

A DIRECTOR PREPARES

by Alexander MacKendrick.

A DIRECTOR PREPARES:

a series of six one-hour instructional video-tapes concerning Film-making.

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A Director Prepares is the first effort to teach film-making by showing a world-renowned director actually making a film.

As the film's author, Alexander MacKendrick, points out: "It has become obvious to me after twenty years as a film-educator that the only way to teach film is with film. It is simply not possible to discuss film satisfactorily in a literary or verbal medium. The language of the medium can only be appreciated in its own medium: the moving picture with sound."

A Director Prepares uses the unique properties of film in which "action speaks louder than words" to show through demonstration the making of a short film: from the fights of writers in story conferences to the hectic excitement of the director "on the floor" working with actors and crew, to the frustrations of the editing room where it all comes together.

But the series does more than just show "how to"; it also provides the viewer with the opportunity to put what he has learned into practical use.

MacKendrick explains: "Movie directing can not be taught any more than any creative skill -but it can be learned. Everything I say and do in the series will only begin to make sense when the viewer starts participating. Cinematic language -like any other- is learned by using it. Experience is what teaches."

For this reason, unedited footage from the film which MacKendrick makes during the series shall accompany the package as an editing

exercise in the style of the American Cinematographic Editors' famous Gunsmoke piece.

Why an editing exercise?

MacKendrick: "One of the best places for the director to learn his craft is, surprisingly, in the editing room. That's where you really learn how to plan coverage, how to match eyelines, and what a good performance is. Sitting at that bench tearing your hair out because the director didn't give you a certain shot; thanking god that an actor held a look for an extra second.

"It is essential that the student be forced to put into practical use what I demonstrate in the series, and the best way to do this is through editing footage with which he is familiar."

MacKendrick is well experienced with this teaching method as he has made two such films already in his years as an instructor at the California Institute of the Arts. The method and its difficulties have been extensively tried and tested in The Terrorists -a simple chase film- and Brenda's Birthday - a more difficult scene of confrontation and character interplay.

In addition to the making of a short film, the series makes extensive use of interviews between MacKendrick and his colleagues such as John Houseman, Alec Guinness, Douglas Slocombe (cinematographer), Michael Pressman and Ed Harris (the last two of whom were students of MacKendrick's). These interviews shall allow -through argument and debate- pertinent anecdotes to be told in the lively context of interaction. This too is a method MacKendrick has experimented with in such endeavors

as the Light of the Director roundtable meeting published in Articles magazine.

Film clips from MacKendrick's own films and from such classics as Intolerance, City Lights, On the Waterfront, and The Third Man shall be shown with MacKendrick seated at a moviola discussing the scenes with editors, actors and writers.

MacKendrick shall stop and start the films, speaking as they play, pointing with his fingers at crucial elements, making line drawings to emphasize points. Again this is a time-tested method which has been used in the director's classes for nearly 20 years.

The final tool of teaching shall be animation. MacKendrick has invented what he considers his "chief contribution to the study of film" -two cartoon figures ("The One-Eyed Winged Witness" and "The Man With the Movie House on his Shoulders") which he uses to demonstrate the interior workings of the director's mind. These cartoons shall come to life to serve as "visual limericks" to help the student remember what he sees.

MacKendrick: "Rules -though they must never be taken too seriously- can be useful at times, and the best ones are those that are easiest to remember. Just as every school child knows how many days there are in the months thanks to that rhyme '30 days hath September...' so should this series provide things that 'stick in the head': that are difficult to forget."

To further aid the veiw'er's memory MacKendrick has prepared two handbooks to accompany the series. Handbooks of the basic "rules" of camera coverage and dramatic construction which he

deals with in the series. "Nuts and bolts material," as he says, "like an auto mechanic might refer to."

This series is unique in the world of film-teaching, but it does have precedents in other fields. Television series such as Jonathon Miller's The Body in Question, Kenneth Clarke's Civilisation, Margot Fonteyne's The Magic of Dance, and Leonard Bernstein's work with Omnibus have all been highly successful works which featured prominent creators or authorities actively demonstrating their fields of specialty in entertaining and direct fashion.

The series is comprised of six episodes of one-hour each, structured as follows:

I. EXPLORING THE TERRITORY

MacKendrick gives an overview of the director's job.

"Directing, writing, acting and editing are all aspects of a single job, and anyone who wants to direct must have some experience of all these skills. But even that is not enough, for directing is a lot more. It also means functioning as a leader who gives direction to a group of talented individuals, getting the best they have out of them. It's knowing how to control a group process."

He goes on to show why most students fail to learn how to direct by demonstrating a method he calls "How Not to Learn How to Direct".

"Student film-makers seem to have an urgent desire to embark as soon as possible on projects on which they:

- a) Conceive an original story idea
- b) Write the script
- c) Produce the venture (i.e. choose cast, crew, locations, etc.)
- d) Work with the actors
- e) Plan the coverage and direct the shooting
- f) Edit the footage
- g) Complete the post-production and mixing.

"The difficulty with trying to learn these seven functions is that while it is a very exciting (if costly) experience, it is also one in which the student never has the chance to learn what works and doesn't work.

"For some reason each of the seven experiences seems to be one which is only fully understood at the subsequent stage; therefore the sequence of experience should be in the reverse order:

- 1) (g) and (f) above. EDITING AND POST PRODUCTION.
You learn this by working on a project that you have not yourself directed, one that is directed by someone with more experience.
- 2) (d) and (f). WORK WITH ACTORS AND DIRECT SHOOTING.
You learn this by directing actors of experience and planning the coverage of a scene you did not write.
- 3) (c) PRODUCE THE VENTURE.
You learn this by working as 'producer' on someone else's project.
- 4) (b) WRITE THE SCRIPT.
You learn this by adapting a subject and then let someone else direct it.
- 5) (a) CONCEIVE AN ORIGINAL STORY IDEA.
You learn this by writing 'stories', not screenplays, and watching how another writer scripts them.

I don't doubt that this will seem very frustrating to the hopes and dreams of every student who applies to any School of Film. But it should be recognized that this sequence, or some version of it, is the way that 'professionals' develop careers in 'the industry'.

Next he introduces the two cartoon figures to remind the viewer that cinema isn't "something up there on the screen", but "a happening in the head of the director and the audience."

"The Man with the Movie House on his Shoulders":



and "The One-eyed Winged Witness" or "Invisible Imaginary Observer":

The 'Invisible Imaginary Observer' should be thought of as a creature who is alive. He is the embodiment of the audience's curiosity. He has a point of view.

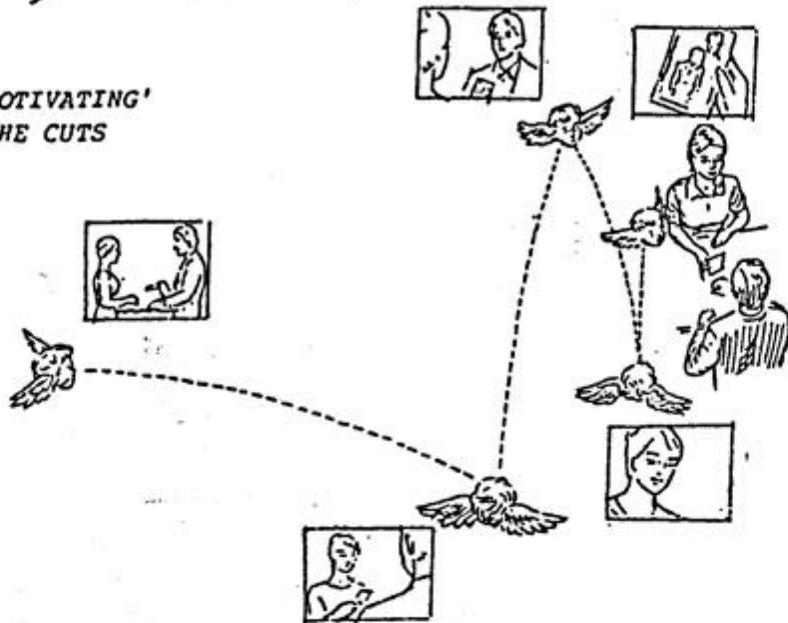
So, when he leaps about in imaginary space and time, he always does so for a reason.

The term 'a smooth cut' is, when you think about it, a contradiction. Every cut is a dislocation. Every jump from one camera set-up to the next is bound to be, to a greater or lesser degree, a momentary 'dis-orientation'. But this disorientation will not feel disturbing as long as it coincides with a desire in the audience to shift to the new viewpoint. If the jump comes precisely at the moment of our impulse to see more of what we want to see, then it will feel natural. The cut feels 'smooth' because 'it makes sense' - it reveals something new, or gives us a better look at the subject of our interest. This may be a closer image of something not quite near enough in a preceding longer angle; it can be a wider view of the surroundings that comes at a moment when we want to know where we are; or it can be simply a different aspect of the subject as seen from a new perspective, adding visual information that we didn't get from the previous set-up.

'Coverage' consists of the director's design of this visual information. What the French call the 'decoupage' - meaning the breakdown of camera angles that is planned in the shooting - is really the first step in the process that will be completed in the editing room.



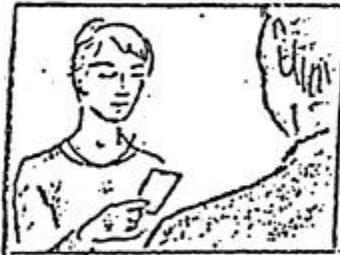
**'MOTIVATING'
THE CUTS**



Each jump of 'the Mind's Eye' should have some purpose. The camera leaps to a new position in order to see more of what it wants to see.



ESTABLISHING SHOT
We 'stand back' to see the relationship of the man and woman 'objectively.' He gives something to her...



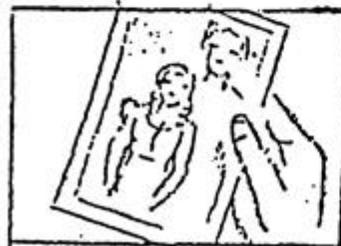
OVERSHOULDER SHOT
...so we jump closer to see her as she takes it. As she takes it, the man is watching...



REVERSE ANGLE
...so we jump to see his expression. Why is he looking at her? The 'something' is a photograph...



CLOSE UP
His point of view. It is her expression he is watching. She is reacting to what she sees in...



DETAIL
...the photograph. We now see it closely from her point of view. It shows two people... Etc.

He continues, using the "One-eyed Winged Witness" to demonstrate that Point of View is the most important decision a director makes, for without Point of View there can be no story.

This leads into the question: "What is a story?" MacKendrick tells of Scheherazade who had to hold the sultan's attention every night to keep from being beheaded in the morning, and likens the job of the film-maker to this. He goes on to explore "What is a dramatic story?", telling a tale he has written called "It'll Never Take the Place of Bear-Baiting" about a plebian audience member of Shakespeare's time who is enticed into enjoying Hamlet because of what MacKendrick describes as "the essence of drama: Anticipation mingled with uncertainty".

Finally he confronts the main issue: "What is a cinematic dramatic story?" What makes a story a good film rather than a play or work of literature?

To illustrate this MacKendrick takes a scene from Tennessee William's' Streetcar Named Desire and shows "how to makes it cinematic" by cutting out all the dialog and shooting it as a silent movie, thus demonstrating the pre-verbal language of film and the unique properties of cinema.

The episode concludes with a recap of the "How Not to Learn" method and the proposal of the exercise film.

II. HOW TO HAVE IDEAS

MacKendrick demonstrates various routines of composition used by screenwriters he has worked with, showing how research can yield stories (as it did for him in Man in the White Suit) and how "sleeping on an idea" can also be useful (as it was in the writing of Ladykillers).

He then meets with two writers who are set the task of writing the exercise film. These writers are put into a story conference with MacKendrick similar to those the director was involved with at Ealing Studios and which he uses in his work at Cal Arts.

The writers are forced to tell their story like raconteurs, are badgered by MacKendrick to be "image specific" -telling only that which can be seen on the screen. Often the writers "act out" the scenes, becoming the characters in order to develop dialog.

As the plot develops it is written out on postcards in a method of re-writing often used at Ealing. Each card contains a specific phrase signifying the action of the scene. Roughly one card per minute of screen time. The writers are then able to stand back and see their story, scanning its structure for flaws, examining where the tension holds and fails to hold, where the point of attack should be, etc. The "Slogans for a Screenwriters Wall" which line MacKendrick's office are put into active use as MacKendrick argues with the writers.

Finally the finished typographical forms of screenplays and shooting scripts are shown.

III. WHERE DO YOU PUT THE CAMERA? (Editing and Coverage)

Now that MacKendrick has a shooting script he returns to the pattern of his "How Not to Learn" method and explains why a new director should spend time in the editing room and working with actors long before going "on the floor".

Using footage shot in the Streetcar scene, MacKendrick demonstrates -not how to edit- but how a director can learn pre-planning and coverage from editing.

This leads to a demonstration of how a director plans camera coverage and learns "where to put the camera". MacKendrick shows the importance of drawing for directors and how to storyboard.

MacKendrick then tells of a method of preparation which he learned while an assistant at Ealing, called "Exploring the Territory", by which a director is encouraged to learn his subject matter backwards and forwards, inside out, then throw away the script and work from a combination of instinct and careful planning.

IV. WORKING WITH ACTORS

MacKendrick casts the exercise film following his professional habit of choosing the actor who comes in to be interviewed "before the seat of their pants touches the chair". This leads to a demonstration of the importance of gut reaction and emotion in working with actors and in acting.

Using the chosen actors he demonstrates the difference between stage and screen acting. Differences which, he says, "can be learned in a few weeks. Good acting is good acting. Doing it for the camera is mostly a matter of scale of performance and learning to understand screen sizes." He discusses also the use of "naturals" and children, non-actors who can be quite effective in films, and goes on to demonstrate the importance of the actor learning how to hold a look (so the editor in the cutting room can use it as a cutting point) and making eye contact.

He further demonstrates the importance of the director learning how to "shut up", to not ruin actors performances by over-intellectualizing and telling the actor more than they need to know.

V. ON THE FLOOR

MacKendrick makes his film.

Arriving at the set well before any of the crew or actors he demonstrates the importance of the director exploring the set, how the director must always "think ahead" in all matters. He shows his method of having three or four times the number of props he could ever possibly use, as the director's control of the actors depends more on props than most novices realize.

He walks the scene on his own, then demonstrates the importance of keeping accurate continuity sheets. As cast and crew arrive he shows how he "protects" the actors from the weaponry of the technicians, things like cameras and microphones which can so easily intimidate the actors single instrument: the "psyche".

As the cameras roll he demonstrates the most fundamental elements of good camera coverage: clearing the frame (making clean entrances and exits in each shot), overlapping the action, considering a "patch" shot instead of a re-take, checking for action matches, being sure of reaction coverage, and planning for cutaway coverage.

He continues by demonstrating the principles of shooting along the axis, staging scenes "in depth", matching eyelines, and getting full coverage. Expanding on this he explains camera angles and camera movements, how to handle the intricacies of a three-cornered scene and when and how to break the accepted rules of film grammar.

This last issue will include excerpts from Man in the White Suit (during the "mirror" scene in which the axis is broken) and such unconventional films as Fellini's 8½.

MacKendrick further demonstrates -on the set, as well as with film clips- matters of lighting, pictorial composition, set design, and the use of music, sound and image.

VI. PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

MacKendrick speaks of the Cult of the Director which has developed over the last 30 years, dispelling the auteur myth by showing how little control most directors actually have over the finished product. Through interviews he tells the saga of "How the Movie System Works" by following the histories of his films High Wind in Jamaica and the never-completed Mary Queen of Scots, both of which were worked on for over twenty years.

Through film clips (ranging from Intolerance to Last Year At Marienbad) he shows how film grammar and dramatic construction have evolved during his lifetime.

He concludes with a statement of how very tedious and demanding the director's job is, that it requires both discipline and a passion comprised as much of pain as of joy.

He restates the theory of "How Not to Learn to Direct" and leaves the viewer with the unedited footage of the exercise film so the student may put these lessons into immediate practical use.

This series has been deliberately divided into six self-contained episodes so that each part may be viewed with satisfaction independently of the others -thereby allowing the viewer to follow whatever sequence is most useful.

The series shall be filmed in its entirety in California and MacKendrick shall serve as creative producer. However, since he appears on camera throughout the series, the whole shall be directed by MacKendrick's colleague Tom Pevsner (assistant director of Ladykillers and currently a producer of the James Bond series) or Michael Pressman (a former student of MacKendrick's who has gone on to direct such features as ThoseLips, Those Eyes).

The end product shall be not only an introduction to the basic craft of the director for film school distribution, but also (as Body in Question and Civilisation) a work of entertainment and interest even to the layman who has no desire ever to make a film.

MacKendrick: "I sometimes use the punchline of a nasty old limerick to describe to students what the basic elements necessary to communicate in a story are. In a way it's also applicable to this series, for, hopefully, by the end, the viewer should at last know -on the movie set-the answer to that limerick's question: 'Who does what with which to whom.' "

ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK is a world-renowned writer, director and educator whose work includes The Man in the White Suit (which won him an Academy Award nomination), The Ladykillers, and Sweet Smell of Success.

He spent more than twenty years making films, working with some of the finest actors of our time, among them Laurence Olivier, Alec Guinness, Peter Sellers, Burt Lancaster, Edward G. Robinson, Anthony Quinn and Joan Greenwood. He has worked also with writers such as Clifford Odets, Terry Southern, and William Rose.

For the last sixteen years he has done something every bit as difficult as directing: teaching about directing. As an educator he has been hailed by American Film magazine as "filmmaker and teacher far in advance of his time" and he has been involved in educational symposiums with Alfred Hitchcock, Charlton Heston, and George Stevens Jr. He has been involved in American Film Institute conferences on education and has taught at the National Film School in England and at the California Institute of the Arts, of which he was the Film School's founding Dean and is currently an Institute Fellow.

He has directed stage plays on Broadway (Face of a Hero with Jack Lemmon and Sandy Dennis) and at the Coventry Repertory Theatre in England.

He is the only motion picture director of his generation (which spans the very history of cinema from D.W. Griffith to today) who has devoted such an extensive amount of time to teaching and writing about his craft.