Alexander Mackendrick *on Film-making*

While he does not have the *caché* of some contemporary scriptwriting gurus, Alexander Mackendrick - renowned as a director - may have more to say of relevance to the thousands of people writing, or trying to write, film scripts. Paul Cronin has done a great service to the development industry with this book, one that is long overdue. If writers understand more of the problems and needs of directors - and *vice versa* - better films will result. The Foreword to the book is by Martin Scorsese.

Foreword

How do you teach film directing? I'm not sure if we've come to a consensus yet. Everyone seems to approach the task differently which should come as no surprise. After all, the medium is still young - a little over 100 years is nothing compared with the thousands of years it's taken for painting, dance, music and theater to evolve. What are the traditions of filmmaking? Where do you begin? What do you teach, and in what order?

This collection of writings by Alexander Mackendrick is a good, solid starting point. That it's of great value to students almost goes without saying - anyone who studied with Mackendrick during his long tenure at Cal Arts, and who received these writings in the form of handouts, can attest to their value. But I can also easily imagine a college without a film program building a curriculum around these writings. They're that clear, that concise, that comprehensive. Mackendrick knew that you couldn't reduce filmmaking to any one thing. He knew that it was about storytelling and that it was also about images; that it was about acting and editing, action and words. And that more than anything else it was about practice. Theories are fine, but practice is everything. "Though it will be only a couple of weeks before you are familiar with the basic mechanics of film-making, it will take a lifetime of hard work to master them." As someone who feels like he's still just beginning, who has to start all over again with each new movie, I can attest to the truth of Mackendrick's words.

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Mackendrick had practice, and plenty of it. He came up through the studio system - Ealing to be exact - where he did some of the best work in the middle of what is now remembered as the Golden Age of British film comedy: *The Man in the White Suit, The Ladykillers* - the last Ealing film and one of the best. For him, they were simply practice.

Mackendrick came to the United States after *The Ladykillers*. Burt Lancaster brought him over to work on a movie called *Sweet Smell of Success*. Some of you might have heard of this picture, one of the most daring, startling and savage ever made about show business and power in this country. "I cannot recommend the film for student study on aesthetic grounds," writes Mackendrick, by way of introducing a section on the screenwriting process and the varying contributions of Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets to that film. It may sound like false modesty since *Sweet Smell of Success* is now recognized as a milestone in American moviemaking. But for Mackendrick, it was simply more practice. It takes a lifetime and even then it shouldn't feel like enough. He knew this.

"Process, not product," was his mantra to his students. The creative process, not the creative method or the creative system. The process. Which never stops. Even when you're resting, letting an idea take root. Mackendrick knew this.

I'm not implying that he was an anti-intellectual Hollywood pro; all you have to do is leaf through this book, with its references to Ibsen and Sophocles and Beckett and Levi-Strauss, to dispel that notion. This book takes on everything from Dramatic Irony to Mental Geography, the relationship between the director and his actors to the structural soundness of *Last Year at Marienbad*. But on almost every page Mackendrick lets the reader know that all of it, from the lessons about crossing the axis and the condensation of screen time to the techniques for cultivating ideas ("Collecting Data ... Organizing the Data ... Incubating the Material ... Preserving the Spark,"▸

- sounds right to me), are worth nothing without practice.

As for the differences between art and entertainment, narrative and non-narrative filmmaking, they are simply matters of taste and temperament. You can only find out through ... practice.

This book - this *invaluable* book - is the work of a lifetime from a man who was passionately devoted to his craft and his art, and who then devoted himself to transferring his knowledge and his experience to his students. And now it's available to all of us. What a gift.

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Below are several extracts from *On Film-making: An introduction to the craft of the director* by Alexander Mackendrick, edited by Paul Cronin (faber & faber, 2004).

Dramatic Irony

The director Alfred Hitchcock was once asked if he had a formula for creating dramatic stories. Hitch gave an answer that is simplistic to the point of being a cartoon image. He said, 'Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath this table between us. Nothing happens and then all of a sudden, "Boom!" There is an explosion. The public is *surprised* but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene of no special consequence. Now, let us take a *suspense* situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it ... In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: "You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb beneath you and it's about to explode!"'

Hitch's image, like almost all strongly structured dramas, makes use of what we call dramatic irony. The American Heritage Dictionary defines irony as 'The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning.' Dramatic irony is defined as 'The dramatic effect achieved by leading an audience to understand an incongruity between a situation and the accompanying speeches, while the characters in the play remain unaware of the incongruity.' Simply put, in any situation where we, the audience, are aware of significant circumstances of which one or more of the characters on stage or screen are unaware, there is an element of dramatic irony.

Dramatic irony is ... where we, the audience, are aware of circumstances of which one or more of the onstage characters are ignorant and are thus kept in a state of 'expectation mingled with uncertainty'.

Mackendrick teaching

The classic example of this is a scene from Sheridan's play *The School for Scandal.* Sir Peter Teazle has married a very attractive and high-spirited wife much younger than himself and, though in truth both of them love each other dearly, they are always quarrelling. But neither is aware of the other's real feelings. Sir Peter has a half-brother, Joseph Surface, who is a devious and malicious character. Feigning sympathy and friendship with Sir Peter, Joseph is really trying to seduce Lady Teazle who is sufficiently exasperated by her husband to be open to his advances. The scene takes place when Lady Teazle keeps an assignation with Joseph in his private rooms. Joseph has started his attempt to seduce Lady Teazle when a servant appears to announce that Sir Peter has arrived and is on his way upstairs. Joseph has time only to hide Sir Peter's wife behind a screen in the corner of the room before Sir Peter enters.

The scene, which you should look at in detail, is quite complex, involving several other characters and a situation in which Joseph, in order to prevent them from exposing the woman behind the screen, has to pretend that he has been entertaining another woman, obviously for immoral purposes. The incongruities are elaborate. We, the audience, are held in a state of comic tension while we wait for the inevitable moment when the screen collapses and all is revealed. One of the ironies, of course, is that in the course of the dialogue between Sir Peter and Joseph, Lady Teazle learns of her husband's real feelings about her, feelings that drastically alter her attitude to both men.

It occurs to me that the device of dramatic irony is so standard a formula of dramatic construction that, in truth, it is quite rare to find any really well structured story that does not make use it. Think of the stories you have encountered where we, the audience, are aware of circumstances of which one or more of the onstage characters are ignorant and are thus kept in a state of 'expectation mingled with uncertainty' as we wait for some turn of events (*peripety*) in which the suspenseful situation is resolved. Can you think of a dramatic work that does not make use of this structure, however indirectly? It seems to me that as students' projects are offered to me, it is the absence of clearly structured dramatic irony (especially in visual terms) that is their weakness.

There is a sense in which the most basic elements of film grammar have potential for dramatic irony. The most standard pattern of editing is a mastershot, the angle within which all dramatic elements are visible. It is an objective, God's-eye-view that makes the audience aware of

the situation as a whole as it allows us to locate ourselves spatially within the shot, to see exactly where the characters are in relation to each other and their environment, and to observe these interactions from the outside. The mastershot is often followed by closer angles, for example, close-ups of the individual characters. A close-up, depending on a number of factors, invites us to concentrate on the thoughts and feelings of one particular character. A reverse angle that follows a close-up will often seem to be the point of view of the preceding close-up character. This choice of screen sizes and the pattern of shot juxtapositions encourage audiences to switch from His viewpoint of Her to Her viewpoint of Him, and then, in the mastershot, to the audience's viewpoint of the two of them, of their interactions.

Consider the scene in Sheridan's play. A film version would almost certainly be covered in a mastershot that shows most of the room and Joseph and his visitors, while the hidden Lady Teazle would perhaps be visible to us but to no-one else. Then there would be closer shots, including cutaways to the reaction of Lady Teazle listening behind the screen. Even in a scene where dramatic irony is not so obviously staged, one can see the principle at work. The camera set-ups and editing might be designed to reveal private thoughts and feelings of one of the characters of which everyone else is ignorant.

As you explore some of the great classics of stage and screen, you will see that most have a 'bomb under the table'. The first scene of *Oedipus Rex* shows the young King swearing an oath that he will investigate the murder of the man who was previously King of Thebes, husband of Jocasta, to whom Oedipus is now married. The audiences for whom this great play was first performed were well aware of the irony here for the murderer that Oedipus has sworn to find and punish is Oedipus himself. Not until the story's final confrontations will he be forced to recognise the awful truth, though the bomb has been ticking away all throughout the play. Eventually Tiresias spells it out for him: Oedipus has killed his own father and committed incest with his mother.

The very first scene of *Hamlet* sets the fuse for the bomb: the Ghost has been seen on the castle battlements. A couple of scenes later Hamlet is told by the Ghost that the present King, Claudius, murdered Hamlet's father. Hamlet's dilemma is that he has no real proof of the crime and is disturbed that the Ghost might be a figment of his own paranoid state of anxiety and indecision. The trap of the play-within-a-play solves that issue but a new obstacle arises when Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius.

The Ladykillers: Ealing Studios

Chamber plot

In a farcical film I directed, The *Ladykillers*, the comedy is based entirely on ironies. We are certain that the figure who follows Mrs Wilberforce back from the police station is up to no good but the little old lady has no suspicions about Professor Marcus. Nor does she realise that the five men apparently rehearsing a string quintet in her upstairs room are, in fact, criminals planning a dastardly robbery. When she does find out, she is innocent of the fact that they are trying to decide which of them will do her in.

Wordless scenes are, in some respects, just as challenging to the screenwriter as scenes of snappy and clear dialogue.

Hitchcock's example is, of course, a perfect example of dramatic irony. With a bomb under the table, the tension may or may not be present in the mind of one of the characters in the scene but it is certainly in *our* minds, and this is what is important. Well aware of the danger that awaits them, we are apprehensive about whether the characters on screen will become aware of it too. If you extend Hitchcock's illustration in its caricature form, you have an encapsulation of several of the classic elements found in dramatic structures.

Cutting Dialogue

When I started out working in a London studio I wasn't very good at writing dialogue. Because of this I had to devise methods of communicating my ideas through visual means, something that gave me a break just when the film industry in Britain was expanding and very quickly - absurdly, if you must know - the reputation of being quite brilliant at cutting dialogue.

My first job in the film industry was as a very junior contract writer in the script department of a British studio. Screenwriters with established reputations were at that time hired by the studios on a freelance basis for individually negotiated deals. These were usually renewable on the option of the studios with six weeks allocated to each draft. The studios might ask for two or three drafts, with the final one a fairly close collaboration between the screenwriter and the director. But it was always understood that the studio was free to assign a new writer at any point in the process. Contract writers, who had a lower status, were on regular salaries and were expected to work on any subject assigned to them. The contract writer, in this sense, was much more of a hack. He didn't have a screen credit and was likely to be given the task of doing draft re-writes of other scenes, bits of carpentry proposed by either the producer or the director. The whole thing was, for me, a marvellously good experience, and one of the things I find regrettable about the film industry today is that this sort of training ground for beginning writers no longer exists.

I have a story to tell of an early experience. I do so with slight embarrassment since it probably does me little credit but does at least illustrate a point. Shortly after I had been put under contract, the studio started developing a story that was meant as a musical of sorts. The storyline was unremarkable, dealing with the marital problems of a very young couple. To work on these scenes, the producer had hired a well-known British playwright. One scene involved a situation with the young wife who, while shopping, runs into a man with whom she had had an affair before she met her husband. Reminding her that she had left something (a pair of skates, as I recall) in his apartment, he takes her back there and, with practised charm, makes an attempt to seduce her. Being rejected, he accepts the situation with grace.

It was not a scene of any great originality and possibly because of this, the writer put a great deal of effort into making it as fresh, sensitive and original as he could. The result was a beautifully crafted piece of work but it was twenty-five pages long, and the producer and director were much dismayed. They saw it as a one-act play in its own right that would badly interrupt the progression of ▸▸

Slogans for a Sc

by Alexander Mackendrick

Movies SHOW ... and then TELL. A true movie is likely to be 60% to 80% comprehensible if the dialogue is in a foreign language.

PROPS are the director's key to the design of 'incidental business': unspoken suggestions for behaviour that can prevent 'theatricality'.

A character in isolation is hard to make dramatic. Drama usually involves CONFLICT. If the conflict is internal, then the dramatist needs to personify it through the clash with other individuals.

Self pity in a character does not evoke sympathy.

BEWARE OF SYMPATHY between characters. That is the END of drama.

BEWARE OF FLASHBACKS, DREAM SEQUENCES and VISIONS. In narrative/dramatic material these tend to weaken the dramatic tension. They are more suited to 'lyric' material.

Screenplays are not written; they are RE-WRITTEN and RE-WRITTEN and RE-WRITTEN.

Screenplays come in three sizes: LONG, TOO LONG and MUCH TOO LONG.

Student films come in three sizes: TOO LONG, MUCH TOO LONG and VERY MUCH TOO LONG.

If it can be cut out, then CUT IT OUT. Everything non-essential that you can eliminate strengthens what's left.

Exposition is BORING unless it is in the context of some present dramatic tension or crisis. So start with an action that creates tension, then provide the exposition in terms of the present developments.

The start of your story is usually the consequence of some BACKSTORY, i.e. the impetus for progression in your narrative is likely to be rooted in previous events - often rehearsals of what will happen in your plot.

Coincidence may mean exposition is in the wrong place, i.e. if you establish the too-convenient circumstances before they become dramatically necessary, then we feel no sense of coincidence. Use coincidence to put characters into trouble, not out of trouble.

PASSIVITY is a capital crime in drama.

A character who is dramatically interesting is intelligent enough to THINK AHEAD. He or she has not only thought out present intentions but has foreseen reactions and possible obstacles. Intelligent characters anticipate and have counter moves prepared.

NARRATIVE DRIVE: the end of a scene should include a clear pointer as to what the next scene is going to be.

Ambiguity does not mean lack of clarity. Ambiguity may be intriguing when it consists of alternative meanings, each of them clear.

'Comedy is hard.' (Last words of Edmund Kean.) Comedy plays best in the mastershot. Comic structure is simply dramatic structure but MORE SO: neater, shorter, faster. Don't attempt comedy until you are really expert in structuring dramatic material.

The role of the ANTAGONIST may have more to do with the structure of the plot than the character of the PROTAGONIST. When you are stuck for a third act, think through your situations from the point of view of whichever characters OPPOSE the protagonist's will.

reenwriter's Wall

PROTAGONIST: the central figure in the story, the character 'through whose eyes' we see the events.

ANTAGONIST: the character or group of figures who represent opposition to the goals of the protagonist.

DRAMATIC IRONY: a situation where one or more of the characters on the screen is ignorant of the circumstances known to us in the audience.

If you have a Beginning but you don't yet have an end, then you're mistaken. You don't have the right Beginning.

In movies, what is SAID may make little impression - unless it comes as a comment or explanation of what we have seen happening.

What is happening NOW is apt to be less dramatically interesting than what may or may not HAPPEN NEXT.

What happens just before the END of your story defines the CENTRAL THEME, the SPINE of the plot, the POINT OF VIEW and the best POINT OF ATTACK.

Make sure you've chosen the correct point of attack. Common flaw: tension begins to grip too late. Perhaps the story has to start at a later point and earlier action should be 'fed in' during later sequences.

What happens at the end may often be both a surprise to the audience and the author and at the same time, in retrospect, absolutely inevitable.

Character progression: when you've thought out what kind of character your protagonist will be at the end, start him or her as the opposite kind of person at the beginning, e.g. Oedipus who starts out arrogant and ends up humiliated, Hamlet who is indecisive at the start and ends up heroic.

ACTION speaks louder than words.

Most stories with a strong plot are built on the tension of CAUSE AND EFFECT. Each incident is like a domino that topples forward to collide with the next in a sequence which holds the audience in a grip of anticipation. 'So, what happens next?' Each scene presents a small crisis that as it is revolved produces a new uncertainty.

DRAMA IS EXPECTATION MINGLED WITH UNCERTAINTY.

A SHOOTING SCRIPT IS NOT A SCREENPLAY. The beginning screenwriter should be discouraged from trying to invent stories in screenplay format.

A FOIL CHARACTER is a figure invented to ask the questions to which the audience want answers (asking the question may be more important than having the answer).

NEGATIVE ACTION (something not happening) needs to be dramatised in positive action terms. You show something starting to happen which then is stopped.

TWO ELEMENTS OF SUSPENSE ARE HALF AS SUSPENSEFUL AS ONE. Aristotle's principle of unity means that one dramatic tension should dominate. All others are subordinate to it.

CONFRONTATION SCENE is the obligatory scene that the audience feel they have been promised and the absence of which may reasonably be disappointing.

What you leave out is as important as what you leave in.

Screenplays are STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE.

Never cast for physical attributes.

Every character is important.

a film really intended as just a sequence of musical numbers. The playwright, a thorough professional, recognized this problem. When invited to cut it down, he discovered he was not able to reduce it by more than three or four pages and even those cuts were painful to him. He gladly agreed to let some other screenwriter tackle the job.

The second writer assigned was much more experienced in writing for film. One of the so-called rules of thumb at our studios in that period was that no scene in a film ought to be much longer than six or eight pages (four or five was what to aim for). This new writer was much impressed with the original scene (unlike most screenwriters who always seem to discover flaws in the work of others) and worked hard on the cuts, even to the point of some drastic alterations of the original scene structure. But when she came back with a scene that was still a dozen pages in length, she had to confess she did not know how it could be further reduced without completely wrecking it. Producer and director felt they were in serious trouble. In some desperation, they remembered that the studio had on its payroll a young man who had been given his first job in the script department because he wasn't very accomplished in writing dialogue but was able to compensate by using certain skills learned when he had been an illustrator and cartoonist. They handed the problem to me.

"How short do you want it?" I asked. "Just cut it down as much as you can," they said. I was impressed with the dialogue of both previous versions, well aware that it was better than I could ever do. Quite nervous, I spent a whole day in very careful analysis not of the lines of the dialogue but of the structure of the scene. I thought about the characters, I tried to define their feelings and impulses. I marked the beats of the scene, the identifiable moves, the shifts of intention and changes in mood. Then, still highly insecure, I decided to go out and just forget about the problem. This, in fact, is for me a standard procedure. When a writing dilemma appears insoluble, it is not a bad tactic to push it deliberately out of your consciousness while you go off on other business or indeed play. Find companions who will talk with you on other matters. Play a game of tennis. Go to a concert. Go for a long walk. Get drunk - any preoccupation that by preventing exercise of thought pushes the problem down into your sub-, or at least semi-conscious mind. Then, just before going to sleep, briefly recapitulate the unsolved dilemma in your mind.

What happened to me was what happens to many of us who use this method. I was jogged into

The Man in The White Suit: Ealing Studios

I beat the doorstep challenge!

wakefulness in the very early hours by an idea that seemed rather preposterous. I got up at dawn and wrote a first draft. Then, after breakfast, I polished it a little and took it in to the studio. With some trepidation I gave it to the typists of the script department. These young ladies are very wise in the politics of the studio and I was not much reassured to hear them in fits of giggles just after I had closed the door on them. An hour later I was summoned to a meeting with the head of the script department. As I approached his room I heard more laughter. All too conscious that my contract was up for renewal, I entered to find that the producer, director and head of the script department were all there, all involved in the hilarity. Sobering up, the director told me that I had solved the problem and that he would shoot the scene precisely as I had written it.

I have to describe my apparently brilliant solution and scintillating dialogue. The scene opens in the empty apartment of the would-be seducer. As he enters, he carries the shopping basket of the young wife that he rapidly discards, and moves toward a record player. By the time the young woman has appeared in the doorway, looking round the room that clearly holds some memories for her, music has begun to play, emphasizing those recollections. The man moves over to her, saying nothing, and offers to help her with her overcoat. With only the slightest of hesitations, the young wife allows him take it and he deposits it in a chair next to the side table on which he starts to mix a drink, again without needing to ask her what she wants. Accepting it she obviously notes he has remembered her tastes. She smiles at him and goes on listening to the gramophone record but when he joins her, carrying his own drink, he leans close to kiss her lightly on the nape of the neck. She turns quickly with a small shake of her head.

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          YOUNG WIFE
(negative inflection)
  Mm-mm.
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          WOULD-BE SEDUCER
   (makes face, questioning)
  Mm-mm?

She looks at him. He looks back at
her and his expression becomes more
serious.

          YOUNG WIFE
   (quietly with tenderness)
  Mmm-mm.

The seducer accepts the rejection
with good grace. He moves away,
opens a closet, and after a moment
returns to present her with the
skates. He is amused but respectful.

          YOUNG WIFE
   (giving the word several
   meanings)
  Thank-you.
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There were two results of this version that consigned to the waste-paper basket the costly efforts of writers with vastly greater talent than my own. The first was that as played by two actors of considerable ability and naturally appealing personality, the scene worked much better than it may have deserved to, and since nobody saw the other versions, nobody could ever tell if they would have played any better. The other was that my contract was renewed and I was privately noted by the Chief Executive of the Studio as a youngster who might eventually be better at directing than at writing. (Years later, I read that Raymond Chandler felt that one of the best dialogue scenes he had ever written in a Hollywood movie contained only one word: "Uh-huh," spoken three times with different intonations. It is the same anecdote.)

It may be worth reminding students that such wordless scenes are, in some respects, just as challenging to the screenwriter as scenes of snappy and clear dialogue, since they depend on very careful examination of the mute behavior of the characters, the use of props and the staging of the action. Such scenes, of course, must also take into account those situations that have preceded it, as well as the entire dramatic structure underlying the film as a whole, an understanding of which must always precede the invention of dialogue. To a strong degree, in cutting these twenty-five pages of dialogue to three non-verbal noises and a single word, I had remained absolutely faithful to the playwright's original story.

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