

- Lisa: My name is Lisa Parks, and I'm a professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at UC Santa Barbara. It is April 1st, 2016, and I am here in the city of Atlanta at the Hilton Hotel to interview professor John Caldwell who has worked in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media at UCLA since 1999. He has also held appointments at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania, the Bauhaus University's International Research Institute, among many other places.
- Lisa: Professor Caldwell is well known for his books *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television*, and *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, both of which have been foundational works in the fields of television studies and production studies. These books use methods ranging from aesthetic analysis and political economy to theoretical interventions, field work, and ethnography.
- Lisa: In addition to his highly influential monographs, professor Caldwell has also co-edited several collections, including most recently *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* with Vicki Mayer and Miranda Banks. He's also published dozens of trailblazing articles and book chapters in journals such as *Television and New Media*, *Cinema Journal*, and *Media, Culture, and Society*, among other journals.
- Lisa: A distinguishing feature of professor Caldwell's scholarly career is that he is also a filmmaker, and he has an MFA from CalArts as well as a PhD from Northwestern. Caldwell is the producer and director of the award winning documentaries *Freak Street to Goa (Immigrants on the Rajpath)*, a film about the migratory pattern of hippies in India and Nepal, and *Rancho California (Por Favor)*, a troubling look at migrant camps that house indigenous Mixteco workers within the arroyos of Southern California's most affluent suburbs.
- Lisa: He recently just finished *Boron to Buttonwillow*, a documentary based on four years of fieldwork along Highway 58 in California's rural Central Valley. His films have been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Film Institute, and state arts councils, and have screened at festivals and been broadcast in locations around the world.
- Lisa: I really want to thank you for sitting with me today for this interview, John. I'd like to start by going back in time a little bit and asking you how you became interested in film and media, whether as a scholar or a filmmaker. I understand you also started doing some video artwork. Maybe you could even start there. Maybe in the process of answering that, you could also talk about some of the early mentors you worked with, if you'd like to discuss the context in which you were working.
- John: Yeah. Thanks, Lisa. I appreciate the introduction. Yeah, in some ways, I feel like I've backed into television studies unintentionally, but that's where I ended up. My background, earliest background is in the visual arts, and painting and photography... I made experimental film and video, and I got my MFA from CalArts at a time of great experimentation there in the mid '70s. My mentor was John Baldessari, and I worked with Laurie Anderson and David Askevold and a number of other people, but the framework for that kind of work was really wide open. It wasn't about making objects

anymore. It wasn't about producing identifiable productions that were distributable. There was really kind of a conceptual critique built into anything anybody did at that time, and I think that inflected the way I approached film and television eventually.

John: One of the things that I was very aware of early on was the idea or the sense that contemporary art, avant garde art, or vanguard art is a theory driven enterprise. It doesn't make any sense, unless you are on board with the theoretical frameworks of the critique that's built into the art practice. I think that's probably one thing that got me thinking broadly about media in general, about cultural politics, about institutions, because that was a period in which that's really what engaged art was about. It was not about sellable productions or art objects or anything like that. That's kind of where I came from.

John: I was at CalArts from 1976 to 1978. I made a lot of experimental pieces from '76 to 1989 or so. I was fortunate to get some regular support from the NEA and regional fellowships and state arts councils to allow me to do that kind of work, which also involved video installations and residencies at places like the Experimental Television Center in Owego, New York, and Media Studies Buffalo. There was a real scene at that time at the Kitchen and Anthology Film Archive. That was kind of the circuit I moved in. That's way out in left field for dominant film and television studies.

John: I recognize that, but I also thought a lot about this odd relationship that the contemporary arts, vanguard arts had with popular culture and with TV culture in general, which was, I think, implicitly about the stupid part of society. In other words, the pretense had been for many decades that whatever was taking place in vanguard art making was exceptional and different than the kind of mainstream moronic values of popular culture. Television really kind of epitomized that framework.

John: The odd thing that happened after the 1960s was art had this move into a kind of fascination with kitsch in popular culture. So even though you could have defined art in opposition to television in the post war era, by the 1970s, the cutting edge art was really trafficking in the same iconography, but in more perverse ways than television was. The lower the culture, the better.

John: Two of my classmates and colleagues at CalArts, Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw I think epitomized that approach. They also did videos and performance. This dialect of no respect or mutual contempt between the arts and television I think became untenable by the mid '70s and early '80s where low culture really was the world that edgy art, engaged art took place within. I think those were the kind of sources of my ability or willingness to travel across media boundaries and to try to understand the bigger patterns and relationships that were operating. That led me to television.

Lisa: I just think it's really interesting to think about where you are at now as a scholar in the field of TV studies or media production studies. It's so fascinating that your work starts in conceptual art. Do you remember any of those first video art practices or projects? Is there an exemplary one that stands out to you as something you really enjoyed and see as maybe a catalyzing moment where you're thinking, "I want to stay in this field of media art or media studies?"

John: Yeah, good question. In terms of my own work, I was making things in the late '70s and exhibiting them, broadcasting them in some cases. Two projects I did, one was entitled "You Too Can Win Over Depression". The other was entitled "You Too Can Have a Successful Marriage". There was a video production involved. These were parodies of low culture infotainment or therapy videos and that sort of thing. There was a kind of mocking, playful engagement with these 10-minute short media forms that were intended to accomplish heroic tasks in individual lives.

John: There was also a performance version of that. I actually screened those, the "You Too Can Win Over Depression" outside in front of the Buffalo State Hospital for the Mentally Ill, and the marriage piece I screened outside of the Attica State Prison in New York, I remember. Trying to put those into charged spaces. Media, that's interesting.

John: I think the other thing that happened, I began to deal with human subjects in my videos and cross cultural work and documentary. I think I went to India and Nepal the first time in 1980 and did some experimental work over there that also folded in or collaged popular representations with the kind of experimental work I was doing. Then I went back in 1986 for two or three months and engaged with a number of expatriates that I had met early on.

John: I had seen the fact that there was this shadow community underground in Kathmandu, Nepal and in India. It struck me as very interesting. These are folks who had been there since the 1960s. Many had radical backgrounds of one sort or the other. For Visa reasons, they could not stay legally in either country for more than six months. There was a kind of de facto migratory pattern where this group spent the summers in cool Kathmandu in the Himalayas and the winters in Goa, former Portuguese colony in southern India.

John: What we did is we followed them as if we were making a PBS documentary on the migratory patterns of hippies on the subcontinent. That was also a kind of crossover point I think that I began to think about culture more broadly, and the human subjects that are involved. I had done a number of other documentaries in the 1980s as well. I was on the border with Honduras and Nicaragua in 1983, did a lot of filming in a UNHCR camp for Miskito Indians, indigenous east coast population communities in eastern Nicaragua and eastern Honduras at that point in time. That was a very charged moment as well, in terms of American foreign policy.

John: That documentary that I did about the Miskito Indian refugees really had a lot of popular imagery of Reagan's boasts and promises, and 82nd Airborne, Big Pine operations and things like that. Experimental work I think by its nature, you are critically engaging with television. Television is an important part of it. There was really no kind of hard wall between experimental work and the other stuff. It really you couldn't really engage critically with the mainstream without somehow working with citing the mainstream.

John: The other thing that happened, there are a number of other projects like that. During this period from '78 to '85 or so, I had done a lot of industrial videos on the side. Like every starving artist, I had to find ways to support myself, and so did promotional videos

for companies, AV presentations and things like that, and it was through that which was less solitary work than video art, that I really began to talk to practitioners a lot more about the way they saw things.

John: I discovered an incredible amount of sophistication in the minds of the editors, online editors I worked with, for example, I would take my projects in, and we would talk at length about film aesthetics and avant garde filmmaking and stylistic approaches, but I would inevitably talk to them about their understanding of graphic imaging devices they were using, online editing systems, tricks of the trade and stuff like that, and I realized there was a lot of sophistication that goes on inside of these technical arenas that academics are completely oblivious to or unwilling to recognize.

John: The idea that there is somehow some kind of charged special place where edgy experimental artists engage in the really substantive stuff, and then the 95% who make media are really doing moronic mainstream production that is not valuable. That seems like a really backwards looking and unproductive approach to things. I would talk with gaffers and electricians who could talk at length about Goddard, and some cases semiotics. Of course, that happens because not only are they watching all of the stuff that academic film theorists watch, but they went to the same universities as the academic film theorists. They were taking courses from pioneers in our field and would inevitably bring that to what they were doing.

John: I remember I had an appointment as an associate professor at Cal State Long Beach in 1989. I was there until 1997, the better part of a decade. We had a lot of great students who went on to do work, mostly below the line work. I loved these students. They were, many of them, working class first-generation college students who really got turned on by film and media studies and television studies, and they went out to make careers in this industry.

John: Inevitably, most of the work that's out there is not the kind of stuff you're proud of, and some of it's not the kind of stuff you will ever tell your mother about. If they're working in infomercials or porn or whatever it happens to be, they're living a secret life that they're ashamed of, but these are people who wanted to be Vittorio Storaro. They knew about Vittorio Storaro's psychoanalytic theories of the image of color and all this other stuff.

John: I was fascinated by that for a lot of reasons, not just that they were bringing a critical understanding into whatever they did, no matter what level of the economy it was at, but that they had to negotiate culturally to do those things where they were at. Labor, to me, is a living enterprise done by people who have real histories, different histories, and it just seemed like film and media studies just leaves a lot of that stuff out. It was never a factor. In fact, it still makes me crazy when people talk about films, and they'll always say Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* or Tarantino's this or that. It just makes me shake my head when you think about the 200 other people that were crucial to making that happen.

John: The question of television and media as a collective enterprise really began to interest me. How do collections or networks make art? How do they make imagery? Why don't

we talk about the distributed nature of labor, the network quality of these things. This is all pre-digital. It's like you don't have to have digital technology to think these ways. This is the way it's always been, but we've just never recognized that.

John: I must say part of what happened to me was that in the early '80s, I was living a life of precarity, like every other individual artist or outsource media maker. I knew that I needed to up my game professionally. I thought, "I really need to get a PhD." Ideas interest me. I'd been reading theories since the early '70s. I loved that stuff. I love apparatus theory, and I would read *Screen* and all of this other stuff. I thought, "Okay," I was living in Chicago at the time, I thought, "I'll try to enter a PhD program." Northwestern was kind enough to accept me, despite my odd and eclectic background. That was a real, obviously, a turning point. It allowed me to-

Lisa: Which department were you in?

John: This was Radio/TV/Film. That's a key department in the field. In terms of this project, Fieldnotes, it was great. One of the people I met and talked to a lot was Jack Ellis, who was one of the founding members of the UFBA, which I think preceded SCS. I talked with him at length about his experience in World War II and with the signal core filmmakers after the war who came to land grant universities and started AV departments, AV extension media programs at places like Madison, and how these morphed in odd ways into communication departments then eventually into film departments.

John: I studied documentary with him. He was really great in a lot of ways, but I also stumbled into classes by people who really did change my life and career. I was able to take formalized television studies courses with Mimi White, and courses on theory in popular culture. Finally I'd met somebody, Chuck Kleinhans, who was really engaged and smart about the politics of popular culture and the possibilities of radical engagement in popular culture. Chuck was very important, and also Stuart Kaminsky was there, who's from a little bit different period, but had published a book on television genres at that point.

John: There was a real kind of shift at that point. Up until that point, I thought that what I was interested in was experimental work, but that really increasingly becomes less important or significant to me, and television studies was kind of emerging at that time, exploding at that time. In terms of an object for scholarly study, far more interesting than film for a lot of reasons we could talk about. It's far vaster than anything, in terms of scale, that we'd been talking about in film studies. It was that sheer quantity, that excess, that unending set of categories that really was kind of exciting.

John: I think I really jumped into that full force and worked with Mimi White on my dissertation. It allowed me to think through what I'd been seeing in the art world and video art, experimental film, for almost a decade by that point, to understand the way academics and theorists were talking about post modernism and its radical potential or lack thereof. It allowed me to think through post modernism at that point in time. Anyway.

Lisa: Yeah. Were there other people in the cohort that were also working on television at that time?

John: Good question.

Lisa: Or were most focused on film?

John: That's a good question. It was an eclectic mix. Television wasn't a dominant thing there by any chance, but it was certainly an acceptable thing. The other thing I realized that was really interesting about Northwestern was that I'd finally run into some film studies people who didn't speak like they were reading from a *Screen* article, which English of badly translated French of high theory, I thought that's what film theory was. I finally met people who could talk about the same things, but in very direct ways.

John: I remember getting a talking to by one of the faculty there when I first went in who cut me off mid sentence, and he just said, "Look, we don't talk that way here. We don't write that way here. Talk about what it is that you're talking about. Don't haul in the pretensions of *Screen* to make something significant." It was actually quite liberating, because I didn't consider myself a good writer, and I thought, "Okay, that's the way you do film studies." I think that freed me up just to look at things honestly, pragmatically, and to engage in a different sort of way. That was a big kind of moment from '85 to '89, I was at Northwestern. Yeah.

Lisa: Then after that, did you get a job as a ... Did you get an academic position first? Where was that? Maybe you could talk about just that experience of transitioning from Northwestern.

John: As a direct result of that, I got a tenure track appointment as an associate professor at California State University Long Beach. That had a fundamental impact on me as well. Now what I learned there I think had a big impact. Believe it or not, I'm teaching production among other things on Televisuality and a number of things that I did after that. But that became a kind ... My job description there involved both explicitly the job description involved teaching film and media and television theory and history, but also production. I was quite comfortable with that.

John: I remember I was being introduced to the faculty of the school early on, and that the chair introduced me as a generalist, a great generalist. One of my other colleagues at that point pulled me aside and said she was horrified by that. That's the worst thing anybody could ever say about somebody. I actually liked it, because it meant I could teach introductory filmmaking, intermediate cinematography, post production, but I could also teach television critical studies, theory, history, all of these kind of things. I made absolutely no kind of distinction between the two, because I had the same students in both classes. The whole point was what is the relationship of the stuff we do as "intellectuals", but the stuff that you do with a camera or with an editing device or whatever. That was really an important part of what happened to me.

John: I think the other thing that happened at Cal State Long Beach was I had dropped, I parachuted into a state university department that had a background as a radio TV department. Most of the older faculty there were members of the Broadcast Education Association, BEA. They have their annual convention in Vegas, usually affiliated with the NAB in some sense. This was a totally new world, different even than the television critical studies I was doing with Mimi White and Chuck Kleinhans at Northwestern, but I was kind of fascinated with this. These are the old broadcasting departments, and their approach historically was about kind of professional training with quantitative research to back it up. Close, some would say incestuous ties to the television industry, but I was intrigued by those kind of connections.

John: Because of that kind of department, I had to start teaching not just post modernism in television or feminist theory in television or semiotics in television, all the stuff that was in channels of discourse in 1987, but I had to start teaching programming, formats, marketing, public relations, content development. That was a great kind of challenge to throw me into. I embraced it. It's like, "Okay, what's the deal with dayparts? What's the deal with ad rates? What's the deal with sweeps week and upfronts?"

John: But I wasn't interested in mastering quantitative methods to figure those things out. I was interested in them as kind of socio-cultural engagements and institutional practices. In other words, what are the politics of these industry events? What are the cultures of the industry events? I think that really forced me to take what had existed in my dissertation and really make it speak to actual industrial and institutional practices. Don't talk about style outside of the kind of institutional logic of style. Don't talk about narrative outside of the institutional logic of television genre or the kind of ad-scape of primetime. All those things are an important part of it.

John: I'd looked at each of these exercises as just a chance to freely engage new perspectives and to mix things up a bit. Just to finish this line of thought here, the first job I ever had in a research one university, a tenure track job, was at University of California San Diego from 1996 to 1998. That was profoundly meaningful and substantive in another way. That was that I fell in with a group of really interesting interdisciplinary scholars who did qualitative critical research, having had backgrounds in sociology, anthropology, artificial intelligence, cultural psychology, cognitive science. They were all doing media studies, but there was no quantitative research whatsoever.

John: I had been hearing the straw man created in film studies by comm departments for 20 years. I thought, "It's a ludicrous kind of caricature of what happens in communication studies in that environment," because they really were working at this thing in very different ways, but in ways that I figured I could use. One thing I discovered immediately was that ethnography was the chief kind of research methodology across all of those disciplines that I just talked about. I would throw political science into there as well. Qualitative critical research on the ground that involved textual analysis.

John: This precious little world of close analysis from film studies with tiny samples, from the screen, it just seemed to be insignificant anymore to me. It's like, "Why not open this thing up a bit and talk to practitioners, talk to people behind the camera, think about

the economics of this in every case. Think about the labor in every case." There's a kind of march through different paradigms that I think led me to where I am today.

John: I started an avant garde video art, and media making, art world aesthetics. I fell into critical television studies and feminism at Northwestern. I fell into, after that, the next chapter was in radio television film broadcasting that forced me to take a kind of industrial, institutional perspective, and then finally at UC San Diego in the communication department, it really enabled me to think a lot more about my methodology and how to integrate things, how to do the kind of research that I wanted to do. That took me up to '98 or so.

Lisa: Right. It's really interesting to hear you talk really reflexively about how each of these different environments also shaped and mutated the research agenda that you had had or the work agenda that you had had. It's fascinating to hear this. That's why I'm so glad we have this Fieldnotes. It's because a lot of what we're talking about, I don't think people would necessarily glean if they had read a book or article, but supplementing with this life information and reflection at a retrospective vantage point I think is really helpful.

Lisa: One question I have, since you've worked both within the Cal State and the UC system, how supportive do you think the state of California has been of film and media studies as a research field? What is its relationship within the academic environment to the economy in the state of California? Do you see any differences across Cal State and the UC in that regard? You might be sort of uniquely positioned to comment on that.

John: Yeah. I actually am very interested in that question you might guess that, because what I just described was a 25-year history of professional chapters in my life that were in different institutional and cultural contexts, all involving film and video. The institutional logic of any article for practice is very important, but the other thing you realize when you do that is you begin to think about the institutional politics of higher education and academia in general, and what props up the intellectual or research agenda.

John: I had some experience in ... Well, lots of experience in the Cal State system, some temporary experience in the community college system. My wife, a historian, Thekla Joiner, is a professor in the LA Community College system. I'm acutely aware of what was going on there and acutely aware of what was going on in CSU. Now I am in the UC. It may be hard to understand, but I felt when I showed up at UCLA, they were kind enough to offer me a tenure track associate professorship, a tenured associate professorship. I felt guilty in some weird kind of way, because it felt like a country club, but it was a country club that a lot of my colleagues didn't recognize or acknowledge.

John: It made me think back to one of the exercises I did in the Cal State system the first week of my class in the fall was to talk about the politics of funding in the California hierarchy. At that point, and I don't know when this would have been, like '92, '93, '94, I remember getting the figures. It was something like \$1,500 per capita. Well, let's go the other way. It was something like \$14,000 per capita for each student in the University of California was given to the UC by the state. In the CSUs, it was something like \$7,500 per capita. Almost half per student. What does that mean? Then I went down and did research in

the community college. \$1,500 per student. What's the cultural politics of this brilliant master plan in California where you segregate the system in that way?

John: Of course, this really made me very angry, because these people I was teaching were not of half the value of each UC student, and the incredible students you will find in community colleges are worth only a 10th of the value of each human being in the University of California. I didn't use these terms with my students, because I didn't want to depress them. We had lots of successful grads, but this is, in some ways, is a caste system. It doesn't take much brains to begin to look at the numbers across these systems and think about economics and race and ethnicity. I'm thinking, "Oh, this is how it works. This is how we resegregate the United States, by brilliant progressive things like the master plan." But if there's not enough money for everybody, you begin to make tough qualitative decisions. Who gets twice as much money as every other college student, and who gets 10 times as much money as every other college student?

John: Of course, that's repulsive to me. Now I don't have any answers, because tuitions have gone up. Tax support has gone down. I do think I really believe in the CSU mission, and I believe in the community college mission. Let me give you an example of this. Again, one of the unplanned events for me this year was to take on an appointment as the vice chair or the head of the undergraduate programs at UCLA, which are primarily production. I figured I would use this as an opportunity, even though I had to set aside some research to do it. It's like, "Okay, I can use all of these 18-year-olds and 20-year-olds as a kind of sample. I want to understand what's going on," and it's really been kind of interesting.

John: Last weekend, we interviewed the finalists from the community colleges, and it confirmed everything that I thought back in 1989, '90 when I got to Cal State Long Beach that these are really incredible people who do things against all odds. Now how is it that they accomplish what they do academically, scholarly, GPA, and know huge amounts about film, and have YouTube channels when you work 40 hours a week at a grocery store for the better part of a decade.

John: I'm glad we have the system we have. I'm glad legally the UC has to take transfer students who are given a second chance, regardless of the zip code that they grew up in, to get into the UC. Sometimes these are the most prolific upperclassmen, and they're usually a little bit older as well. I really like to get involved with residents of California at the undergraduate level. In terms of the strategic quality, I think that strategic quality with the state, that's something that deans and others and presidents at higher pay grades than mine are trying to figure out.

John: On one hand, you would think film, television, and now certainly digital media are economic engines in California. The odd thing is those industries have not supported higher education in a proportional way. Even when a lot of folks from the industry or corporations funds the UC tends to go to health sciences, to medical school, important things. That was an air quote.

John: I think I've been involved in some articulation agreements and attempts, what are they called? Transfer pathways initiatives in the UC this past year. It was great to get together

with all of the film studies people across the system. Is it okay if I keep talking about the UC?

Lisa: Yeah.

John: Because I'd always felt like there was a little ... Oh, I shouldn't say this, a little bit of provincialism about the UCLA Film School, which early on was sanctioned as the only place that a professional film school would be funded in the UC. That makes sense. It's a very expensive enterprise per capita. You can't do it everywhere like that. UCLA had a great place in the logic of the master plan in the '50s and '60s especially, but also into the '70s.

John: Obviously our field has changed. There's a lot of other ways to approach film and television and media. What's happened at UC Santa Barbara, UC San Diego, UC Santa Cruz, UC Riverside, every single one of the campuses had ... Oh, Berkeley, of course-

Lisa: Berkeley.

John: ... has a deep history.

Lisa: Irvine, all of them.

John: Irvine has a deep history. Each of those programs are slightly different. They come out of slightly different disciplinary backgrounds. At Riverside, they have at least two really interesting programs out there, one of which came out of theater. There's a media production we were talking about at UC San Diego both in communication. I was teaching with people like DeeDee Halleck at the time, Alternative Television, Paper Tiger TV, that whole tradition. But down the hill at UC San Diego in visual arts, a huge enterprise in experimental film and video that goes back three decades.

John: Santa Cruz has a different approach. Oh, of course Irvine had to create a different kind of institutional configuration with a visual studies, a label at the top, probably to make sense of that in that environment, but for my money, and based on my career, I would say that interdisciplinarity is exactly what makes this field or any field viable for the long-term. The more you mix it up on that level systematically, I think the better prospects are for the future. It was really great to get together with all of these different ... Everybody in the system and to talk about what are our common expectations? What would appropriate prep courses be and all of that?

John: I embraced the idea that this is happening everywhere across the system. The digital tools are there, the online platforms are there. There is no reason to restrict access to this in any way to increase the economic value of the filmmakers that come out. In other words, scarcity was the basis always for economic value and distribution, but it was also I think the basis for the economic value of practitioners and professional filmmakers who went into the industry in the '50s and '60s. That no longer holds. I think there's tremendous opportunities in the University of California now I think for work in media across the system.

John: Of course, I looked at the media industry's research at UC Santa Barbara as a most impressive accomplishment where Michael Curtin, Jen Holt, Constance Penley, Kevin Sanson were able over the years to bring in mainstream media industry support and development that would support and enhance academic and scholarly research on film and television. That does not happen everywhere. The fact that ... That is a great model for how you can do that and keep your independence. That's always the fear. You get outside money from commercial corporations. They're going to skew what you do.

John: But I think what's happening at Santa Barbara, the deals with those funders I think are brilliant, in terms of making sure that academics and scholars have the right to this material, can publish it in ways that they want to as well. Fine. Deliver White Papers to the corporations, but let your doctoral students and faculty engage with that research in substantive ways. The systematic way that UC Santa Barbara has done it I think is really a model that I think the rest of us could learn from.

John: Now at UCLA, I think we've got a deep history of media industries and production studies, but it's been more ad hoc, and it's been substantive, but for different reasons. I think what my colleague, Denise Mann, does there is also kind of brilliant. She's the head of the producer's program, MFA program, and she's been that for a long time, 10 or 15 years. She also has an MFA like I do early on in the '80s and became a great archival television historian and television critic. She would represent a kind of ideal that I think I would align with. That is there is no clean line that is drawn between what the producer MFA students do and what the PhD students do in my cinema media studies area when they study transmedia. Those distinctions between theory and production have completely collapsed.

John: She's got a great project now that's funded by the European transmedia firm Havas that involves lots of our doctoral students doing on the ground original research inside of media firms that nobody else can get access to, and they're doing critical qualitative field work. Precisely the kind of stuff that I was imagining or would see as an ideal sense in the late '90s. Now it's actually possible to do. The reason is the newer firms don't know what's going on either, right? Everybody's looking for answers. How do you get answers that go beyond what exists in the trade discourses and the trade literature? The only way to do that is to get out of the seminar room and go meet with people to observe what goes on in new media firms to be involved in production. I think those are two very different models, right?

John: Santa Barbara has a big undergraduate program with a really impressive PhD research unit at the top, but it's also got filmmaking is part of that, but it's also got the media industry research, which has a certain formalized contractual relationship with the industry. At UCLA, it's a more ad hoc kind of informal enterprise, but rich in terms of its production. Our PhD students who have backgrounds in digital humanities, for example, can do critical cinema media studies where in that transmedia environment in ways that allow them to produce White Papers for producers and companies that are scratching their heads about where the audience is, but it's also material that they can then use in their dissertations to fill in all of these gaps in cinema media studies that exist and continue to exist.

Lisa: Maybe I think we're kind of leading to a wrap up.

John: Okay.

Lisa: This has been great, and I love how we kind of roamed through the different institutional contexts and talked about various issues. I'm wondering where you think the field is going now, and in the context of answering this, I know people have read your books carefully, but they may not be as familiar with the current work you're doing on what you call para-industries or the work you're doing on spec work or stress aesthetics, what you call stress aesthetics. Feel free to talk about any of that. Maybe if you are anticipating any trends or areas where we need further attention by scholars or film and media makers or the two combined even, but maybe we could just end with whatever you'd like to say about the future of the field and current state of research.

John: Yeah, I'd certainly be the last person who could predict anything. I don't consider myself a futurist, but I think the three projects you're talking about are the areas really that's the industry I see. The industry I see is not the industry I read about in media industries books. The media industry I see and then try to engage with involves the legion hundreds and hundreds of sub companies that surround the big brands, the big 5, 7, 10 brands that everybody knows about. 95% of the action exists in this rhizomatic network of sub companies. Maybe I'm so aware of that is because I've got so many generations of students out in those worlds. That's the kind of reality of what work is like out there.

John: Now in some ways, one of the reasons I really praise what's going on with the qualitative research by Denise Mann and others, and by Jen Holt at Santa Barbara, is because they are coming to grips with what film and television will be now and in the future. I think they're doing it in that kind of systematic way. I feel like, and I joke about this to both Jen and Denise, that I feel like I've been studying the decline and fall of the Roman empire.

John: I love to go to old equipment houses and look at 200 feet deep rooms filled with Steenbecks and Moviolas covered with dust. It's like the end of a Citizen Kane or something. I love to talk with people who use those tools and that sort of thing. I really love that stuff. I used to love to learn the technology of every machine I use. That's why I like production. Then that fed back in. But people have been pointing out to me now for 10 years that, "You know the below the line jobs no longer really exist as a viable option in Los Angeles. There's still a bit of work that's done that way, but if you really want us to understand production, go to Louisiana where more film features are made, or Vancouver, or North Carolina, or Toronto."

John: But I also know that there's some inertia in LA that will keep these major media corporations there in some form or another. What form is that? Is that what we want to study? It's probably not going to be on screen aesthetics or editing aesthetics, the stuff I loved to use to teach in the '80s and '90s, but it really is kind of a question I think we need to ask. What is film and television now? Where does physical production exist? Does physical production matter? I think it matters, but not in the way that it used to when I would record war stories from camera operators for production culture or whatever it happened to be.

John: One of the things I really I think working with Vicki Mayer and Miranda Banks was really a good experience. I'd both had them as doctoral students. I loved the work they did on their dissertations. What I think I learned from them in mid stream of my research was this idea that, oh, I get it. I get what I'd been studying is, in many cases, the erasure of labor, the systematic erasure of labor. That actually corresponds to what's going on in the industry that I just described with runaway production and all of these other things.

John: It got me to thinking rather than think about the disappearing work of gaffers, grips, and electricians in LA, let's think about all of the ways that production involves speculative, imaginative labor that's never recognized, that's never addressed, that's usually never paid for. Now there are people, for five or eight years, who have now been studying great research on free labor from fans in the new media environment, the online environment. That's great work, but what I was studying was free labor from professionals and from craftsmen. What's the logic of that? Then what's the history of that? Once you start asking that question, it becomes really interesting.

John: There's a long history of spec scripts in Hollywood. Most people know what that is. You spend a lot of time crafting a script to deliver to an agent or to a producer as a kind of calling card. The assumption is that's not necessarily going to be produced, but it is a way to open a door. I'm thinking, "Well, how long does that take? Is that creative? Do we study that sort of thing, the speculative work of writing a script?"

John: But then I realized how many other things involve this preemptive, preliminary creative labor that makes up the industry that we think of even as the mainstream. This is not something fan communities do or subcultures. This is something the industry does. There's kind of an endless list of things you can come up with. I've been studying public pitch fests, demo reels, how to cut comp reels, how to brainstorm collective enterprises like the writers' rooms for a long time. We've recognized what is a writers' room? It's more than just collective work. There's a lot of unrestrained brainstorming and spit balling that's going on in an environment like that that ends up producing something, but there's also pre-writers' room writers' rooms. There's also an endless number of sub companies that want to get in the middle of the unpaid spec work and to charge for expertise in those environments. It's those bottom feeders I really am interested in and very cynical about.

John: Training agents, training people how to be agents who are not agents themselves, screen writers, training people to be successful screen writers who are not successful screen writers themselves, producers teaching people how to make it in an industry who have not made it in the industry, but all of these people figure out how to charge and make livings off of the bottom feeding sub companies and populations of aspirants and desperate wannabes that want to work in the industry who are good people. It's that kind of endless layer of economic and cultural activity that fascinates me.

John: The last thing I would ever say is that film education production only takes place at the three or five biggest professional film schools. There's dozens and dozens of commercial enterprises that are now charging a lot of money for people who move to LA and elsewhere to learn these things. I'm quite interested in what the purpose of all of this pre-pre-production work is. Just to make a long story short, I've got a chapter in Michael

Curtin and Kevin Sanson's new book "Precarious Creativity" on spec world, brand world, craft world where it spells these things out in more detail very simply.

John: My hunch in all of this is don't write this off. Academics should not write it off. In fact, I think that all that off-shore subcontracted work that's kept at arm's length is a systematic part of the mainstream industry that is rationalized on the boundaries and harvested on the boundaries. It's that harvesting of the free creative work that interests me a great deal. This may go back I think in production culture, somebody asked me the question, "What the heck analogy is that?" That was this to me is like strip mining. I grew up in a town of 1,200 people in southern Illinois in coal country. It's really bad farming, poor land, but when I was growing up there in the 1960s, they strip mined the entire county. They just came in and removed the top of the earth and left just terrible kind of environments that everybody else had to co-exist with.

John: The coal mines are those folks who are long gone, it's high sulfur, low quality soft coal, but there's a kind of strip mining that goes on in the preemptive, imaginative world of spec work that intrigues me a great deal. I want to understand how the mainstream industries relate to all of this stuff. I don't have any answers about where we should go, what we should be doing, but there's a lot of opportunities out there that didn't exist. There's a lot of categories that didn't exist. There's a lot of categories of media content, new categories. There's a lot of categories of new media professions that didn't exist. There's all kinds of intermediaries, and a group of scholars are now looking at intermediaries rather than the producers of the audiences. It's all that kind of middle ground that just keeps evolving and morphing. I don't think we're ever going to be at a loss for things to study.

John: For my money, maybe this reflects my age, film studies, as I understood it in the mid '70s really was about culling the herd and converging onto exceptions. That's what we studied. We studied exceptional cases. I think what turned me on about television was that it was just the opposite approach. It was the excessiveness, the complexity, the endlessly mutating categories of television. That's the definitive description of television that we have in front of us. It really is a great research enterprise. I think the fact that you have the media studies programs developing everywhere is a good sign. Hopefully it will continue, because I think that approach does align well with the kind of mediated culture we see in front of us.

Lisa: Thank you very much. That was an incredible interview. I think we covered a lot of material. I have a feeling we could talk all day. There's so many interesting things that you've touched upon in your own career, both as a filmmaker, video artist, but also as a scholar and as someone who has had so much experience working across the conceptual art world and the scholarly world of film and media studies, and the industry, and then also just across different institutional contexts, whether it being familiar with community college systems, Cal State, private schools like CalArts and Northwestern, as well as the UC system. I feel like we really got a lot of bang for our buck in this interview. Thank you for taking time for the Fieldnotes Project.

John: Thanks. Thanks for having me. It was, I think, good for me to think reflectively about this as well. I'm still trying to figure out what's going on. Having this kind of discussion is useful for me I think as I go back into the classroom next week. Thanks.

Lisa: Thank you.