

Mackendrick on Film

Study Sheets

The questions in these study sheets are designed specifically for students of film-making either considering film school or in the early stages of their studies. However, it is worth bearing in mind that Mackendrick taught the same material to both undergraduate and graduate students. He just expected a greater level of understanding and a higher standard of work from more experienced students.

Section One (23 minutes)

Quitting Hollywood

1. Why did Mackendrick quit film-directing and accept the job of Dean of the School of Film and Video at the California Institute of the Arts?
2. Was Mackendrick's decision to become a teacher one he was forced into?
3. Can film directors today expect anything like the kind of support that Mackendrick experienced at Ealing Studios in the 1950s?
4. What skills should the director be schooled in beyond the craft of film-making?
5. How important is it that directors learn to work with studios and producers?
6. What obligations does the director have to the financial backers of the film he is making?
7. Are there any similarities between directing and teaching?

California Institute of the Arts

1. What kind of an educational institution was CalArts in the late 1960s and 70s?
2. Why were CalArts teachers encouraged to continue with their own projects while working with students?
3. Does a film need a story?
4. What kind of film-making/storytelling did Mackendrick suggest students concentrate on while at CalArts?
5. As an aspiring writer or director, are you drawn more toward mainstream cinema or to 'independent'/'experimental' films?

Section Two (53 minutes)

Teaching Film

1. Can film-making be taught?
2. What is the job of a film school?
3. What can students expect to learn at film school?
4. What are students expected to bring to their studies?
5. Why do students need to learn ‘the capacity to adjust to change?’
6. Why did Mackendrick believe it is important for film-makers to explore their ‘compulsions’ while still students?
7. What does Mackendrick mean when he says ‘many students know they are the new Antonioni’?
8. What does ‘High Tech = low imagination’ mean?
9. Why do you want to work in the film industry?
10. Who are the people Mackendrick suggests ‘really shouldn’t be in the business’?
11. Are you prepared to do the hard work needed to become a writer or director?
12. As an aspiring writer or director, do you feel you have anything original to say, or new ways of saying it?
13. What does it mean to say something ‘original’?

The ‘Rules’

1. Are there any conventions and principles about film-making that every writer and director should know?
2. In what ways do ‘rules’ exist to be broken?
3. Do you believe it is necessary to learn the fundamentals of film grammar and dramatic construction before you start work in the industry?
4. Why are students often resistant to the notion of ‘rules’ when it comes to film-making?

‘Mistakes’

1. What are the only real mistakes a film director can make?

Craft

1. Is film-directing a craft or an art?

Instinct and Intellect

1. What can students learn about film-making from books?
2. Is the only way to learn film-making just to do it?
3. How useful is film theory to the working director?
4. What did Mackendrick mean by ‘Process, not product’?
5. Why did the idea of ‘no information in advance of need’ appeal to Mackendrick?

Section Three (71 minutes)

The Pre-verbal Language of Cinema

1. Is there a universal 'language' of cinema?
2. Why is it so difficult to 'think cinematically'?
3. What is the difference between 'pictorial' and 'visual'?
4. Do directors need to have basic drawing ability?
5. Can today's film-makers learn anything by watching silent films?
6. Why are so many young film-makers interested in dialogue-driven film stories?
7. It is a bad thing if a film story is constructed primarily using dialogue?
8. In what way can audiences learn about a character by the way he moves and interacts with other people?
9. How can props help the director and the actor tell the story?

Section Four (39 minutes)

The Director and the Actor

1. Why is it important for the director to understand the craft of the actor?
2. Does the writer need to have any acting ability?
3. Are too many directors in thrall to the technical aspects of film-making?
4. Why did Mackendrick believe it important directors be as adept at working in the theater as with film?
5. In what ways is the actor the most valued collaborator of the director?

Section Five (61 minutes)

Dramatic Construction 1

1. Are there any principles to consider when conceiving a story?
2. Can today's writers and directors learn anything by studying ancient texts about dramatic construction?
3. What is a story?
4. What is not a story?
5. In what way is drama 'anticipation mingled with uncertainty'?
6. What is the difference between the protagonist and the antagonist?
7. Why is theme a potentially problematic starting point for a story?
8. Why might plot be a less important element of story than character?
9. What is 'character in action'?
10. Why is a 'character in isolation hard to make dramatic'?
11. What is a foil character?
12. What is 'triangulation'?
13. What does it mean for a story to be suspenseful?

Section Six (48 minutes)

Dramatic Construction 2

1. How do you know when a story is at an end?
2. What is the significance of the obligatory scene?
3. What is the purpose of exposition?
4. What is the best way to establish exposition in a film script?
5. How can the director best express the internal feelings of the characters?
6. 'Who does what with which and to whom.' Discuss.
7. What is postcarding?

Section Seven (63 minutes)

When Not to Write a Shooting Script

1. What is the role of the writer?
2. How aware should the screenwriter be of 'film grammar' and the job of the director?
3. Why are some screenwriters tempted put so many technical details into their scripts?
4. How might writers avoid adding technical details yet still convey their ideas?
5. Why might a director consider a script full of details of edits and camera angles to be the work of an amateur?
6. What is the difference between a screenplay and a shooting script?
7. What does the director expect of the screenwriter?
8. Why did Mackendrick suggest students write prose versions of their story before attempting a screenplay?
9. Why do so many film students want to be *auteurs* (writer/directors) rather than just writers or directors?
10. Why is it useful to compare the screenplay of a film with its dialogue transcript/post-production script?

Film as Collaboration

1. In what way is film-making a collaborative process?
2. In what ways are acting, directing and editing three stages of a single process?
3. Why was Mackendrick so antagonistic to what he called the '*cult of the film director*'?
4. Why did Mackendrick believe that film students should start by learning their craft with editing?
5. Why is it important for students to start directing material written by someone else?

Section Eight (41 minutes)

Film Grammar 1

1. Is there a 'language' of the cinema?
2. How do differences in shot sizes, camera movement and framing help tell the story?
3. Can the 'form' of a film ever be entirely distinguished from its 'content'?

Section Nine (52 minutes)

Film Grammar 2

The Longest Axis

1. Why should the director look for the 'longest axis' on the set?
2. How does the director prepare camera coverage?

The Watergate Exercise

1. How relevant is film grammar to non-fiction cinema?
2. Can the basic elements of film grammar be found in any series of moving images?

The Imaginary Ubiquitous Winged Witness

1. In what ways is cinema as concerned with reaction as it is with action?
2. How does the director know where to put the camera?
3. What is the film director actually 'directing'?

A Director Prepares

Total length: 451 minutes

Mackendrick on Film is designed to be screened in its entirety over a two-day period from 10am until 5pm