

Paula Massood: Hello, my name is Paula Massood. I'm professor in the Department of Film at Brooklyn College at the city university of the University of New York. I'm here in Montreal at SCMS in March 2015 and it's my pleasure this evening to interview Professor Lucy Fischer, distinguished professor in the depart of English and Film at the University of Pittsburgh. Professor Fischer has had a long career that has encompassed about 30 years, a little bit longer than that. A number of publications, including *Cinematernity* and also *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition in Women's Cinema*, *Designing Women: Art Deco and Female Form*, *Stars: The Film Reader* and many more. We'll talk about that a little bit more when we're having our discussion. Professor Fischer has also been Director of the Film Studies program at the University of Pittsburgh, and also President of Society for Cinema and Media Studies. So let's start.

Lucy Fischer: Okay. Yes.

Paula Massood: So what inspired your interest in becoming a film scholar?

Lucy Fischer: I was living, I grew up in New York and I was living in New York in the late 60s and early 1970s. And there was an excitement about film at that point. It was the moment in which a lot of the new wave cinemas, French new wave and then later new German cinema, were showing in movie theaters at the time. It was also the time I think when people began to feel that to be a kind of educated person in the arts, it was film that you needed to know about. Not instead of literature and other things, but suddenly film had reached a certain level of cultural validity and that was part of it. You know, I started attending the New York Film Festival. There was also the sense that it was a new field. I had studied literature as an undergraduate and I was interested in working in a field that was less traditional that seemed to be open that a lot of interesting areas had not been already. The scholarship in those areas was still very open and ready for change. And then I just began reading film theory on my own.

At that point there was nothing like the present series of anthologies of film theory. There was a book by Dan Talbert that collected various essays in film theory and another one by Richard Dyer MacCann, I think it was called *Film: a Montage of Theories*. With excerpts of Arnheim, you know, Eisenstein, Bazin, Panofsky, people who were writing about film in a way that was not like the contemporary review in the newspaper or magazine. And so I just kind of, I was sort of an autodidact in the beginning.

Paula Massood: So was your first film class when you went to NYU, or did you take another before that?

Lucy Fischer: I took some graduate classes, just not as a, I wasn't enrolled yet as a PhD or Master student, but you could take some courses on your own and I took a course with Andrew Sarris on film history at Columbia University, and then I took a second one with Stephen Scharff who was kind of out of the Czech film school, kind of both the critic and a theorist. And so I took those two courses on my own, testing my interest in film and then one summer I went ... The

American Film Institute had a summer seminar in film studies that was run at the time by Jim Kitses who wrote on the Western and he was at the AFI, he'd been at the BFI and those experiences convinced me that I was really interested in pursuing it on the graduate level and in a doctoral program.

Paula Massood: And that's when you enrolled?

Lucy Fischer: Yeah. That's when I applied and enrolled in NYU.

Paula Massood: And was NYU very small at that point?

Lucy Fischer: NYU is minuscule at that time. I mean, there were only about four or five faculty, I'm not even sure if I could remember all of their names. Don Staples and of course Bill Everson and Annette Michelson was there, and so was Jay Leyda. Those are the people that I remember. Those may have been the only faculty when I started. But then by the time I had taken some courses, there were additional people. Several of whom were NYU's own graduate students who were then hired. Bill Simon, Noël Carroll, they had gotten their PhD's in the program and were then hired.

Paula Massood: So once you finished in the program, I mean you wrote on Jacques Tati at that point.

Lucy Fischer: Right. My dissertation was on Jacques Tati.

Paula Massood: What was your first teaching job?

Lucy Fischer: My first teaching jobs were at NYU. I mean, of course I was first a teaching assistant, I think for Bill Simon in Film Aesthetics or Film Art, whatever the course was, and then I came back and taught at NYU, I taught a standalone course on Film Comedy since I had been working, Film Comedy was one of my areas of examination and so I taught a kind of history.

Paula Massood: That continues to be one of your [crosstalk 00:06:00].

Lucy Fischer: Yeah. It's kind of on and off. I definitely returned to it. Today actually I get the paper on women and comedy and the sitcom girls and a little bit of broad city. So yes, so my first standalone course was actually at NYU and then I went on to teach at University of Pittsburgh, where my first standalone course, I think, was World Film History.

Paula Massood: So when you were doing the film comedy class, was that a history of film comedy?

Lucy Fischer: Yeah. I did it as a history of film comedy, but on the other hand I organized it both conceptually in terms of different comic theorists that had interested me in wiring about Tati. So I did sessions that sort of favored the Freudian kind of

approaches to comedy, the Bergsonian approaches, and then some sessions that dealt with sound in comedy, which had been my interest in Tati. But I also focused on historically on a series of comic, I guess auteurs, performers largely, or sometimes performer-directors like Chaplin, Keaton, Laurel and Hardy as a team, you know, I did some work on team comedy like Laurel and Hardy or the Marx Brothers. W.C. Fields, you know, up to Tati and more contemporary comedy.

Paula Massood: Now you've had a prolific career in film publishing with, you've published a number of monographs, a number of edited anthology collections, you've published in journals, you've published in collections as well. So I was wondering if you could talk about your early career. So your experience, particularly when you first began publishing and what that was like and if you felt as though there was an openness to publishing some things rather than others. So did it affect what you were thinking about writing and publishing at that time?

Lucy Fischer: No. And it never has. Which is maybe not a good thing in terms of one's career, but it's not the way I've operated. Well first I started writing while I was still in New York. I actually wrote for what was then the *SoHo Weekly News*, which was like an alternate *Village Voice* for a while. And also I did publish a couple of things in the *Village Voice*. And largely I was writing on kind of independent film and experimental film, which has also been one of my interests. So I did a little of that early on, but then when I got into film academics, I think the first publishing that I did was largely with *Film Quarterly* at the time, under Chick Callenbach, who I realized just died this past year. And I mean, film studies was still this wonderful field. I hope it still is, where you literally put things over the transom, you know, I was a graduate student I think at the time. I did not have a name or anything. But people read your work, evaluated it for what it was, and published it. So my first publishing experience was several articles with *Film Quarterly*. I think one on Bruce Baillie's *Castro Street*, one later on *Dames*, the Busby Berkeley and sort of women's studies. I did one on magic and film, *The Lady Vanishes*, and I think something on, I think the thing I wrote on Vertov's *Enthusiasm* was.

But I mean as you can see from that list even of early publishings, I was not focusing, I've always worked on what interests me and what interests me has never been in a single area. Later too, I remember particularly *Millennium Film Journal* and you know because it was an area where work on the avant-garde was welcomed, although Chick Callenbach did publish the article on *Castro Street*. I remember when another sort of earlier publication was on, I did something on Méliès and the Poirot figure and kind of French culture in *Millennium*. So, I found it a very open field, but I didn't sort of design my writing in terms of, I'm not sure I could have told you what the market was at that point. But I sort of followed what I was interested in.

Paula Massood: And can you talk a little bit about your feminist writing in your books? Because they came at, especially *Shot/Countershot*, came at a really important time.

Lucy Fischer: Yeah.

Paula Massood: And what was inspiring you at that moment.

Lucy Fischer: Well, I think partly autobiography. I grew up in that strange era where you had one foot in the 1950s, you know? We were being raised to be Doris Day, except I didn't have the blonde hair and all that. And then went through the second wave feminism, which I remember kind of hit when I was at NYU. I can remember sitting in a seminar and somebody talking about the first New York International Women's Film Festival and being very, very impressed by that. But I felt I was a product of second wave feminism, in that I was raised to not have a career. I mean my parents weren't college educated. They knew that I should have a job. I knew I should have a job because they didn't have money. But I was kind of designed to be certain things, like maybe a speech pathologist, and maybe a public-school teacher. And I initially, getting out of college, was interested in pursuing a doctorate in English, which had been my field, and I kind of knew within the frame of my world, it didn't seem possible at that time.

So, when the women's movement hit, I felt it really personally. I mean, I should not be here. You know what I mean? I should not be a professor, I should not be doing this. And I really felt for a long time, even when I was one, or beginning to publish, it was kind of like I was an imposter because I remember the times when, and I mean it's not just the women's' movement, it's other historical things which I won't go into. So when the women's movement hit both as a movement, a social movement, but also within academics, it felt very personal to me and I felt like I was learning things about kind of ideological issues about women that had a lot of relevance to my life and so that spurred me on to do that kind of writing and to be interested in women filmmakers, to be interested in the feminist analysis of melodrama, and romance, and things like that that I felt I had been brought up on and also, I mean, I have to say even for example, probably the best example of the very personal was my book *Cinematernity*. I mean, I did not know if I wanted children.

That was kind of in the era which if you were going to be a career woman then you were going to be nontraditional and you didn't necessarily have children. And I really can see myself struggling with that whole issue in writing that book. And I mean there was no, I would have been happy either way, so I think it was very personal for me and I learned a lot about myself, about my own social conditioning through writing that stuff.

Paula Massood: And do you see, where I see in your writing still a through line with your interest in women's issues and feminism, even though you've written books on different subjects, but that that is a presence.

Lucy Fischer: It's a presence so that when I was asked to do a BFI monograph for their Masterpieces of Cinema, I chose *Sunrise* because to me that is an ur-text on the good and the bad woman and as well as being an incredible film. Same thing with Rutgers, the book that I wrote for their series of single film, edited to

collections was *Imitation of Life*. Even recently, well even working as I've worked on design in cinema in recent years with the book on art deco and film, it was art deco and the figure of women. I mean, so my interest was in the way that a sort of modernist style was usually attached to a kind of dangerous, questionable woman, like Greta Garbo and a lot of her films. And even I'm working on art nouveau. Art nouveau now in film and art nouveau is maligned as feminine style. And so I think it, you know, there's a way that once you have on those glasses, you know, there's no way not to continue, even though you might not simply be writing on women in film. You know, the gender perspective I think is strong and it remains because it's true.

Paula Massood: Now you mentioned this a little bit, you mentioned some journals a little bit. Do you recall key journals or books that were particularly formative for you early in your career? Not only in your own research but also in your teaching.

Lucy Fischer: Yeah. I can remember formative books, I mean I'm talking early on for me that were *Film Form*, *Film Sense*, Rudolf Arnheim's *Film is Art*. I think when I started to teach Phil Monaco's... James Monaco's *How to Read a Film* was very important. The work of Susan Sontag, though not entirely on film, was extremely important to me. *Against Interpretation*, *On Photography*, works like that, and you know, in the early days of women in film there were various collections. Some of the earliest anthologies on women in film that are probably no longer in print anymore, but I remember there was one by Patricia Erens, another one by Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary. So, all of those, I'm talking about early on sort of before a lot of the canonical. Of course, when, you know, the film theory texts, even like Mast and Cohen, I guess it was the earliest version. It's now in its seventh iteration. Those were very important in taking because finally you had a single text that could help to represent film theory.

Paula Massood: Did you pull also from any of your lit background as well in terms of say lit theory and-

Lucy Fischer: I did in that I taught, actually, some of my interests in film studies kind of came in a comparison between literature and film. Not as adaptation, but in terms of the medium and questions of word and image. And so I frequently teach a course in literature and film. It's kind of organized around theoretical concepts, so things like Nicholas Vardac's *Stage to Screen* that talks about how literary melodrama was transformed into cinema. I'm interested in, well also one of my more recent books is *Body Doubl: The Author Incarnate in Cinema*, which is about the writer in film. And that continues to interest me and draws on theory of word versus image, but also there's a chapter in that on writers who are also filmmakers, but who don't adapt their works, so there's a chapter in which I discuss the works of Paul Auster, for example. The literary works of Paul Auster in relation to his film *Smoke*, but he's also done others, *Blue in the Face* and I've also worked a bit on David Mamet as well. So, I do return to that and I remember *Critical Inquiry* also being a journal that wasn't specifically film but was film friendly and sometimes had articles by various theorists of literature who had begun to be interested in film like Seymour Chatman and then later

various other people at Brown, kind of when it was moving from a literature program to a semiotics program.

And, of course, all the writing on semiotics, Metz and Wollen, language in cinema, has always interested me. And, of course, there's only so far you can go with that. So, the semiotic theory, you know, worked on my literary background as well.

Paula Massood: So I want to switch it up a little bit here. So what sort of technology was available for teaching and studying in film early in your career?

Lucy Fischer: Oh my god. This is the point at which I feel like I'm Abraham Lincoln talking about how I had to hike in 15 miles to school. It was a nightmare. I'm not entirely sure how I did it or why I did it. First there were, well, even before teaching, there was the studying at NYU where it was 16-millimeter film only. We of course had access to films as well but if you borrowed a film or something like that, you had to lug film cans, you know, metal film cans. If you were lucky they were plastic, you know, on the subway, to your house, you had to own a projector, you had to learn how to thread a projector, you had to clean the projector. Films broke, you had to be able to deal with splicing. All of that was really hard as well as writing a dissertation, for the most part by seeing films in a movie theater. And you know, going back five times and hoping that, for particularly like the Tati films, stayed at the Fifth Avenue Cinema long enough for you to write your dissertation.

But then teaching was a similar kind of thing. You had to have the projector in the room often, you had to project yourself, the projector made noise, there wasn't always a booth, and so that sometimes made it hard to hear. There was the question of availability of prints, the 16-millimeter versions of those films that was before a lot of films were being remastered and of course before digital remastering technology. So, we were looking at really bad prints of films. Even the best were usually from the Museum of Modern Art, where I actually worked for a while on their film collection.

Paula Massood: I was going to ask if that helped a little bit in terms of being able, especially when you were in Pittsburgh, to be able to get your hands on some prints because you knew what they had and-

Lucy Fischer: Right. I certainly used their collection, but of course you couldn't borrow from the archive unless you were another archive or had 35-millimeter equipment, but not just that, you had to be, because those films had to be protected. You couldn't necessarily get them, but so it was very difficult to teach film. You couldn't get all sorts of films. The films that you could get, the quality was not very good. The classrooms, a lot of universities that didn't have dedicated film programs, were not accustomed to people needing that kind of technology in their classroom. It's very different from now where everybody's using a computer and, you know, a digital projector is kind of de rigueur practically in every classroom. So, there weren't window shades, or there weren't blackout

shades. You were showing bad prints of silent films in the light. So, it's kind of a miracle that we got through that and I have to admit there are two things I'm very jealous of these days, which is students can now get the availability of all these films and they don't weigh a lot. And, also, that instead of having a million books, you have access to eBooks and instead of having 15 four-drawer file cabinets in your house you have a box full of jump drives. So- it was a whole different world.

Paula Massood: What did you think when film started being transferred to VHS? Was that a hallelujah moment of, "Well this will make it easier?" Or was it a-

Lucy Fischer: It was a kind of both hallelujah and not hallelujah because the quality of VHS was bad and usually they were only transferring the really bad 16-millimeter prints to VHS, so that it was a dub of a dub of a dub. But I was not, I never had the sense that, I loved film projection, I loved being in a movie theater with wonderful projection, but I never fetishized the object. I mean I'm very happy now, I can say, that we have all of this digital technology available because the quality is quite good. And so, it was kind of a mixed bag when VHS came.

Paula Massood: Good. What's your recollection of the cultural and community context in which you worked in the beginning? And I'm thinking here as well, when you went to Pittsburgh, there wasn't a film department, right?

Lucy Fischer: No. There wasn't. There was a film program one could say in name only, which was that Marcia Landy, who had been there before me, organized their being a listing of courses in whatever was the catalog or however they then distributed upcoming semesters courses, locating all of the film classes that were being given, and there were a few in different departments. So that was the extent of the program but she was a driving force in wanting there to be a film program and she's in the English department, I was hired in the English department, and I was hired as the director of a kind of nonexistent program with the understanding that I would begin such a program. So, there was support at that level and you know, departmental support at that level, but it was a difficult process, particularly as a junior faculty. Now they would never ask a junior faculty to come in and start a program, particularly with the possibility of alienating senior faculty. But I then turned it into a degree granting program, first a minor, then a major, eventually a PhD, on an interdisciplinary model, trying though to build hires. English was willing to hire because English departments are very big departments, and so there's a constant turnover and if the department is willing to give the lines to a particular field, there's always lines available.

As opposed to the smaller departments, certain language departments, where it was harder to convince them to hire a film trained person because in those departments they had to do much more double-duty to a small department, be it a language department or even a theater, critical studies theater department. So, the atmosphere was supportive to some degree but then in the beginning I had a dean who told me that his nephew wrote, was Max Kozlov I think, and he

wrote for *October*, and that he had said film was not an art. So, there I was. Thank you very much. Later we had a series of deans who, they were always scientists who had very little interest in the humanities. So, while it wasn't obstructionist, there was a kind of convincing way that was not the case at NYU or UCLA. And you know, even within the English department though, they've been very supportive and hired a bunch of people. There's always the, what are our hires going to go for? Are they going to go for lit, creative writing, film? You know, there were always those battles to fight.

But, they were totally fair about tenure in that it wasn't the case where I had heard about some horror stories where people were in a language department, or English department, or theater department, and when tenure time came they suddenly expected you to have all your publications in their journals. It was not like that. It was very supportive.

Paula Massood: Great. Can you also talk a little bit about the community in Pittsburgh, because you worked at the Carnegie, right?

Lucy Fischer: Right. Yeah, I had been at MoMA before I came so I had museum experience and my first year I worked at the Carnegie Museum of Art, which had at that time, a film department that was run by Bill Judson who was also teaching. He was one of the people who, he was teaching part time at Pitt. And that atmosphere was really interesting. The museum in its infinite wisdom have subsequently eliminated the film department because it never was having the prestige of the kind of fine art, sculpture, et cetera. I have not been a member of the museum since. But it was a really wonderful moment because that department, that film department had been really active in the independent and avant-garde film scene. Bill and a predecessor had brought in Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, James Broughton, Maya Deren had made a film in Pittsburgh, I mean before the museum was having a film department. So, it was a very lively program. They did wonderful director series of ... I think the first one that I programmed was a John Cassavetes series. But series of Buñuel and so there was that. There was also Pittsburgh Filmmakers, which is one of the longest lasting media arts centers in the country.

Because I remember in New York that was Collective for The Living Cinema and I'm forgetting some of the other names, and they were also a very vibrant, so the people at the university, the people at the Carnegie Museum of Art, the people at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, and Pittsburgh Filmmakers taught our production classes. It was like our film making department but there were battles to be won to have those courses that I had to go through to have them counted and to make them free with your Pitt tuition. I remember this stage, it always amuses me. I remember the stage when some dean was, "Well, should we really be giving credit for filmmaking courses? Aren't they vocational courses?" And, of course, I had to explain, particularly Pittsburgh Filmmakers, which was film as an art institution that they were not, but it amuses me because now it seems to me that all the universities want to do is give their

students vocational courses. So, you have the kind of hypocrisies of some of the changes in academia.

Paula Massood: So, I'm hoping, I just want to go back a little bit to your discussion of developing the program at Pittsburgh. And I was wondering if, did you look to other schools as models or how did you sort of, or were you looking at the specifics of Pittsburgh, the university, or deciding that you were going to design from what you had there?

Lucy Fischer: It was a matter of both, I think. There really weren't any other models at the time that I was aware of as I was starting. I think in the interim they developed an interdisciplinary program that went through the minor, the major, and you know, graduate level, which was something we had always hoped-

Paula Massood: And what are the years for the minor, the major, and then the graduate?

Lucy Fischer: Well the graduate program only started just a few years ago. So, there was almost immediately when I got there, I constructed the minor and then worked my way up to major, and then there was a big hiatus until the graduate program. Though we had already built up a very strong graduate program within English of students who came in wanting to do film and essentially didn't really have to take any literature courses if they didn't want to. So, there wasn't a good model but it was also that it was a university. And we started as a program, right? Because that was the only way to start, for example, as a minor. And I didn't feel that my department, my department was very much about not breaking down into tracks. They had a kind of vision that we should all be related in what we do. So, it wasn't hospitable to say, "Okay, well in English let's just have a film studies major as a track." That's not what they wanted to do. So, it seemed like the best option was as a program. But in my university, programs do not have hires. So, we had to keep with the model of tenure in various departments and work from there.

It led to a lopsided kind of thing because as I said English had the most positions and the most hires. But then we were able to make the argument in several cases for other departments to hire not simply somebody who was doing their own field and then a little bit of film, but in a few cases, we were able to make the argument that they should advertise for a film person. This happened twice in German with Sabine Hake and then later Randall Halle. In more recent years in French hired David Peterson. And in East Asian we hired people both in Japanese and Chinese film. So, it was more about trying without ... As a program director you don't have the power over the other departments. I had some power within my own department. So that was the challenge because I did not do what some programs do which is just kind of put out a call for people who are interested in teaching film. Having been one of those people who was one of the first generations to be trained in film studies, I mean, I sometimes joke about being a test tube baby. I really wanted to hire people who had significant training in film and were not just doing it as an add on. Because it had become a field where training was possible, like everything else.

So that was the model but the difficulty was trying to cover the bases without opening up in a way to having courses that I didn't believe in.

Paula Massood: Did you see SCMS as a resource for when you were thinking through the program, or actually more generally, your own career as a place to go to sort of talk with other people about-

Lucy Fischer: Oh, I definitely did. I mean, it is really the only professional organization I've ever felt at home in. I mean, not that I go around trying out a lot of professional organizations, but of course I've had my MLA experiences, partly by being in an English department and sometimes being forced to be there because of hiring and stuff. Occasionally I did in the early years when I think some people, I was on an executive committee for film at some point, I gave some papers, but no I've always found SCMS hospitable, again sometimes feeling at home, and also definitely a way that if you had a question about ... I did begin to think about the PhD program. For example, I contacted Dudley Andrew at Yale who was doing a similar thing at Yale and he was very generous in letting us know what the models were there. It turned out to be completely different because instead of a standalone PhD, at Yale, you know each institution has their roadblocks and Yale it had to be a joint PhD with a series of departments, whereas in our university the joint or dual degree did not work. And it had to be a standalone programmatic. So yes, I've talked to a lot of people.

I remember even last year there was a panel on some aspect of women's studies at the university, or film studies and women's studies and I was thinking about doing a course on women directors and a little bit nervous about it because the only course in the history of my teaching all those years that ever did not run years ago was women directors. And I got a lot of advice from people about that, which influenced. And, of course, there were those teaching files that were often published in *Cinema Journal* that could be helpful. But I find it an open group, an interesting group, an un-stuffy group, and I think that it's a friendly group and I think people feel like you can just contact someone, even if you don't particularly know them and collaborate in some ways.

Paula Massood: In your opinion, what do you think are the contributing factors to the growth of women media studies over, there's been a tremendous growth in let's say the last 20 years.

Lucy Fischer: I think it started in the late 60s. I think it started because I can remember even, I was at Columbia, 1968, and I can remember the call, aside from some of the more directly political aspects of all that, there was the call for relevance. I mean, there was that call for a curriculum that reflected more today's world. Now some of that had to do with politics and race and other things, you know there was the bashing of Columbia for taking over Morningside Heights, but the relevance thing was also about changing the curriculum in a way that sort of, I guess to some degree reflected some aspect of youth culture at the time. I think that was important. There had been already independently the kind of media

movement, also late '60s. I mean some people at NYU, some notion of what you do, it's kind of like giving the means of production to the people, right?

And the means of production was the camera. And it was one of the impetuses of women-made movies. The women's movement, you're going to give cameras to the women who haven't been represented, but there was also those people who were giving cameras to Native Americans to see what kind of films they would make, or ghetto youth. That I think also did something to filmmaking. I think the notion that film was being elevated. Susan Sontag was writing about film, right? Susan Sontag was, as somebody put it recently in the film, in the TV documentary about her, she was the "it girl" of intellectual circles at a certain moment in the 70s and so she was writing about film. It gave a certain cultural panache. I think that helped. I think the interest in filmmaking on the part of the young, and the fact that at that time in order to be trained in making film, you needed equipment, and you needed a program in which to do it. And university programs were one of the ways to do it but that also affected film studies because people wanted students to be trained in film history.

Then I think things like the women's movement, post-colonial studies, race studies, all of those global studies. The various waves of cultural studies that have come because film seems to be so important in all of those areas, sometimes the only arts that are actually talking about that stuff and cutting-edge, so I think all of that had an effect on the growth of film studies. Not to mention that universities were expanding. You know, it's also the economics of university expansion. I mean, the state university system in New York. It actually did not exist in the way that it does now when I was going to college. There was Harper College, which now is Binghamton University. There was a small college on Long Island that later became Stony Brook. Buffalo University was private, University of Buffalo. New York developed its big state universities. California, I mean of course there was always Berkeley and UCLA but then there were a hundred other campuses. They were all hiring at some point. So, there's also the economics of film studies luckily having come into academia, at first in an era of expansion, as we know that's not the case now.

Paula Massood: Though film studies and media studies is still expanding.

Lucy Fischer: It's still expanding. Yeah.

Paula Massood: And I think related to the economics. So where do you feel the future of university level film and media study and scholarship is headed?

Lucy Fischer: Well I think, maybe I would say there's good news and bad news. The good news I think is that media studies in this very expansive way that isn't necessarily only about, and when I say film I don't actually mean celluloid, I mean kind of motion picture moving image studies. That media studies is expanding in interesting kinds of ways. We've seen at a conference like this about video games or about, and the art is expanding. So, you know, there's always more questions about virtual reality in film, or about video games in film,

or about various new technology like three-dimension, different screens. So, I think all of that's going to be very, very important as well as other aspects in which film is very important, like local studies and understanding other cultures and one of the ways that people do that is through film. I guess where I'm concerned is not so much about film studies ... Oh, there's also digital humanities, which I think has both its good news and its not so good news. The good news is that suddenly everything is about the digital humanities and people are getting away from just the book. And they understand that digital often involves sound and image.

But, on the other hand, nobody seems to quite know what the digital humanities is or how it applies to different fields. But on the other hand, deans who know nothing about the arts or cinema, they just want to hear the word digital. The negative aspects I think about the future, and this is not, well with digital humanities, for example, is I sometimes fear that now because it's called digital humanities that everyone thinks that if they're a humanist they're also somebody who can work with film image and sound and they need no training. They can simply move from whatever field they've been in because it's digital humanities and they're humanists. So, I worry sometimes about again my value on the training and film studies and wanting people, if there are going to be classes on things that involve moving images, that they be the people who are trained to do that. I guess my other concern is just the humanities in general. And we're entering a moment when there's such a devaluing of the humanities as opposed to the stem subjects, the arts, and the kind of assessments often that universities are doing is now wanting to know where are your graduates? What are they earning? And how do the people who have majors in literature or creative writing or filmmaking or critical studies, what are the implications of those measurements for the humanities if it's all about now, it seems all about vocation?

Which is the opposite of what they used to say about not wanting to credit classes in filmmaking. So, I hope it's not dire. But you know, one sees that turn and I'm concerned about it in the culture, not just academia.

Paula Massood: So why do you think it's important to study film and media in universities? And I say this, I think actually for undergraduates who might not actually be even film majors. Do you think that it's important for students to study it in some way, even if it's just a class or something?

Lucy Fischer: Yeah. I do. I think for reasons that I'm sure other people would say, which is that if as we just mentioned, images, sounds, moving image culture, is more and more prolific and more and more apparent, and I mean not just in the culture, the image itself, but the sharing of media. You know, the Facebook, Instagram, all of these kinds of things. And after all, we are also based in photography, so I see photography as also relevant. In fact, for my own university I'm doing a talk on photography in a few weeks. I think that it's important for people to understand how these things operate, what your position within them is, it's kind of the apparatus, and whether you're on camera or behind the camera or a

viewer in a theater, how they operate, obviously in terms of political social construction, all of those kinds of things. But I will say too that, I mean, part of me thinks, so it's funny for me to use the phrase "the life of the mind" because that's what John Goodman shouts as he's running through the, the murderous John Goodman. But it's also that I still do want people to appreciate film as an art. Aside from the questions of ideology or all of that.

And what are you doing with most of your life? Hopefully you'll have some free time in your life. What are you thinking about and what are you doing? And I hope that these are going to continue to move you. But I guess also going back to the media platforms, I don't know how conscious people are of some of the dangers involved. When some of these sharing, you know, the selfies, all of that. I'm not the person to be doing that, but we have young scholars who are going to be dealing with that. And I think that kind of question. With us it was voyeurism and the gays, but it's taken to a whole other level now. And the last thing I'd say about that is again going back to the global, and it seems to me that another reason for film studies, aside from the art, aside from the continuing social construction and proliferation of imagery and screens is, it is one of those ways that we're understanding other cultures. And certainly, for undergraduates, I think it's one of those ways that they can get some kind of taste of both some of the social questions that are involved around the world, and also the different cultural conceptions of what cinema is. So, I mean I certainly do think it's important.

Paula Massood: So last question. And it's a big one.

Lucy Fischer: Yeah.

Paula Massood: So what keeps you excited about studying film, teaching film, watching film?

Lucy Fischer: Okay. What keeps me excited are various works that excite me. I mean, I'm very much someone who's always focused on, I get interested in something largely through the fact that I'm knocked out by a particular work. And then it will lead me somewhere. I mean, that's not been all of my work. My work on design actually comes from my status as a collector. And my interest in art deco and art nouveau, material culture, and then I went from there to working on it in film. But a lot of times, I'll give you just a couple of examples, so partly that is what happens. I remember seeing *La Vie En Rose* years ago and it very much affected me. I mean, I had not been someone who knew much about Édith Piaf. I'm not of that generation. It was as though I knew there were films that you watch for the first time, that you know you will have to teach or write about. You just know it. And I did seven years later, somebody asked me to talk in a melodrama conference, and I finally wrote something on *La Vie En Rose*. But it was the fact that that stayed with me, that I knew, it's that desire. Whatever that desire is that I think must be what has to be a desire of an academic and a writer.

And I mean yesterday, I don't know if it was yesterday, on Tuesday I taught for the first time *Birdman*. I'm knocked out by that film. And I don't know if I'll ever

write on it. I knew I would have to teach it. And I find the same thing about something like my interest in design for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. There are works like that, more than simply a topic, but I do have to say also, I don't know that I'll ever do much writing on it, but I've also become much more interested in television as it's gotten into these incredibly wonderful dramatic series that you can watch and it's like watching a 27-hour movie. It's like the film scholars desire for the movie that will never end. So that actually kind of interests me too. So, I think it's that whatever that is that happens, it's a kind of, I don't know how to name that desire. It's a kind of intellectual desire, if there is such a thing that says, I want to think about this more.

My notion of how to think about it more is to teach it or write about it as opposed to, I don't meditate. I don't just sit and think anywhere. It's always in some kind of activity.

Paula Massood: So this has been a great pleasure and actually as you were thinking about talking about desire, I was thinking there's also pleasure in that. Not only pleasure in watching, but pleasure in talking about it, right?

Lucy Fischer: Absolutely.

Paula Massood: So, I'd like to thank Lucy, Professor Lucy Fischer for spending this time with me to chat and I'd also like to thank SCMS and the people who organized Fieldnotes for giving us this opportunity.

Lucy Fischer: And I would like to thank Professor Paula Massood for interviewing me and for Fieldnotes and SCMS for thinking of me as worthy of being interviewed. Thank you.