Edward Dmytryk

ON SCREEN DIRECTING

Introduction and New Material by
Bette Gordon & Eric Mendelsohn

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

On Screen Directing

With *On Screen Directing*, renowned filmmaker Edward Dmytryk distills a lifetime of experience as a director into a dozen short essays on the craft of directing, spanning every stage of the filmmaking process, from screenwriting, preproduction, and casting to set design, post-production, and promotion.

Originally published in 1984, this reissue of Dmytryk's classic directing book includes a new critical introduction by Bette Gordon and Eric Mendelsohn, as well as chapter lessons, questions, and exercises.

Edward Dmytryk (1908–1999) was an Oscar-nominated American filmmaker, educator, and writer. Over an acclaimed forty-year filmmaking career, Dmytryk directed over fifty award-winning films, including *Crossfire* (1947), *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), *Raintree County* (1957), and *The Young Lions* (1958). Entering academia in the 1970s, Dmytryk lectured on both film and directing, first at the University of Texas at Austin and later at the University of Southern California. He is the author of several classic books on the art of filmmaking, including *On Film Editing*, *On Screen Directing*, *On Screen Writing*, *On Screen Acting*, and *Cinema: Concept & Practice*, all published by Focal Press/Routledge.

Bette Gordon (contributor) is a director and independent filmmaker best known for *Variety*, a beautifully seductive film about voyeurism and pornography. *Handsome Harry* features a stellar ensemble cast including Steve Buscemi, Aidan Quinn, Campbell Scott, and Jamey Sheridan. Her most recent film, *The Drowning*, a psychological thriller with Julia Stiles, is streaming on Netflix. Gordon's films have been shown at international festivals including Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Tribeca, and Toronto. She is currently a Professor of Professional Practice (Film Directing) at Columbia University.

Eric Mendelsohn's (contributor) feature film *Judy Berlin* premiered at Cannes, won Best Director at Sundance, Best Film at The Hamptons, and was nominated for three Independent Spirit Awards. His short, *Through An Open Window*, premiered at Sundance and Cannes. His film *3 Backyards* garnered Sundance's Best Director award, making Eric the only person to win the award twice. He's the co-writer and producer of *Love After Love*, starring Andie MacDowell and Chris O'Dowd, and the recipient of Columbia University's Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching.

Publisher's Note

In the 1980s, Focal Press published five books on the art of filmmaking by legendary film director Edward Dmytryk (1908–1999), Oscar-nominated director of *Crossfire*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and *The Young Lions*, among many other films. Together, these five titles comprise a masterclass with one of Hollywood's most acclaimed, storied, and controversial filmmakers.

With most of these books long out of print, Focal Press/Routledge is pleased to reissue these classic titles with all new supplemental material for current day readers. Each book includes a new introduction, as well as chapter notes including exercises, discussion questions, and more.

Mick Hurbis-Cherrier serves as coordinator for the series, which includes the following titles, all available from Focal Press/Routledge:

Cinema: Concept & Practice (originally published 1988, with new material by Joe McElhaney):
On Film Editing (originally published 1984, with new material by Andrew Lund)
On Screen Acting (with Jean Porter Dmytryk, originally published 1984, with new material by Paul Thompson)
On Screen Directing (originally published 1984, with new material by Bette Gordon and Eric Mendelsohn)
On Screen Writing (originally published 1985, with new material by Mick Hurbis-Cherrier)

We are grateful to the estate of Edward Dmytryk and Jean Porter Dmytryk, especially to Rebecca Dmytryk, for their assistance in bringing these important books back into print.

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On Screen Directing

EDWARD DMYTRYK

Introduction and new material
by Bette Gordon and Eric Mendelsohn

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Edward Dmytryk

A Short Biography

Within the industry and art form known as the cinema, the life of Edward Dmytryk is one of multiple journeys. Born September 4, 1908 in Grand Forks, British Columbia, Dmytryk was the second of four sons of Polish-Ukrainian immigrants. In 1915, the family moved to a small town in Washington called Northport. Dmytryk's father was frequently abusive to his family, and the death of Dmytryk's mother from a ruptured appendix prompted Dmytryk's father to move the boys to San Francisco, where he placed them in an orphan home with a promise to return. He returned a year later, by which point he had remarried.

In 1919, the family moved to Los Angeles, where Dmytryk was enrolled in Lockwood Grammar School. During his time at Lockwood, Dmytryk was tested by the Terman Group from Stanford University, in search of students with superior IQ. Dmytryk qualified for the study and became part of what was at the time the longest-running psychological study ever conducted.

Further abuse from his father drove Dmytryk to run away from home at age 14. For his safety, social workers placed him in a private home, but he was told he would need to get a job to help cover the rent. Thus, from a very early age, his was a life devoted to labor, to working hard: as a caddy or selling newspapers on street corners, or as a messenger and office boy.

It was the latter job, working evenings and weekends for Famous Players-Lasky studios (later Paramount Pictures), while attending Hollywood High School, that first brought him into contact with the motion picture industry. Through this job he first encountered the cutting room and taught himself to splice film while also becoming a cutting room projectionist. "It was in the cutting room," he would later state, "that I learned the rudiments of filmmaking."

While working for Paramount and still in high school, Dmytryk was offered a scholarship at the California Institute of Technology. He accepted the scholarship, but continued to work as a projectionist on weekends and holidays. After a year in school, Dmytryk decided he wanted to make the film business his full-time career, and returned to Paramount. Soon thereafter, Dmytryk was working as an assistant editor and, eventually, editor, cutting films for such directors as George Cukor (*The Royal Family of Broadway* and *Zaza*) and Leo McCarey (*Ruggles of Red Gap* and *Love Affair*). He made a short-lived directorial debut in 1935 with the low-budget western *The Hawk*, made for Monogram studios, but would spend the next few years directing sequences in B films without credit, while continuing to edit the films of others. It was his uncredited co-direction of *Million Dollar Legs* for Paramount in 1939 (the same year in which he became an American citizen) that led to his first director jobs, first for Paramount and then for Columbia.

A contract with RKO Radio, beginning in 1942, dramatically changed the shape of his career. In 1943, he took over the direction from Irving Reis of the low-budget anti-Nazi film *Hitler's Children*. The result was an unexpected critical and financial success. Later that year he graduated to A film budgets with the home front wartime melodrama *Tender Comrade* (1943), written by Dalton Trumbo and starring Ginger Rogers. A more significant turning point occurred with *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) one of the classic early examples of film noir, adapted from Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, and starring Dick Powell cast against type as Philip Marlowe. The film was produced by Adrian Scott and written by John Paxton, two men who became central to Dmytryk's career throughout the remainder of the decade. In *Murder, My Sweet* we see with a particular clarity a recurring type of protagonist in Dmytryk's work, the investigative figure who moves through a sometimes enigmatic, sometimes hostile, and sometimes dreamlike environment in which he becomes enmeshed: losing consciousness, physically assaulted, falling from great heights.

Paxton and Scott would collaborate again on another noir, *Cornered* (1945), this one with a wartime setting and an anti-fascist scenario, with Powell once more in the lead. Slightly interrupting the collaborative run with Paxton and Scott is the Dore Schary production *Till the End of Time*, adapted from Niven Busch's novel, *They Dream of Home*, about Marines returning home after the War. The film had the misfortune to open the same year as a film on a similar subject, William Wyler's masterpiece *The Best Years of Our Lives*. A comparatively "small" film, *Till the End of Time* has its own defining qualities, in particular its emphasis (in contrast to Wyler's film) on middle-class and blue-collar men (often psychologically and physical damaged) resisting the process of being integrated back into "normal" American society. After this, though, Dmytryk would return to working with Scott and Paxton, on two films, both released in 1947, *Crossfire* and *So Well Remembered*. The former was adapted from *The Brick Foxhole*, Richard Brooks's novel about the investigation into the murder of a gay man by a homophobic and racist soldier. But due to censorship issues, the murder was changed to one provoked by the soldier's anti-Semitism. *Crossfire* was made the same year as another major Hollywood film about anti-Semitism, Elia Kazan's prestigious *Gentleman's Agreement*. But *Crossfire* situates its social ambitions within a more explicit post-war environment of existential anxiety about the future of America at this particular moment in history in which, as one character states, "we don't know what to fight." A commercial success, *Crossfire* was perhaps the greatest critical triumph of Dmytryk's career and the only film for which he received an Oscar nomination for Best Director. (The film itself received five nominations overall, including one for Best Picture. It lost to *Gentleman's Agreement*.) *So Well Remembered* has been neglected compared to *Gentleman's Agreement*. Adapted from a James Hilton novel of the same name, set and shot in England with a primarily English cast and crew (the film was a co-production between RKO and J. Arthur Rank's Alliance Productions, Ltd.), its American release was delayed due to Howard Hughes (a partial owner of RKO Radio) who believed that the film, with its emphasis on the resistance of factory workers to their corrupt owners, contained Communist ideology. For many years, the film was rarely screened and, in some quarters, believed to be lost. Now widely available, *So Well Remembered* is a major example of Dmytryk's work and shows, as do all of his films of this period, signature Dmytryk touches, such as exploiting the expressive

properties of light and shadow, using highly varied camera angles, and taking full advantage of current developments in film technology, including optical effects and camera movement devices

Shortly after the production of this film however, Dmytryk came under scrutiny from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Attracted by ideals of economic justice and anti-fascism, Dmytryk had briefly joined the Communist Party in 1945, but claimed to have become quickly disillusioned with it, seeing the so called "party discipline" as a threat to the freedom of creative activity. Nonetheless, one of his earlier films, *Tender Comrade,* with its line of "share and share alike, that's democracy" was held up by HUAC as an example of covert Communist ideology insinuating itself into a seemingly patriotic Hollywood film. Dmytryk and nine other industry screenwriters (including Scott and Trumbo), known as the Hollywood Ten, appeared before the committee but refused to testify, believing that the Constitution protected private citizens from having to disclose their personal, religious and political choices. Dmytryk was the eighth of the ten to be called to testify and, like the others before him, he refused to answer the chairman's questions.

Charged with contempt of Congress and faced with an impending jail sentence, fired from RKO, and barred from working in the United States, Dmytryk accepted an opportunity to work abroad. Accompanying Dmytryk was his second wife, the actress Jean Porter, who he had married in 1948 and who had a supporting role in *Till the End of Time*.

Dmytryk made two films in England during this period of exile, both released in 1949. The first of these is the marital revenge drama *Obsession* (adapted from Alec Coppel's novel *A Man About a Dog* and released in the United States as *The Hidden Room*) and an adaptation of Pietro di Donato's acclaimed 1939 novel of Italian-American working class life, *Christ in Concrete,* released in Europe under the title *Give Us This Day*. *Christ in Concrete*'s screenplay was written by Ben Barzman, who had already collaborated with Dmytryk on the John Wayne war film *Back to Bataan* (1945). *Christ in Concrete* is a central Dmytryk achievement. Reproducing New York City in the studio and through redressed British locations, the film is one of Dmytryk's boldest visual exercises, with its extreme high and low angled shots, low-key lighting, and the use of walls, floors and ceilings to create spaces that are at once psychological and social. It is also a major example of the tendency of Dmytryk's protagonists to engage

in agonized social struggles that are played out through gestures of self-inflicted physical pain, resisting the limited options given to them. Like *So Well Remembered*, however, *Christ in Concrete* received limited North American release, both in the U.S.A. and the U.K.

His passport due to expire, Dmytryk returned to the United States in 1950 to face his sentence and was imprisoned for six months. This situation, combined with his belief that the Communist Party had done nothing for him, drove Dmytryk to eventually agree to appear a second time before HUAC. On April 25, 1951 he confirmed the names of people who had also been affiliated with the Communist Party, among them Adrian Scott, and Dmytryk chose to do it publicly, rather than behind closed doors. After Dmytryk's recanting, it was the producer Stanley Kramer who became central in providing him with work in Hollywood. For Kramer (whose production company was releasing films through Columbia), he would make *Eight Iron Men* (1952), a skillful adaptation of Harry Brown's play of World War II, *A Sound of Hunting*, and *The Juggler* (1953), with Kirk Douglas as a deeply traumatized Holocaust survivor (Michael Blankfort adapted his own novel here), and the first Hollywood film to be shot in Israel.

But this period in Dmytryk's career is most notable for two remarkable films, the first and the last that he made for Kramer. *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), the last, was a commercial and critical triumph for him, the second highest-grossing film of 1954, and the recipient of seven Oscar nominations, including Best Picture. Adapted from Herman Wouk's 1951 Pulitzer Prize winning World War II novel, it is the first of a number of Dmytryk films made over the next decade adapted from lengthy, best-selling novels. In comparison with Dmytryk's most notable films prior to this, *The Caine Mutiny* is restrained in its visual approach. Working in color for the second time (the first was the low-budget *Mutiny* from 1952) and for the first time with the gifted cinematographer Franz Planer, *The Caine Mutiny* employs a largely muted color palette and (unlike Dmytryk's bold black-and-white films) soft lighting contrasts. But the core of the film's formal interest are the extended sequences of meetings, conspiratorial conversations, and, most notably, the court martial sequence, with the paranoia of Humphrey Bogart's Captain Queeg reaching a point of mental disintegration memorably played out through his recurring gesture of nervously fondling the ball bearings in his hands. Throughout all of these extended dialogue sequences, Dmytryk's gift for framing and cutting among his actors in

various singles, two-shots, group shots, and then breaking up a composition by having a character suddenly rise or lower themselves into a shot, is strongly apparent.

However *The Sniper* (1952), the first of the Kramers, while not a notable success at the time, is arguably the more striking of the two films and one that bears comparison with the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang. In his autobiography, Dmytryk shrugs the effort off as a "piece of cake" in terms of the challenges the film presented to him. When seen today, however, the savage, unsentimental depiction of a city under siege (the script is by Harry Brown from a story by Edna and Edward Anhalt) gives the film a bold, modern quality, foreshadowing David Fincher's serial killer film *Zodiac* (2007), both films making imaginative use of San Francisco locations. In *The Sniper*, Dmytryk repeatedly draws attention (as he so often does throughout his work) to levels, heights, and staircases, creating a cold and indifferent urban environment. In the midst of this is an anguished killer who, in an indelible moment, deliberately burns his hand on a hot plate in his apartment.

After the split with Kramer, Dmytryk's career took a varied, but no less prolific, path. *The End of the Affair* (1955), shot in England and released by Columbia, was a simplified version of Graham Greene's great novel of Catholic salvation. This "small" black and white film stands in contrast to his other films of the decade that find him embracing new developments in widescreen technology. Between 1954 and 1959, he shot six films in CinemaScope for 20th Century Fox, including two melodramas from 1955, both set in post-War China. *The Left Hand of God* (1955), reunited Dmytryk with Bogart, and *Soldier of Fortune* (1955) with Clark Gable and Susan Hayward. There was a remake of *The Blue Angel* (1959). There were also two "adult" westerns, *Broken Lance* (1954), the first of two films with Spencer Tracy and first of three with Richard Widmark, and *Warlock* (1959), also with Widmark, which are standouts from this period. Whereas *Broken Lance* (a remake of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1949 gangster melodrama *House of Strangers* transposed to a western setting) was the more financially and critically successful of the two westerns from this period, *Warlock*, a box office failure, when seen today is arguably the stronger film.

Dmytryk had already received producing credit on *The Mountain* (1956), but he began work on that film fairly late in its pre-production schedule. *Warlock*, on the other hand, was the first film in which he exercised his production duties from the very beginning of the process,

and his firm control over the project is evident. Adapted from Oakley Hall's 1958 novel of the same name, *Warlock* eliminates a crucial aspect of Hall's novel that focused on the labor disputes of silver miners (had it been retained, this could have given the film some suggestive links with *So Well Remembered*) and instead focuses on the tensions between an ironically positioned "civilized" community and the outlaw forces that threaten to disrupt it. The moral ambiguities in the film are, typically for Dmytryk, played out through a tense conception of exterior and interior spaces and of the tortured movements of the psychologically and physically damaged characters within these spaces.

The late 1950s are otherwise dominated by two films starring Montgomery Clift, *Raintree County* (1957), Dmytryk's only film for MGM, shot by Robert Surtees in the MGM Camera 65 format (the first film to be shot in this process, which later became Ultra Panavision 70), and one of Dmytryk's favorites, *The Young Lions* (1959), shot in black and white CinemaScope for Fox. Both were based on long novels, the first by Ross Lockridge, Jr. and the second by Irwin Shaw, and both were published in 1948. If *Till the End of Time* has unfairly lived in the shadow of *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Raintree County* has suffered a similar fate in relation to another Hollywood Civil War roadshow epic, *Gone with the Wind*. But the films are quite different in intent, the romantic and often impulsive behavior of the protagonists of *Gone with the Wind* is replaced in *Raintree County* by characters either more philosophical (and thus hesitant to take action), or marked by trauma and internalized racial anxiety. The result is a rather more somber epic, where images of fire and burning are central, and shots are dominated by Dmytryk's use of crowded, widescreen frames, with numerous primary and secondary points of interest. *The Young Lions* made changes to Shaw's World War II novel that displeased the author. The most fundamental change was in relation to the German protagonist, a ski instructor (played by Marlon Brando), who in the novel gradually transforms into a Nazi whereas in the film he is a member of the Nazi Party from the very beginning but ethically torn and ambivalent. But such a change is consistent with Dmytryk's recurring interest in characters facing ethical struggles that are often tied to specific political and historical situations, such struggles ultimately enacted through punishing physical action and confrontations with individuals who embody the forces of oppression.

By the 1960s though, the dramatic changes in the funding, production and distribution of films in Hollywood were making themselves felt on

the nature of Dmytryk's output. Such films as *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), *Alvarez Kelly* (1966), *Anzio* (1968), and *Shalako* (1968), produced under chaotic circumstances, were less-than-happy creative experiences for Dmytryk, although all contain elements (and individual sequences) of interest. In 1964, Dmytryk directed two films produced by Joseph E. Levine for Paramount, both adapted from Harold Robbins novels, *Where Love Has Gone* (reuniting Dmytryk with Susan Hayward) and *The Carpetbaggers*. The latter of these, a fictional imagining of the life of Howard Hughes, while critically derided, was a huge commercial success and inspired the ambivalent admiration of Andy Warhol who, reveling in the film's "plastic" falseness, claimed to have seen *The Carpetbaggers* multiple times. Two films from this decade, though, stand apart. The first of these is *The Reluctant Saint* (1961), made for Columbia. A partially fictionalized version of the life of the sixteenth century saint, Joseph of Cupertino, this small, black and white film, shot in Italy and seen by very few people on its initial release, is one of Dmytryk's most unusual achievements. If in so many other Dmytryk films, the male protagonist uncertainly stumbles through treacherous, dimly lit, and often hostile environments, here he is a childlike innocent whose literal stumbling achieves a saintly comic dimension, culminating in his metaphysical act of levitating, and in which the film ends in a vision of the blinding white light of God.

The second major film of the decade is *Mirage* (1965). Working with an original screenplay by Peter Stone, two years after Stone had written *Charade* for director Stanley Donen, both films are self-conscious attempts to produce a Hitchcockian film, minus the still active Hitchcock. (*Mirage* was, like all of Hitchcock's films of this period, made for Universal.) If *Charade* attempts this exercise by referring to Hitchcock's lighter, more romantic escapades, such as *North by Northwest* (1959), *Mirage* draws upon Hitchcock's more somber films, in particular *Vertigo* (1958). Both *Vertigo* and *Mirage* link the male protagonist's trauma to the witnessing of a man falling from a tall building. (Albert Whitlock, who did the special effects for *Vertigo*, executed the recurring image of a falling man that was very similar to the one he had done for Hitchcock) Particularly memorable in the film is its opening sequence, with its striking use of light and shadow, of a New York skyscraper in which the electricity has suddenly been cut off. The cinematographer, working in black and white, was Joe MacDonald, who had shot numerous films for Dmytryk up to this point and would go on to shoot *Alvarez Kelly*.

In the 1970s, Dmytryk's output dwindled to one final theatrical film, *The "Human" Factor* (1975) and a TV movie, *He Is My Brother* (1976). *Bluebeard* (1972), though, an R-rated sex romp with Richard Burton as the title character, updated to a post-World War I setting, is marked by a tongue-in-cheek humor rare in Dmytryk and by its spirited absorption of various formal tendencies of the period in its use of zooms and fast, elliptical montage. Dmytryk once stated that editing is "the only film craft that is entirely indigenous to the cinema" and in *Bluebeard*, with its non-linear organization, he seems to be giving it his all in one final (almost) valiant effort in the midst of a rapidly changing cinematic and social landscape. For the remainder of his career, Dmytryk worked in academia teaching film production at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Southern California. In the 1980s, he wrote several textbooks on the art of filmmaking. In 1984 he published *On Film Editing*, *On Screen Directing* and *On Screen Acting*; in 1985 *On Screen Writing* was published; and in 1988, *Cinema: Concept and Practice*. During this later phase of his life and career, he also authored two memoirs, *It's a Hell of a Life, But Not a Bad Living* (1978) and *Odd Man Out: A Memoir of the Hollywood Ten* (1996) that chronicles his experiences during the Hollywood Black List era. Edward Dmytryk died in 1999, at the age of 90.

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Introduction

Film directing is in many ways the most complex of all modern art forms. Among the disciplines one must know, practice, and master to be considered even a fledgling director are acting, screenwriting, visual composition, basic producing, editing, casting, and on and on. Film-making is also an inter-disciplinary exercise that references all other art forms; like painting it is a two-dimensional art form, like comic books and graphic novels it is a sequential art form, like music it relies on rhythm and pacing, like sculpture it uses our perception of space to create feelings and experiences. Furthermore, it requires the tenacity and fortitude of a military general, the organizational skill of a political activist and a fortune teller's ability to foresee—months in advance—the potential results of decisions that must be made in the dire emergency that is day-to-day film production. And so the question becomes: how can you teach such a thing?

Edward Dmytryk, the director of acclaimed films like *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), and *Raintree County* (1957) arrived at a solution to this problem in this book *On Screen Directing*. He did what any director about to tackle a complex scene would do: he broke the complexities down into their component parts. Because Dmytryk was not only a prolific director (over 50 films to his credit) and had been a consummate filmmaker working in myriad positions in

the film industry (including editing for The Marx Brothers!), he had already experienced filmmaking in all its constituent parts. He knew the nuts and bolts. And thankfully for all of us, he had one talent that isn't necessarily a certainty among the great creators of art: he was a teacher. In his years at USC and University of Texas at Austin, Dmytryk developed the ability to reduce the sophisticated art form of filmmaking down to fundamental principles; many of which remain as true today as when he stood before his classes, or wrote them in this book.

And what are those principles and how is it that they remain fresh and full of value when the film industry has undergone seismic changes unlike any other comparable art form? What constitutes a "truism" in an art form that in a little over a hundred years has seen silent films rise and fall into oblivion, movie musicals crest and then fade out—only to return to win Oscars—and technological innovations advance to the point where characters, locations, props, lighting, and actions can be generated by computers? In other words, what is it that Dmytryk focused on that didn't go out of fashion or fall into the waste bin of obsolete trends and technologies in the ever-changing industry of movie making?

He identified and focused upon the essentials of the medium.

Dmytryk understood that the core of every good film is a strong story—he emphasized the screenplay first and foremost. But he also perceived that this could be easily mistaken as promoting a kind of novelistic approach to film and so he went further. Perhaps Dmytryk's major assertion in the book is that, as a visual medium, film directing required a form of translation into a language all its own. He understood that the practice of film directing depended upon images—not words—as the basis of its storytelling mechanism. He went further. He proposed a completely filmic manner of going about character creation when he asserted that visible actions and external behaviors revealed character, not dialogue or voice over.

As a seasoned practitioner, Dmytryk was also refreshingly pragmatic. While we live in an era that is saturated with film theory classes and film studies majors, Dmytryk knew that film directing was a craft that demanded excellence in skills most usually associated with business or even the military. He emphasizes the need for trusted collaborations, decisive actions and stamina. When Dmytryk talks about the necessity of having "creative partners," he is not simply stating the obvious need of any film project to employ a production team. Instead, as a creator himself, he is asserting that collaborations and collaborators themselves

are the tools of the trade. His continual refrain about a director having to exert leadership and communicate well isn't simply the practical advice of a veteran of the Hollywood system. Dmytryk is contending that in film directing these skills are prerequisites to *creativity.*

A novice reader might decide that the kind of precise, seemingly mundane concerns that interested Dmytryk lack the flair and glamor of other books by directors writing on their experiences. Unlike them, Dmytryk does not natter on about the "business." He does not have salacious stories about stars and their vanity. He does not indulge in Hollywood war stories about crafty talent agents or secrets of well-known performers. And that is because all of those things are utterly useless to a young practitioner.

In contrast, when Dmytryk talks about casting, working with the crew and even set design his advice is grounded in the mastery of practical strengths that lead to expertise in the complex art form of directing. For example, when he touches on the direction of actors he eschews theories and schools of practice, instead choosing to remind directors about the internal nature of film performing and the "capturing moments" which is the life's blood of a finished film. Rather than espousing on the creation of "atmosphere" in his chapter on production design, Dmytryk favors a sensible conversation about the pros and cons of location versus studio shooting. His chapter on shooting techniques is stunning—not because he is invested, like so many contemporary filmmakers, in the wizardry and pyrotechnics of production—but for its elegance and simplicity. He talks about the effect movement can have upon drama. He talks about the common mistake directors make in relying too much on their master shot. He goes on to talk about and enlighten beginning film directors about the emotional (not just technical) capabilities of lenses. At one point, Dmytryk reveals a seemingly insignificant—though completely profound—reality of the director's job when he states: "The director controls the viewer's attention."

The irony is that a book whose techniques and practices were gleaned from a career that spanned from the 1940s to the 1960s should have remained so vital, useful, and full of worth. In reducing and distilling a lifetime of knowledge into a few chapters, Dmytryk has managed to retain a voice that can speak to today's independent filmmaking—a movement he never could have predicted occurring. In fact, in an era when the conversation about filmmaking often revolves solely around the subject matter, or the budget of the film or its first weekend returns—Dmytryk's approach seems startlingly modern.