
Foreword by Martin Scorsese

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 film-making? 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 CalArts, 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 film-making 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.

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 *The Sweet Smell of Success*. Some of you might have heard of this picture – one of the most daring, startling, 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 movie-making. 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 film-making, 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.