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For the Record off the Record

(On receiving SCMS's 2010 Distinguished Career Award)

I am deeply honored to receive this Distinguished Career Award. My thanks go to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and to its current President, Patrice Petro, for hosting me at this anniversary celebration in LA; I thank the Award Committee members who selected me for this year's award and in particular Ann Kaplan, chair of the Committee, for her gracious introduction; I especially wish to thank those who nominated me, who shall remain unnamed because their names are unknown to me; and many thanks to all of you for receiving me so warmly. But my gratitude cannot stop here. It goes on to my former students and colleagues in film and media studies, from whom I've learned so much about cinema; and to the film artists who have ignited the passion and sustained the labor of love that is being rewarded today by the distinction this award confers on me.

As some of you know, I don't like to have my picture taken – and I don't usually talk about myself. But today is rather exceptional, so I will tell you a story. It's a story of origins, in a way, and you are free to consider it a myth or disbelieve it altogether. In any case, it's not the story of my origins but of... yours.

In 1971-72, I was an Assistant Professor of Italian at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. The Italian program was small: we had no advanced students who could take literature courses and only offered language classes. Teaching language was fine with me – it gave me time to

write – but it could get boring. So I came up with the idea of floating a course on Italian cinema. The Milwaukee campus did not have a film program then; in fact, my Italian Cinema was the first film course ever to be offered on that campus. The enrollment was spectacular – some 270 students, of whom more than 200 completed the course. At that time, in the aftermath of student and faculty protest against the Vietnam War and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia (a time of horror that we have seen return and replay again and again), foreign language and other general requirements were being dropped or significantly curtailed; such an enrollment opened up the vista of a rich field lying fallow and inviting institutional cultivation. In the next few years, more and more film courses popped up in the curriculum, as most humanities departments hastened to hire part-time or junior faculty willing to teach film classes.

I say 'willing," not "trained," because there were no PhD's in film history or criticism then, to say nothing of film theory, a branch of film studies that was to develop in the late 70s and thrive in the following decade. There were, of course, film critics and "cinematologists" outside the academy, and inside were some film lovers like me, who bravely seized the opportunity to teach film even though the work was low-prestige and carried the stigma of what was then known as "bread and butter courses." We were by turns called on to teach film courses, resented for their popularity, and covertly disparaged for what was taken to be a lowering of academic teaching to the level of popular culture. Consistent student demand, however, combined with the fast growth of film scholarship, conferences, and journals at the national level, and a market for textbooks on the subject, eventually led to the establishment of a film–studies major and then the funding of a full-fledged department of film production.

This personal microhistory makes no claim to account for the origin of academic film studies elsewhere but, as it happens, similar stories are told in a recent issue of *Cinema Journal* (Fall 2009), in a section edited by Lucy Fischer and perfectly titled "Out of the Past." In that past, through the early 1970s, the study of cinema did not exist as an academic discipline, and it was not until the end of the 1970s that it was "legitimated as an intellectual and academic pursuit."[1] Other bridges remained to be crossed, other media studies remained to be legitimated, but they have been and are being crossed.

Those who, like me, began teaching and studying film in the early 70s and whose field of scholarly research and writing was literature or art history may remember the excitement and the sense of embarking on an intellectual adventure that we felt then. The new world of film scholarship—criticism, history, pedagogy, and theory—was unbounded by rules of propriety, methodological constraints, disciplinary traditions: routes were not mapped and all sorts of encounters might be made along the way. The first encounter, at that time, had to be with politics, and I do not mean politics as an academic discipline. This encounter was certainly not exclusive to film studies, for in those years politics was the first item on the campus agenda; but in the new academic areas of film studies, women's studies, Afro-American studies (as it was called then), and ethnic studies, some form of radical politics was central and integrated into the curriculum from the start. That is one reason why feminism has been a significant and indeed a formative presence in film studies.

[1] Ramona Curry, "Twenty-Five Years of SCS: A Socio-political History," *Journal of Film and Video* 38 (1986): 49. The Society for Cinema Studies (SCS), parent of today's SCMS, evolved from the earlier Society of Cinematologists, founded in 1959.

The other reason was the burst of independent 16 mm. films produced by women and the network of distributors, festival organizers, conferences, and film journals that sprang up around them. These promoted a collaborative interchange between women in the academy and the broader women's movement, and brought about the phenomenon of a women's cinema, as it was called then, a cinema by women and for women. The feminist film work of the 70s and 80s, it seemed to us, created new ways of seeing and new objects of vision (I'm thinking, for example, of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* [1975] and the camera work of Babette Mangolte); it elaborated a new film-critical discourse concerned with spectatorship and affective response rather than reception or commercial viability; it also invented new practices of cinema (here I'm thinking of the ethics of reception exemplified in the making of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* [1983]). My own work in *Alice Doesn't* (1984) and *Tecnologies of Gender* (1987) was a direct response to that women's cinema and an effort to theorize it through the exciting exchange that went on between filmmakers and film scholars in the context of a wide-ranging institutional and social contestation. What was created in those years was a feminist film culture whose effects are still visible in transnational festivals such as the one held annually in Seoul, South Korea.

The second major encounter was with theory. This, too, ironically, was made possible by the low status and the openness of the nascent field. Tools of analysis and conceptual paradigms, both domestic and foreign, could be eclectically used; no one monitored our teaching or imposed models of critical propriety and consistency with established canons. No one said that Freud was not an acceptable source for reading film texts, that structuralism and semiotics were not germane to aesthetic expression, that *Das Capital* could not provide an understanding of cinema. In our search for how to teach and write about film, we innocently jumped into theory. The

multiplicity of codes both technological and semiotic involved in film production and reception, and the effort to account for film as a powerful cultural form made us look for new ways to pose critical questions in many kinds of discourses, from the literary to the technical, from philosophy to economics to psychoanalysis. Thus the study of cinema had to be interdisciplinary.

In a way, the interdisciplinary, theoretical, and politically inspired work of those years has determined my itinerary as teacher and scholar: cinema has continued to be central to my thinking and present in my writing even when the focus shifted from semiotics to psychoanalysis or from queer theory to literary theory. My continued engagement with film over the years, if from an institutional location eccentric to the discipline of cinema and media studies, is evident in the collection of my essays selected, edited, and introduced by Patricia White, whom I publicly wish to thank here, today, for a splendid job and her exceptional insight in the formative influence of cinema in my work. In my most recent book, Freud's theory of sexuality is illustrated with reference to popular films, and another chapter traces the inscription of the death drive in the cinema of David Cronenberg.

Paradoxically, in my story, cinema studies *had to be* interdisciplinary in order to become an academic discipline. But its origins were political, at times even militant. That is something to be proud of, in these times.

I am proud and deeply honored to receive this award. Thank you.