

J. D. Connor: Hi, my name is J.D. Connor. I'm an assistant professor in the Film and Media Studies program at Yale University. I'm here with Charles Musser, professor in Film and Media Studies, in Theater Studies, in American Studies at Yale University. It's April 2, 2016 and we are in the Hilton in Atlanta, Georgia. Professor Musser is well known for his publications in ... and, I hope I got the whole list ... early cinema, the history of African-American cinema, theatrical and non-theatrical exhibition and even more recently, documentary in the environment, the arrival of modernism and female performance and cinema and American politics. It's a real pleasure to be here with Charlie today, and we're going to start by asking the question that we should start with, which is how did you get started in cinema studies?

Charles Musser: Yeah, as I was going to college, I had an apprentice to a potter. I was working every day as a potter. Then, I went to Yale, and to my surprise, there was no facilities there to do that. I started looking around for different things to do. Tried sculpture, which was disastrous. Photography, which was interesting, but I began to be a projectionist for the Yale Film Society and then I also began ... Actually, I should say first I made posters for the Yale Film Society. Then, I learned that you could get paid to watch films by projecting them so I became a member of the Yale Film Society doing that. Then, my girlfriend at the time, Alexis Krasilovsky, said I really should take this course with Jay Leyda. The first course I took with Jay Leyda was *Problems and Methods of American Film History*, which is actually basically the very course I now teach to our graduate students. It was a graduate course. I took it as an undergraduate.

J. D. Connor: It was the first course you ever took?

Charles Musser: It was the first course I took, right.

J. D. Connor: What had served as the introduction to film studies that gave you enough movies to have watched to make that course even plausible?

Charles Musser: I think the demands were relatively low. Yale was, and I think this was true with a lot of universities, an incredibly rich environment for film viewing. We had several films shown every night. It was a really different kind of psychology because if you didn't see that film then, you wouldn't know when you could see it again. Of course, every film was important for some reason. Every night, you would go and see a couple films, and then the Law School Film Society had brought in stars in the afternoons. Yves Montand would come in, and Peter Friedkin would come in, and Jean-Luc Godard would come in. Under these circumstances, one wasn't necessarily the best student in the classroom.

J. D. Connor: Got it. You don't go straight through as an undergraduate and there isn't a film major for you, right?

Charles Musser: Right. Exactly. Film was really quite new at Yale. Stan Lawder, I think, was hired in History of Art in 1967, 68. Jay Leyda had just arrived. There was an MFA

program in the School of Art, which was just getting started in filmmaking, which wouldn't last that long but was there. Those were the kinds of filmmaking courses that I could take. Michael Roemer showed up fairly, at least in my awareness, pretty late in terms of what was going on there. It was a really vital time. Stan Lawder was bringing in Brakhage and every kind of experimental filmmaker on an almost weekly basis. I don't know, it was like \$7.00 or something, and he would fill the art gallery lecture hall. Everyone somehow knew that film was where it was at. Not necessarily in the classroom, but that also was changing.

You could create your own major back then if that major didn't exist. It was called Division Four major. Me and one other person in my year were Division Four majors in film studies.

J. D. Connor: Then, you don't go one, two, three, four years?

Charles Musser: No. I think this was probably common of a lot of students that my parents thought this was a really bad program of study, that I was never going to find a job in the film industry, and that I should really grow up and become a lawyer since I couldn't because a doctor because of my weak stomach. Meanwhile, the major problem at Yale was that there was really no way of teaching people the basic technical stuff that you needed to know, which has changed but back then it was like how to sync dailies. Of course, it turned out that the people they hired, these directors, didn't know how to sync dailies so there was no one there. Some grad student, to show you the trick ... There was this constant drumbeat on one side from my parents and this other sense of I wasn't really learning the craft.

At the end of my junior year, which I left and I moved to New York to seek fame and fortune in the film industry. It was just possible to do that because my draft number was high enough, even though it was pretty low, so that I no longer had to worry about the draft.

J. D. Connor: What year is that that you make the move to New York?

Charles Musser: I went to Yale in 1969, which is the first year that women were admitted to Yale as undergraduates. Then, three years later in the summer of 72, I moved to New York and started knocking on doors to find work. Actually, the first door I knocked on, I got a job. Basically I was syncing up footage of blown up hands and feet. Just to put it in perspective. I got a job as a PA on an independent feature film called *Groove Tube*. I moved down and I got a job working for Sam Lake, who owned the World Theater before showing *Deep Throat*. Porn had just gone hard core, so Sam Lake had this problem which he had all this soft core film that was no longer commercial. He went out and shot a bunch of inserts, and my job was to-

J. D. Connor: Hardcore inserts for the soft core porn?

Charles Musser: Right. I would cut them into the prints. He had 10 prints of this, I'd cut in the inserts, and then I cut the shore out of the additional material to be shown actually before *Deep Throat* in the World Theater. That was my first editing job.

J. D. Connor: Fair enough.

Charles Musser: Commercial editing job.

J. D. Connor: Commercial editing job, right. Then, do you want to talk a little bit more about the difference between the New Haven film scene that you've described and what the New York film scene is for you in those mid-70s?

Charles Musser: Well, you know, I think that the idea was really to not use the old boy network, which is ironic as it turned out to be, but to just go and knock on doors and find whatever work one can since one was told one couldn't find any work each job. Of course, you needed some basic things on your vita because I often when I said I took these film courses, they would tell me to come back in two years. Then, I walked down the street and kept on knocking on doors. I happened to knock on the door of Leacock-Pennebaker. The "Girl Friday" as they were called, the administrative assistant was called then, looked at my vita and said, "Oh, so you went to Yale. What college are you in?" I said, "I'm in Berkeley College." She said, "Oh, well so was Penny. He'll want to see you."

I was ushered back to the great man, who is an anarchist at heart. He had just rented some space to some people who had come across the country and were making a film about the Vietnam War. He was in the financial state where he was doing the transfers, and he knew that they needed someone to sync the dailies, so I was sent down the hall and met Peter Davis, and was hired for two weeks. The famous line was you're hired for two weeks, not two years. Two years later, the film was in the Cannes Film Festival. I had been transformed by that experience. That was the experience where I really grew up.

J. D. Connor: Right. You haven't said that the film was *Hearts and Minds*.

Charles Musser: The film was *Hearts and Minds*, which won an Oscar. I worked on that five, six days a week. Sometimes I'd come in on Sunday and cut scenes in case they needed them, and some versions of at least two of the scenes I created ended up in the film. I learned from really the best people. Our cutting room where I was syncing dailies at night in New York, because the first year was in New York and the second year we moved out to LA, but the cutting room was being used by Barbara Kopple, who was making *Harlan County*, and Deborah Shaffer, who was working on another film. I became embedded in the New York film scene right then and there.

J. D. Connor: That's an intensely production oriented scene. Are you still then at the end of a long day cutting and syncing? Running out and watching stuff in the evening? Or, there's just not time-

Charles Musser: Some. Well, no. I think then there still was. I should back up a little bit to talk about what the situation was like at Yale because the thing about Jay Leyda was this is a man who actually has made some important films, worked in film for a long time, worked for Eisenstein, made some of his own documentaries, *A Bronx Morning*, for instance. There was Stan Lawder, who I took silent screen from and who really inspired me to get excited about silent film. He also was making experimental films. The idea of integrating critical studies in production was an immediate idea. In other words, I was always interested in doing both. I think not only reading Eisenstein's and Vertov, who embodied this in some kind of ideal way, but then there was the real live examples of Stan Lawder and Jay Leyda. Even though I was focused on production, I don't think that the critical studies side had entirely disappeared.

J. D. Connor: Right. Then we've got you in LA, and at a certain point, the production centric-version of you makes another turn.

Charles Musser: Right. The film finally came to an end. I was exhausted. I didn't understand what it would be like to finish a project. I thought I would feel wonderful and liberated, and in fact, the days were endless and I felt incredibly depressed. I moved back to New York. Some of this is like what do you read? I moved back to New York. I read volume one of *Capital* and Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, and then went back and finished my degree at Yale ... My BA ... and wrote a senior thesis on Russian Formalism and Early Soviet Film theory, arguing that, which was then ... My professor, Peter Demetz, he and Stan Lawder were my advisors, was somewhat skeptical about the ability to integrate Russian formalism and Soviet film theory, but I convinced him at the end, and actually he wanted me to apply to the Comp-Lit department at Yale for a PhD program, which I politely declined.

J. D. Connor: You're done with your BA. You got an Academy Award documentary that you've edited on, and it's taken all of this ... Now, how do you make that next choice?

Charles Musser: Going back was really interesting because my first three years, I was always obsessed about would I be able to make it in the film industry, but when I came back I knew the answer to that. I'd also taken film courses. Peter Davis actually came back and taught at Yale the year I came back as well. He said, "Charlie, you've taken a course with me already. I don't want you to take my course again." Of course, I felt the same way. Actually, when I came back, I didn't take film courses. I took courses in literature, and then worked on that senior essay. I was actually appalled at how much I'd forgotten in terms of writing, spelling, all the basics.

I said this is not good. I'm not going to do this again. When I finished, I moved to New York and by that point, Jay Leyda had been at NYU in cinema studies. Annette Michelson was there, and P. Adams Sitney was there. These were three really major figures, so there was no question in my mind that the place to be in terms of cinema studies was NYU. I wanted to continue in the critical side, and I

could do that in New York, so I basically worked in the industry during the day and took courses at NYU. Not necessarily at night. When I worked on *Hearts and Minds*, Tom Cohen, who was the associate producer, used to see a shrink twice a week. Come hell or high water, I got to go see my shrink. The deal I made in the production where I was editing ... We were in post-production ... was I have to go to my class once a week. I'll make it up.

I was basically almost a part-time grad student in cinema studies. Initially things were so different, initially I had to pay tuition. Then, I began to get tuition relief, but I never got a dime of a fellowship. It was an entirely different world. Yeah, so that's how I was working. I was doing both. In part of *Hearts and Minds*, I had been working on a documentary proposal about Gerry Williams, the potter I apprenticed to, who was actually, I think, a really important member of the American Crafts Movement in the postwar era. He was in New Hampshire. He actually was also an important model for me because during the Vietnam War, he had been a CO and actually gone to Danbury State Prison rather than re-enroll in the draft. He was like a heavy-duty draft resistor.

He grew up in India, where his father was a good friend with Gandhi. He was a kind of Gandhian, non-violence kind of person. In the context of the Vietnam War, this was ... He was also an amazing potter, so I actually was able to get a bi-centennial grant to make a film. I called it the *Bicentennial Potter Film: An American Potter*. I thought it was important that this guy who refused to fight in World War II and was in prison for not enrolling in the military would be called *An American Potter*.

J. D. Connor: That project finishes up and then ... I'm trying to get to *Before the Nickelodeon*.

Charles Musser: Yeah, okay. I get a grant from the NEA to make that film. I shoot it in the summer of 1976, and just finished it at the end of the year. While that film was resting, because I cut it. The way I can afford to make these things is because I cut the films myself. I didn't shoot it. I got someone else to shoot it, but that's like three weeks of shooting versus three months of editing. I started taking Jay Leyda's course on Griffith. I think this was a really important course that Jay did. Tom Gunning's book on DW Griffith came out of that project. He was a year or two ahead of me. The questions I asked when we looked at the Griffith ... What we would do in the Griffith project, in his course, was we would look at every Griffith biograph film in chronological order. We'd do *The Adventures of Dollie*, and then we'd do one after another.

My classmates, when there would be a camera pan, they would say, "Oh, that's the first pan in film history" because Griffith invented everything. That's the first close-up. I had seen enough that I was a little skeptical about this. I went down to the Library of Congress with Ismail Xavier, who was actually the person who induced me to take Jay Leyda's class because actually, the first classes I took at NYU were with Annette Michelson. The first two classes. I imagined myself as being a film theorist at the time. For various reasons, that didn't work out so

well because film theory was changing very quickly, and also there was the proper form of film theory and there was everything else that was wrong. If you were six months behind, you were totally out of date, so if you popped in and out, you were always behind and you always seen as sort of stupid.

J. D. Connor: Your formalist training as a film theoretician is just not in sync with an Annette Michelson and the assimilation in America of a lot of the stuff that's going on in screen with someone else-

Charles Musser: Yeah, I would say with that, right. Annette Michelson who was doing Soviet film theory, I think that worked fine, but yes, the kind of, as David Bordwell will say, slab theory. Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, Barthes was psychoanalytic. It was all feminist film theory. It was all moving very fast, and it was also there was a certain right way to do it that if you had to read all the psychoanalytic theory behind it and of course, it was helpful also to be in France for a year or two and read it in French before it was translated into English. It also was helpful actually if you were a woman because feminist film theory, I think, was the wedge in which women entered our profession in a really important way, which was all fine, but none of those were really working for me for different reasons.

This is, I think, often seen that the historical turn, and particularly a turn to early cinema, like what Tom Gunning and I did. What Tom did, and what I did, and a lot of other people who were in the Griffith project, and ultimately FIAF in 1978, the Brighton Conference, that in some ways this was an opening up of a new area of film studies that was an alternative to the opening up that was going on with feminist film theory.

J. D. Connor: Let's talk about both of those, and you can do them in whichever order. More about going down to the Library of Congress and getting that early archive, or the Brighton stuff. Whichever.

Charles Musser: I was enrolled in this Griffith course, and I went down with a smile, and actually there were two piles. One of them was going to look at the biograph films and one was going to look at the Edison films. Sorry, I got the good end of the stick that time, and I got the Edison films. I started looking at these things, and I began to realize pretty quickly that this could be the basis for another documentary, and also it was the basis for a really interesting paper. I think that this is where having been being a filmmaker turned out to be really valuable. In particular, being a film editor because the question I initially asked was what was the first cut?

What I began to realize was that editing was around before cinema. It was a series of lantern slides. Shot A, Shot B, Shot C. The exhibitor puts them together so that the exhibitor, if you will, is in charge of post production up until 1901, 1903, and beyond particularly when you're dealing with lantern slides as opposed to film or lantern slides and film. I think that helped me understand what was going on in the early years, at least in a particular way. This is not a

model that everyone, I think, has fully grasped but I would risk my life on the accuracy on this assessment of what was going on.

Porter made this move very slowly. It was a step by step move, and I realize that these films were very short and that this could maybe be the basis for a documentary, and I also wrote a paper about it. I had problems with people being interested in the documentary. Someone said a thousand people would never see this film. It's really obscure. Then, I submitted the paper to one of the earliest Society for Cinema Studies Student Awards for Scholarly Writing, and it won. That was very meaningful for me because it meant that somehow what I was doing was recognized as being productive and worthwhile. I remember opening the envelope and a check falling out, and realizing I had won. I actually almost got fired, though, because that time I was back out in LA working as a line producer/editor on a series called *Between the Wars* about American foreign policy between World War I and World War II.

One day, we were waiting for stuff to come in at the very beginning, and I said I'm just going to use this day to rewrite this paper one last time. I did, and the guy said if I ever catch you doing this again, you are out on your ass. I didn't do it again.

J. D. Connor:

Now we've got three different kinds of institutions at work here. We've got scholarly institutions, NYU and Yale. We've got the world of documentary independent kind of work and some of the state funders that go with that like the NEA, and SCS as a third important thing. Can you talk a little bit about the community that you're putting together by patching together these different things? Are there people that we haven't mentioned yet who were really important, or is it just a Venn diagram with three circles and you right in the middle?

Charles Musser:

No. There's a real community. Again, New York was a real vital part of film culture. Actually, just before I got the job on *Hearts and Minds*, I wrote film reviews for the *Yale Daily News*. I got into all the films for free for the New York Film Festival in the fall of 72 as a film reviewer, and I met Michael Peyser, who would then go on to work with Woody Allen and is now a full professor out at USC. A professor of producing. He was at Hampshire College doing the same thing I was, and we sat next to each other. For a number of years, we were very close friends. He helped me get a job on *Ragtime* and helped me get a job on *Zelig*.

Then, there was the downtown scene. Going to *Collective for Living Cinema*, *Millennium*, *Anthology*. It was a very immersive, multifaceted, very diverse culture in terms of film.

J. D. Connor:

Okay, so now you've got your documentary. You've got your essay, the [crosstalk 00:26:29] of the book. Do you want to talk about now how that becomes the big project?

Charles Musser:

Yeah, I can a little bit. I think one other person who then became important in here was Noël Burch and *The Theory of Film Practice*. That book was completely inspirational in terms of what I was reading. It also provided a framework in which you could easily understand what was going on in early cinema. You understood how to articulate it. An important moment in here was I write this essay, and then I go off for about a year to LA to work in the industry, and then I come back and we all end up in Brighton at the Brighton Conference in 1978, in which we go and we watch all these films from 1900 to 1906, fiction films. Noël Burch is there. It's hard for me, it was like I was sitting next to God.

We went and hung out together and did a few things. I just could not imagine that I'm doing this with Noel Burch. It was a larger than life experience. Of course, Noël, André Gaudreault and I all had essays on *Life of an American Fireman*, which I think approached it from quite different points of view. That was a sense at that moment that we were a part of some community. A lot of us were graduate students. Tom Gunning was still a graduate student, would be for some time. Me, Jon Gartenberg. There were a lot of people there, so that Noël was there was really important. Of course, what's interesting in all this is that Annette Michelson wrote the introduction for *A Theory of Film Practice* and was really involved in it, and was a big Noël Burch fan.

Noël Burch had turned to early cinema, and Annette told me at one point that I had thrown a somewhat promising graduate student career away on this early cinema stuff. She was able to discount Noël because of who Noël was. Then, when Thomas Elsaesser did his book on *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, she realized that something bigger was happening. He just won the Jay Leyda prize, and this would be his next project was I think a sobering thing for her. In any case, that created this network, which we found different ways of meeting and exchanging. It was complicated in a certain way, but we all showed up with our papers. Noël was able to get his published first. The debt that we had to Noël was not in terms of his paper on early cinema, but it was *A Theory of Film Practice*, which we all I think would say enabled us to do what we were able to do.

J. D. Connor:

Because it gave you a theory of what had been lost, not simply a primitive thing that would grow to what-

Charles Musser:

It was really not a historical paradigm. It was like saying okay, you can have a continuous time moving from Shot A to Shot B, or you can have a gap in time, or you can go back in time. A gap in time or go back in time so you have a repetition. You could just take this *Life of an American Fireman*, and map it onto the various categories he had. Rather than just seeing it as this guy doesn't know what he's doing, you said no, look at this. It's repeated. It happens again and again. This guy does know what he's doing. This is really different. This is interesting. This is important that what did this happen? To me, the reason why it happened was because he was someone who had been an exhibitor and knew how to assemble films in a particular kind of way, and took those skills and

moved it. Then, when he moved into production as a cameraman and putting films together, he brought some of those editorial skills with him and applied them.

This is why Porter is really the first filmmaker because he's the person ... In the United States ... Obviously, it's happening in the UK, it's happening in France, but because of the particular circumstances in the United States, where Edison is putting all the competition out of business through his patent wars, Porter was in this unique place in the United States and had these skills, so really applied them in really radical ways. In a certain way, this is why I think of Porter and Griffith actually having a lot in common because each took a certain system of representation and applied it in the most extreme way, in which they were coping with issues of simultaneity but found totally opposite solutions. Each of those solutions in some way was radical and appropriate for their particular moment in which they were working.

J. D. Connor: Great. We got you with an intellectual network. We got you with what you would probably regard is the first foundational argument that you're making. What comes next?

Charles Musser: What comes next? Well, I mean I think that Brighton was also a wake up call because I had been ahead of everyone else, if you want. This is how I saw it. I go off for a year and work in the film industry, and I come back and everyone, Tom Gunning and all these people have been continuing. In fact, there was a pre-Brighton screening at the Museum of Modern Art of all early American films between 1900 and 1906, which I couldn't attend because I was out in LA. If I hadn't been out there, I think I might have been the official representative of the American group. Instead, Tom was the official representative. This wasn't a problem in the sense that it wasn't just delegated to one person. I also was able to contribute my essay. It was very collaborative. It was a group. It was a group thing, but FIAF expected to have a particular person, and I think if I recall correctly, for the US it was Tom. I think Canada may have been André and so on.

I began to buckle down a little bit. What was interesting is that as I tried to raise money before the Nickelodeon and I didn't have any success, once I won the SCS Student Award for Scholarly Writing, I showed the proposal to the Museum of Modern Art to get their imprimatur, and also they had material I wanted to use. Suddenly, they were very interested in the film. I got I think a letter of support from them, and I was able to get a NYSCA grant. Also, there was meanwhile this problem of moving forward with what I hoped would be my PhD. I applied to the PhD program at NYU because I was in the master's program. Initially I was turned down. You only got two chances. I was turned down having just won the SCS Student Award for Scholarly Writing. It says something about the status of history even in a department that had Jay Leyda and William K. Everson that that happened.

Also, it wasn't just history actually. I think a lot of it had to do with filmmaking and also being a part-time student. There were a number of things that contributed to, if you will, my marginal status. Then, *Cinema Journal* published my essay and I simply resubmitted the same thing with the published essay, and they accepted me. I think that part of it also was when you have to do a rationale, my rationale was I was interested in being a scholar practitioner. You know, someone who made films and also wrote about cinema, and that this was really with great skepticism in NYU and cinema studies despite the fact, right, of Jay Leyda and this history that they all were a part of, that they would bring Noël Burch in to teach a course at one point, I believe. Peter Wollen. They brought Peter Wollen to teach a course. That's for sure.

Anyway, where does that place me? I'm able to get the funding to make the film. I finally get into the PhD program, but I'm still seen as this problematic figure. Then, somehow, *Before the Nickelodeon* gets in the New York Film Festival and had its premier, I submitted the film as a work in progress. Then, when they accepted it, I had to spend another \$25,000 or some substantial amount of money to finish it, and go into debt-

J. D. Connor: Where does that money come from if it's the NYSCA grant?

Charles Musser: The NYSCA grant gets me so far. I borrowed a little money from my parents, and I had made some money from *An American Potter*. *An American Potter* actually turned out to be a very successful film. It won a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival. I sold over 100 prints. I had 30 prints in circulation on a rental basis during the school year. It created its own kinds of problems because it won best in category fine arts, both at the American Film Festival and at the San Francisco Film Festival. This upset a lot of people who were making documentaries about fine artists. Actually, after my film won, the American Film Festival created a separate category for best film about crafts so that the people that made films about artists wouldn't get so bent out of shape. That provided some money, and I went into debt.

Basically, while I was finishing *Before the Nickelodeon* in the post production process, getting the third answer print, I was also cutting two other films for other people to make enough money to pay my bills as they were coming in. I just remember being euphorically exhausted at a certain point.

J. D. Connor: It all converges, and your graduate year is done-ish.

Charles Musser: Well, what happens then is ... I remember this very clearly. I went down to Cinema Studies at NYU and I said, "My film's in the New York Film Festival." They said, "Fabulous, what's the feature?" I said, "Well, my film is the feature." They said, "Oh, well what sidebar is it in?" No, it's in the main event. You are our star graduate student. It was like from being the problem graduate student to being the star graduate student in about two minutes, and it was very ironic to me because actually I had looked outside NYU. I was on good terms with David

Bordwell and what was going on in Wisconsin. I had been out to LA a lot of times. I had Bob Rosen, who was running the UCLA Film and Television Archive, was living with a potter. I invited myself over and showed them *An American Potter*. Bob Rosen and I became good close friends. I had this whole other network, which really had very little to do with NYU, because I was seen as the problem graduate student.

For instance, they wouldn't hire me as a TA, or as a RA. Part of that was Jay Leyda, who felt that it would be better for me if I worked in the film industry. I could make more money and I would learn more working in the film industry than as a TA or RA. That had its own kinds of problems, too. When I finally started teaching, and really if that film had not ... What happened was because *Before the Nickelodeon* turned out to be such a success, a lot of things happened. You have to understand my worst review unfortunately was in the *New York Times*. Carrie Rickey called it one of the best documentaries of the year, and I got consistently good reviews in the *LA Times*, the *Chicago* ... All over the country. Every place but the *New York Times*. I was suddenly a kind of star. I finished my dissertation. The film came out in 82, I finished my dissertation, which was basically the book that went with the film. It was a book-film project.

They were both called *Before the Nickelodeon*, but the dissertation was called "Before the Nickelodeon, Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company". The film was called *Before the Nickelodeon, the Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter*. I guess here we might, as in passing, mention that this first essay that was published, *The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter*, was I think an important moment in which the term early cinema came important. I think I had stumbled across a term that became important. I didn't necessarily define it. I had it defined in my own mind what I meant, but I don't think I defined it as clearly as I could have, and probably should have for a more general film studies environment.

J. D. Connor: Now, we're to the mid-80's. You have a PhD, but the trajectory is still not straight down the line.

Charles Musser: Again, because of *Before the Nickelodeon*, I'm able to get three book contracts. There was this *History of American Cinema* 10 volume series that Charles Harpole was doing. I don't know what it was, but the badge of honor was to be asked to do it and turn it down. Yeah, everyone, they would turn it down. I couldn't believe this because there was substantial money involved. Ultimately, John Fell, who was supposed to do volume one and felt very ambivalently about it, didn't really want to do it ... I wanted to do it. He was very kind and stepped aside because I had this reputation. Even though I was a graduate student and because the series was in such trouble in some ways, I was able to do volume one, and then Eileen Bowser did volume two, and Richard Koszarski did volume three. We did these three volumes together. That was one book contract. Another one-

J. D. Connor: *The Emergence of Cinema?* Sorry.

Charles Musser: Yes, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. That was one. Even before that actually, I had known Chick Callenbach for a long time. When I was an undergraduate, I had actually asked him if I could do a book review for *Film Quarterly* of the film theory of Lev Kuleshov. That didn't quite work out, but I think when I was out in California, I met him. He handed me this book that he didn't think was going to be very good or very interesting by Richard Koszarski. Richard, I had had dinner with and I was a big fan of Richard Koszarski's, so I reviewed ... I think it was probably the first book review I did was of his Erich von Stroheim book. Richard is a fabulous, fantastic historian. In a way, I should say I think he provided a certain kind of rigor. In fact, throughout my professional life, I've often relied on Richard. When something got into film history, I knew it was going to be put through the ringer and mistakes were going to be found, and directions were going to be pointed to.

Anyway, that was Richard. Anyway, we had been talking about UC Press publishing my dissertation as a book, and in fact, that's what happened. In fact, that book was done almost two years before *The Emergence of Cinema*, but this was at a moment when they were trying to go move over to digital, to computers, so that they could take my text that was just beginning to be done on a computer and then put it into the book without typesetting. Learning how to do that turned out to take a lot longer for them than they expected, so even though it was done almost two years before *The Emergence of Cinema*, *The Emergence of Cinema* was published first. Then, the third book, which was with Princeton University Press, was Lyman Howe called *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and The Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition*.

I had gotten to be friendly with Carol Nelson, who made this documentary about Lyman Howe, and she got some money to do a study guide. She had some research, but she didn't really have a way of going about it. We agreed that we would write what became *High Class Moving Pictures*, but basically ... Not basically. I ended up writing the book, but you have to see it. She was the producer. She was the person who found the money. She had found a lot of the research. I obviously did a lot, lot more research and had the conceptual apparatus to think about this. It's by me with Carol Nelson, which I think is probably accurate if you understand what that means. Again, this is a book that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for her. She was essential to the book.

I had these three projects. As a graduate student basically, I had these three book contracts. The books all came out within eight months of each other. I was indexing them back to back. First, *The Emergence of Cinema*. Then, *Before the Nickelodeon* and then *High Class Moving Pictures*. In the midst of that, I don't know where, but my daughter was born. I was in my office at 2:00 in the morning indexing one of these books and I got a call from her mom. "My water's broke." We ran off to the hospital. The joke was which weighed more, the three books or my daughter, and could I keep the production up so the books would

continue to weigh more? It didn't last for very long. In any case, yeah, actually in fact what happened is of course the book production fell off substantially quite radically as a result of that fourth achievement.

J. D. Connor: Right. All right, so-

Charles Musser: Which is turning out to be probably more important for cinema and media studies than all three books of those together since my daughter, that daughter, is now ABD and Media Culture Communications at NYU. The rival department to my department.

J. D. Connor: The rival. All right, do we want to finish the getting you hired somewhere part of this?

Charles Musser: Okay. Yeah, I made a decision after I couldn't get being a TA or an RA in cinema studies to not really look for a job until I had my PhD in hand. I remembered, because it was one of the great things about Yale at that time, that I could apply to teach a college seminar. I did. I applied to teach a college seminar in Early Cinema, and David Rodowick was there. Actually, David Rodowick was there and then he left. Antonia Lant, who now teaches at NYU, was there for a year and was being DUS. She was DUS while I was teaching this course in the spring of 87, I think. I got my dissertation in the fall of 86, taught that course in the spring of 87, and then NYU, which I think to its credit was very supportive of at least some of their PhD students that were graduates that hadn't yet gotten enough teaching or gotten established enough so that they would give them some adjunct teaching.

George Stoney, who had been teaching this year long course on documentary, had other things he wanted to do for the next couple of years. I was hired to take over George Stoney's course. I taught those. I taught this two part American documentary, or documentary in general. One was history, and then the second one I brought in documentary filmmakers. This is one of the reasons why I think they hired me, because by that point I knew a lot of them and the ones that I didn't know, I had some kind of basis to bring them in. I brought in Barbara Kopple, I brought in Robert Drew, I brought in Pennebaker. I brought in all the most interesting people who were in New York. Then, I started teaching at Columbia as well. Annette Insdorf, who had been teaching at Yale and was in fact, at that point teaching between Yale and Columbia, she hired me.

I guess another thing that was happening in here that's worth mentioning is I also got to be good friends with James Schamus. Not that long after Hannah was born, I loaned him my life savings so he could produce his first film, *The Golden Boat*. I loaned him my life savings. I did not loan this to the production. I said, "Jim, I don't know what's going to happen in this film, but I'm convinced that you'll be able to pay me back.", which he did actually very quickly with very decent interest.

J. D. Connor: You financialized James Shamus early on?

Charles Musser: Yeah, right. He wanted to actually take *High Class Moving Pictures* and turn it into a film. That was his idea. It didn't get too far, but he was always looking for angles. He'd find scripts that hadn't been produced by famous film directors and he'd try and put that together. He was constantly packaging things. What I realized was that he was at a whole different level. I was stuck in the past where you tried to get these grants from arts organizations, and those grants were getting smaller and smaller. They weren't really meant for me, either. In any case, which I didn't really quite understand. They were looking to give voice to groups that had not really had voices before. Women, people of color. That didn't mean there weren't lots of white male filmmakers getting grants, but I'm just saying those grants were getting smaller and smaller under Richard Nixon and ALA.

James had figured the way the game was going to be played. He figured it out in a way that was way ahead of me. Yeah, I was teaching at Columbia, and I was teaching at NYU. Then, I got an NEH fellowship, which in part ended up being used to help finish those books than to do the next project. Then, this position at Yale came open, and I had worked with Jay on this *Before Hollywood* project. This is the kind of way I used to make my living because I was totally freelance. I did some programming, a Porter retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, and the American Federation for the Arts had this money to put together a five part series of early cinema called *Before Hollywood*. That's Sam McElfresh's title, not mine. *Before Hollywood, American Cinema to 1915*. They approached Jay to be the curator, and they thought maybe I could help them.

Jay said he'd only do it if I could be his co-curator, which was very generous of him. In any case, there I met Alan Trachtenberg. Alan Trachtenberg who was Mr. American Studies at Yale. I met a lot of other people that Jay knew, and got much more connected to a kind of cultural history realm. Alan and I would periodically talk about what was happening up at Yale. Not specifically in terms of "Oh, is there going to be a job there for me?", but in terms since I had been an alum, what's happening to film studies now? David Rodowick was at Yale, and came up for tenure. This was at the moment at the height of the culture wars and the Benno Schmidt administration. Don Kagan was dean of Yale College, and he thought that basically the 20th Century shouldn't be taught in college, that that was too recent. His modernist on the Senior Appointments Committee was someone who did Renaissance Studies. That was modernist.

For whatever reason, David was immensely popular and successful, and he came up for tenure actually a little faster than he needed to. There was this huge battle around David, and ultimately they lost the battle around David, but they won the war because this position then came open, and I applied. By that point, I was actually teaching for a year as a visiting assistant professor out at UCLA. This was 91-92. Scott Bukatman, because I was unavailable. They had asked me but I already had the UCLA gig. Scott Bukatman ended up at Yale

teaching there for the year. When I got on the short list, I actually tried to talk myself off the short list. I said, "Look, Scott is fabulous. I know this. You had him for a year now. You know this. You got to hire him." I'm a Yale graduate, so help me out there. I'm trying to hold onto this job at UCLA. If I have to come back and do a job talk, I'm going to miss my first couple days of classes, and that's going to be really bad.

The financial situation out there and the UC system is not good, and I really need your help. We went around and we found a way somehow, but they wouldn't so I came back, and I heard that Scott had been throwing his con around in a way that Jon Butler did not approve of. I showed up and everyone was sick. I went up for a job interview and the only person who was there really was Howard Lamar, this historian who as it turned out was about to become president of Yale. I ended up arriving at Yale on a first name basis with Howard. Yeah, so I showed up at Yale, and a week after I'd been offered the job ... Or, maybe two weeks after I'd been offered the job. Like around the time I accepted ... Benno Schmidt announced that he was stepping down as university president and that meant that Don Kagan was a dead duck. A lame duck, I should say. He was also ... That's not fair.

He was a lame duck. David, who was everyone's most beloved figured, who had passed through American Studies, Comp Lit and Film Studies unanimously only to be killed in the Senior Appointment Committee. The only thing in the way of bringing David back was me. I walked into a situation that was not easy. I have to say at the same time that David was a total mensch. When things were difficult, I would call David and David would give me advice and support, and sympathy, and "No, you're understanding things correctly. This is what's going on." I was there at Yale. This was the fall of 92.

J. D. Connor: Now, 23 years, 24 years-

Charles Musser: 23 years. Okay, I mean the thing about, if we're talking about politics which I guess I like to do and we've done a certain amount of, the thing was that a lot of people had gone through there teaching film at Yale. Really impressive people. Jay Leyda, Don Crafton, David Rodowick, and none of them had gotten tenure. Not immediately, but at some point, Angela Dalle Vacche also did not get tenure. The question is what did you need to do to get tenure? It seemed to me that what you needed to do was have a film studies program that was big enough and complicated enough so that you needed a senior person to run it. You needed to also somehow make film studies inside the curriculum as opposed to outside like it was when I was there, somehow vital. In a way, it was disconcerting for them, but I had three books. I had enough books to get tenure.

They couldn't say shut up, and if you want to get tenure, you write those books. They also couldn't say, "Well, look. This is Yale. You don't understand Yale. You just keep your nose to the grindstone and don't do things, and stay out of trouble, and you'll figure out how Yale works" because I was a Yale

undergraduate. What I wanted to do, and what I did, was basically build a film studies program that was the kind of film studies program I would have liked to have when I was there as an undergraduate. The students were really angry, so they would walk into my office and start screaming at me. "This is not a film studies program. This is a film criticism program." There were screenwriting courses that were being offered in the college seminars. Anytime a screenwriting course was offered at a college seminar, which was totally unpredictable, every film studies major would try and take it. They'd sometimes take one after another and they were all basically beginning courses.

There was no rhyme or reason to that, and there was no guarantee they would get in. If they weren't in the right college, they might not be able to get in. There was a lot of frustration about that. The first thing I did was I asked the undergraduates to write a petition that I would take to the Dean of Yale college, Brodhead, in which they requested a screenwriting course in film studies. I got that in to Brodhead, the dean, he gave us money. It turned out at the time that Brigitte Peucker, who was basically the CEO ... She was the chair of the film studies program. I was the COO. I was the Director of Undergraduate Studies. It was only an undergraduate program. She was really upset by that, so she went over and told Dick never again. All these students took it, and then they wanted to do senior projects in filmmaking.

This was still somewhat of a controversial issue. They had to meet with the film studies people. Michael Roemer, Brigitte, me, maybe Angela, and say I want to make this. They said, "Well, the script needs work." I said, "Yeah, that's okay. I'm going to work with Marc Lapadula on that." Marc's agreed to work with me on it. One after the other, that was what was happening. Brigitte, to her credit, went back across the street and told Dick Brodhead that in fact we should continue with Marc. Marc now taught one course a year in screenwriting. The way we hired Marc was because there were a number of different people who taught something, playwriting or screenwriting in the college seminars or in the theater studies, and I got them to submit applications, which I turned over to Michael Roemer. Michael Roemer ended up selecting Marc Lapadula. Actually, I was hoping he'd select someone else, but Marc was the person he felt was the only person who could do it.

J. D. Connor: All right. When you get back, and you're going to have tenure, and you're going to make this program more curricularized, it's a totally different generation from that turn of the 1970's version. You could, at that point, just slide on and keep doing the same stuff that you'd been doing up until that point, and instead, your scholarship spreads, and you start eventually going back to making-

Charles Musser: Long time. Well, before this-

J. D. Connor: Maybe we'll talk about the two. [crosstalk 01:01:26] Let's do the scholarship and then the making and then that'll take us to now.

Charles Musser:

Basically, by the time I finished those three books, my connections with the film industry were so out of date that I'd basically left film making, and also, there wasn't time. I was presenting myself as a straight critical studies person, which this film was not unimportant, so I was told at one point by Michael Denning that one of the reasons they hired me was because they had a lot of students who were interested in film making, and so that I understood that was seen as a plus. It was whatever value I had as a scholar, as an academic that did it, but then this other thing was a plus. I think that this scholar practitioner idea has actually come back and has become pretty popular. For a while, I really felt I was a scholar practitioner, but if you haven't made a film ... I really stopped working in the film industry around 1986. By 2001, that's 15 years I haven't done more than watch a film or spend a day or two cutting for a friend of mine.

It's like I was a filmmaker, not I am. All this stuff is happening, these three books are finished in 1990. It's like downloading. It's like the computer was full. There was no room to think about anything else but that, keeping all the names, all the dates in mind. Once all that stuff was downloaded, then I was able to begin to move in different directions. I became interested again in documentary. I had lost a certain kind of interest in it, but Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* was, for me, an incredibly, amazing, important film I found incredibly inspirational and it totally rekindled my excitement about documentary, this feeling that documentary was actually moving in new exciting directions. That was really important. When I was on the film festival circuit, I was at the Berlin Film Festival with *Before the Nickelodeon*. Spike Lee was there with *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barber Shop*. I got to know him a little bit, and he worked with First Run Features that distributed my film.

In fact, he was on the festival circuit doing that and then I came in to pick up some films and First Run Features, and I was showing my film, which was 60 minutes plus a few shorts so we'd have an hour and a half program. They sent me back to pick up the film and there was Spike Lee cleaning my film. This was, if you will, very disconcerting. Also, when people ever think that Spike Lee is arrogant or something like that, I say you don't know. That was obviously a moment I won't forget. I also was blown away by *Do the Right Thing*. I lived in Hell's Kitchen. I live in Hell's Kitchen, 45th between 9th and 10th. I moved there between Bebell and Bebell Film Labs and Motion Picture Enterprises. Actually, if you took a shower the people in Bebell Film Labs could watch you through the window. They were not watching me so much as my girlfriend.

This was the early 70's so we'd wave. Wave back. Anyways, there was *She's Gotta Have It* before that, but I went to see *Do the Right Thing* in a number of different theaters, and it was really quite interesting the different responses. I wrote something for *Cineaste* arguing that it was the best use of film dialectics since Eisenstein's *October*. They thought I was exaggerating so they wouldn't publish the review. Then, they ended up having a round table discussion in which a somewhat edited version of what I wrote ended up in *Cineaste*. That was the first piece I really had the audacity to write about race and

representation. Thinking back about my background, I was not necessarily well suited. I was not well trained in this in terms of my own family background. I also began working with Rae Alexander-Minter, who was in charge of public programming at the New York Historical Society. We did a bunch of public programming.

She is an African-American scholar, and they were giving her a hard time. I was really sympathetic to being given a hard time, because I'd been given a hard time at NYU and elsewhere. We really had this close friendship, so I started showing her ... I showed her my review of *Do the Right Thing* and asked for her feedback. We talked about it, and then she actually moved on to the Paul Robeson Cultural Center at Rutgers, and she wanted to do a centennial exhibition of Paul Robeson. She contacted me and said, "Charlie, we're doing this centennial exhibition. I don't think we should show any of Paul Robeson's films. Don't you agree?" Now, at this point, I had really seen one or two of his films. I said, "No, you need me for this exhibition." Also, if you want to see Paul Robeson perform, how else are you going to see him?

It's like good or bad, you have to show these things. Probably, you just need to think about them. She hired me to begin to curate a show on Paul Robeson. The two Paul Robeson films I'd seen really, I'd seen them out at UCLA where I taught a course on theater and film. I showed *The Emperor Jones*. I noticed that this Micheaux film, *Body and Soul*, was made at roughly the same time that he was performing in *Emperor Jones*. I said gee, wouldn't it be interesting to see what his performance style would be like in *The Emperor Jones*? I had that as a double bill. It immediately became clear to me that *Body and Soul* owed a lot to *Emperor Jones*. Robeson got me interested in Micheaux, and moved me into this path where I read about Micheaux, got involved in *Oscar Micheaux and His circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of The Silent Period*.

All these things were working together. First of all, I did something about *Body and Soul* and *Emperor Jones* for the Robeson catalog. Some of the ideas were there, but I was only some of the ideas and then I turned it into a more elaborate piece, which actually again won the SCMS Scholarly Award for Best Essay. I have to say that in some ideal world, I would think it would be nice if ... We shouldn't have prizes because this is a way of ranking things. Some articles, you know, are really good and they don't win, and others, maybe they're also very good, but they do win but not necessarily in any way that you could predict. It depends upon who the reader is. There's all sorts of good luck and bad luck involved in this. On the other hand, I have to say that the Kovacs Prize, and other things like that, have really been instrumental in me being able to do what I wanted to do because at one point early cinema was seen as destroying your career.

J. D. Connor:

Right. Now, we should talk about the future.

Charles Musser:

Well, I think the 2000's are in some ways a little simpler. First of all, I did *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle*, which came out in 2001. The 1990's, I went back and a lot of stuff ... I think this is out of order now, but I was starting out doing one book, *Before the Nickelodeon*, on early cinema and then I needed to provide the context, and that was becoming unruly. I downloaded a lot of that into *The Emergence of Cinema*. In some ways, these books kept on splitting off, but one thing that was really important was this idea of doing a filmography of Edison Films in the 1890's because it allowed me to avoid a lot of minutiae that otherwise, it might of felt should have been in either *The Emergence of Cinema* or *Before the Nickelodeon*. That came out quite a bit longer in 1997. This is the sorry state of kind of scholar I am because in some ways, the reason I did that book was because I could get a grant to get a laser printer which cost about \$1,000 back then.

That was the rationale. I need a laser printer to do the filmography. What? We're into the 2000s. I think what happens when you become an administrator, if you will. First, I was DUS, Director of Undergraduate Studies, from when I arrived at Yale in '92 to really when I got tenure around 2000. I was mostly writing articles, which is why, for instance, the fact that the piece on *Body and Soul* got some kind of recognition since I wasn't producing books was important. It meant that people realized I had lost it. I wasn't a one-shot pony. I was at Yale teaching everything. I was like the utility infielder, first baseman, pitcher, catcher. I taught Intro to Film Studies, I taught Film Theory and Aesthetics ... That was interesting because at NYU, it was well established that I was a joke as a film theorist. In retrospect, what I realize is that I was interested in the history of film theory, not in showing the incoherence of individual incidents of film theory, which is what Noël Carroll was interested in doing.

I took a couple courses of film theory with Noel Carroll, which were not a happy meeting of minds. At one point, that was one of more major fights with a professor when he refused to appreciate what I was doing with Hugo Munsterberg, which I was comparing business psychology to the photoplay of psychological study because one was being dictated in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Obviously, there was this relationship. Someone else ended up publishing that piece, but in any case, that was the straw that broke the camel's back in terms of our relationship. We don't need to go there all the way.

I was teaching film theory at Yale, Intro. I was teaching Classical Hollywood Cinema. Sometimes, a little documentary. Not that much. I was doing whatever needed to be doing, and meanwhile, I was trying to build a program. Marc Lapadula who taught one course in screenwriting, the students wanted to do a screenplay as a senior project. He was brought in to come in every other week to supervise that. That was the equivalent of two. Then, there was so much demand for his course that he started teaching Intro fall and spring, and then they realized that really the advanced course should meet every week. He went from one to two to four, and then ultimately, they wanted to make him full

time. We added an intermediate course. This was building a program. It was in some ways more diverse than it is now because I would started teaching documentary film workshop. Really from when I arrived, I was told that I needed to supervise a senior project in documentary filmmaking, which obviously I could do as a documentary filmmaker, but I was basically told to do this.

I felt it was always a little bit a part of the effort to break Charlie Musser so we could bring back David Rodowick in the beginning. In any case, by I think the third year, I had six or seven students talking documentary film workshop. What they were doing was doing independent study or a senior project, and to do it, they had to be in the class with me. Then, I turned it into a formal course. Then I went on leave, and they said that they were willing to pay someone a little bit to teach the course while I was on leave. A student that was in the course then was doing a music documentary, and was interested in this, so I called Pennebaker up and asked if he would meet with this student since that's what he really does is music documentary. Penny asked me when he could teach at Yale, and I said this fall. He was in a really bad negotiating position.

Well, obviously he went to Yale, so he also I think saw this as a way of giving back. He came up, and then after a certain amount of time, Chris Hegedus, his partner in personal and professional life ... They co-produce and co-direct films often also ... They started to do this course together, so she would teach it in the fall, which was really good. I understood why. This was an essential partnership for Penny because he is an anarchist. He tells the best war stories of any filmmaker I've ever heard or met. They're never quite the same, but Chris is the person that organizes Hegedus-Pennebaker. As it should be, Hegedus-Pennebaker. She'd get the students launched and then he'd come in and help them finish and tell them war stories.

When I say that, I mean Penny for me was a totally inspirational figure. Every time I worked out in LA, I'd come back to New York, I'd say hello to Pennebaker and he'd take me aside, and he'd show me a film about New York. He showed me *Daybreak Express*. I said I'm so happy to be back in New York. Then, he showed me *Jade*. I said I'm so happy to be back in New York. He made me feel like I had come back into home. We have a somewhat different approach to filmmaking. That's probably even arrogant of me to say, but I'm a huge, huge fan of Pennebaker as a person and of his films in general. *Don't Look Back* is one of my favorite films. Anyway, he was teaching. He came and taught there for eight years, and then commuting up to New York ... as I said, Penne was getting old. Older ... and they had a lot of projects in New York. He's still making films.

They asked to bow out, and I hired Laura Poitras, who had come up for this conference I did in war documentary on Iraq, and showed *My Country, My Country*. This was the soul of the conference in my estimation, so I felt that if I ever had a chance to hire Laura Poitras, I would do that. I hired these three people, and then the crisis of 2008 hit. The financial crisis. The university did a variety of things, and one was that they defunded documentary film workshop.

In effect, they ... I don't want to say fired because that's not quite right, but they let go a woman who was about to win an Oscar, who was preceded by someone else who also just won an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement, Pennebaker. I basically hired two Oscar winning filmmakers, and then had to go back and teach it myself. The university was not prepared to do this. The institutional history was such that I don't think they realized that I had been approved to teach this course, that I originated this course.

I, if you will, book ended D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus and Laura Poitras. This teaching documentary also meant going back to making documentaries to some extent. It's been a gradual process. I was very rusty. It wasn't something I planned to do, but it was something the university, in some ways, forced me to do because it was, in effect, a way of protecting the undergraduate major. I believe, and I have evidence of sorts at least to prove in my own mind, that they were going to get rid of documentary film workshop, move screenwriting out of the Film and Media Studies program into the Creative Writing program in the English department and then take our remaining senior workshop in fiction filmmaking, which was half in school of art and half in film and media studies, and just move it in the school of art since it was a nub. In some ways, and this got lost, what I was trying to do in this period in building an undergraduate major was to create these three workshops that were the capstone courses.

It was very successful, and we still have them. Once you got rid of one, the whole system was going to collapse and we were going to be back where we were almost when I arrived. I felt at risk of losing 15 years of administrative effort. Now, there were other things I did, too. At the risk of boring our listeners, one of the things I did was teaching Intro, I had a lot of TA's. One of them was John MacKay. There were a lot of other people. Karla Oeler. Actually, a lot of TA's before we had our PhD program, they would come and teach my course, TA my course, and I'd flip them to become film professors. John, first of all TA'ed Intro to Film Studies, and then he TA'ed Film Theory and Aesthetics and he came up to me one day and he said, "Look, here's this essay by Althusser," I think it was, "...about Chaplin. It's never been translated. Let me tell you what it said. You'd be interested.", because I had written about Chaplin.

I said "John, that's great." I was on the board of the Yale Journal of Criticism. "Why don't you translate that and do a note?" Actually, he was about to leave academia to become a lawyer. One of the things I had him do was he became the managing editor of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*. He did that translation and the note. I said, "John, that's terrific." Now, Miriam Hansen had told me that there was a lot of untranslated stuff about Chaplin by Benjamin and by Arnheim, and by all these guys. Once he got done with the first one, I had him do the next one, and then the next one. Then, he saw *Man with a Movie Camera* in my Intro to Film Studies course, and then he saw *Enthusiasm* in my Film Theory and Aesthetics course. This was the beginning of his interest in Vertov, which will hit the bookstores any day now.

Basically, I hooked him into film studies, so when he came up for tenure, they didn't want another full time person in Slavic. The other half of what was then the JFE was in Film and Media Studies. That was some of the ways of building the program. Another way was when I arrived, there was a 35 projector, but it was in the art gallery. You had to book it months in advance. You had to rent the room. You had to pay the projectionist. You had to pay two guards. It was like \$800 in 1990 to show a film. It was impossible. They didn't even want the projector there. They also were going to downsize the film studies center into the language lab. They were going to sell off their film collection and basically just have some video. I had to rescue the film study center, and in the process of rescuing it, found a new place for it, which was the Whitney Humanities Center. The idea then was to take the projector that was useless basically in the art gallery and move it over to the Whitney Humanities Center, which I did.

Then, once I got it over there, then I went to Dick Brodhead and I started asking money to buy prints, which became the basis of our 35-millimeter collection. Here I was, getting these people who were supposed to do Comp-Lit and suddenly they were doing film studies. David had been in Comp-Lit, American Studies and Film Studies. I was only in American Studies and Film Studies. Comp-Lit was getting a little jealous. I don't mean to exaggerate here, but it was getting a little jealous. Angela Della Vacche had Dudley Andrew apply for the position of Comp-Lit, and they decided to hire him. He had an infrastructure at Iowa, but because we now had the Whitney Humanity Center with its 35 projector, we had an emergent collection of 35 millimeter films and a system to show them, I created an environment where he could imagine coming.

Now, who knows? Maybe he would have come because he just wanted a change of scene, but he hesitated for a long time. It wasn't clear for a long, long time whether or not he was going to come. In fact, that turned out to be very important because I was coming up for tenure the same time that Comp-Lit was making an offer. By that point, I certainly understood the game, which was very often someone's about to come up for tenure and then they give a job to someone in the same area, and then there's no position for that person. I know to some extent that Comp-Lit thought that that was what they were doing, which they felt somewhat guilty of. Indeed, the person who was chair of the senior appointment's committee, I think, felt that okay, maybe one tenure person in Film and Media Studies is enough. If Dudley comes-

J. D. Connor: Charlie goes.

Charles Musser: Charlie goes. Or, if Dudley doesn't come, then maybe we'll consider Charlie. Dudley just couldn't make up his mind for such a long time, and I then got an outside offer from the University of Michigan. Then, they changed the makeup, and particularly the chair, of the senior appointment's committee from someone who was not my ally to someone who was my ally. That made all the difference. Basically a window opened, and I went through it, and then the window closed.

J. D. Connor: At that time, what you got now is a critical mass of faculty, or at least what looks like it, a program that's curricularized that's both production and studies, and the infrastructure necessary to support that. All of which develop after that through similar kinds of struggle.

Charles Musser: Bringing in Dudley was really crucial. This was the other thing. The only way we were going to get a graduate program was to bring in Dudley. For example, he was coming to teach as a tryout for a semester, and he was going to teach a course on Japanese Cinema. We had six videotapes, or maybe eight videotapes, of Japanese films in the film study collection. Now, routinely what I would do when someone taught a new course is I kept on writing grant proposals to ask for money for the courses. I wrote one up, and I took it over to the dean, to Dick Brodhead, and I said Dudley's coming and he needs this amount of money to teach the course so we can buy the films. He said, "No, no. That's the provost office. The provost office is trying to recruit him. They pay for that." I went over to the provost office, and they said no, we don't do that. That's theirs.

Michael, bless his heart, I said, "Michael, we're going to find the money." He said, "Well, until you find the money, I'm not going to." Finally, I said to him, "Michael, I have found a donor so that if the provost office or the Yale College does not pay for it, they will have \$2500. Let's buy \$2500." Michael, bless his soul, told the provost office and the dean that they'd found an alumni who was a donor of \$2500, which happened to be me. I thought it was really important, essential really, to get Dudley to come. Once Dudley came, there was an understanding that we would start a graduate program. I think at first he thought maybe he could just do it in Comp-Lit, and that this graduate program he might do a little bit for other people, but I think quickly he realized that he needed it as much as the rest of us.

It's become a really substantial, highly regarded graduate program. Also, when he came, he was able to get this position in east Asian that Aaron Gerow got, and I went in and got a joint appointment in AFAM, which Terry Francis occupied for sometime, which hopefully it now looks like it's been renewed. Then, Penny Marcus came in. There was a period there where we had one new big person a year, if not two. The program really grew and took off.

J. D. Connor: Do we want to do the future part of this now?

Charles Musser: The future.

J. D. Connor: The future of film studies. Have a drink. We've now talked about what things looked like when it had almost no curricular profile. We've taken it through the period when there are only islands of film studies in the US, and your navigation of those islands, and now we're to a point where major institutions all need to have a film and media studies program, or cinema and media studies program. One kind or another. You're in the Yale version of it right now. What do you see coming next, either for you or in general?

Charles Musser:

Well, for me, there was this point when I had first been Director of Undergraduate Studies for eight years, nine years. Nine years, I think. Then, I was co-chair of Film and Media Studies ... Actually, still it was just Film Studies ... for another almost seven, eight years. Actually, what happened was that I was trying to get a full time filmmaker. One of the things that's really bothered me about Yale was that we do not have any full time person teaching filmmaking. I went over to the new dean of the school of art to talk to him about this. For various reasons, I felt like I had misjudged things, but in any case, I had a very good relationship with the previous dean of the school of art, Chip Benson. We had been talking about doing this. This new dean just said, "Film? Film is dead. Filmmaking." It was a very unpleasant conversation, and he said anything that the previous dean has discussed with you is totally irrelevant.

I felt like that in some way, if this was going to happen, someone else was going to have to do it. I went back to Dudley and basically said I think maybe it's time for us to step down. Being co-chairs, which was very eccentric on one level, is really productive because we each had certain things. I was willing to push things much further than Dudley at certain moments, which meant that I didn't necessarily be popular but we got certain things done. Dudley has a certain kind of cache, so he could do certain things that I couldn't have done. I think that complimentary thing was successful for a long time. It was a time to also use that as a way of giving something for John MacKay to do. "Say, John, if you stay here and you don't go down to Duke," which is what he was competing with, "You can really help shape this program because we want to make you chair of the Film Studies program."

There were, I'm sure, many factors in why he stayed, but the fact was he did stay and become chair. I stepped down. It was like okay, I feel like for the first time I can think about teaching. I had one year in which I felt I'll teach whatever I want. I'm entitled to. I taught a course on D.A. Pennebaker, which I think had three students or something like that. Even though my daughter assured me that that was the coolest course, and I'd have lots of students. She wanted to take it, but she couldn't because I was her dad. It turned out that that vote of confidence was ill placed in some ways. Anyways, it was for one year. That was fine. Then, the financial crisis happened and then, as I was thinking about how to re-figure things, I resumed teaching documentary film workshop. Next year will be year 10. This is year nine of doing that, so my teaching, for me, is now billing myself as a scholar practitioner.

I made a documentary about Errol Morris. I'd written about Errol Morris. I had program films about Errol Morris. This was, it seemed to me, totally integrated into my scholarship. It was documentary of scholarship. Also, one of the things that had changed since I taught it before was when I taught it before it was just an undergraduate program, and I was untenured. Now, I was tenured, and we had a graduate program, so I got a graduate number for it, which got met with a lot of resistance. They wanted to do it in Film Studies, but American Studies did it. It was like if you don't do it, it's okay. They'll just take an American Studies

number, right? Then, Brigitte Peucker, with whom in fact we at a certain point really formed an alliance, was actually the DGS who put it through. I'm very appreciative of her for doing that.

For graduate students, it's a course where they do documentary that's connected with their scholarship, with their course of study. They'll just come in and do something as a change of pace, or because it's fun, or it's a way I really keep them on the straight and narrow. I think the Errol Morris is an example of what that might mean.

J. D. Connor: Scholar practitioner, not just to cater to the job market, but for you the world has caught up with the kind of productive work that you are doing now 40 years ago, but it's the thing, however you ended up teaching it, that looks like the kind of thing that we need to be doing with our students more.

Charles Musser: Yeah. I think that there's a lot of appetite for people who can do that. I mean, the very reason why I got hired, which was that all these students are interested in it so it's good if you have a faculty member who understands that inclination and, in fact, can give them advice and can help them find balance. Some of them think that they don't need to know any of the critical studies and any of the history of theory criticism. They just need to make it, and they need to understand that this is not what this institution is about. They're allowed to make it, but they also need to think about it critically and that either it's a give or take, but it's also a dialectic in learning. There's that, and for me, what I've found interesting is that I did *Before the Nickelodeon* and I came out with these three books, and then okay, I co-edited a book. There was a lot of writing in it. Probably the amount of writing I did was almost like a small book.

I did this filmography, which was a big book, but again it was a filmography. Really, the first single authored book since those three in a traditional sense is the one that I'm about to publish *Politicking in Emergent Media: US Presidential Elections in the 1890s*. What happened is some friends of mine at Yale said it's sort of like you've gone through a midlife crisis and you're doing filmmaking now. I guess you're not so interested in scholarship. That was deeply upsetting. I said I got to publish a book. This is unacceptable. I turned around and I published this book. The day after I turned that manuscript in, I started my next documentary. I can see this process happening. There's a way in which this structures for me personally. A kind of drive to actually get projects as opposed to exploring things I find really interesting, which of course I'm still doing, but I just mean that the structure somehow has shifted and actually these two things somehow seem to me to be very complimentary in all sorts of way.

One of them is switching back and forth. I'm always behind on one because I've done the other.

J. D. Connor: Should we make that the happy ending then?

Charles Musser: Okay, I don't know. What's happening with the field? We have to see. I'm teaching documentary in the environment. I think there's a lot of interest in thinking about the environment in terms of film and media, and documentary is a very fruitful place to do that. The hot term, early cinema or cinema of attractions, is being replaced with the term media archeology. This is the new paradigm. It's interesting to see how it's different, how it's the same. Or, more accurately, how they overlap. Those are maybe a few of the trends. Obviously, the field has become more and more diverse and we're leaving out all sorts of really important things, but at the moment, those seem to be the things I'm ... I'm trying to figure out this idea of media archeology. I guess it's why I just finished this book on *Emergent Media and Politicking*.

J. D. Connor: I just want to thank Charlie for sitting down with me here for this fulsome interview, this account that really takes in, I think, a very different pathway than a lot of the other field notes in terms of how a scholarly career can get built, or got built during the institutionalization of film studies here in the United States in the latter part of the 20th Century. Thanks, Charlie.

Charles Musser: Thank you, J.D. I really appreciate you doing this. Yeah, it's great.

J. D. Connor: It's great.