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## Alan Marcus

**H**IS film career has taken him from the mail room at 20th Century Fox and a disastrous Sunny Delight drink commercial in Hollywood to Channel 4, the Arctic Circle, Dachau concentration camp and the University of Aberdeen. The order is purely chronological.

Alan Marcus, the son of a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, started off in Hollywood with the usual dreams of directing art house movies. And he would not have been the first former mailboy to make the big time – John Landis went on from the Fox mail room to direct *The Blues Brothers* and *Trading Places*.

But Marcus's career and life took a different turning and he became instead a documentary film-maker – “I fell into it,” he says, an ethnographer and an academic. His documentaries are far removed from those of Michael Moore, which present the film-maker as star, and those of Kevin Macdonald, which use dramatic reconstruction to deliver an exciting, fast-

paced story that can compete with the best narratives that Hollywood screenwriters can think up.

Instead he has developed a style of “observational documentary” which is typified by his recent film *Beautiful Dachau*. “It doesn’t have any dialogue, it doesn’t have any interviews, it doesn’t have any commentary, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly for a film on Dachau, it doesn’t have any archival imagery,” says Marcus, who is now programme director of film studies at Aberdeen. “I’m assuming most people will have that kind of imagery already in their memory banks, of the horrific scenes, of the emaciated bodies piled up, the corpses, the torture scenes and all the rest of it.

“It uses an observational cinematic style to investigate how people interact with what is an iconic site. What I’m really trying to do is explore the spatial relationship and integration of that well-known SS concentration camp, which has now been woven into the fabric of a picturesque







## It seems polemical to call the film 'Beautiful Dachau'

Bavarian town, which shares the same name. It seems polemical to call the film *Beautiful Dachau*, but in point of fact that was taken from a tourism poster. After visiting the camp I saw a poster on a bus shelter which read 'Beautiful Dachau – things to see and do'."

That was on an initial visit a few years ago. Marcus duly returned in 2006 to find out what people do see and do when they enter the site of some of the worst Nazi atrocities. "I was surprised to see people posing in front of the ovens to have their photograph taken. And in one case that's in the film itself, a father posed his young daughter in front of the ovens to take her picture. There are all kinds of different behaviour patterns."

Marcus was born in New York City in 1958, though his father's family was Canadian, and his mother's ancestors came from Scotland. He was named after Alan Breck Stewart, the Jacobite anti-hero in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, his father's favourite book. He studied film at the University of Illinois and recounts that in the summer before he graduated, he worked in Hollywood in the mail room of 20th Century Fox. "There I spent much of my time filing mail for Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi."

A couple of acclaimed short films led to his being hired by Francis Ford Coppola's assistant director for the short-lived job of production assistant on a Sunny Delight orange juice commercial. "Coming back late at night from location, I didn't tie down the wrought iron furniture in the back of the truck that I was driving the props around in. Unfortunately, it slid into about £5,000 of neon lighting, which curtailed my career as a production assistant." Subsequently, however, he worked as a writer, producer and director in Los Angeles for several ABC-TV and CBS-TV short documentary and magazine shows, including *Hollywood Close-Up*.

He came to the UK in the 1980s and made *People of the Four Winds* (1989), a Channel 4 documentary filmed among the Sami reindeer-herding peoples of northern Sweden. "That was the kind of thing that Channel 4 was prepared to fund at that time," he says. The broadcaster would later redefine the concept of reality and refine its own observational documentary approach by putting a group of strangers together in a house and watching them interact.

**Alan Marcus has developed a style of "observational documentary"**

The BBC put up the money for Marcus to spend a year going round sites, from the Arctic to the Pacific, that were connected with the pioneering documentary film-maker Robert Flaherty, who made the great silent documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922) among the Inuit of northern Canada.

The intended series never happened. Marcus went to Cambridge University instead and did a Master's degree in polar studies and a PhD in cultural history. He did return to the Inuit communities and has written several articles and books on the subject, including *Relocating Eden* (1995) and a recent visual anthropology article on *Nanook of the North*. "I have always been interested in issues of otherness, and the ongoing relationship of man to nature," he says.

He set up the film programme at Manchester University. "In the course of teaching documentary film for the next ten years I was drawn more to an observational approach and less the standard television format for documentary film-making, with a lot of interviews and voice-overs."

Aberdeen is not quite in the realms of the Sami and Inuit, but again Marcus has headed north to what he describes as the periphery of Europe, while finding it an epicentre for learning. He took up his post as reader in Film and Visual Culture at Aberdeen in January (2007) and has been fascinated by the fact that the city has the busiest civilian heliport in the world, servicing the oil industry. He is considering making a film about the relationship between the city and "this other world".

Meanwhile, the university's entire film programme has been overhauled. It is not intended as a training course for film-makers, though some students may well go on to vocational courses elsewhere.

"What we have tried to do is to lay on a completely new programme," says Marcus. "We have redesigned everything from scratch and in doing so tried to place film within a broader look at the arts as a whole and areas of literature and folklore." Marcus is also the driving force behind *The Director's Cut*, a new series of public conversations with renowned "practitioners", including the screenwriter and producer Allan Shiach, a Scot who made his name in Hollywood. ■

[www.abdn.ac.uk/directorscut](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/directorscut)

*Brian Pendreigh is a film critic and author*