

Mind the Gaps

THREE USEFUL HOW-TO'S AVOID THE JARGON

by Alyssa Worsham

First Time Director:

How to Make Your Breakthrough Movie,

by Gil Bettman,

Michael Wiese Productions (2003)

Documentary Storytelling

for Film and Videomakers,

by Sheila Curran Bernard

Focal Press (2004)

The Eye is Quicker: Film Editing:

Making a Good Film Better,

by Richard D. Pepperman

Michael Wiese Productions (2004)

There is a scene in *Good Will Hunting* in which Matt Damon's character tells a pretentious, know-it-all grad student from Harvard that he could acquire the same knowledge and Harvard edu-

The point is that learning is an active process, and no amount of instruction can account for, or trump, a fire in the belly—the motivation to seek out knowledge on one's own. In fact, some of the most innovative work in film, and the art world in general, is done by those with little or no traditional training or education; those who work because they must, because they can't imagine doing anything else. For those filmmakers interested in supplementing their raw skills and inherent passion, though, three new books offer refreshing insight into the art of directing, documentary filmmaking, and film editing.

Like most film schools, many how-to film books focus mainly on theory or are intended for readers with firm foundations in rudimentary filmmak-

second or third films, and to spend time focusing on the challenging enough task of directing one entire feature. An associate professor at Chapman University and an experienced director, Bettman provides a straightforward directive without sounding too preachy or self-aggrandizing. And for those who have a little more experience and just want a refresher, Bettman includes chapter summaries in convenient bullet-point form, which will make the book useful as a quick on-set reference as well.

But probably the most refreshing aspect of *First Time Director* is Bettman's use of movies that most everyone has seen instead of referencing obscure foreign directors or art house flicks (which, of course, have their own place in the landscape of film guidebooks). When Bettman discusses camera blocking in Chapter 3, he uses the "Jack Rabbit Slims" scene from *Pulp Fiction*. While stills from the film will help to remind readers of the scene, most are probably already

first time director:
how to make your breakthrough movie



gil bettman

Michael Wiese Productions

DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING
FOR FILM AND VIDEOMAKERS



SHEILA CURRAN BERNARD



the eye is quicker



richard d. pepperman

Michael Wiese Productions

cation for no more than a buck-fifty in late fees from the public library. An exaggeration perhaps, but one that nonetheless yields to a certain measure of truth—a truth, I'm sure, that has made more than a few self-serious scholars of all disciplines squirm in their seats.

ing. These new books focus on filling in some of the gaps.

Gil Bettman's *First Time Director: How to Make Your First Breakthrough Movie* has essentially one goal: to help you get the job done. Bettman tells his readers, vis-à-vis aspiring directors, not to worry about awards until their

familiar with the movie and can easily recall its significance. Like most how-to books, there are passages in *First Time Director* that can be skimmed or simply skipped, but Bettman's conversational style and clean prose make it a pretty enjoyable read.

Documentary Storytelling for Film and

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Videomakers, by Emmy and Peabody Award-winner Sheila Curran Bernard, could be considered the nonfiction version of Bettman's book, though will probably be more helpful to seasoned filmmakers. Documentaries can be trickier than features, as they don't have the advantage of artifice or plot to engage the audience; the director must prove to the viewers that this subject is not just important, but interesting. Bernard walks her reader through the various stages of the filmmaking process—from exposition to research and interviews, to narration and post-production—but some of her most insightful advice is about storytelling itself.

While documentaries are nonfiction, they are certainly not objective, and even the smallest choices in writing, filming, interviewing, narrating, or scoring can drastically alter the perspective of the film, and in turn, the audience. Bernard is keenly aware of the power of persuasive images, and her insistence on complexity and integrity is a consistent theme throughout the book. She, like Bettman, also uses well-known films like Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* for clear explications of her points. Bernard also includes a series of interviews with filmmakers including Ric Burns, Jon Else, Susan Froemke, and Sam Pollard, among others, all of whom offer a wealth of varying perspectives. Pollard, who has edited several films for Spike Lee, talks about searching for the story arc of Lee's *4 Little Girls* in raw footage alone. And Ric Burns reminds readers that the research must end at some point—that there should remain “an oscillation between obsessiveness and decisiveness, and you can't abandon either.”

Finally, editor and School of Visual Arts professor Richard Pepperman lends his editing insight and experience in *The Eye is Quicker: Film Editing: Making a Good Film Better*, which compliments both of the aforementioned

works. Pepperman's title counters the adage “the hand is quicker than the eye,” his premise being that even with all of the new digital editing technology, bad cuts in film are still just as distracting to the eye, pulling the viewer out of the film in a “mental hiccup.” Editing is more than stringing together a set of scenes. An editor must be aware of the jarring effects of cutting, which also involves lighting, focal points, movement, and angles.

Pepperman states that editing should remain simple, though it isn't easy to keep it as such, and his book heeds its own advice. The writing is concise and straightforward, and his anecdotes are well-chosen. Pepperman sets out to explain the mindset and acquired skills necessary for an editor, and then takes his reader through the various techniques. While examples from films (both Hollywood and student features) comprise the bulk of the text, Pepperman includes bolded tips and hints throughout, so a discerning or hurried reader can skip around.

Though he is familiar with all of the latest technology, Pepperman is a traditionalist at heart. Editing can be a tedious process, and so can reading about it, but to Pepperman's credit the book's tone keeps pace at a steady, linear clip, and the illustrations by Mark Pacella elucidate many of Pepperman's finer points, while at the same time providing some nice eye candy. *The Eye is Quicker* is not just a book for editors, it is a book for filmmakers. Pepperman's sensibility might easily lend itself to directors looking to compose a shot or to writers trying to make a clean transition.

While each of these books has something distinct to offer, the real value is in their collective, bottom-line accessibility to a variety of filmmakers. Without using alienating jargon or theory, all are geared toward getting the job done—as simply and skillfully as possible. ■

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