SCMS ORAL HISTORIES: INTERVIEW WITH JAMES NAREMORE:

Jake Smith: Thanks so much for taking the time to be part of the SCMS Field Notes.

James Naremore: Well, it is great to see you but also to be with somebody who knows a lot about sound, so maybe this will help…

J.S: I write about sound, I was never the person plugging in the wires and turning the knobs, but it should be good. So the project is great because it's got the two, as you probably saw in the oral history starter kit, it's got the kind of the two different goals: one, to find out about teaching film in the university, and then to find more about your particular trajectory.

J.N: Right.

J.S: So, a good place to start may be more on your particular story. When did you first become interested in film, in thinking about film as a scholar?

J.N: Well, as a scholar that took a while but I need to back up a little bit because I think I was always interested in film. The movie theater was a kind of a magic place for me when I was a kid. It was like a womb or something, I don't know. So I loved movies, and when I was in high school I made three discoveries. One was in the high school library, I found Deem Taylor's *A Pictorial History of the Movies*, which was a standard pictorial history of the movies and a good one. I just devoured it and I actually swiped it from the high school library. Years later I found that Martin Scorsese had a similar experience and he says at one point that he wanted to swipe it from his high school library.

J.S: You one-upped him.

J.N: Yes but anyway, I hadn't seen a lot of these movies but I just found it fascinating about the history. The second was, I read a Ben Heck? (2:04) sort of biography. I think I was interested in being a writer and then I thought, oh! when I go to college I'll study journalism and I'll be a reporter and have a kind of an interesting life as a reporter and figure out a way to write something that would get me into the movies, you know as a screenwriter or something like that. That was a sheer fantasy because the movie industry was changing radically by that point and I didn't have any idea of how to do it. I actually made a 16mm film when I was in high school. I don't know how I was able to afford to get the camera or whether I've lost it. It was never finished, but I had a couple of sequences that I did. It was a kind of a film noir.

J.S: Really?

J.N: Yes, yes

J.S: That you wrote yourself?

J.N: Yes. I heard Stravinsky's *Firebird* suite and I thought, oh! - I could see images when I was hearing it - and I thought oh! I have an idea for a sequence I can play to this music, I can film to this music. So anyway I did that. The other discovery I made was James Agee, I somehow stumbled across James Agee and I was just swept away by everything he wrote. I bought a copy of *Agee on Film* and I just loved reading it even though I hadn't seen many of the movies he was talking about. So I had this intense interest, but when I went to college I didn't like the journalism course and I loved my freshman English teacher and I said, I want to be like that guy. So I became an English major and stayed that way in grad school. I never took a film course such things really didn't exist. At Wisconsin where I went to grad school, there were film courses somewhere in the campus. I think David Bordwell came there the year I left. I had the idea even then, although my dissertation was about Virginia Wolf, I was going to be a literary scholar, but I had the idea, oh once I start making a salary maybe I can buy the equipment I need to make a movie. I actually had the idea. In those days I had read this Renaissance drama called *Arden of Feversham*. I don't know if you have ever heard of it? It's a fairly obscure Renaissance drama, some people think that Shakespeare may have written parts of it, but it's really raw, and naturalistic and realistic. I had this idea, this fantasy of doing a kind of modern-dressed, if you like, version of this in a kind of neo-realist style. So I thought, oh when I get money from college I'm going to go out and buy some stuff and do this, but then I soon found out once I got a job it was all consuming. I had now a career I couldn't just monkey around. Though it seemed like a lot of money I was making compared to anything I had done before, it really wasn't enough money to delve into things like this, and I had a child and so forth. So anyway, that was my experience, but I had always this passion about the movies. When I got to Indiana, Harry Geduld was teaching film courses there in Comparative Literature. I guess he probably started what there was at the Film Program, there wasn't a lot of it at that point, and also Charles Eckert was there. Charlie and I became, I think, good friends. I always thought he was the most brilliant guy I ever new, but that fueled my interest. Also, while I was in grad school I had read Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema* and that had a really powerful impact in me. I was fascinated with the history of Hollywood and then also during that time I read, not in grad school, but once I came to Indiana, I read Noël Burch's *Theory of Film Practice* and that had a great impact. And then you know I was reading Robin Wood, Raymond Durgnat, and people like that. I went to…my dissertation got published, a book on Virginia Woolf, and I wrote a little article about the *Maltese Falcon* for *Literature and Film Quarterly*. And I remember going to a couple of people in my department, senior people in the English department, and saying: look I really think I would really like to write a book about Orson Welles, is that going to be okay? Because you know the department doesn't do film… some of them shrug their shoulders and said, sure fine go-ahead, but one guy told me, you know you'd be better off if you wrote a book about James Joyce's *Dubliners* that a whole book about Orson Welles. Anyway, at that point I was too far into it and Harry Geduld gave me the opportunity to write a little monograph about *Psycho*…

J.S: Right.

J.N: …so that really kind of started what became my writing about film. I don't know if I am answering your question?

J.S: No, it's great. I wonder if we could go back on a couple of things, just the point that you made about the film theater being this kind of this magical place. Can you say a little bit more about it? Was there an specific theatre when you were young that was…

J.N: No, I just wanted to go to all of them, all of them. That was the days, you know, the divested detour of the studios from the theaters had already happened. I was in the little town called Sulphur in Louisiana near Lake Charles, and in Lake Charles in those days there were, I don't know, 4-5 movie theatres, a very modest size town. It was clear that a couple of those must have been controlled by MGM because most of the MGM movies came to one of those two places. Fox seem to do movies in another theater, and then there was a real grungy place a place that just played already released stuff. The hallways smelled of urine, it was really grubby but I saw some great stuff in there. First time I ever saw *It's a Wonderful Life* was in there. I liked the old stuff, it impressed me a lot.

J.S: I have to ask too, because Wells ends up being so important, is his work something you encountered on the radio as well. Was radio important?

J.N: I remember as a child hearing Welles's voice on the radio. As a very young child I remember hearing that *Shadow* thing he did, you know, "who knows what evil lurks in the heart of man?" I can remember that his voice had a particularly mesmerizing quality but I didn't know very much about Wells. There was something kind of spooky or satanic about his voice. When I read that Deem Taylor's book I told you about, *A Pictorial History of the Movies,* there are four stills from *Citizen Kane* in there and he's talking about it. He talks about well being a magician, and I was at that time a boy magician. I had learned how to do "slide a pen" (9:16), I used to do shows for kids and for the elderly club and stuff like that. I was even on local television a couple of times.

J.S: Wow

J.N: Yes, I mean I've all forgotten it now but I was crazy about magic. And here was a guy who was magician. Then one night on TV, in a very snowy, we had antenna on those days, it was kind of a snowy evening, I saw the opening of *A Journey into Fear* this sort of low-budget movie that Wells didn't even direct although he clearly shaped the style of the film. And the opening of that film blew me away so I said, oh wow! Orson Welles is pretty interesting. So I was always interested in him and in Hitchcock. Hitchcock made a strong impact on me when I was a kid.

9:10

J.S: It's interesting just, as a side, that *A Pictorial History* was such an important book. I'm writing about the film *Zoo in Budapest* and I found this critic making references to an obsession with an old book that they had as a child, that has a still from that film of

Loretta Young in that film and it made me... It seems like those kind of books circulating those photographs from film history where really key for a while there.

J.N: Absolutely yes, well they certainly were for me. They fired my imagination and my imagination and I thought, gee I liked to see this movie!

J.S: Yes! Can you say anything else about, you said there was an English teacher that really, a professor that really change things for you.

J.N: Yes, yes, his name was Bernard Benstock. I think I dedicated the *Noir* book partly to him. He was my freshman teacher in English and I thought he was the coolest guy I have ever seen. He would come into class and smoke Gauloises and show pictures of his trips to Paris, and slides and stuff like that. I just thought he was cosmopolitan and interesting. He was an expert on James Joyce. He was one of the leading American scholars on Joyce. I had already read *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Men* when I was in high school, but through him I really studied Joyce pretty intently and Joyce's *Ulysses* has always been for me, maybe because of this his influence I don't know, has always been for me the greatest thing anybody has ever written. I loved teaching it; it's a single book that gives you a liberal education and its beautiful for a class if you have a whole semester to spend on nothing but that book. So anyway, Bernie was… my parents died when I was quite young and I think Bernie became a kind of surrogate father for me. He's the reason I became a…I got a PhD in English so…

J.S: Speaking of teaching what was the first course you talk on film? You talk a little bit about making the transition from publishing on Virginia Woolf to the *Psycho* book, and I want to ask more about that, but what about teaching? Do you remember the first film course you taught?

J.N: Yes, I remember the first film course I taught. I don't remember, I guess the *Psycho* book had been written by then, I don't know, but again Harry was generous enough to allow me to teach a course in comparative literature about, so I was able to…in those days a lot of people in the English department at Indiana had joint appointments in Comparative Literature, I did not at that time but I had a Comparative Literature minor at Wisconsin, so because all the film courses where at that time in Comparative Literature when I got really intensively interested in this (? 13:09) only after teaching a course there. I am pretty sure the first course I taught was highly successful, was a course on Wells and Hitchcock, 50% Welles and 50% Hitchcock, and those were the two directors I was most interested in, but they also make a really intriguing comparison and they kind of overlap in certain ways. They make interesting comparison and contrast.

J.S: Was that a comp lit program at IU one of the firsts? Or were there real struggles to get film on the agenda there?

J.N: I don't remember any struggles, no. As I said I think Harry had established it. Harry and Charlie Eckert were teaching it when I got there, then I started teaching

courses in comp lit. Harry went away, he got a job I can't remember where it was, in Maryland or something, for a year or something like that, and during that time, I believe it was during that time several people, me, Charlie, also graduate students there…three people who were graduate students at that time were Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess and Julian Lesage, they were all three at Indiana, and they started *Jump Cut* at Indiana.

J.S: Okay

J.N: At that time we got together and had discussions about the film curriculum, and we expanded it, they were more often. Then meanwhile more people were coming into the English department, they had a passing interest in film, and I think a colleague of mine Murray Sperber got two film courses established in the English department. Meanwhile, there were some being established in other departments around: the expanded comp lit program plus all these other single courses in language departments mainly. By the late 70s there were enough of those so we establish something called the Film Studies Office and a Film Studies minor that people could do, both undergraduate and graduate students, and we cross listed those courses. We didn't have anybody in that program who was FTE, full time faculty member, in that program but it was a pretty large program. I think, I mean I don't know chronologically how Indiana developed alongside other places, it has a pretty old history in teaching film courses. Actually I was surprised to learn that there were courses at some point taught there even before Harry. But it really became part of that kind of general movement of film studies in the 70s, I think.

J.S: Who did you… what other schools or programs do you thought at that time as being your competitors or fellow travelers?

J.N: I think the most successful people at that time were Dudley Andrew and David Bordwell. I should have mentioned David by the way, he's an influence on me. I told you I read *Theory of Film Practice* and I read the first version of *Film Art* the textbook and I believed, I'm not sure I may be wrong about this, I believed that that first version was just by David and the subsequent ones where by David and Kristin. The technical aspects of that, even though I knew a lot about movies and even had made a little bit of a movie, it helped developed a formal vocabulary for me and to think about certain things so that was important to me.

J.S: So what was the….

J.N: Oh, you asked about other programs yes, so I would say the program at Wisconsin and the program at Iowa were a very high profile during that period, maybe more than Indiana I don't know. Although looking back on it now it was interesting that Indiana was in comp lit and I think Indiana gained something from that. It attracted some students who spoke different languages, who had more of an interest in world cinema and they were kind of an interesting breed of graduate students there that I

suspect were not quite the same as in those other places, which they were centered in communication departments, I believe at that time.

J.S: You talked a bit about having to kind of talk to your English colleagues about the concept of publishing about film. Can you say a little bit more about that first publication on *Psycho* and what was it like in terms of were there key journals or presses? Was it difficult for young scholars or graduate students at that time to find an outlet for publishing on film? …

J.N: I can't speak for everybody. It wasn't difficult for me, although I had far better luck writing books than writing articles. Indiana University Press was a leading publisher in film books, academic film books, at that time. In fact I think it was an outstanding publisher of film books. It was distributing the BFI books at that time and Harry and Ronald Gottesman had created this kind of series that they called *Film Guides* and they just gave me a chance to do one of those. So I didn't have to sell my work, I was only there. The Wells thing came about just… I don't know… anyway just, I decided I wanted to do it and I wrote a proposal for it and circulate it through some publishers and that is how that came about. I didn't have, I can't remember but I didn't have quite as much luck with articles. I tended to publish like in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, also the thing at that time, and it lasted for quite a while in my career, I felt because I was in an English department that I owed something to the English department to teach literature as well as film, so I would do that I would teach a literature course and film course. But I was getting further and further away from any scholarly interest, I mean I wrote some pieces about Joyce, I wrote about Philip Clark and the poet… but then I would tend to write about figures like Dashiell Hammett who were like taking me closer to the movies. As time went on I felt like I'm really not any longer an up-to-date literature scholar, I mean I like Literature but I just wanted to teach film all the time.

J.S: It seems like your work has benefited so much from that kind of cross-fertilization, not only a kind of rich description of film noir that includes all this history of Pulp literature but also things like adaptation. Are there other ways that you feel that your background or initial interest in literature have shaped the kind of ways you have approached film?

J.N: I think that I am still a literary intellectual to a large degree and I think that shapes my work no matter whether I mention literature or not I take as a model, a certain kind of belletristic writing that I associate with really good literary criticism. The models that are like that in film studies were to me the early people, not only critics like James Agee who of course was a gifted writer, but people like Robin Wood and Raymond Durgnat, they saw film in the context of wider, maybe not hugely wide, that is they didn't look at it the way people do now in a very wide context, it was a different context they looked at in terms of mainly European literature I guess and the… for example Wood was strongly influenced by F.R Leavis so he brought to the discussion of film some of the same kind of severity and intensity of judgment that Leavis did and wanted to talk about film in the same way he talked about literature. By the way I should mention another person who was an important influence on me, it was Peter

Wollen's first edition of *Sings and Meaning in the Cinema* was very important. It was such a lucid explanation of certain theoretical concepts they were beginning to come along, he seemed to know a lot about certain histories I did not know much about so anyway…

J.S: Another author or text that you have mentioned a few times in writing as being very important was Durgnat's "Wedding of Poetry and Pulp" can you say a bit more about why that essay in particular is something that you bring up as being a kind of a key text for you.

J.N: You know I haven't re-read in a long time so my memories of the tales are a little shaky. For people who don't know that essay, it's and essay about what we look on the surface like a very cheesy science fiction movie, *This Island Earth*. In fact, you probably know this, the old Mystery Science Theater… remember that?

J.S: Oh, yes. Did they do it?

J.N: That does the jokes about the bad movies, they did this one and I thought, man… everybody who saw that episode should be forced to read Durgnat. What Durgnat was doing was taking the film seriously, and taking the genre seriously. I always thought it was a tour de force. I can say I was that huge a fan of the film but when I read him I had to see this film.

J.S: Yes, I just reread it after reading your references to it. It's amazing and actually the thing that reminded me the most of is your essay on A.I.

J.N: Interesting.

J.S: Maybe because the science-fiction connection but also because it kind of keeps taking us across the film from this different perspectives. I feel like you're A.I essay is also a tour de force in that way. The way we keep kind of moving back across this film.

J.N: Thank you. Yes, that is what I liked about the Durgnat's, it kind of broaden out. It was both about the film and about really interesting ideas I thought.

J.S: Were there other key books, writers, theorists from that early stage when your carrier was getting going that you haven't mentioned?

J.N: I probably might be forgetting one now but I don't… I think that I have enumerated most of the really early influences. I think after that point though, what happened was that as film studies became academic it also became more highly theoretical and that was a difficult time for me because it challenged a lot of what I was doing. My work was kind of traditional criticism, evaluating auteurs, I remained substantial auteurist through most of my career. So I had to figure out a way of talking that fit with the reigning paradigms. I think also when I begun teaching I was already pretty politicized by the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War that I began to

realize that I needed to somehow, especially since I was dealing with movies, to reconcile my aestheticism with my politics, and I began… my encounter with the students in the 70s was educational for me. I remember the first time I shown the *Maltese Falcon* to a bunch of students and the women all got upset about it and it never occurred to me that there might be something offensive to women in this movie. So feminism had a, even though I had written about Virginia Wolf I was already thought sensitive to these issues I was not somehow… so, so feminism... And then I had to figure out what high-theory was all about and somehow accommodate that to what I was doing. So yes, I would say that beginning with that period film studies became, because of the theory, seemed to be more cutting edge than some of the other humanities did in that particular period. But gradually times went along, I found, maybe this was just the experience at Indiana, but I found that film increasingly became something of a challenge even within what we think as film studies now. That is to say…I think the University regarded these film courses a something of a cash cow, because they were popular among students, but I'm not sure that the establishment regarded them as having much a lot of intellectual way, and that meant that theory was given more and more presence. And programmatically I think film has always been, in my experience people, even after he became very well established and moved into a communications or media studies kind of context, film was seen as kind of old-fashioned as kind of retrograde, sort of conservative in some way. I got that sense. So it's always…it's never had, in my experience, what I felt was a secure home. I know it does now in many places but still.

J.S: What the, I mean, where do you think it's best home is? You've seen several different models, at several different constellations…

J.N: I think because of the particular, I am not trying to say that what I am doing is superior because it's the particular kind way, the background I come from and so forth, I feel a film ought to be connected strongly to the humanities and maybe even the literary humanities. So I like it better there. I helped establish what became the cultural studies program at Indiana and that was a very important influence, another moment in my career, but I think as cultural studies became more and more the paradigm everything shifted to popular culture in a stronger way than, I mean I had always had a certain ambivalence about popular culture. I mean I liked it, but I wanted to maintain a critical distance from it, and some of that I think got lost in the development of cultural studies…so anyway.

J.S: Maybe, I am reading some of your quotes in the *Movie Mutations* back and forth. I wrote down this quote, which seems to speak to that: "it seems to me that the real enemy of academic film studies and the thing that means to avoid in the future isn't theory or history or aesthetics but positivism, which produces sterile formalism, self-perpetuating audience research and apolitical industry history."

J.N: Yeah, I don't know if I should have used the word positivism, somebody took me to task for using that. I suppose in some ways positivism is good, for me it had a negative connotation. Yes, I meant some kind of dry empiricism that didn't…. that

obviously involves serious research and discovery of facts or in some ways more important than criticism but it didn't have the quality that I think the humanities should always have. It became a kind of watered-down social sciences. I don't know…

J.S: And you seem passionate about maintaining the connection with a kind of a criticism, a culture of criticism…

J.N: Yes, yes.

J.S: You've written quite a bit about that…

J.N: Yes, yes. I think that is partly because that is what I enjoy reading and what I enjoy writing. And I think that what I enjoy reading and writing always has some kind of evaluative quality built into it. It might be wrong, it might be pompous, it might be snobbish, who knows? my own opinion changes all the time. But I want to be involved in a kind of a debate about cultural values that goes along sides with enjoyment and pleasure.

J.S: Thinking about that overlap with a culture of critics and your own work kind of crossing lines between academic publications and being a critic…

J.N: Well a little bit, but not really, somewhat yes.

J.S: Are there moments that you recollect when you felt like a really productive community context in the film scholarly community, were that with filmmakers or…

J.N: Wait, in the academic community or…?

J.S: …or crossing lines?

J.N: Yes I, as I said, I was really good friends with Charlie Eckert you know we used to have some pretty intense intellectual conversations and of course I've been influenced in many ways by my colleagues, by Barbara Klinger for example, I don't recall any and I miss that almost from the beginning, that sense of…that I had in grad school, I don't know a kind of community of people who liked to just sit around and shoot the ball or whatever about what they were interested in. And I think there's something about the professionalization of academics that works against that possibility. When I was at Indiana at one point I made a little movie, which I am not anxious for anybody to see, but I remember that the experience of this was really wonderful because the people I was working with felt like, it didn't feel like academics they just felt like… I don't know professionals and filmmakers, you know sometimes you take a break and sit around eating popcorn or something like that and then I enjoyed that. Whereas as an academic I always felt kind of isolated in my cubicle, you know?

J.S: No, I wanted to ask you about that, is that *The Last Tycoon* film? It's kind of legendary, when I was at IU people would talk about it…

J.N: Come on, oh… I don't know man

J.S: Yes, yes people would talk about it…

J.N: That is one to hide…

J.S: And you use it sometimes in the classroom like just to talk about your hand, right? The shot with the story…

J.N: The body double.

J.S: Yes (laughs)

J.N: Yes, I used, I put a… red nail polish on my fingers because we forgot to get a close-up of a young woman picking up a matchbox so that's my hand yes.

J.S: Well that's interesting though, just to think about that standing out as moment, doing that kind of production work, production is ….

J.N: Yeah, I learned a lot from that by the way that I think I would not have learned from just reading about film. One of the great revelations for me was the sound and how much editing of sound goes along with editing of pictures, and how much the soundtrack is manipulated. So that was a big deal for me. For example, I didn't even… I never… in my experience, little amateur experience with film, I didn't know about the need to establish an ambient track, or the need to enhance certain sound effects like heels walking across the floor or you know? All that became very new to me, and the editing of sound was along with picture, was fun and interesting. And so I had always thought, I became intensely committed to the idea later in my career that students who were studying film in an advanced way ought to take a production course. Not necessarily, even if they don't want to be a filmmaker, that it's been a lift available in let them see certain things. Doing that film and editing that film made me when I went into a movie theater, like I would go to see like a James Bond film, wow did they edit that well! I mean I knew about editing and I thought I could appreciate it, but sometimes things, if you have actually been trying to do it you become more intensively aware of it.

J.S: That is interesting because my, you know I was a performer and a songwriter and recording artist before I became a grad student in a academic, and I have often thought that what that experience did was make me a lot more sympathetic to performers.

J.N: Yes, yes.

J.S: Because I knew how hard it was…

J.N: Yes, right, right…

J.S: You know, just getting a vocal track down, just getting a performance you know?

J.N: Sometimes it seems, it looks real easy but it isn't.

J.S: Yes, I think it made me more forgiving in a certain way.

J.N: Yes, yes.

J.S: You have mentioned Wells and Hitchcock, where there other artists, filmmakers, performers, I mean we should say actors as well, since your acting book was so important to the field… where there other artist or performer who…?

J.N: I think that I developed my own personal favorites, you know like everybody. I really like Howard Hawks, I like Lubitsch, I like Keaton… so I can name many filmmakers that I admire, Renoir… if you like they form a little pantheon for me and they tend to be part of the classic American cinema. I guess that is where I have the most fun watching films and so forth. And at the other extreme from that, lately I as you may know, have really gotten interested in the away from Hollywood. For some reason, I feel alienated from contemporary Hollywood and so what I've gone is to the other extreme, to what may call the 'slow art cinema' of Europe and Asia and Latin America. Those films, the ones that we show at the music box at the Indiana University cinema nowadays, those are the ones that interest me the most. I haven't seen a lot of Hollywood, contemporary Hollywood films, I got really excited about…

J.S: Although you mention contemporary television at the end of *An Invention Without a Future*. Long form series, cable television, as…

J.N: Yes, I think that is where the best… if you can think of classic Hollywood as an institution which for all its weaknesses was pretty strong all the way through, I mean it was able to turn out solid popular stuff that was sometimes engrossing, and I think that's pretty clearly what has happened now, that films of that kind in the United States, mainly in the United States specially tend to be in the long form of films that are movies, but are longer than usual movies, they tend to be continuous series…and they are exhibited on television. I am not as nervous about the shift to digital as some people are but I just think there is an awful lot of good filmmaking going on at that level. I guess what you call sort of midrange, maybe is middlebrow…I don't know but there is a lot of good stuff there.

J.S: Are there particular television series where that realization really pops for you? That…

J.N: Well, I think the first, and I only wrote about it very briefly, the first of the only one I have ever written anything about was *Mad Men* when it first appeared I was really struck by how good that was. And then I just began seeing…they are

unavoidable now if you have anything more than a basic cable subscription, and even some of the basic ones are now doing really interesting stuff….so, yes…whereas the theatrical movies nowadays for are often overblown and kind of marketed to juveniles, so I don't know, I just don't find that much of interest in them.

J.S: You mention the shift to digital.

J.N: Yes.

J.S: Thinking about technologies of teaching in your earliest experiences of the classroom teaching film, a lot must have changed.

J.N: Yes, absolutely.

J.S: How was it like in terms of teaching film, when you were first beginning to do that?

J.N: Well, the medium one had to work with was 16mm and there were lots of rental agencies designed for classroom schooling, where you could rent 16mm films and…During the seventies there are pretty good libraries, those things grew up, and there were distributors designed to do that kind of thing. So when we taught at Indiana we did two things, we rented from those places and we begun purchasing more and more 16mm films for a library of our own just sort of canonical films. But in the classroom 16mm was what one had and what I tried to do early on there we purchased some analyzing projectors. I don't know if you have ever seen and analyzing projector, it's a 16mm projector that not only projects but it allows you to stop in a frame…

J.S: ah!

J.N: …or to go forward one frame at a time, I can't remember if you can go backward. But I used those from time to time in class. Like for example if I showed this shower scene from *Psycho* I would stop on certain frames or go very slowly though certain things so people could see the editing. Also, I don't think anybody else did this, but I built up a whole collection of 35mm slides. I bought a, I had the film studies office buy a camera with an adaptor on the front of it that you can take a photograph of a single frame of a 16mm film. In fact the illustrations for my Welles book and for my, the book on acting, were all done in that way. I just took it to a photo shop and had them blown up into glossies and sent those to the publisher. But in the classroom I used these slides, I would sometimes lecture with the slides, and I thought at the time when people started showing videotapes in the classroom, I thought oh man this is disgraceful, this is so sleazy, this is not really movies and you can't really analyze anything with these video tapes. But as time went on I began to realize that no, the digital has greatly enhanced both writing and teaching about film. I can't imagine how… I don't even remember how I was able to write with a typewriter.

J.S: Yes, I am amazed to think about a time in film studies when people were writing from memory often times about a film…

J.N: Yes, exactly, exactly…

J.S: It seems like just the, in so many ways it is an example of how the technology changes the field's expectations. I mean I think you see that in film history now with all these online digital archives newspapers that is kind of an arms race to see who has enough historical material.

J.N: Yes, yes. I think Raymond Bellour once said, I remarket it how it stuck with me, that the major difficulty in writing about film as opposed to writing about literature – and he wrote about literature as well – is when you are writing about film you can't quote. And I think what he meant by that is that if I am writing an essay about Robert Frost I can within certain limits quote lines of the poem write there on the page and comment on that, whereas with movies the best you can do is take a still of a sequence and then try to describe the sequence as a whole in some way. But now I think on, I just wrote something recently for *Cinephiles,* it an online journal.

J.S: Yes, I saw that.

J.N: And, that…for example when I was writing – this was a piece about acting – and when I was writing about acting I found it particularly difficult to do because you couldn't quote, you had to just sit in the room and watch sequences over and over and try to be as good as you could about evoking what was happening. Whereas now you can do a video essay about acting very easily, I mean, and you can even show moving sequences digitally rather than just stills. It makes certain kinds of writing about movies a lot more interesting and easy.

J.S: Although, to play devils after kids, it seems…so I just taught as you know a media performance seminar and we read your acting book and the fact that you go to that fine grained analysis and you are able to describe that is so much of the joy of reading that…

J.N: Yes, yes, well I'm pleased. I always felt that book took a long time to develop and audience I think. I didn't get very strong reviews when it appeared but I taught it was in some ways the best written thing I've ever done or that I have devoted the most care too because it was so hard to write about acting. So, yes, I don't mean, I don't think the digital leaves the writer out of the hook, I think you still have to be a good writer and not just…I know now, I don't teach very often anymore, but sometimes when I am teaching I've had the experience of teaching fairly recently at UCLA and one of the things…I had good students but I, one of the things I had reservations about in the graduate seminar is that when people gave a report it was mainly clips they had taken from a film or various wonderful kind of digital things they had done to put several images together to talk about so and so, and there were time when it said to

me that the ability to do these kind of shows got in the way of really talking about the material, if you see what I mean.

J.S: Yes, eh…thinking about key political debates over the course of those years you've written about and you have been speaking a bit about the rise of high theory and at some moments that made you consider taking up truck driving,

J.N: Yes, (laughs)

J.S: But, thinking about key debates, and you've mentioned auteurism, you know you are somebody that has written about directors kind of throughout these changing paradigms.

J.N: Yes, right.

J.S.: What was… how did that debate played itself out either in your own, writing your own work or in your…how you saw your place in the field?

J.N: Well, at first I thought because most of the kind of anti-authorship discourse, which still I think it's pretty strong in film studies, I felt that that was a challenge to the work I had just done, like the Wells book and so forth. And it inhibited me from writing about certain things, about certain filmmakers that I wanted to write about. When I got the opportunity to do this little book on Vincente Minnelli I think that, what happened was that that moment was, it was part of a series of books Cambridge was doing about directors, and cultural studies come along man, and I was involved in that, and I think cultural studies liberated me in a way that high theory had not. In other words, I think the way high theory the most gets into, that period of high theory the most gets into my work is in the acting book where I am preoccupied with notions of the self and subjectivity and so forth. I was always interested in politics though, even in the Welles book I was interested in Welles's politics, and I think politics has always been a key part of when I was writing about a director or whatever. But in the case of the Minnelli book I was able to put him in a broader kind of cultural context and then that spilled over the film noire book as well. That really gave me an outlet of data. I had felt a little bloc before that.

J.S: A few more things?

J.N: Sure.

J.S: Your work covers so many different key areas that continue to be key to the field. I mean, generative authorship, adaptation, genre with the noire book, performance acting…are there any of these areas that you feel particularly committed to or you feel there is exciting productive work yet to be done or there is key areas there?

J.N: Within those fields you mean or…?

J.S: Or particular ones of those authorship adaptations or performance…

J.N: I think, you know, I've been retired for a number of years and only occasionally teaching here and there so I can't speak with any authority about exactly what is going on in film studies right now in the average, in your department or any other department. So generalizations I might make about them might be wrong. Tell me the question again because I was going to say something and I lost track.

J.S: You set your clear touchstones on the various places…

J.N: Yes, possibilities and the things to do.

J.S: What are the ones you feel more, you feel most committed to or once were you feel like there is more to be said or to be done in particular…?

J.N: Yes, It seems to me that in the best of all possible worlds there will always be opportunities to write about individual artists right? No matter what they do and I don't think there is anything politically suspect about writing about individual artists. It depends on how one does it. I think it will always be of interest to write about adaptations of one form or another, and it will always be interesting to write about performers…so it's not that the fields could ever be exhausted because there is always new things coming along, things that are worth writing about. I worry more about what is happening to higher education in the United States and about what is happening to the humanities than I do about whether anything is exhausted. And what I see happening is the death of the great state university system in the United States, which is one of the greatest inventions of our society, because its funding forward has been cut and it's turning more and more to endowments and so forth, and it's more and more obsessed with professional schools and the humanities are in kind of a crises. And I think in someway the humanities had doomed themselves and in some ways are victims of the need to make themselves professionally relevant in some way. Whereas I think their relevance goes deeper than that, it has to do with the kind of development of…what?...of taste, of sense of values, of something that makes life livable not just profitable….I don't know.

J.S: And is that, I mean, that is part of the anxiety about the positivism of what films studies could become?

J.N: Yes.

J.S: As just an adjunct to industrial market research, audience research or…?

J.N: Exactly, exactly, right I worry about populism in film studies and though I like popular art, I don't consider myself a populist, and I worry that some of the kind of study of popular audiences and so forth plays into the hands of the industry. I mean, it

celebrates what the industry is doing and it doesn't have a sufficient, some I am not saying this about everything, it doesn't have the sufficient critical distance on it. It's a trick, I mean, you don't want to seem superior to the popular audience but you also don't want to seem like a (? 52:45) about what Hollywood is doing.

J.S: Have you…the concern that you've felt in terms of criticism just one last quote from your movie mutations dialogue: "As I seen it, we've have been caught in a situation where at one extreme you have frumpy academics who for one reason or another think it isn't their job to make value judgments, and at the other extreme you have popular reviewers who operate purely as guides to the consumer economy and who think of their job as a matter of sticking their thumbs up or down. The best writing has always been in-between these extremes, where a certain historical perspective and an openness to experiment are joined with a manifest love of the thing one is discussing." Have you felt, you've kind of returned to these questions about academic films studies and criticism and the culture of film criticism, do you feel like that's an avenue of addressing some of those concerns?

J.N: Yes, I think it is, and I think, I think as a teacher, not only as a writer, one is best when one has a passion about the things you are teaching and can convey that somehow with enthusiasm to the students, but at the same time wants, wants it to be as good as it can be and therefore is trying to open people's minds to other ways of seeing tings and so forth…I don't know if I am addressing your question correctly? But, yes, I like that quote, I stick by that quote.

J.S: Do you have advice for PhD's in the field?

J.N: No, I feel I am beyond that now. I really feel, I have one book project that I am involved in now, and I am not even sure I would end up teaching again, who knows, maybe I'll do that, but no, I think that whenever I get in discussions with several graduate students in Indiana I always try to be encouraging, encourage them to publish because for good or bad that is what they are going to need to do if they want to get a solid job, and I think my only approach to graduate students now is to try to relive them of the anxiety, encourage their work and tell them how to submit something for publication and so forth. That's a lame answer but that's all I can do.

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J.S: How have students, either undergrads or grads changed since you started teaching them in the 70s to more recently?

J.N: I think in the 70s when I begun teaching, I think the average student had a wider frame of knowledge than they do know. The whole system of graduate studies, I think this is everywhere in the United States, has changed considerably since I got a PhD and since I was working the first decade or so of my teaching, one of the main things that happened was the shift towards tailoring everything that graduate students does towards that graduate students choice of dissertation. So that the course selection, the special committee is developed in other to develop an exam on that topic for that

student, whereas the kind of PhD exams that I took, and that students took for a long time after I became a teacher were general exams, that is to say everybody took the same general exam and it was only after that that you (? 56:50) on an specific topic. And I think this system of graduate education we have right now is too narrow, and there ought to be a wider frame for it, a more general kind of learning. Of course, one of the problems is that we don't have anymore an established canon in... I think that we should, without going back to some of the old reactionary qualities of the old canon, we should try to institute canons of some kind or another that we feel are important for anybody in the field to know and to be able to talk about and that ought to be the basis of the PhD examinations. But that is just me, that is where I came from. So I worry about that narrowness now, and for me personally when I write about something I feel that I'm kind of exhausted, that I don't want to do it anymore, it's like if I write a book about Welles, I might be asked to write about something here and there after that but I am not really interested in writing about Welles for the rest of my life, you know, and I feel…so the idea is to move on to something else.

J.S: Any final thing?

J.N: No, I am not a…I had an interesting career and I've lived a long time but I am not a fountain of wisdom no.

J.S: Well, your work is certainty a fountain of wisdom, I think, for all of us in the field and thanks a lot for taking the time to talk with us.

J.N: Thank you.