Mackendrick on Film

Alexander Mackendrick wrote: 'Film-writing and directing cannot be taught, only learned, and each man or woman has to learn it through his or her own system of self-education.' In this article about Mackendrick's book, *On Film-making*, Paul Cronin, the editor, takes us into the world and mind of Mackendrick, one of the most inspiring teachers of creativity in film who kept asking the question 'Can film be taught?'

Though he made only nine films throughout his twenty year career, Alexander 'Sandy' Mackendrick (conceived in Hollywood, born in Boston, raised in Scotland) remains one of Britain's most highly regarded directors. Acclaimed for his much-admired features made while working at London's Ealing Studios in the 1950s, including *The Man in the White Suit* (1950) and *The Ladykillers* (1955), Mackendrick also directed the celebrated cult favourite *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) in Hollywood. What he did following his retirement from the industry is not so well known. In 1969 at the age of nearly 60, after the last minute collapse of two long-cherished projects, he accepted the position of Dean of the School of Film and Video at the newly established, Disney-funded California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, north of Los Angeles.

Throughout the nearly twenty-five years he spent at CalArts, Mackendrick produced hundreds of pages of notes and sketches for students, recently published in a volume entitled *On Film-making: An introduction to the craft of the director.* Designed to guide aspirant film-makers through the disciplines he called Dramatic Construction and Film Grammar ('the narrative and visual devices that have been developed through inventive direction and performing during cinema's short history'), Mackendrick's handouts are masterful studies of the two primary tasks confronting the film director: how to structure and write the story he wants to tell, and how to use those devices particular to the medium of film in order to tell that story as effectively as possible. Devoid of obscurantism - concentrating on the practical and tangible rather than abstract concepts of cinema as 'art' - they reveal that Mackendrick had the talent not only to make films, but also to articulate on paper with clarity and insight just what that process involved.

Mackendrick and stars of *The Ladykillers*

The Ladykillers: United Artists

For Mackendrick, the job of a director was a 'craft' that could be learned by anyone willing to undergo the necessary rigorous training. He was anxious to spell out to CalArts students - many of whom prided themselves on being 'artists' yet dreamt of gainful studio employment as Hollywood 'professionals' upon graduation - that there were very definite skills they needed in order to become efficient storytellers within that system, or indeed any area of film production. As he wrote in one handout: 'One would not banish pianos from a music school on the grounds that an ability to play is merely a technical skill. We expect you to be able to read a light meter, focus a lens and use an editing machine because these instruments of the craft are inseparable from the practice of the "art" of the filmmaker.'

In this respect Mackendrick is reminiscent of Eisenstein when he wrote: 'I am a civil engineer and ▸

mathematician by training. I approach the making of a motion picture in much the same way as I would the equipment of a poultry farm or the installation of a water system.'

Always in search of the middle ground between the arena of personal expression and film-making as an industrialised process, and resolute in his beliefs because of his acute understanding of the grim realities of life in the film industry, Mackendrick sought to equip students with the most functional and adaptable collection of tools as possible before sending them out into the world of work. He taught that the basics of film grammar and dramatic construction - the 'conventions' that govern the medium - were ultimately transferable to all forms of cinema. By doing this, Mackendrick believed he was helping lay the groundwork for students to express themselves with more clarity in whatever kind of cinema they chose.

He explained to students that his classes '... explore the processes through which certain common usages were developed by film-makers, and in turn became structures that were swiftly understood by audiences. The importance of studying conventional and established patterns of cinematic communication is not to lay down any immutable laws. It is rather to help you examine the always-evolving processes: how they have worked and why they have had effect in the past. If you are able to understand such things, then you need no longer think in terms of "rules". Understanding the function of traditional usages will leave you free to invent and innovate as the need arises.'

Within the milieu of CalArts, an institution established (as the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in 1969) 'with the dream of starting a tradition of academic unorthodoxy', Mackendrick's approach was considered somewhat conservative. When it came to dramatic construction (though his teachings were directed primarily at student directors, most of his notes are concerned with scriptwriting and storytelling), he would constantly stress the importance of classical Aristotelian principles, even suggesting that much of the *avant-garde* work he saw around him at CalArts was an evasion of students' real tasks as film-makers. Mackendrick lectured at the National Film and Television School near London for a short time in the late 1970s where the writer and director Terence Davies was a student. As Davies has succinctly noted, 'Most people come to film school wanting to write *Ulysses*, but don't want to learn the alphabet.'

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Discussing the sweet smell of success

Sweet Smell of Success: United Artists

'Sandy constantly pushed students to ask themselves exactly what it was they wanted to be *avant* of,' says Lou Florimonte, who taught at CalArts with Mackendrick for many years. 'If they didn't have a grasp of how story structure and film functioned at the most rudimentary level, just what was it they were experimenting with? Sandy believed there were certain 'rules' that serve as the bedrock of narrative storytelling, a good knowledge of which would help students master their craft. But he encountered many students over the years who felt that stories needed to have something of a magical and unknowable element to them and who were resistant to the way he reduced narratives to their nuts and bolts. Consequently, Sandy's ideas were seen by some as being old-fashioned, unadventurous and rather commercially orientated, a perception that came from his emphasis on discipline and structure.'

Though thirty years old, Mackendrick's writings are fresh, utterly compelling, and - like the trajectory of his career - unique. Are there any other directors of traditional narrative cinema, and of such stature, who quit the business outright, only to spend as much time as Mackendrick did actively writing about and teaching - with such enthusiasm and erudition - the insights he had gleaned during his career as a writer and director?

Unlike most books on the subject, *On Film-making* is written by a *bona fide* film-maker, a man whose cinematic achievements are recognised more than thirty-five years after he directed his final film. Moreover, Mackendrick is a lucid, vibrant and invigorating writer. Of the book, Martin Scorsese has written: 'Invaluable ... I can easily imagine a college without a film program building a curriculum around these writings.' Compared with the overwhelmingly shallow and self-serving prose of the vast majority of books claiming to hold the secrets of dramatic construction, *On Film-making* has genuine literary qualities. It also, thankfully, eschews the 'Believe In Yourself' and 'Maximise Your Creative Powers' approach so many 'how-to-write' books take.

What also makes Mackendrick's methodology so crucially different from the majority of these kinds of texts is his belief in the exploitation of cinema's unique qualities as a storytelling medium. For him, the technical concerns of film grammar were never to be explored independently of story, while at the same time any competent piece of cinematic storytelling was an inevitable example of how 'form can never be entirely distinguished from content'. 'Every bit of a film,' Mackendrick wrote, 'ought to be a necessary part of the whole effect.'

So enthralled by their apparent understanding of how a well-written film script is structured, most other authors either totally disregard or breeze perfunctorily over the inextricable links between the work of the screenwriter and the film director. But as Mackendrick explains, a writer's ability to do his job is severely curtailed if he has only a superficial knowledge of how cinema functions as a medium. Most other books explain that dialogue should be kept to a minimum (the old adage 'show, don't tell' is ubiquitous), while the subtly distinct idea that words be merely 'the sprinkles on top of the ice cream cone' (as David Mamet has written) is relatively unexplored.

A good example of Mackendrick's characteristic approach is his discussion of 'subtext', a crucial component of any film story. In most screenplay tutorial books, subtext seems to be confused with 'subplot' and is explored entirely from the writer's point of view. Though in the theatre it is the actor's job to render even banal dialogue meaningful (with - as Mackendrick would call it - different 'colors'), with cinema it is the competent director who will use the fundamentals of film grammar to turn script pages into effective cinematic sequences. By not taking into account what the camera, lighting and editing machine are able to convey to the audience - regardless of what is being said by the actors - other authors explore only half the story.

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In fact, most other volumes scarcely touch upon the concept of visual storytelling at all and when they do, often make what Mackendrick would have considered a fundamental error. For many, a film that contains beautiful cinematography and imagery is 'visual' but to Mackendrick such works were merely pictorial. A truly visual film, he explained, is one that exploits the medium of cinema to the fullest extent by telling its story primarily with shot-to-shot images. As Jack Valero, one of his first students from the early 1970s, notes, 'For Sandy, 'pictorial' means pretty pictures. But lots of people can get pretty pictures; it's what Hollywood does the easiest. But 'visual' means telling the story with the pictures, something that separates the men from the boys.'

Consequently, Mackendrick's ideas about film-making are rooted in a single fundamental concept that shaped every line of his written work, one he called the 'pre-verbal language of cinema.'

'A recurring theme of my notes is that cinema is not so much non-verbal as pre-verbal. Though it is able to reproduce reams of dialogue, film can also tell stories purely in movement, in action and reaction. Cinematographic images, particularly when synchronised with recorded sound, deliver such quantities of visual and audible data that the verbal component (even, in the days of silent-cinema title cards) is overwhelmed and becomes secondary. Consequently, the essential and underlying meaning of film dialogue is often much more effectively transmitted by a complex and intricate organisation of cinematic elements that are not only not verbal, but that can never be fully analysed by verbal means.'

As an example, Mackendrick chose the 1949 French film *Les Amants du Vérone,* written by Jacques Prévert: 'Some visitors are being taken round a glassworks in which the young hero is one of the skilled craftsmen who makes fantastically ornamental goblets, vases and mirrors. One of them is an attractive young actress who is being escorted by an elderly and wealthy man who obviously wants to impress her. She, in the meanwhile, has taken rather a fancy to the hero. While her escort is buying her a present in the showroom, the hero watches through a glass partition. The girl turns to smile at him through the glass, whereupon he makes a couple of scratches on one of the panes with his diamond glass cutter and knocks out of it, on to her side, a small piece of glass in the shape of a heart. She is amused but has to conceal it quickly as her wealthy gentleman friend returns bearing a huge and ornate mirror. He presents it to her proudly. She looks at it and after a moment smiles. But the camera shows us something he cannot see: she is really smiling into the mirror at the reflection of the young man behind.

'This entire incident is quick and casual. It probably takes less time in front of the camera than it does to explain in words, and is much more effective on screen than I have told it here. This is the point: it is not the sort of incident a novelist would invent because it is far clumsier to describe than to play out on film. Nor would it make a good piece of action for the stage actor because the effect depends on quick glimpses of detail, the flicker of reactions on faces and a switch of viewpoint by the camera. Prévert is writing for the cinema, and nothing else.'

Though Mackendrick's comprehensive approach to film-making is worth serious study, two of his ideas will prove to be especially useful to beginner screenwriters and film-makers. The first is Mackendrick's own starting point for his ideas about dramatic construction, namely the three basic components of story: plot, character and theme, elements that were, he warned, 'so involved with each other that they are virtually impossible to distinguish one from the other'.

James Mangold, former Mackendrick student and writer/director of *Heavy* and *Copland*, explains that 'I've met many people who can inhabit plot in a way that I can't. I could never come up with a 'clever plot'. If there is a kind of innate logic to storytelling, I've always found the answers to what happens in character. To me, operating from plot and theme are difficult because themes are often so stale in and of themselves, at least when boiled way down, while plot often looks like a series of arrows and dots. Character is the only thing that makes me feel like there's something fresh inhabiting the space.'

This sits with Mackendrick's own approach. To start a script from the point of view of an ideology or theme might, he suggested, lead to problems. 'Any person who is good at plot will have the potential for a fruitful Hollywood career,' says Richard Jefferies, another former Mackendrick student. 'But character is ultimately more intriguing. If you try to express a particular theme or idea, your script will come off preachy and pre-packaged. But if you simply pay attention to the craft of telling a good story, the theme will inevitably emerge from the creative minds behind it. Theme is an abstraction made concrete through the combination of elements of plot and character, among other things. Sandy taught us that theme is the last living element of what makes a story resonate and stay alive for the audience, and it's dangerous to focus on.' Crucially, as former student and screenwriter Tess Clark notes, 'If you don't know the theme it doesn't mean you haven't written it anyway.'

In an interview from 1985, Mackendrick explained that 'Action derives out of personality. But remember that character is character-in-action - somebody who wants to get something done, or wants to avoid having something done to him or her. So you have to think of character as the root of action. But until it is expressed in action it's not even character. And then action, of course, produces the events and incidents that make for plot. The crisis of events at the end of the story is where the theme is revealed.

'So character is the starting point. If you start to write plot without examining it through the eyes of character, it becomes a very mechanical thing. It becomes something where you're pulling the personages like puppets on a string. If the action derives out of the will and desire of the person, then you have a real character, and this is the starting point for action. And action creates plot and plot demonstrates theme.'

The second of Mackendrick's ideas of particular use to film-makers is his wholly practical approach to screenwriting, namely 'When Not to Write a Shooting Script' (as contained in the hand-out of the same name). As Mackendrick explains:

'The overwhelming temptation of many students when faced with problems of dramatic construction in the scripting stage is to dodge the real challenges by fantasising about the much more pleasurable (and indeed easier) problems involved in actually shooting the film. As such, the particular passion of many students is to work, from the start, on their own stories in shooting script form (those containing precise shot, framing and editing details, including the staging of actors and camera angles) before putting their ideas on paper as either a screenplay (dialogue with basic expository explanations), or even a treatment (the bare bones: plot and essential action of a story). Do not fall for any of this. Get your screenplay right as a screenplay before you let yourself off the hook by indulging in the delights of being a director.

'A writer who seems over-eager to indicate just how exciting, in cinematic terms, a scene will be is apt to alienate a director reading his screenplay. As it is put down on the written page, a good script does not concern itself with technical matters. Eager to show his competence as a director (instead of a screenwriter), the student is liable to introduce into his writing technical jargon that is meant to demonstrate his acquaintance with problems of production. I urge you to avoid this, for these things are not his business. While the impulse of a good director will be to scratch it all out, it also clearly indicates to the producer that you are a bumbling amateur.

'In addition, a concern with technical problems is usually a distraction from the much more important challenge of storytelling. The screenplay of an experienced writer wastes few words on qualities that, in the completed film, will be the contribution of the cinematographer, art director, costume designer or any other member of the production team. Directors, rightly or wrongly, regard it as their prerogative to contribute these kinds of details. The experienced screenwriter understands that atmosphere and tone is not his responsibility, that his only (and vital) function is to provide the dramatic tensions, incidents, actions, reactions and situations (as well as, of course, the dialogue).'

Sweet Smell of Success: United Artists

This tells me everything and shows me nothing

'I find camera directions in a script a turn-off because it takes me out of the story,' says James Mangold. 'But there are ways of letting the reader of your script know that you want a close-up at a certain point. Describe the colour of your character's eyes, that there's a tear welling in one corner, or that her lids are trembling. All these things tell me I'm not in a wide shot, and it's a much more passive way of getting the director to shoot a scene the way you want him to because you're not literally issuing orders to him.'

As Mackendrick elaborated: 'Let me briefly tell you about a screenplay I had the pleasure of working on some years ago. I was collaborating with a screenwriter for whom I developed a great deal of respect. We spent months together in story conferences during which he improvised scenes. Then, when I went off to explore locations and work with a production designer, this writer went off to do the job that is essentially solitary: the final act of writing. When I read his completed screenplay, what astonished me was my discovery that the writing was, in a sense, already a shooting script, even if it never once gave explicit details of framing, shots or editing. Each time the writer began a new sentence, I could see a new camera set-up in my mind.

An example might be something like: "The young man picks up the few chips he has left, gulps at his drink and moves to the table, where he hesitates, looking back." Here I saw a mastershot, framing the man in the foreground from behind. Then: "Belatedly, he has noticed the mirror on the wall behind his chair and is struck with an unpleasant realisation." Perhaps a shot from his point of view, with the back of his chair seen reflected in the mirror. Finally: "But the couple who have cheated him are already gone." A longshot, framed as a tableau of the situation, showing the card table and the man standing by his chair.

'This kind of writing has a vitality and pace that makes it highly satisfying and exciting for a director to read. To be candid, it is exactly the kind of energy I find lacking in most student scripts that are often too wordy and literary. In effect, when writing his script, the inexperienced writer often yearns for those qualities legitimate in the most expressive literary industry form (the treatment), but that should actually play no part in a screenplay.'

For the last twenty-five years of his life Sandy Mackendrick was consumed with the question 'Can film be taught?' Even if he felt it probably could not be, for him teaching remained a dignified profession and a fruitful use of his time. Critic and Mackendrick biographer Philip Kemp has written that Mackendrick 'always maintained that he never stopped making films - since training new film-makers is an integral part of the whole movie-making process - but simply gave up directing them.'

'I'm not sure I have any answers,' Mackendrick told students at the American Film Institute in 1977. 'If I do have anything it's an instinct for how to organise the question. In other words, all you can teach is the learning process. You can't teach the answers. You can only teach the technique of phrasing questions.'

George Orwell (whom Mackendrick cites more than once in his notes) wrote in a 1944 essay about advertisements for writing courses: 'If these people really know how to make money out of writing, why aren't they just doing it instead of peddling their secret at 5s. a time?' Sandy Mackendrick was a man who could have continued to earn a living from film-making but felt his time better spent 'peddling' his wisdom to the younger generation. For devoting his final years to disseminating the body of knowledge he had accumulated throughout his career, and for suggesting the right questions, students of cinema will be eternally grateful.

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Paul Cronin's books include *Herzog on Herzog.* His company Sticking Place Films (www.thestickingplace.com) has recently completed an educational documentary about Mackendrick's teachings which includes interviews with Mackendrick and several former students. A documentary will be screened at a workshop at the Directors Guild in London on 26/27 March. Email saskia@dggb.org or call (020) 7836 3602 for details