

Seth Feldman: My name is Seth Feldman. I'm here at the SCMS conference in Toronto to interview Barry Grant, who we'll get to in a moment. The date is Saturday, March 17th, 2018. We're recording this at the Sheridan Hotel.

Before I let Barry speak, let me tell you a Barry Grant story. We were both graduate students at Buffalo together. At one point, I had a job with something called Media Studies, which was an off-campus organization but that worked closely with the university. We had the good idea of doing a speaker series with graduate students. Of course, Barry was part of that. Barry was going to talk about Hitchcock. I put little flyers up around the campus and Barry Grant was going to be talking about Alfred Hitchcock.

The day before the talk was supposed to take place, I got a phone call at Media Studies from a woman who said, "We're coming to this." She just wanted to know how to find the building on campus. I told her and all this. Then, she said, "And where can we put the bus?" I said, "Bus?" It occurred to me. I said, "Where are you coming from?" She said, "Pittsburgh." I said, "You mean, you rented a bus to bring people up from Pittsburgh?" She said, "Of course, we did. I mean, how many times do you get to hear Cary Grant talk about his Hitchcock films?"

I had to give them the news that this wasn't going to happen, which was just as well because Barry had changed the topic to science fiction. They didn't come but that was a shame for them, mostly, because Barry has always been interesting. He's always been worth the bus ride from Pittsburgh. Barry.

Barry Grant: Yes.

Seth Feldman: Let me start by asking you how you got started in this business and how you got interested in film from way back.

Barry Grant: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I've always been interested in movies. I watched movies growing up. I grew up in New York City. There were movie theaters everywhere in New York in my neighborhood. There were probably six within walking distance. This is what we did on Saturdays. Sometimes when I didn't go to school and went to movies instead, which served me well in the long run. I've always been interested in movies.

I had this experience after graduating with my BA. I worked in VISTA for one year, which was domestic version of the Peace Corps back in the 60s. I was stationed on a Chippewa Indian reservation in Northern Minnesota. My job was to run a teen center. Most of the kids at this teen center were native. I'm looking for things to do with them. I found a projector and some films in the basement, one of which was John Ford's Stagecoach.

I showed Stagecoach to them one evening. In the climax of the film, when the stagecoach is being pursued on the salt flats by the Indians, and John Wayne is out jumping from horse to horse and he's firing his rifle. There's a shot where

two Indians fall from one bullet. At that point, the native teenagers all burst into applause. I thought something odd is going on here, that these people are seeing their surrogates on the screen being decimated by John Wayne and they're identifying with John Wayne. It made me realize the power of cinema. At that point, I became much more interested in a kind of intellectual way in film.

Seth Feldman: What was your academic training in film?

Barry Grant: At SUNY Buffalo, as you know, where we both were students at the same time, in the English department, the English department was one of the top English departments in the country at the time. There were so many important writers and scholars there. One had to have a minor field of study that was outside literature. They had some programs set up already like literature and psychology, for example, which was a very big program but I thought because of this interest I had in movies that, "Well, why not do cinema as a minor field?" It would certainly connect to American literature, which was my emphasis, but there was no program in film studies in the time in Buffalo.

I approached Gerald O'Grady, who was the head of Media Study Buffalo. He agreed to do a series of independent studies with me, which I did and I took one course that Gerry taught, which I still can't figure out what that course was about. We were reading all kinds of visionary material. It was more about, I guess, the mind in the media-saturated society.

I took those courses with him. No formal coursework, really, and pursued my own interests that way. I felt pretty much a kind of outlier from the program because of my interest in popular cinema. When I graduated and I was looking for jobs and was really either in literature or film but I was much more interested in film at that point.

Seth Feldman: Was your PhD in literature or film?

Barry Grant: 19th century American literature with ... I had a chapter in my dissertation on Walt Whitman. My dissertation had to do with literary style in relation to theories of democracy.

I made a comment in my chapter on Whitman that his catalogue technique in his poetry was similar to Eisensteinian montage. One of the members of my committee said, "That's the center of your chapter. You have to expand this." I was perplexed by this because it wasn't a cinema thesis but I did expand it. Ultimately, it became my first published essay.

Seth Feldman: In your experience, how have you seen different filmmakers from different genres react to each other's work?

Barry Grant: As I mentioned, I did feel like an outlier in Buffalo. When I would talk to the other graduate students who were pursuing film studies like you, I remember

going to the Norton Conference Cheater. We had a screening of ... It might have been *The Man with the Movie Camera*. There were no subtitles. You were translating as we were watching. That was very impressive to me.

You're looking at Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein. Ron Green is looking at Godard. We have Jean-Pierre Gorin coming. We're looking at the latest Godard/Gorin films. Here I am looking at these horror films from the 1950s.

One day, I went to the airport to pick up Stan Brakhage, who was coming to Media Study. As we were driving from the airport, he asked me what my interests were. I was almost embarrassed to tell him. He said, "Well, what films do you particularly like?" I said, "Well, *The Fly* from 1957." He said, "Oh, I really like that film, too. That's a really good film." I felt a little bit vindicated. Then, later I found that, of course, the surrealists like Georges Franju and other people held *The Fly* in high esteem. It validated my own interests a bit.

Gunvor Nelson came, again, to Media Study. She was from out of town. She didn't know her way around. One day, she was in the office. I said, "I'm going to the movies. You want to go?" Maybe she didn't know what she was getting into but she said, "Sure." I said, "I'm going to see this film *Bug*. It's a science fiction horror film." She came with me. She was good. She was patient. She found some interesting things to make the experience worthwhile for her.

Seth Feldman: Then, what happened, getting a job and going into the profession?

Barry Grant: Mm-hmm (affirmative). After being at Buffalo for four years, then I also worked at Media Study Buffalo for one year for Gerry. While doing that, I was applying for jobs and had this ironic situation, which you know well. You had an interview at Brock University. You told me about the job. I had an interview at University of Western Ontario, Western University now. I told you about that job. We ended up interviewing for each other's position. We got the opposite jobs.

My job at Brock was convenient because it was very close to ... It's in the Niagara Peninsula. It was close to Buffalo so I, for the beginning of my teaching career, could go back and forth, because at the beginning, my job was a one-year leave replacement, which eventually became a two-year contract, and then became permanent tenure track after that.

Seth Feldman: You developed that whole program over the years. You've put in a cultural studies program. Could you talk a little bit about how you developed a program and what was your rationale for pushing it in that direction?

Barry Grant: When I came to Brock, film studies was taught in the English department. They just separated from the English department and became a department of drama. The department of drama offered two BAs, three actually. One in dramatic literature, one in theater, and one in film studies. I knew there's a debate among Canadian film studies folk as to whether Brock or this university

or another one was the first to offer a degree in film studies but that aside, we had a degree in film studies. I had two very good colleagues, Jim Leach and Maurice Yacowar. It was basically the three of us.

But after my first year, when I got that two-year contract, I said at a department meeting, "Why are we called the department of drama? We have a film studies degree also and that we should give that more of a profile." We changed the name to drama and film studies.

Eventually, because of various political things going on at the university, we became amalgamated with the music department and with the visual arts department and became the department of fine arts. I was a founding chair of that department. Eventually, that department then vulcanized. I guess nothing remains permanent in this context. Film studies, now finding itself more or less on its own, decided to combine with communication studies and create a degree in popular culture because that was a particular interest of mine. I started a popular culture course, back in the days of the drama department but I think was probably the first popular culture course taught at a Canadian university back in late 1970s.

Seth Feldman: How did you teach popular culture back then? Were you pure Birmingham School or you don't know?

Barry Grant: No. No. My approach was more, as with film studies, more in terms of textual analysis and ideological issues. Because that course, like the introduction to film studies course, it was a potential humanities elective course for non-humanities students.

The important thing in that course was to find texts like popular music of the day, for example, films, TV shows, magazines, that students were actually using and consuming. To teach them to be able to understand how to negotiate. In film studies, we would call that "cineliteracy" but how to negotiate the various cultural media that are out there.

Seth Feldman: You started publishing very quickly and had published a lot. Can you talk about the arch of your interest in terms of publication?

Barry Grant: As I mentioned before, my particular interests were in popular cinema, particularly genre film and, of course, back then, as film studies was getting established and the interest was in art cinema and experimental film. I found myself a little bit, as I said, on the outside. There wasn't much being published on popular film but a few things, like Stuart Kaminsky's book on *American Film Genres*, for example. Those are the kinds of works that I was interested in.

My publications have always just flowed from my particular interests at the time. I've tried to connect it with the teaching I was doing. I had a particular interest in horror film always. Before that first essay on Whitman and

Eisenstein, one day, I went, or one night, to the Buffalo drive in and I saw *Race with the Devil*. This is not a film that we would have discussed in any class on film but I thought it was an interesting film. It touched on aspects of American iconography and the myth of the West and so on in a contemporary context. I wrote a little thing about that and sent it to *Jump Cut*. That was my first published piece.

Then, some of my books really have grown out of what I saw as a gap in teaching. There was no book about film genre that I felt I could use in a class so I decided to edit one on my own, which eventually became *Film Genre Reader*, which has been a course text for several decades now. The same thing with *Documenting the Documentary*. I teach that course and I would get essays printed from this source or that source. I put together a package. I thought, "Why not put together a book of essays on touchstone documentary films that was accessible for students?" That's the way I often proceeded with my publications.

Seth Feldman: There are some areas, though, that I think you're known for and that you've really gone into in-depth, like the study of Fred Wiseman. Could you talk about that and how you ...

Barry Grant: Yeah.

Seth Feldman: ... got into Wiseman and what you think of him now?

Barry Grant: I discovered Fred Wiseman's films in Buffalo.

If I can just digress for one minute, the film screening opportunities in Buffalo were astonishing. We had film screens probably every day and every night on campus sponsored by one department or another. The Wiseman films were usually sponsored by Media Study but when I saw *High School* and I saw *Titicut Follies*, I thought, "This filmmaker is really doing something interesting that I haven't seen in documentary before." He was taking actual things. He was assembling them in a way that was very different from the other observational filmmakers of the day, because he wasn't putting them in chronological order. He was creating a text. I was fascinated by the text he was creating and by the way it was addressing me as a spectator.

The end of *Titicut Follies* is an implied question to the spectator. The end of *High School* is a direct question. "When you read a letter like this, wouldn't you say we've been doing a good job at Northeast High School?" These films are really engaging me as a spectator and presumably others as well. I just started watching all of his films, every one I could see.

When I worked on my first single-authored book, I thought, "What would I want to write on more than this filmmaker," that I felt very passionately about? I

approached him. He was very amenable to lending me his films and providing stills. We've had a very good relationship. I've done two books on Wiseman.

To come to the last part of your question, I think his more recent films ... I mean, he's moved away from that muckraking tradition of his early films and is more involved in films that are about cultural institutions now. I think his attitude is much more open and generous and less condemnatory than it used to be.

His recent films, like *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library*, and *Boxing Gym*, and *Crazy Horse*, and *National Gallery* are very brilliantly self-reflexive about his own filmmaking practice. With an astonishing 50 films to his credit, he is not slacking off. He's one of America's greatest filmmakers.

Seth Feldman: What do you think he leaves as a legacy?

Barry Grant: That's an interesting question. I think he has given us a way of looking at documentary, which helped shift the notion of documentary as objective to subjective. He always argued that he's not presenting anything objective. It's personal. It's a report on what he's found. Those are his words. He says he has no preconceptions but he develops ideas when he goes into an institution. His films are personal, yet based in the real world. I think, even if you look at somebody like Michael Moore. I think he owes a great debt to Frederick Wiseman.

Seth Feldman: You wrote and helped develop a national cinema, not Canadian but New Zealand. Could you tell me how you got started in New Zealand cinema?

Barry Grant: When I was working on the book on *VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman*, I said to myself, "When I finish this book, I want to take a long trip." I wasn't sure where but I started thinking about it. I decided, "How much further away can I get than New Zealand?" This was the days before the internet. I knew nothing about the country whatsoever. I thought it would be good to make contact with people who taught film there. Through snail mail, I wrote to people at the seven universities in New Zealand, made contact.

When I finished *VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY*, I went on almost a two-month trip to New Zealand, traveling around from university to university, meeting people, making friends. I became immersed in the culture for that time period.

While I was there, I saw the New Zealand Film Awards and saw the early films of Peter Jackson. I thought, "Wow! This guy is ... Again, another interesting filmmaker that's being neglected because he's just making horror films and exploitation films," but I saw that as a connection to Canada because, like the Canadian cinema in relation to Hollywood, Canadian filmmakers have had to, in many ways, play off of Hollywood film. New Zealand filmmakers were doing the same thing. I became interested in New Zealand film.

When I made three more trips to New Zealand subsequently. Then, once I felt like I knew something about the culture, same thing with Canadian cinema, I didn't teach Canadian cinema or write about it until I was here for 15 years. I felt like I really needed to understand something about the culture first. The same with New Zealand cinema.

Seth Feldman: What directions has your writing been taking you lately at post-New Zealand, let's say.

Barry Grant: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I seem to be focusing in the last few years on science fiction. I'm particularly interested in that genre, always have been. I did the BFI Film Classics on *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I'm working on a book on the *Twilight Zone* right now, the Rod Serling TV show. Also, working on a book on science fiction film generally.

I think one of the reasons why I'm interested in science fiction film is because the narration of science fiction film because, and this is an issue for science fiction literature, too, the narration has to give a lot of exposition to set up the extrapolation of the alternative world and has to find ways to do that. Often, it's done by suggestion and relies on the spectator to make the connections and to do the extrapolation. I think that science fiction film, therefore, actually engages the spectator in a cognitive way more than any other genre.

Seth Feldman: That's really interesting. I like that idea. You, in addition to publishing all these things you've published, you've had a whole other career as an editor.

Barry Grant: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Seth Feldman: Could you talk about that and how you got into editing and the value of doing that and how it's helped other people?

Barry Grant: I got into editing through editing my own books. What I discovered immediately was that editing is largely undervalued. The general perception among those who haven't done it is that editors basically, they take things, they put them together. That's how they edit but when you're truly editing a book, you want to bring things together to make a cohesive whole.

You're editing individual essays and trying to bring out the best that the writer has written but you're also trying to make connections between the various essays. I discovered that I had a felicity in doing this. Then, I began editing while I was on the editorial board for Wayne State University Press and eventually became series editor. Then, my concept of editing expanded beyond editing my own work to editing the work of others and also to soliciting work from people.

To me, I've always felt that teaching was actually only one part of our job as academics. There's teaching, service, and publication. I've always taken the

service seriously. Part of the service to the field is helping get good work out there and helping shape the field in that way. I've tried to do that.

Seth Feldman: Could you tell me how you go about working with an individual film?

Barry Grant: I think when I work with individual films, which, for the most part but not exclusively, for the most part have been genre films. What I've tried to do is to extract the richness of the text by putting myself in the position of a reader of the film who is somebody who has the knowledge of the generic tradition. Then, I look at the film. I see that the film is mobilizing the generic tradition in some way, either invoked by making a reference or an homage or by, oh, varying a convention or repeating a convention.

When you talk about the intertext that are being mobilized by a film, then you find all these points of entry and points of comparison. It leads you other places. I think that's how I demonstrated that genre films are actually rich texts that we can talk about. That's always been my strategy.

Seth Feldman: I want to talk about, I guess, the future of film studies, given that you've worked in so many different areas of it. First of all, what do you see as the discipline today? How is it integrated with cultural studies, for instance?

Barry Grant: Mm-hmm (affirmative). At one point, if I can go back to that history of the departmental mutations at Brock, we had thought of calling ourselves Cultural Studies, which would be the umbrella for everything. This immediately raised the ire of every other department in the humanities. They said, "We do cultural studies, and also there's no such thing as cultural studies." That squashed that whole idea.

But I think now, it's obviously a different landscape. I think if we look at what's happened to SCMS, for example, it's a kind of microcosm of what's going on in the discipline at large. Society for Cinema Studies is now Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

If you look at the program for the last few years, you find that we have panels on every aspect of media. Film is just one little part of that. I think that's good in the sense that it's contextualized film within the rest of the media landscape, which is obviously important now with all the transmedia things going on, but on the other hand, I think it's watered down film studies to some extent. Film now becomes just another medium to be discussed in the overall media landscape.

Also, I find that a lot of the politics is missing from film studies now because people are talking about this sitcom and this long form TV show and so on. I'm not seeing the evaluation. This is why Robin Wood was important to me because he not only was a close reader of text, he could evaluate texts. I'm

worried about the lack of evaluation, especially in the contemporary cultural and political context.

Seth Feldman: That's interesting. In the terms of your career, have you seen the role of film change in that political context?

Barry Grant: I think, when we were studying film, there was no question that cinema could be political, that cinema was a medium of ideas, and people went to films and I'm not talking about film studies scholars now but generally the population went to movies and they talked about them.

Now, people went to see Avatar. They said, "Really? There's a political message in Avatar?" They debated whether you could talk about it politically or not. In popular cinema now, I think it's a lot of distraction. We're being distracted from the politics and we always were but people are being distracted more now than in the past.

Seth Feldman: What is the text today? You made the differentiation between, I think, classic feature film shown in a theater and a miniseries TV. Why isn't that part of the kind of text you're looking to or why is it or what do they have to do with one another?

Barry Grant: I think they do. I mean, they're both visual, narrative storytelling forms. There are differences obviously because of the mode of transmission and reception but also because one is longer than the other. We do have six-hour films. I remember going to *Our Hitler* here in Toronto. I said, "Never again will I sit through a six-hour film," but so I think that, the texts are essentially the same. I'm more interested in cinema in the classic sense. I think there were some great long-form TV shows that rival the best of films, like *The Wire*, for example but now, there are so many and the whole idea of binge watching, for example, is really taking us in a different direction from watching with focused intention.

Seth Feldman: Has that changed the nature of teaching or the nature of students, actually? How has that changed over the course of your career?

Barry Grant: Yeah. I think things have changed with students. For example, they're much less interested in the history. They're not interested in looking at silent films. They're not interested in early sound films. They want contemporary films. These are the films they go to. Those are the ones they want to talk about.

They have a harder time. Everyone laments the writing skills of students these days. I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about that but I think what's happened with teaching is that we've tried to accommodate students more because of their diminished skills, certain kinds of skills, so we give shorter essays.

Now, I know in some film studies classes, we have true or false exams. We used to give essay exams. Students can write short papers instead of long essays. We find ways to accommodate them but I think it has to do with the attention span of students.

Seth Feldman: What do you see as evolving in present-day culture as a way of presenting narrative and as a way of transmitting values through film and television?

Barry Grant: I think where narrative visual storytelling form is going to go is in gaming and virtual media so that, as in gaming, we interact with the narratives. In fact, I did work on several video games and am working on one now, hopefully in which the player will be able to interact with characters in the game.

Seth Feldman: You're designing these games?

Barry Grant: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I worked on the camera systems.

Seth Feldman: Okay. Where do you see all this going? What would you tell somebody who's entering the discipline today and going to teach film?

Barry Grant: I think they need to not be a specialist in a particular area. I mean, obviously, they have to have something that's going to define their research when they're looking for jobs but they need to be able to teach in all areas because we're having fewer and fewer tenure-track jobs. Faculty, in order to get those jobs, they have to be able to teach a range of courses. If you look at the departments now. We've fought for departments of film studies. Now, they're being folded into screen studies or media studies. So, film becomes one part of that. They have to be able to fit into that kind of landscape.

Seth Feldman: Another thing you've done a lot of is work in SCMS and other film organizations. How do you see the field as having organized itself over all these years?

Barry Grant: SCMS, at the beginning, was Society of Cinematologists, was quite different from what it is now. I was on the executive when we voted to change the name. I was certainly concerned. I thought it would open up the discipline to things we were already doing anyway and to other academics. It certainly has. The society has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade but it seems to be so splintered right now. It's going in so many different directions.

Seth Feldman: How have film teaching technologies changed what you've done over the years?

Barry Grant: God! That's an interesting question, Seth, because I think it really has. When we started teaching film, depending on what the classroom design was like, we were basically using 16 millimeter projectors. I remember teaching a course on silent cinema. I had this 16 millimeter Bell & Howell that was breaking down all the time. I was showing, I think it was *Die Nibelungen*. Of course, the take-up

reel started not to work so I stuck a pencil in it. I spent the whole time just taking up the reel, otherwise we couldn't watch the film.

One challenge was the technology. Another challenge was getting the films in the first place. Now, we have libraries of DVDs but back then, you had to order the film so you had stacks of all the catalogues from the different companies. We had a staff person whose job it was to book the films from the different distributors.

In my documentary course, I wanted to teach Wiseman's *Law and Order*. I told the person to please book this film. I take the film. I'm on my way to class. I put the film on the projector. The light comes up. The film starts. Here comes Ronald Reagan riding out of the horizon on a horse. This was some B Western called *Law and Order*, so we've had mistakes like that in the past.

But I think one thing I would point out about recent changes in teaching is at one point, maybe about 10 years ago, I had a sabbatical leave. When I came back, I noticed that a lot of faculty were now using PowerPoint in class. This hadn't been done before. This was a new technology. I thought the PowerPoint could be used really in interesting ways.

For one thing, PowerPoint was changing the way people were teaching because now, you can have images behind you at any point as you were teaching but it was having a negative effect on a lot of teaching because people who didn't understand how to use the medium were basically, they were putting quotes on their slides and they were saying them. They were repeating what was on the slide.

The way I used it in my teaching was only images. They were in counterpoint to what I was saying or they elaborated on what I was saying but it meant that students had to come to class. I posted the PowerPoints after the lectures but they would make no sense if they didn't hear the context in which they existed.

Then, I was teaching in two levels at the same time. I was able to use images, to play off of what I was saying. I think that has been a really useful way to use PowerPoint.

Seth Feldman: Is there anything missing in the technology of film teaching that you'd like to see to make your life easier or make everybody's life easier?

Barry Grant: Yeah. It wouldn't make my life easier because I'm retired now but I can't really think of anything. We can embed clips in our PowerPoints now. We can go to streaming websites and have the class watch the whole film or part of it. I think these are all great boons for teaching film. I wish, actually, I was teaching now because I'd be able to use them.

Seth Feldman: I have one point. Just started using YouTubes. Although the quality isn't quite as good, you think of something and you go to the YouTube. You're illustrating your ideas with the actual film.

Barry Grant: Exactly, yeah.

Seth Feldman: There's also students in the room who have got a computer. At one point, I said something about a film being lost. A student in the back, "No, it isn't. I've got it here on YouTube." We showed it.

Barry Grant: That's great but then you have to deal with students doing their social media stuff on their computers, so that's an issue to negotiate as well.

Seth Feldman: Thank you, Barry.

Barry Grant: Oh, thank you very much, Seth.