On Directing Film Study Guide

On Directing Film by David Mamet

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

In his book, "On Directing Film" famed writer/director David Mamet lays out his theories and his path to them in an informative, straightforward and entertaining manner. Mamet's book is based on a series of lectures before students of the Columbia University Film School. These discussion sessions are an enjoyable aspect of Mamet's book. While they provide a good dose of technical and theoretic information, they give insight into Mamet's style as an open and flexible artisan, characteristics essential for the successful film director.

The prolific Mamet certainly has the credentials to teach about writing and story construction. At the time of the book's publication, Mamet had written many notable screenplays including "The Verdict," "The Untouchables," and the modern version of "The Postman Always Rings Twice," to name just a few. He had also directed two major movies, "House of Games" and "Things Change." Prior to his film making work, Mamet was a playwright with a dozen plays to his credit including "Glengarry Glen Ross" for which he won the coveted Pulitzer Prize and the New York Critics Award.

Mamet references and quotes many literary and cinematic icons to support his theories in film making. He stresses the necessity of keeping the film true to the story, setting aside both the screenwriter's and director's egos. To add weight to this point, he quotes both iconic writer Ernest Hemingway and legendary philosopher Aristotle to help make his case. He quotes Hemingway on the subject of writing as, "Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works." Aristotle cautions the writer that the focus of a story lies in what happens to the hero not what happens to the writer.

Mamet views the director as the Dionysian extension of the screenwriter. That is, the director takes the flat, skeletal outline that is a screenplay and gives it life and dimension. However, the good director does not change the story for his own purposes. Film is a design based on the blueprint that is the screenplay. If the director diverts from the story to "make a statement" or create "performance art" he has violated the storytelling and has not done his job. Mamet sees the audience as smarter than the filmmaker. They want the story to progress and come to an end. The human mind deals with things in a finite manner. There's a beginning and an end. The successful film satisfies that basic human need. Those films that divert from that recipe do not stand the test of time and collapse under their own deception.

The overarching point that Mamet consistently makes throughout the book is the necessity of the director to stay true to the story, doing his homework pre-production and most importantly presenting a succession of uninflected images juxtaposed in a comparative manner that will move the story forward for the audience.

Preface and Chapter 1: Storytelling

Preface and Chapter 1: Storytelling Summary and Analysis

Preface

In his preface, David Mamet explains in a rather humble manner that he wrote "On Directing Film" in 1987 when he had just completed his second film directing assignment. Looking back, he acknowledges that at that point there was a lot he did not know. However, he presents the book in a genuine, honest fashion and asks the reader to take what he can from it. The book is based on a series of lectures he conducted at the Columbia University film school. His goal during this series was to explain the theory of film directing, one that he arrived at based chiefly on his background as a screenwriter.

Mamet makes some astute and interesting references in conveying what film means to him. One example is a reference to a newspaper review that derided a blind novelist's attempt to become a screenwriter. Mamet notes the reviewer's sublime ignorance of the craft of screenwriting: One does not have to be able to see to write a film story, one only has to be able to imagine.

In Georgi Tovstonogov's book "The Profession of the Stage," Mamet references the author's caution to directors not to worry about a "pretty picture" but rather to focus on the story. Hemingway instructs the writer to "Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works." Even Aristotle weighs in: "The point is what happens to the hero...not what happens to the writer." Mamet sees the director as the Dionysian extension of the screenwriter. That is, the director takes the writer's skeletal outline and adds beauty and depth to it. He makes the story come off the pages and become alive.

Chapter 1: Storytelling

There are several approaches a director can take in making a film. One is to follow the protagonist around and devise the most interesting and imaginative shots possible of his activities and movements. A second method is a series of images presented in a comparative light. This is a simplistic description of Eisenstein's theory of montage. Tell the story in cuts; a series of shots that tell the story rather than a narration that spells everything out for the audience. Trust them. Let the viewers be surprised and construct their view of the story.

This style of "storytelling" is much closer than the actual way that people talk. People relate stories in cuts and let the listener fill in the blanks. For example, "It was foggy. A crowd of people were on the corner. Must have been a full moon. A car comes up. The guy next to me. . . ." as opposed to, "The night was foggy and visibility was bad. There must have been a full moon because the crowd of people seemed to be acting strange.

Since the fog was so thick, a car appeared suddenly out of the thick atmosphere and surprised me and the man who was standing next to me." The quick images of the first rendition are what works in film.

The sequence or juxtaposition of the shot is what moves the scene along and the scenes are what the film story is based on. Documentary filmmakers may take a shot of a bird reacting to a snapping twig or a deer suddenly raising his head up. The two shots may have been shot miles or years apart but once they are juxtaposed on film, the documentary has illustrated to his viewers "sensing danger in the forest." In this sense, all filmmakers should be documentary filmmakers. They need to get the shots necessary to tell their story.

A filmmaker cannot make a shot from the line "Nick, a young fellow in his thirties with a flair for the unusual." It cannot be done without narration. If the point cannot be made without narration, there is almost certainty that the point is unimportant to the film story. The audience does not want information, it wants drama. Unfortunately, most scripts are written for studio executives who do not know how to read scripts. To correctly "read" a script requires either a cinematic background or education or total naiveté. Studio executives do not possess either.

The director's job is to construct a list of shots that tell the story. Once that is developed, the director needs only to follow the list. Mamet attended drama school and found them useless. Although he did not attend film school, he suspects what those students are presented with there is just as meaningless. What they should teach, again, is an understanding of the juxtaposition of disconnected images that create in the mind of the audience the progression of the story.

Mamet considers the Steadicam (hand-held camera) as technology that has hurt film making because it makes it easier to follow the protagonist around. The results of using the Steadicam is continuous footage instead of the superior series of cuts. The purpose of technique is to unleash creativity from the subconscious. If the conscious mind is allowed to rule it will be bogged down with pleasing others or resorting to formula or cliché.

Images of film can be compared to those in dreams. Most images in a dream and quick shots and unrelated to other aspects of the dream. What gives the dream meaning is the order, or juxtaposition, of these shots. A film is not reality so it too, in essence, is a dream. Although each shot in a dream or a film does not necessarily make sense by itself, when included in the series of shots there is one story or one dream that emerges. A film is make believe, whether it's "Dumbo" or "Platoon." The point is, how good is the make believe?

Mamet recommends that prospective filmmakers read psychoanalytic books, for example: "The Interpretation of Dreams" by Sigmund Freud and "Memories, Dreams, Reflections" by Carl Jung to name just two.

Chapter 2: Where Do You Put the Camera?

Chapter 2: Where Do You Put the Camera? Summary and Analysis

Mamet is discussing camera placement with his class. He involves the students in the discussion, asking for their ideas and input. As a scenario for a movie, Mamet offers a simple premise of a bunch of students entering a classroom. One student suggests that the scene be shot from above. Mamet responds that that type of shot is more like TV where the camera swoops down and shows the name of a building. The TV show is establishing a place or character while a film is telling a story. Another student suggests that the position of the camera shot depends on the scene. Mamet concurs: a director is only concerned with what the scene is about not creating a clever camera angle that only serves to distract from the story the scene needs to tell. Audiences are smarter than directors; they know when a filmmaker is trying to distract them. The scene is always about what the protagonist wants.

Mamet suggests that one of the students (the protagonist) needs a cause (what he wants). Perhaps he wants the professor's approval on something. How is this shot without narration or dialog? What are the beats of the scene? (Beats are the changes the protagonist makes to progress the scene to its intended result.) First, the student arrives early; then he prepares; next he pays homage; and lastly, he presents his case.

Mamet then discusses how to shoot the four beats of the scene. Students make various suggestions and finally decide upon one scenario. The student is shot walking down the hall, trying the doorknob of the locked door, and then sitting down on a bench next to the door. For "preparing," the group decides on shooting the protagonist affixing a new tab to his notebook. The student pays homage to his professor by standing up to greet him. The student "presents his case" by placing the notebook on the professor's desk. The scene ends with the professor looking down at the notebook. The four beats of the scene accomplished its mission: The student is asking the professor's approval on something. The students go on to flesh out what shots are needed in each scene. For example, to show paying homage, one shot would be the student standing up, another shot close-up of the student smiling, another shot of the student holding open the door for the professor.

The audience does not have to know what the approval was. What is important is that the protagonist is after something—needs something. Hitchcock used the term "MacGuffin" as that thing that the hero is chasing. It could be "secret documents" or "the seal of the republic." Each audience member will assign his own idea to the sought-after item. In "The Uses of Enchantment" Bruno Bettelheim contends that the less the hero is identified and characterized the more audience members will endow him with their own meanings. For obvious reasons, it makes sense to write, "The hero rode up on a white

horse" rather than "The short [or tall] hero rode up on a white horse." Everyone, short or tall, wants to relate to the hero; don't spoil it for them.

Mamet emphasizes the importance of withholding information from the audience—only give it precisely what is needed to tell the story you need to tell in the scene. Mamet calls it his K.I.S.S. rule—Keep It Simple, Stupid. It has been Mamet's experience that films are more successful when scenes are shot in the least "interesting" way. The thing that draws in the audience is that the protagonist needs to do or to find something. Viewers will stay engaged until the protagonist succeeds or fails. The "what" of the something is not crucial to the audience's satisfaction; rather it is the conclusion or outcome of the hero's quest.

If there is a beat in a scene that only serves that portion of the scene, then it is generally not necessary. If the moment only stands for itself rather than moving the scene along to its final purpose, then it is a self-indulgent moment or "performance" art.

The next beat in the scene could be the professor reviewing the notebook with the protagonist sitting alone at a desk in the empty classroom. Although the hero could get a rejection from the professor, Mamet suggests since it is the class' first movie that a happy ending is in order. The next beat is the professor marking on the notebook and the student standing and smiling at the professor. The scene has ended and the protagonist got his MacGuffin.

Mamet makes a footnote to the readers about producers. As a group, Mamet views them negatively. The only scenes and lines that they concern themselves with are ones that help promote the movie or more succinctly the bottom line. Mamet looks at them as arrogant and talentless opportunists whose contribution is "Let me take that cow to the fair for you, son."

Chapter 3: Countercultural Architecture and Dramatic Structure

Chapter 3: Countercultural Architecture and Dramatic Structure Summary and Analysis

Mamet attended a radical college in Vermont during the turbulent 1960s. The college organized a new program called the "School of Countercultural Architecture." The thought behind this new school was that traditional architecture was too stifling. The focus in this new way of looking at architecture was on how the architect "felt" versus the purpose of the building. As a result, these counter-cultural buildings were a big failure. They were not well built and have fallen or will fall down. They are beyond repair. Applying this experience to film making, Mamet stresses the importance of tradition and planning. If filmmaker does his work pre-production, his chances of success are far greater than if he waits and tries to patch up a bad movie while it is being produced or edited.

A movie is basically a design. Any time a director diverts from his shot list based on the story to be told (the design) he taxes the audience with a distraction. What the audience wants is to know what happens next, not to be bogged down in an artistic stab by the director to "make a statement." Mamet again stresses that the job of the director is to tell the story through the juxtaposition of uninflected images. This is the director's job because that is precisely what an audience wants: One thing happens, another then happens and then the viewers want to see the next thing that happens.

It is human nature when presented with a series of images to connect them into a story. As long as the story progresses, the director does not need to provide further inducement to the audience, neither in visual stimulation nor in explanatory narration. The director does his job and lets the the audience do its. Once a story becomes unhinged, the director may seek to further dilute the story by trying to trick the audience into paying attention. The director takes chances: let's have more nudity; let's burn the building; let's have the actor do more stunts (putting him in danger). The movie becomes more and more bizarre and the director's career is off to one that is increasingly outré. The more common this process, the more likely that the culture itself can sink into depravity. Mamet feels that has already happened with American film.

The construct of any dramatic form should bottom line be logical, a syllogism. The conclusion should bring sanity to the preceding story. The story should not end in unrest but in solid resolution: The bad king dies, boy gets girl, the guy lived, the guy died. The audience has its answer and is satisfied and knows it is time to go home. A stellar director, like Frank Capra, understands that the job of the director is to first understand the story then second to relate it in an uncompromising way. Filmmakers have tried and failed to use film to change or influence people's lives or to express their political views. These films do not stand the test of time. In Vermont, roofs built with a peak will shed

the heavy snow. Those with flat roofs designed by the counter-cultural architect cannot stand the weight of the snow that is not allowed to slide off. Conventional wisdom provides the truisms of the ages. The performance artist says "but I really don't care, because I have something to say." Mamet instructs his students to avoid the pratfalls in current American film: sloppiness, triviality and obscenity.

Chapter 4: The Tasks of the Director

Chapter 4: The Tasks of the Director Summary and Analysis

What to Tell the Actors and Where to Put the Camera

Just as the placement of the camera in a scene depends on what is to be accomplished in that scene, the instructions to the actor rely on the story to be told in the beat or the scene. Returning to the example of the student attempting to get something from his professor, the actor playing the part needs only to hear the basics. If the actor's done his homework, he understands the scene and its purpose in the film. If not, the director does (or should) and needs to tell the actor in the first beat, coming early, to walk down the hall, try the locked door and sit down on the bench to wait. The actor does not have to do any fancy emoting to drive this beat. His basic, simple movements tell that story. A nail is not a house and it doesn't have to look or act like one. It merely has to look and act like a nail.

If the actor playing the students asks for direction—i.e., "how do I walk down the hall?"—the director who has done his homework easily comes up with an answer. He tells the actor "quickly" because he knows the story and is staying true to it. Often the director is so deeply into the story that responses to art directors or actors seeking direction are not written down or even thought out on a conscious level. Rather, such responses are coughed up from the subconscious that has a hold on the story as a result of the time and attention the director has devoted to pre-production.

"Performance art" type questions coming from the actor like, "What am I thinking?" or "What is my motivation?" all have the same answer: It doesn't matter—just walk down the hall. American film actors are badly trained and no longer have the benefit of years of experience acting in plays as they did some years ago. Now they act to stay employed, to further their career and win praise. The importance of telling the story is not part of their drama education. As a result, there are many bad actors. These bad actors are intelligent and work hard, but use their efforts and talents at cross-purposes to storytelling.

The actor's dialog has the same role as the actor and camera placement. Its purpose is to drive the story rather than providing an opportunity to for the screenwriter to show the world the clever lines he is capable of creating. A bad piece of dialog is, "Jack, I'm coming over to your house to get the money you owe me and you better be there." Altered into good film dialog, it becomes, "Where the Hell were you yesterday?" If the director is telling the film with images, the dialog is just the sprinkles on top of the ice cream. A good director will strive to make all his movies silent movies, only resorting to dialog and narration when crucial to move the story along. When Humphrey Bogart's character in "Casablanca" is told that the band should not play a certain song because the Nazis are coming and they have banned the song, Bogart merely nods at the band

and they begin playing the forbidden music. The scene was powerful and tells the audience volumes about the character—yet he didn't utter a word.

The camera crew will continually ask the director where the camera should be placed. Mamet bows to other directors who are visual masters but does not place himself in that company. His answers to the camera crew are simple: Put the camera where you can shoot the beat we are working on. Mamet's answer to "where do you want the camera" is often just another question, "What's the shot of?" The story is a series of disparate shots that will be cut together in the editing process. All involved in film making from director to actor to sound mixer fall into one category: they are all technicians and just need to do their jobs in a straightforward manner.

Chapter 5: Pig—The Movie

Chapter 5: Pig—The Movie Summary and Analysis

A neophyte director would do well to spend time watching and studying cartoons and animated movies. Animators understand the value of images—everything in the film comes from imagination. Watching cartoons, a director can learn much about choosing shots, telling a story in images and the editing process where cuts are made. "Dumbo" is a perfect movie. It tells the story of an elephant born with ears that are too big making him the target of ridicule. In his journey, Dumbo learns that he is not bad, just different. He learns this through self-discovery, not ear reduction surgery.

The audience has a vested interest in the outcome of a film story. Begun properly by the director (once upon a time), the audience is with the director from the beginning and wants to see it through to its conclusion. Both the fairy tale and the dirty joke are vehicles that directors should study. They have an engaging beginning that leaves the reader or listener eager to learn the conclusion.

Mamet presents to his students with the scenario of a pig farmer who wants to sell his pig. He asks his students how should the film start, What shots need to be taken and how should the shot list be constructed? The discussion evolves from "a pig farmer who wants to sell his pig" to "a pig farmer who has to sell his pig." This adjustment places a new dynamic on the film: Why does he have to sell the pig? Students offer various reasons: He can't afford to keep it; he's selling the farm. One student suggests showing the farmer hammering a for sale sign on his property. However, Mamet cautions that may work but is demeaning to the audience.

The discussion progresses into a scenario where the pig hops over a fence and mauls the farmer's child. Now the scenario is "a pig farmer must sell a dangerous pig." One student suggests that there also be a shot of an empty cupboard to show that the farmer is running out of food and is killing the pig for his family to eat. Mamet cautions against this design as it offers two reasons to kill the pig. One reason is better than two reasons. It's like saying, "I was late because the bus drivers are on strike and my aunt fell down the stairs."

The students and Mamet decide to have the farmer walk down the road with the pig, encounter a farmer on the side of the road fixing a broken wheel on his cart. The second farmer has two pigs on his cart (indicating he is wealth), the hero farmer helps the man fix his cart, the second farmer starts to get money out of his pocket to buy the pig but the pig bites him. Mamet cautions the students against making the next beat too similar to the first causing unwanted circularity in the story. Therefore, the decision is made to have the next beat show the farmer arriving at the town slaughterhouse still trying to get rid of his dangerous animal.

The scenario continues. The slaughterhouse is closed for the day so the farmer ties the pig up by the slaughterhouse and goes to a bar for a drink. He gets in a fight with the other pig farmer and the pig breaks lose and runs to the bar, bites the other farmer and saves his farmer. This conclusion contains two essential elements termed by Aristotle as surprise and inevitability. Speaking in terms of the drama or tragedy, Aristotle taught that a tragedy consists of fear and pity. Applied to the pig story, there is pity because the farmer got himself in such a spot and fear because the audience relates to the hero and fears he could experience a similar fate.

The final beat decided upon by the group is one where the pig farmer falls asleep by the slaughterhouse, when he awakens the pig is in a pen inside. There are shots of the farmer arguing with the owner over his pig, a shot of the farmer paying money to the owner, a shot of the farmer walking two pigs home, then a montage of the happy pig and his love having piglets. The final shot is the farmer's little girl riding around on the pig who is no longer dangerous. The story has been told successfully. The farmer got rid of the danger confronting his family.

Chapater 6: Conclusion

Chapater 6: Conclusion Summary and Analysis

It is up to the director to decide whether to tell the story through the juxtaposition of uninflected images or not. There is no mistake-proof technique that will guarantee the perfect movie. What the director can do, though, is follow the tried and true technique, the pure process that endeavors only to tell the story. Stanislavsky asks a steamboat captain on the dangerous Volga River how he was always able to steer it safely downstream. The riverboat captain replied that he sticks to the marked channel. The same is true in making a film—stick with the safe path that has proven itself.

In the end, all the director has is his choice of shots. They have to count at the time however, the director cannot compensate for missing or incorrect shots in the editing room. The director cannot rely on the actors to improve upon mis-shots. It is not his job. The hierarchy of a film is the story, the scene the beat and the shot. The shot is the smallest unit of a movie—each one is important and has as much weight as any other.

Screenwriting and directing are both very similar trades. If the director or writer takes the time and effort to learn the trade, the payoff is the successful film. The filmmaker can hone his craft in succeeding films, but the task remains just as difficult as each new project presents new challenges. However, applying the correct technique the filmmaker will give himself the tools that will enable him to give it his best shot. By doing the appropriate work pre-production, the director, who will always have moments of confusion, has the map and the compass (the story and the shot list) to refer to and bring him back to earth in chaotic times.

Is it possible to do everything "right" and still make a bad movie? First, what is the definition of a bad movie? That definition will vary from different perspectives. The job of the director is to understand his tasks and carry them out; stay true to the story; and apply the right techniques. When all completed, the work is done.

Characters

David Mamet

David Mamet, author of "On Directing Film, is a renowned screenwriter, playwright and film director. At the time of the writing of this book, Mamet had directed two films, "House of Games" and "Things Change." Mamet is the screenwriter of such notable films as "The Verdict," "The Postman Always Rings Twice" (modern version), "The Untouchables" and "Hoffa" just to name a few. Mamet enjoyed earlier success in writing a dozen plays including "American Buffalo," "A Life in the Theater" and "Glengarry Glen Ross." Mamet won the coveted Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Award for his most successful play, "Glengarry Glen Ross" which was subsequently made into a film.

David Mamet hails from Chicago and currently has homes in Massachusetts and Vermont. Mamet's educational background was not in film rather it was in drama school. In his book Mamet points out that neither a film nor a drama education adequately addresses the job of the playwright, screenwriter or director. Mamet's strong feelings that training for filmmakers is so lacking was the driving force in Mamet's decision to write "On Directing Film." Mamet tells the reader in his preface that he is just beyond the neophyte stage in film directing having completed just two such assignments.

Mamet's unique perspective from his great successes as a writer of both plays and films, gives him credence and authority in telling his students that what makes a great film is first a great screenplay. He stresses the importance for both screenwriter and director to have the imagination to make the film. Mamet compares films to dreams—they both contain a series of seemingly unrelated images that come together to form a story. The director concerned more with "making a statement" or creating "performance art" are those directors who veer off from the basic stories by giving way to their own egos. The usually make deplorable films that do not stand the test of time.

Mamet draws an unbreakable connection between screenwriter and director. He considers both screenwriter and director as tradesmen, whose tasks are intertwined and inseparable in the creation of good film. Mamet, in his preface, explains that he "came to film directing as a screenwriter, and saw the craft of directing as the joyful extension of screenwriting, and taught the class, and offer this book accordingly."

The chapters in Mamet's book that include transcriptions of discussions between Mamet and his students illustrate his open approach to his students. He uses his expertise and experience to guide and instruct his students but is very open to their ideas, sometimes even deciding that their ideas are better than his. Mamet interacts with his students on a light, humorous level which the students undoubtedly enjoyed. At the same time, the seriousness of Mamet's theories on film making are always readily apparent.

Russian Dramatists

Constantin Stanislavsky and Sergei Eisenstein are two famed Russian artisans. Mamet makes a number of references to each man. Constantin Stanislavsky, a legendary Russian acting theorist, developed what modern actors refer to as the "system", which is a process wherein realistic technique is applied to dramatic acting. Many modern day acting coaches use the techniques developed by Stanislavsky as an integral part of their instruction.

When discussing how a director must develop his shot list pre-production and work to understand the film's story and the tasks he must accomplish, Mamet references an encounter Stanislavsky had with a steamboat captain. Stanislavsky was having dinner with the steamboat pilot on the Volga River. The River was apparently notorious for its treacherous passageways. He asked the pilot how he was always able to navigate safely through the perilous waters. The pilot replied simply that he stayed within the channel that was marked and proved to be safe. Mamet stresses that that same logic should be applied to film making.

Stanislavsky determined that there are three types of actors. The first is one who presents superficial human behavior. The actor offers what passes for stock versions of "passion" or "anger" or "sadness." The second kind of actor studies his script and comes up with a unique approach in playing the character. His focus is on his performance rather than the story. The third category, referred to by Stanislavsky as the "organic" actor, deems that no behavior or emotion on his part is required only an understanding of the scene and the ability to reproduce the appropriate actions before the camera. Mamet concurs in Stanislavsky's descriptions and adds that the last category of actors is the one most directors want to work with.

Mamet makes several references to Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein who developed the original concept of the film montage. This technique has nothing to do with following the protagonist around with a camera. Rather it is what Mamet bases his filmmaking upon—that is "a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience." Mamet pays homage to Eisenstein's concept on which Mamet has based his film making theories.

Mamet learned from studying Eisenstein that the best image is an uninflected one—that is one image in a succession of images is not necessarily connected to any other: A shot of a teacup, then a shot of a spoon, a fork, a door. Eisenstein's theory was to let the shots tell the story. Based on Eisenstein's work, Mamet formulated his own methods based on shooting only the cuts that move the story along to its intended conclusion.

Columbia University Film Students

Mamet's book is based on the lectures he delivered before the film students of Columbia University.

Georgi Tovstonogov

Georgi Tovstonogov is the author of "The Profession of the Stage Director." Mamet makes reference to this book.

Alfred Hitchcock

Mamet references the famed director, Alfred Hitchcock several times. In one example, he refers to Hitchcock's dubbing the "thing" the hero is chasing as the MacGuffin.

Aristotle

The legendary Greek philosopher, Aristotle, is referenced several times by Mamet.

Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway's caution to writers to, "Write the book, take out all the good lines, then see if it still works" is referenced by Mamet.

Frank Capra

The director, Frank Capra, is referred to as one of the preeminent directors of modern film.

Humphrey Bogart

Bogart's understated acting skills are lauded by Mamet.

Dumbo

Several references are made to Dumbo. Mamet considers it a classic movie since it simply tells the story it was designed to tell.

Bruno Bettelheim

Mamet references Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment" which addresses the psychology of fairy tales.

Objects/Places

Columbia University Film School

The book is based on lectures Mamet delivered to film students at Columbia University Film School.

Chicago, IL

Chicago is the home town of David Mamet.

Vermont

Mamet attended college in Vermont and has one of his homes in the state.

Hollywood

Mamet became a screenwriter and director of many top Hollywood films.

New York, New York

Mamet's play "Glengarry Glen Ross" was a Broadway hit for which Mamet won the Pulitzer Price and New York Drama Critics Award.

Massachusetts

David Mamet has homes in Vermont and Massachusetts.

Volga River

Renowned Russian dramatist Constantin Stanislavsky is referenced by Mamet. When Stanislavsky was having dinner on the Volga River he wondered how the steamboat captain was able to always steer the boat safely down the river.

Steadicam

Mamet considers the Steadicam (hand-held camera) as having injured American movie making. The Steadicam makes it too easy for the director to opt to follow the protagonist around rather than develop the story.

MacGuffin

The "thing the hero is chasing" was dubbed the "MacGuffin" by Alfred Hitchcock, illustrating the fact that the audience is not as concerned with what the hero is chasing as it is whether or not he succeeds in getting it.

Fairy Tales/Dreams

Mamet recommends that prospective directors study both fairy tales and dreams. He feels that there are elements within both that are comparable to film.

Themes

Stay True to the Story

David Mamet's book, "On Directing Film" is based on a series of lectures given by Mamet to students at Columbia University's Film School. Of his chief theories in creating good film, one that stands out as fundamental and most important is the necessity of staying true to the story. The director's job in pre-production is to work hard to understand the story of the film he is to direct and create a "shoot list." That is, amass a chronological list of all the shots that will be necessary to tell the story the screenwriter has written. Once the director understands the story and understands that it is job to tell that story, his job becomes easier.

When a director goes awry and veers off the design (shoot list) to "make a statement" or present "performance art" that is when the movie is doomed. The story will not be told and thus the film is a failure. Those directors who decide to go off mark, fail in their main task which is to take the story they were given to the screen. They have failed in their fundamental mission. Directors need to keep their egos in check and take second place to the story to be told. Those movies made by directors who want to share their personal or political views with the world do not stand the test of time and collapse under their own irrelevance.

Juxtaposition of Uninflected Images

Another point that Mamet makes throughout his book is that a movie is a design comprised of the juxtaposition of uninflected images. He compares film to dreams. When one dreams, the images typically seem unrelated to one another—they are quick shots of one thing then another. The makeup of films is similar to the that of dreams. The director takes shots of people or things that seem to have no connection. In the end, in both cases, one story or one dream emerges. The dreamer assigns his own meaning to the dream. Likewise, the film goer at the conclusion of a successful film can relate the story of the film—even though dissecting the film into "shots" would not have the same resolution as the story as one entity.

Mamet feels that movies shot by having the camera follow the protagonist is exactly the wrong way to approach film making. Mamet's preferred technique of the juxtaposition of uninflected images is far superior and more artistic than the easy way—the director cannot expect the actors or the dialog to save his movie if he does not nail down the sequence of shots that are necessary to tell the story.

Iconic References

Throughout Mamet's book, "On Film Directing" he makes numerous mention of various literary and cinematic giants. He even references the legendary Greek philosopher,

Aristotle. Mamet recommends the screenwriter opt for an austere presentation rather than creating a platform for his clever lines. Aristotle says that the point of a story is what happens to the hero not the writer. Ernest Hemingway seconds that by saying, "Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works."

Mamet makes several references to Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein who developed, as an original concept, the montage. This technique has nothing to do with following the protagonist around with a camera. Rather it is what Mamet bases his film making upon—that is the juxtaposition of uninflected images designed for one purpose which is to move the story of the film forward.

Mamet tells his students that the audience cares that the hero finds what he's looking for—not especially what that thing is. Alfred Hitchcock dubbed this device (that "thing" the hero is chasing) as a MacGuffin. Mamet makes numerous references to Constantin Stanislavsky, a famed acting theorist. For example, Stanislavsky apparently asked a steamboat captain how he was always able to steer his boat safely down a dangerous river. The pilot replies that he follows the path that has proven to be safe. Mamet applies that same logic to filmmaking.

Mamet also references Humphrey Bogart, C. S. Lewis, Bruno Bettelheim, Frank Capra, Cary Grant, "Platoon," and "Dumbo" among others.

Style

Perspective

The book, "On Directing Film" is authored by filmmaker David Mamet. The book presents his theories on making successful films. As such, he is the perfect expert to discuss his own views versus other techniques which with he has issues. Mamet proudly points out that he was not a film student. However, he gives no more credence to his own education in drama school.

What he does bring to the table in touting his film making theories is his cinematic background. He was the screenwriter for "The Verdict," "The Postman Always Rings Twice," "The Untouchables" and "House of Games," all critically and financially successful movies. At the time the book was written, Mamet had just completed just two directorships having under his belt "House of Games" and "Things Change." At time of writing, he acknowledges that he is just past neophyte stage in directing experience.

Prior to coming to film, Mamet had a long career as a playwright with more than several notable plays to his credits. His plays include "American Buffalo," "Glengarry Glen Ross," and "A Life in the Theater." Mamet draws on his experience as a playwright and to underscore his points, makes many references to literary icons such as Hemingway and film giants such as Alfred Hitchcock.

Tone

David Mamet presents his theories on film directing with a voice of experience and wisdom based of course on an extensive and successful career. Mamet, recognized as an accomplished writer, brings logic and reason and a dash of humor to his book, "On Directing Film." One of his tenets in making film is the acronym, "K.I.S.S" which stands for "Keep It Simple, Stupid." In writing the book, he has followed this logic and presented a work that is easy to follow and one that succinctly cuts to the point.

Specifically, he stresses the importance of giving the film going audience only the information that is absolutely necessary for a particular scene. In that way, the viewers will assign their own internal meaning to a scene which is what a good director strives for and what makes a film successful. He gives several examples of how a screenwriter could write a line: "The hero rode up on a white horse;" or "The short hero rode up on a white horse;" or "The tall hero rode up on a white horse." The successful filmmaker will choose the first line. Those watching the movie will assign specific identities to the hero, usually based on their own characteristics.

Several chapters cover the discussion sessions after lectures given to Columbia University film students, and portray Mamet as knowledgeable yet willing to accept the students' ideas over his own. Although a man of Mamet's stature certainly has a healthy ego, the attitude that he presents to his students shows a man that is dedicated to

making a good film rather than one who is unwilling to let go of his own views if a better one emerges. The tone shown in these discussion chapters is one of give and take. Mamet's attitude is very open and supportive of his students.

Structure

The book, "On Directing Film" by writer/director David Mamet is based on a series of lectures at the Columbia University film school in 1987. The preface and the first chapter deal with good writing and successful storytelling. The book's preface deals with the basics of being a successful writer. Mamet quotes Hemingway's theory on writing: "Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works." Mamet references Aristotle who cautioned prospective writers that the point is what happens to the hero not what happens to the writer. Chapter 1, entitled "Storytelling" is more focused on the screenplay. Translating the screenplay to the screen requires a director with the ability to stay focused on telling the story and not be carried away with the tendency to make an "interesting" film that drifts away from the story.

Chapters 2 and 5 consist of transcriptions from discussion sessions following his lectures at the Columbia University Film School. Through these discussions, he is leading the young film students to understand the complexities of directing a film and the reasons why he has developed his particular set of standards and theories. Chapters 3 and 4 are based on some of Mamet's student lectures. In the final chapter entitled, "Conclusion," Mamet emphasizes that the director's job is to create a shooting list and follow it and stay true to the story. It is not up to the director to assess the movie as "good" or "bad." The director merely needs to understand his task and work until it is done.

Quotes

"They are most happy who have no story to tell." (Anthony Trollope, "He Knew He Was Right") Foreword.

"'. . .a newspaper review lately about the career of a novelist who went to Hollywood and tried to succeed at screenplays [concluded that the] he was deluded. . . .how could he have hoped to succeed as a screenwriter when he was nearly blind!' The reviewer exhibited a profound ignorance of the craft of screenwriting. One does not have to be able to see to write films; one has to be able to imagine." Preface.

"This concept was also stated by Hemingway as, 'Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works.'" Preface.

"'Platoon' really is not more or less realistic than 'Dumbo.' Both just happen to tell the story well, each in its own way. In other words, it's all make-believe. The question is, how good make-believe is it going to be? Page 7.

"Hitchcock denigrated American films, saying they were all 'pictures of people talking'—as, indeed, most of them are." Page 22.

"A poem is never finished—only abandoned." Page 41.

"Over the course of a movie, it [diverting from the story] forces the filmmaker to get more and more bizarre. Over the course of a career, it forces a filmmaker to get more and more outré; over the course of a culture, it forces the culture to degenerate into depravity, which is what we have now." Page 63.

"The more an actor tries to make each physical action carry the meaning of a 'scene' or 'play,' the more that actor is ruining your movie. The nail doesn't have to look like a house; it is not a house. It is a nail. If the house is going to stand, the nail must do the work of a nail. To do the work of the nail, it has to look like a nail." page 68.

"As Leadbelly says about the blues, he says in the first verse use a knife to cut bread, and in the second verse use a knife to shave, and in the third verse use it to kill your unfaithful girlfriend. It's the same knife, but the stakes change, which is exactly the way a play or movie is structured. You don't want to use the knife in the first verse to cut bread and in the second verse use it to cut cheese. We already know it can cut bread. What else can it do?" Page 97.

"Stanislavsky was once having dinner with a steamboat captain on the Volga River and Stanislavsky said, 'how is it that among all the major and minor paths of the Volga river, which are so many and so dangerous you manage to always steer the boat safely?' And the captain said, 'I stick to the channel; it's marked.' And the same thing is true here [in filmmaking]" Page 104.

"The task of any artist is not to learn many, many techniques but to learn the most simple technique perfectly. In doing so, Stanislavsky told us, the difficult will become easy and the easy habitual, so that the habitual may become beautiful." Page 106.

"It's not up to you to say whether the movie is going to be 'good' or 'bad'; it's only up to you to do your job as well as you can, and when you're done, then you can go home. This is exactly the same principle as the throughline. Understand your specific task, work until it's done, and then top." Page 107.

Topics for Discussion

In his preface, Mamet references Hemingway and Aristotle. What point or points is he making with quotes from these famous men? How does he apply the principles to film making?

Mamet refers to an acronym "K.I.S.S." What does the acronym stand for? How does Mamet apply to film making?

What is a MacGuffin? What famous director coined the word? What type of films is a MacGuffin most generally used in?

Mamet makes reference to a movement in the sixties by an architectural school to unleash the architect allowing him to design buildings by how he "feels" rather than by traditional construction standards. Why was this movement a failure? How does Mamet use it in comparison to film making?

Explain why attempts by filmmakers to use a movie to "make a statement" or create "performance art" are not successful.

Describe the ways in which Mamet compares dreams, dirty jokes and fairy tales to film.

Describe the three categories of actors categorized by Stanislavsky? Which of the three does Mamet prefer to work with?