



ISSN 1835-2340

❖ **Cohen, Hart, Juan Francisco Salazar and Iqbal Barkat**
Screen Media Arts: An Introduction to Concepts and Practices
Oxford University Pres, Melbourne, 2008 (pp 368) ISBN:
9780195562446

Reviewed by Walter Tauber

It is a courageous enterprise indeed to pack so much into 400-odd pages. And it is intrepid – some might say reckless even – to so fearlessly bridge the dichotomy between a practical manual for the aspiring filmmaker and a brief, yet fundamental, guide to essential background knowledge, to the history and theory of screen media.

There are many books on the market touting practical knowledge with attractive graphics of camera frames and positions, shot sizes, representations of crane, jib or dolly movements, or even complete storyboards. Some consist almost of annotated pictures alone, and many include those insider's tips (with or without duct tape) that we all love when confronted with a task that has such a large practical component. These books can be useful, but they are essentially reductionist, stressing technique over the essence of filmmaking, over storytelling.

Alexander Mackendrick, teacher par excellence as well as filmmaker, once stated: "Film writing and directing cannot be taught, only learned, and each man or woman has to learn it through his or own system of self-education." 1 French filmmaker Laurent Tirard comes to a similar conclusion after interviewing some of the greatest contemporary directors: "... a hundred directors have a hundred different ways of making a film – and ... all of them are right. The lesson of all these interviews is really that one has to create one's own approach to filmmaking." 2 Leafing through these interviews can leave you baffled. Martin Scorsese believes there is a grammar in filmmaking and agrees with Godard that this was established by D.W. Griffith and Orson Welles.3 From this one might infer that where there is grammar, there must be teaching as well as learning. Yet Pedro Almodovar goes along with Mackendrick, and adds: "there are either too many rules or too few ... my advice to anyone who wants to make films is to make them, even if they don't know how."4

So, should we chuck out the books, skip class, grab a video camera, and just press 'start'? The technical simplicity of modern equipment is certainly liberating. Using automatic camera settings, anybody can make a video. Michael Rosenblum, guru of video journalism, states that

with only five shots you can cover any scene: "If you shoot this, and only this, each and every time you are guaranteed to have a cuttable CNN-type piece every time."⁵

But is that what we want? The notion is not as singular as one might think. As Ross Gibson states in the introduction to *Screen Media Arts*: "By the late 1990s, the famous notion of the camera-stylo, first espoused 1948 by Alexandre Astruc, had undeniably become a practical, everyday reality."⁶ A Flip camera, cheap and tiny, can truly be compared to the filming pen, Astruc was imagining. Can we all be video journalists now, wielding our Flips or our mobile phones wherever we go? This leads us to an interesting concept that the French, always good at finding the right word, call *sousveillance* (as opposed to *surveillance*). As the state, always eager to encroach on our private lives, sets up CCTV cameras that are as unreliable for identification as ubiquitous, we shoot back.

So why write another book about screen media if the objective is to go out and just do it? And why a book such as this? Peter J. Hutchings summed up well what 'Screen Media Arts' is at the book launch in November 2008: "Before printing, books were often compilations, libraries between bound covers: sometimes random, sometimes systematic, thematic gatherings of writings on particular subjects. They were resources for learning and understanding, books made and of making rather than passively read, fixed tomes." And he stressed the point that this book should be read at a large table with plenty of room for the many texts quoted and with a computer for the DVD and online resources. For 'Screen Media Arts' is not a syllabus, it's not one of those books that students have to learn to pass their exams. It does contain the essentials our students need to know – but that is just the beginning.

I would compare this book to a wonderfully detailed atlas of a complex and mysterious world. It shows routes and pathways into fascinating hidden corners, it highlights the scenic byways as well as clearly marking the motorways to the essentials. Is it possible to usefully outline theories of audience analysis in half a dozen pages and, in the same book, 70 pages further on, explain camera angle and shot sizes? This juxtaposition of theoretical knowledge and technical information is what makes this book ambitious and essentially useful. Not all students will venture into the world of Dziga Vertov or marvel at *Un Chien Andalou*. Yet those that do will find the essentials here, as well as the markers that will lead them on.

Formal clarity is one of the great strengths of 'Screen Media Arts'. The information is organized in a way that makes navigation easy, and as in every good atlas, the connections between maps are clear and easy to find. The what and the why are summed up at the beginning of each chapter, and the objective clearly stated. Case studies bring theory and practice together. Questions for debate appear as if they were rest stops on the road, invitations to reflect. Definitions of core concepts in the margin make searching for key ideas easy, and the suggestions for 'activity' are way more imaginative than the usual textbook 'homework'.

An essential element for the usefulness of 'Screen Media Arts' is the DVD. Visual concepts can be described in words or pictured in illustrations, yet these can never replace the real thing. On the DVD, called the Digital Media Lab, you can, for example, see how a camera operator wields a monopod; then you click through to see the shot he made. Why is it that such basics are sometimes long in coming?

Are Hart Cohen, Juan Francisco Salazar, and Iqbal Barkat making themselves redundant, as

Peter Hutchings warned? "All in all, it's a rather dangerous book, if I can adopt a university management perspective, because any student who engages seriously with the riches of this book might decide that they don't need to go to class, so much as spend time in the library, and a media lab. You might be doing yourselves out of a job, in doing your job so well."⁷

Some modern media visionaries state that a large part of what is taught in communication arts departments will be out of date only a few years after the students graduate. They forget that teaching screen media is not about teaching techniques, but about defining concepts and creating context. Why would Mackendrick spend a large part of his life teaching, if he believes that is not possible? But then, Mackendrick taught the essence of dramatic storytelling. Learning is finding an individual path, and that is why, for teachers as well as students, an atlas is so much more useful than a mere compilation of techniques.

'Screen Media Arts' will probably need some revision in future editions (some practitioners don't quite agree with the chapter on Animation, for example). But then, the essence of an atlas is flexibility; it must be open to continuous change in routes and topography. And for all the minor points we may critique, this is a useful instrument on the road of self-discovery that is filmmaking. Let us end with a quote from Wim Wenders: "There are two ways of making a film, or, if you prefer, two reasons for doing it. The first consists of having a very clear idea and expressing it through the film. The second consists of making the film to discover what you are attempting to say."⁸ Whichever path they choose, our students will find a guide in 'Screen Media Arts'.

References

1. Alexander Mackendrick, *On Film-making*, ed. By Paul Cronin (Faber & Faber, London, 2004), p xiii
2. Laurent Tirard, *Moviemaker's Master Class* (Faber & Faber, New York & London, 2002), p. xii
3. Tirard, op. cit. p 63
4. Tirard, op.cit. p. 82, 83
5. Michael Rosenblum, *Rosenblum 2.1*, (Rosenblum Associates, Inc., N.Y, 2002), p.97
6. Op cit. p. iii
7. Peter J. Hutchings, speech at book launch, November 29, 2008.
8. Tirard, op. cit., p.74

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