

The ABC of Cinema & The Cabbage Story

Diego: Do you have an idea of where to start?

Kees Hin: What I can tell you to start... I don't know if it's what you want to do but...I was thinking about the ABC of making films. The foundation movements. The basic handling. The basic elements on views on life. How does someone look to him/herself in a mirror? How to film the way in which someone ties his shoes? If you want to be a filmmaker, even if you want to make cinema-verité (to film something just as it happens) or if you want to make extreme thought about films, or filming in a studio with actors, or doing it through pre-organized interviews, even then, filming is done on the instant. At that moment you don't have too much time to think about many things...like a musician, like a piano player; you have to prepare yourself. Like a sportsman does everyday. Everyday you have to exercise.

If you want to make films, you have to be interested the whole day in what's going on: what you read, what you hear, what you see. It's good to be interested in all that, to think: oh, this is good for film, or this is not or something like that. Then you train yourself in a, lets say, intellectual way, on what is worth to film. In this way, you can train on methods in how to get inside by using different combinations on what you know, hear and see about a subject. This is the base. This day and night attitude of thinking and feeling all the time: Could this be film? Could this be not? Just like a musician. A musician has to be in contact with music, with composers...

Diego: So you are not talking about technical basics like how to hold or turn on this or that camera or how to work out the sound levels, the boom?

Kees: No. I'm talking about the first thing you have to do if you want to make films: train yourself. The second thing comes when you are at the spot. At the moment you are there, filming. You first have to train yourself because at the spot you don't have time; you will be busy with the camera, if the light is good or not, if the battery loaded, if the image is sharp, etc. It is so busy at the spot that you don't have time for many other things. That's why you have to train yourself before. Like football players or politicians do: If a politician has to talk and debate on the spot, then he has to train himself before.

When you are at the spot, you have to deal with the surrounding and the crew; then, the other part has to be automatic. In five seconds you don't have time to think about all the complexity of the ideas behind. That's why you have to train, so it becomes automatic, instinctive. At the spot you have to be there you have to say I'm now here, but at the spot the whole world is there too. The complete whole world. This complete world, you have to know, you have to feel in order to understand what is

happening at the spot. At the spot, by intuition, this has to be done. That makes you a filmmaker, an artist, somebody. That is the start to climb to the Olympics... In the early days they used to say that to make a good shot is to go to the Olympics. The Olympics of cinema.

Diego: So what you are saying is that you have to train yourself in order to be able to make all kind of combinations on what you know, what you hear and what you see of the subject at the spot?

Kees: Yes because at the spot you'll have to handle quick and by intuition. Therefore you have exercised with all sorts of actions for the whole day, so it eventually becomes more or less unconscious. You cannot handle with the brain, not only with the brain; most of it has to be done in the background of your nervous system. Like a piano player has to have a concert in his hands. You cannot play that by thinking. You have to play it as much as possible so it's in your life-system. Then you can just have the score in front of you. That's enough because your nerves will do the rest.

You have your camera and you ask yourself how can I film a man who is now phoning someone? If you train yourself on how to do that, on how it works, then you are prepared for the moments when it's so hectic, when everybody is tense and nervous. Then you'll be able to handle, then you won't forget what to do. Then you'll make good shots. But you have to train yourself to see how a man, a woman, a person is walking in a room from there to there. You have to exercise on how to make a close shot of this or that because you cannot see it in the total shot of the space.

A total shot is full of actions, happenings, dialogues, movements. Like now: out there in the distance people are walking, and at the same time, if you look on that other direction, that woman on the picture on the wall is looking to me in a special way. Neeltje (Kees' wife) is cooking in the kitchen, the branches of the tree out there are being moved by the wind... How can you make a film, an editing of it? You need to know that you need to make a shot from here, to see out through the window, and you need a shot of Neeltje making coffee for us and while making the coffee she is thinking about the newspaper that she cannot find, and later on she comes here and asks Where is the paper? But you always forget this kind of shots that make the whole situation. Oh no! I forgot to shot that or should I have done that? You are now writing down this conversation: if I don't make a shot of you writing it down, then the editor will say Where is that shot? It is very important. If I don't film you now, in this special funny nervous way you are writing things down, it will be gone. Everybody and me too, always forget to film these kinds of things. But if you exercise before... That's happening here, that's happening there, how can we in one minute, in five minutes have all the shots. If you do this 100 times, then you'll be equipped for it.

How does a man cut a red cabbage with a knife: Once I made that kind of shot and everybody was thinking Oh, no! What is Kees doing now! But there are people that still remember that film because of that special shot. The inside of a red cabbage. The whole cosmos is there, I thought. That time we

were filming and it happened that there was this lady cutting a red cabbage next to us. The beauty of nature was in harmony or just in precise contradiction with the rest of the film. Getting that shot is something based on exercising. You have to be trained to be able to find and film those details that say more, because when they happen, there is not much time to organize it because your whole crew might just want to finish and go home. Come on, we already have it all, lets go the cameraman or the soundman might say, Why a detail of a cabbage, Kees? They might just not find it interesting. So in a split of a second you have to say to the lady who is cutting the cabbage Oh look! Lets do so or so! You are doing it so nice, you were almost cutting the tip of your fingers and I had to look in your eyes and for a moment I was just mad about you, for one second I was completely in love with you!... something like that and then, everybody will say Kees is crazy but it's good, lets make a beautiful shot of the cabbage. And the lady will do it again but with a little extra because she feels something. And then you might say to the cameraman let's do it two times, one like this on the hands and then you have to show me her eyes.

Things like that you have to do at the spot. If you have to work with your cameraman and your team, they might just want to finish and have some food or a coffee and they will always make trouble and...just like you and your own group of documentary-film students, right? You always go through this kind of situations but by training yourself before, you can handle and therefore I invented these simple exercises, right?

Diego: So it's not only the way it looks, the way you film it, but the way you interact with the persons; the cameraman, the crew and also the subjects you are filming.

Kees: Then you are able to interact because you are trained to do that, and to get the shots lively. You have to train yourself as a universal person: It starts when you have to say to yourself every morning: Where am I? (I don't do it but you have to do this kind of things) I'm here and at the same time, in Australia maybe, there's somebody like me also sitting there and saying What am I doing here, who am I. At the same time I hear the tram passing by over there and inside the tram there is an old man going to his job for the last time in his life and he has with him a book and he wants to give it to this colleague of him to whom he has never really talked to but that for the last 40 years he has only said hello and goodbye to everyday at his work. He wants to say to him I'm here for the last time, and I want to give you this book, the new translation of the Bible. And when he gives the book to his colleague, the latter says How did you know?, and turn around sobbing or something like that. I just made this now up, it's like life huh? That's cosmos, its universal.

A detail: How many sugar spoons does a man put in his coffee? It's not just because you have to see it happening, not because yes, and then he put sugar in his coffee. You have to see the sugar because it tells something about the character or if it's a murder story, there might be poison or maybe not, but

if you have to do that in the spot, if you are trained, you will do it the right way. That's the base of the ABC. Can you give me fire? The most famous shot with Humphrey Bogart. How can you film that?

If you want to be a filmmaker, you have to be busy the whole day with your inner and your outside eye. As a director, you might just make a shot in a whole year but in order to have it, you have to be busy the whole year. There is this story that my neighbor K. Schippers told me, that his mother told him: once while walking on the street, all of a sudden, she saw a man walking with his coat on but she felt there was something wrong, strange with this man. And then she saw what was it; the coat had still the coat-hanger on. The hanger was still inside. Perhaps the man had just bought the coat and everybody at the shop had forgotten to take the hanger away; doesn't matter. But you have to have the eyes to see those kinds of things. The streets are full of these remarkable things but if you are not open for it, if you are not trained, you won't see them.

I see a man now through the window, passing by, down there on the street. There is something special in the way this man walks. You have to be trained. You have to zoom-in to get that special rhythm he has as he walks. It's like he has the whole world on his shoulders. If I make a shot just on that direction, just like that, I won't have it because it's my eye that is doing it. My outside eye and my inner eye. In an instant you have to psiuuik! Zoom-in close enough so that the movement is seen but then if you are lazy and you stop to think if you should do it or not, then two seconds afterwards, the man is already out of the frame.

I went to a burial of a friend in the dunes. At that moment, while being out there while they were doing it, I saw a bird that came and then flew away. Did you see the bird? I said to Neetlje my wife. Yes, I saw it, she said. It was him. He was flying away.

There are billions of neurons in our brain and billions of them store sort of images. These images are sleeping but you can wake them up. Like that special moment with the bird. In a way, your brain is full of images and full of colors and the whole day things happen and your brain is hearing things, watching, thinking, and these stimulus wake up those images I'm talking about. And then they go away again. This is the way we see, the way we become conscious of being here. Sitting here, standing there. I know I am in a street called Van Baerlestraat because I've been living here for 40 years or so, and I know this table because I repaired it, sanded and painted it myself; I know that I'm here because that's over there and because that photo of my daughter Jacinta hanging behind you, which I don't see anymore because its been there for so long, helped me today to remember the shot I did about the cabbage and by reinventing the cabbage anecdote again today, you made me think about your students that night when we talked about the ABC of cinema with them for the first time. Making a film is using some of these kinds of moments so the audience can feel a complete story. You don't have to put all in the film. Lets say that it starts with three moments and you can go up to 72. If you have that in a one-hour film, then the audience will be able to combine it. It will be enough to feel millions of moments. If the structure is enough, then the audience will complete it. You need to have

special moments. The audience can be one person. I'm not talking about the commercial thing; one person is ok. For the film itself it is enough. We call it the eye. The public eye. And if this public eye can see the inner eye. That's film.

You see with your inner eye. You start with it. This inner eye is completely full, it has no borders. If you see a total shot with its details, then the inner eye will be triggered. Details like that man walking now in the distance with his jacket and a hood walking in the rain. He's a drug dealer. He's there. I just saw him but it was my inner eye. If you want to be a filmmaker, you have to train yourself so when you make a film you can be sure that you will have at least a handful of these moments. It was not only the beauty of the cabbage, but the combination with the beauty of the lady cutting the cabbage and also by telling her that she nearly cut her fingers and about her eyes and the beauty of her lips. Nature makes the cabbage and then you bring in the moment of lets say, sensual sphere. And this little moment will bring you to other sensual spheres. The eyes of my daughter Jacinta in the picture behind you are not sensual, but because of the dance of emotions I just brought up by telling you the cabbage story, I can't see the photo of Jacinta the same way as I did this morning since the photo has been hanging there for so long. The cabbage story changed my seeing that photo. And that's making film. If you bring a handful of those moments in the editing, it's enough to give your film a universal feeling.

If you see a shot or a scene and you discover that there is something that was not there before, then you will remember the scene. It will stay in your head and if it comes back again and appears again somewhere else, this event will give you excitement and this will bring excitement also to the dramaturgy of the world. If you recognize something and then five minutes later or ten days later it appears again over there, you'll be surprised. Through the 26 exercises I came up with, 26 as the letters in the alphabet, your students can try this idea.

But Diego, don't tell this to everybody. It's not good that the real professionals of film, the playwrights, the directors get to know about this.

Diego: But they might bump into this booklet and might read this interview that we are having now.

Kees: I know, and they won't tell us that they have read it. They will only say that Kees Hin is crazy. They will say that this ABC is not a good reason for making a real good film.

Diego: And what would be a good reason to make a good film for them?

Kees: If ten million people go to see it in the Pathé Cinemas. But not all filmmakers think like that.

A good director will do these kinds of exercises because this idea is based on the world's dramaturgy. It has to stay a little underground; otherwise they will make you weak. So don't tell too much to everybody or tell it in a sort of safe way so you take care of the message.

Don't tell the police how you hide yourself. Don't tell the boss how you communicate with that man over there. They don't need to know it all.

To follow some examples of basic film-exercises

-How does a man cut a red cabbage with a knife?

-"If you know precisely what a woman has in her purse, you have her." Film it.

-Someone who is there, but doesn't want to be there; A woman comes out of a room and at the same time she is not coming out of the room.

-How much sugar? As precise as possible, film someone sweetening a cup of coffee.

-"Can you give me some fire?" The 1000-times filmed scene. Can you film it?

-One shot, one space, same frame. All of a sudden a sound whose source you cannot see (out of the frame) changes everything. What kind of space? What sound and how to combine them?

-Ask your mother or father to write their last will. You can only make two shots: One on their hands and one on their eyes.

-Protocol: You say hello. How many kisses, one, two or three?

-A man sharpens his last left pencil's bit. How does he do it?

-Three questions: Do the same interview, three times, with three persons: Medium shots. Ask them the same questions. Watch carefully the three filmed interviews. Can you catch the lie? Where, how, when?

-A movement, a gesture. What is a gesture? Is it my finger trembling? Is it someone pointing at this or that direction? Make a list. Choose one and think how you could see it on the screen. Medium shot? What has to be in? Film it in such a way that "you could even see it" but most of the people will not. Or someone's typical gesture: how does the barkeeper clean the beer taps in a bar. Or someone playing the clarinet for the first time. That sound, that first sound, is also a gesture.

-Open the curtain and see the light coming through into the room. You want the light or you don't want the light. Is it nice or is it an awful pain on your eyes?

-One word: "hi" or "yeah", "bah", "nice" ... how is it best? Total/ medium/ in space/ on the background?
Which word is enough to explain it all? The way someone says "thank you" can make half of a film.

-Hands. Film two hands.

-Stay in a place: feel anger, loneliness, anxiousness, luck or restlessness. Film it in such a way that the brain of the person that will see that scene will recognize that anger, that anxiousness, that luck, from another moment.

-Some one is tying his shoes.

-Someone leaves a personal item somewhere, in order to have the excuse to come back to that place.

Film the item.

-A man is a box.