take Barr’s analysis further. 1955 was the year when the Conservatives consolidated their hold over government in the form of the elderly wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill. It would be another four years before the Conservatives recognised ‘the winds of change’ in Harold Macmillan’s words and yet another four before they would be deposed by Harold Wilson’s ‘modernised’ Labour Party. (But it would be only one year before the disgrace of the Suez campaign and the last throw of Empire would signal the end of Victorian Britain.) The crooks represented the mixed alliance that signified both the Labour Party and the modernising influences generally – the intellectuals (the Professor), the ‘unreliable’ middle classes (the Major), youth (Harry), ‘foreign’/American culture (Louis the gangster) and the working class (‘One Round’).

Representations
Location is important in Mackendrick’s films and the choice of St. Pancras is significant. The area around Kings Cross and St. Pancras remained a distinct working class community with a village-like feel right up until the late 1950s. Mrs Wilberforce knows the local shopkeepers and the police station is presided over by genial Jack Warner, already familiar from Ealing’s The Blue Lamp and soon to become a television regular in Dixon of Dock Green. The location was used again by Mike Leigh in the 1990s social comedy High Hopes.

Significantly, Mrs Wilberforce’s house is in a cul-de-sac overlooked by the railway and with the dark, gothic Victorian edifice of St. Pancras in the background. The house was constructed for the film, but the location also allowed Mackendrick to place his camera on a gasholder and gain the high angle long shots that emphasise the house’s isolation in its dead end.

As Richards and Aldgate point out, the major absence in the film, apart from the character of Harry, is that breaking phenomenon of the mid-1950s, youth. Mrs Wilberforce lives in the past and the film suggests a triumph for the ‘old’ values. Richards and Aldgate refer to the plaque erected at Ealing in 1955 when the studios were sold: “Here, during a quarter of a century were made many films projecting Britain and the British character”. During the 1950s the projection of Britain seemed to involve the survival of old institutions like rural railways in The Titfield Thunderbolt and steam putters in The Maggie as well as vintage cars and old cinemas in Genevieve and The Smallest Show on Earth (1957), non-Ealing films made by ex-Ealing writers and directors. When Mrs Wilberforce coos at a baby in its pram at the start of The Ladykillers, the baby cries – what hope is there for the future? Mackendrick appears to be saying goodbye not just to a complacent and old-fashioned England, but also the cosy confines of an Ealing dominated by Balcon’s paternalism.

The other major absence in The Ladykillers is any mention of sex or sexuality. Ealing did have its young female stars and virile leading men, but most of them like Googie Withers, John McCallum and Joan Greenwood flourished in the 1940s rather than the 1950s. Mrs Wilberforce takes her place alongside the characters created by Margaret Rutherford in the 1950s – brisk, no-nonsense old ladies. Richards and Aldgate quote George Orwell’s description of British society in the 1930s as fitting The Ladykillers perfectly. “It resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family… It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts”.

Taylor (2000) offers a slightly different reading of The Ladykillers in a comparison with Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998). He argues that the ending which allows Mrs Wilberforce to keep the money ‘cocks a snook’ at social order. He also points to the way in which the relationship between Mrs Wilberforce and the gang is something like that between a mother figure and a group of naughty children. The importance of the mother figure in American and subsequently British gangster films is evident in a range of texts from White Heat (US 1949) to The Krays (UK 1989) and even to EastEnders and Peggy Mitchell.

Specimen Questions
The WJEC Specimen Questions for FS3 Close Study are as follows:

1. “Films reflect the messages and values of the time when they were made.” Is this true of the film you have studied? Refer in detail to a particular sequence from your chosen film in responding to this statement.

2. Describe the impact of your chosen film on either critics or the public and try to account for this by reference to the messages and values it contains. Refer in detail to a particular sequence in order to develop your answer.

Mrs Wilberforce shows a ‘motherly concern’, offering the gang tea.
Working on the questions
The material above should give ample scope for starting an analysis of The Ladykillers in terms of its ‘messages and values’. The requirement to describe one sequence in particular is slightly problematic since it is the whole film that stands as a vision of England. One suggestion might be to take the opening of the film up to the point where the gang have arrived at the house. This is a sequence of approximately 10 minutes, but this could be shortened to by stopping at the point where Professor Marcus has met the parrots and explored the house.

In the opening, we are introduced to Mrs Wilberforce and her house. The long shot of the house on location cuts to a studio set for the cosy street with its shops, pubs and local police station where Mrs Wilberforce, in Edwardian dress, goes to reassure the Superintendent that the aliens story was just a dream. She greets all the shopkeepers and frightens the baby before checking her advertisement in the newsagent. The shadow of Professor Marcus over the card in the window contradicts her discovery that no-one has shown interest in the room to let. Typical English rain sends her scurrying home with her (nearly forgotten) umbrella as the pavement artist shelters his portrait of Winston Churchill. Here is the cosy world of Ealing domesticity in the 1950s, immediately disturbed by the shadowy figure of the Professor coming to call.

The Professor’s arrival shows Mackendrick’s skill and knowledge of Hitchcock and Lang, not just in visual terms but also with the editing of sounds – the Professor is introduced by his own musical motif and also by a shrill train whistle (a ‘marker’ for the vents at the end of the film). The Professor is the alien presence attempting to break into the Victorian world of Mrs Wilberforce’s house and take it over. Inside the house the rickety plumbing is expertly put right by Mrs Wilberforce with a well-timed blow to the pipe – a ‘no nonsense’ blow to the system. The walls are festooned with Victorian portraits and the parrots, including ‘General Gordon’ and ‘Admiral Beatty’ are a reminder of her long-dead ship’s captain’s husband.

Opening the door to the gang members, Mrs Wilberforce reveals the imposing face of St. Pancras station down the street (a geographical impossibility that lends an even more surreal tone to the scene). As each member of the gang is introduced they join the Professor as interlopers threatening the idea of ‘Englishness/Britishness’ embodied by Mrs Wilberforce. It is also suggested in this sequence that the gang are not who they say they are. The ‘Professor’ has clearly been ‘Doc’ on a previous occasion and he welcomes the ‘Major’ with a deliberateness that signals a change of character and knowledge of Hitchcock and Lang, not just in visual terms but also with the editing of sounds – the Professor is introduced by his own musical motif and also by a shrill train whistle (a ‘marker’ for the vents at the end of the film). The Professor is the alien presence attempting to break into the Victorian world of Mrs Wilberforce’s house and take it over. Inside the house the rickety plumbing is expertly put right by Mrs Wilberforce with a well-timed blow to the pipe – a ‘no nonsense’ blow to the system. The walls are festooned with Victorian portraits and the parrots, including ‘General Gordon’ and ‘Admiral Beatty’ are a reminder of her long-dead ship’s captain’s husband.

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It is difficult to uncover too much detailed evidence of how The Ladykillers was received by audiences in 1955, except to note that the film was very successful at the box office. There is more evidence about its critical reception. Richards and Aldgate refer to British Film Academy Awards for Best Screenplay and Best Actress and quote favourable reviews from a wide range of publications. All thought the film funny and accomplished, particularly in its deft handling of murder for comic effect. None showed any inclination to ‘read’ the film in the way Barr suggests. They saw the film as conforming to a mainstream Ealing view of British life and clearly sided with Mrs Wilberforce.

References
John Ellis (1975) ‘Made in Ealing’ in Screen Vol 16 No 1
Brian McFarlane (ed) (1992) Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema, British Film Institute

The Ladykillers is available on DVD from Optimum!/StudioCanal. The Man in the White Suit and Whisky Galore are also available. All text in these notes © 2001 Roy Stafford/itp publications unless otherwise indicated.

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