Patricia Z.: My name is Patricia Zimmermann. I am a professor of screen studies in the Roy H. Park School of Communications at Ithaca College. It is March 24th, 2017, and I am here in the city of Chicago, Illinois, at the Fairmont Hotel to interview professor Michael Renov, who works in the division of cinema and media studies in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.

Professor Renov is well-known for his many books such as The Subject of Documentary and edited volumes such as Collecting Visible Evidence and Theorizing Documentary. And he's made a major contribution to the field of documentary studies with his co-editorship of the Visible Evidence book series with University of Minnesota Press. He has a long series of contributions to journals, festival catalogs and museum catalogs around the world, including academic journals such as Framework, Wide Angle, Afterimage and the Quarterly Review of Film and Video.

So Michael, we talked when we were preparing this that we would spend a little bit of time on your intellectual biography and trajectory, and so what I wanted to ask you is, when you were an undergraduate, what got you interested in film and media?

Michael Renov: I was a literature major. I was an English major. I was at Tulane. There were no film classes at Tulane. I started there in 1968. When I spent my junior year abroad in the UK at Reading University, there were these interesting film series that made me think about film in a slightly different way. I should say that even as a child, some of my strongest first memories, I'm sure this is like a lot of people in our field, were those experiences of going to the movies. I was from a pretty small town, Shreveport, Louisiana, and those were the nights that I remember really well in the movie theater, graphically.

But going to England and seeing that films were being talked about in a different way that, for example, there was a series on the western. I'd never seen ... and in England to see the westerns on the big screen and to see that there was a kind of academic interest in the western, that was news to me.

Then when I came back to the U.S. and I graduated, moved to California in '72 and began living in Berkeley, discovered the Pacific Film Archive. I'm tempted to say the rest is history, but I feel like I got my big education in the cinema was ... for the first year, doing nothing much more than going to the movies and playing basketball.

Patricia Z.: So let's talk a little bit about Pacific Film Archive and I'm really struck by how you mentioned it first rather than your academic training. And this is an era that's very explosive and we've talked about it as the Wild West of film culture, as opposed to film studies. Could you elaborate a little bit about exactly what is Pacific Film Archive and what it was back then for viewers who may not know? And the kinds of experiences you had there, that informed the opening of your thinking.
Michael Renov: The Pacific Film Archive was and is, although it’s moved, but still connected to the University Art Museum at UC Berkeley. It was founded by Sheldon Renan, Tom Luddy and then Edith Kramer early on. It had an archival dimension to it, but it was a cinemateque, essentially. It was something like reconstruction of the cinemateque Française, only it was at Berkeley California.

They would show two, three, four films a day, and at that time it was a dollar for admission. And I have to add, wickedly, that since I was living on nothing, unemployed, those times when they didn’t take my ticket, they were color coded, when they didn’t actually pick up my ticket, I would keep it for the next time they used that color and then I could get in for free. Sorry to everyone out there!

Not only did they show every kind of movie, a lot of international film, a lot of repertory kinds of things, the classic films, they also brought in people from everywhere. So it was a great opportunity, I think Tom Luddy was the real genius behind that. So just thinking in that period, Howard Hawks, the sort of the last gasp of Hollywood, those people would be brought to Berkeley. But also Satyajit Ray, to be able to literally sit at the feet.

Because I remember there was this one time and after the screening, they found a room where he could sit and talk to young people like me. And it was a room with probably just a dozen people. To be in his presence and to hear how he thought about the cinema. Werner Herzog, Godard and Gorin. That was the Tout Va Bien period.

So it was just eye opening, and then when someone whom I had known at Tulane came through the Bay Area and said, well, he was looking for a film school, he wanted to be a filmmaker, and he said, San Francisco State could be just the place for you, because they teach not only filmmaking and screenwriting, but they also do film studies. And I just think that might be something you would be interested in.

It was kind of a whim. I applied and I got in and I loved it. But the Wild West as we were talking about it, it wasn’t like film studies programs were everywhere. It was at that point, ’73, so I think film studies was starting to have a bit of cachet, and I know that some of the other students in that program, I was a little intimidated because their undergrad backgrounds were Harvard and Stanford and other really top programs, Yale. And here I was from Shreveport, Louisiana.

But I thrived and I loved it and I had great teachers and I guess it was a great fit.

Patricia Z.: Let’s take that little gem you dropped, you had great teachers, and we had talked about some of the professors you had while you were in graduate school, who completely kind of jack-hammered your preconceptions about not only
cinema, but about theory and the life of the intellect. You had a tram for it, I believe. Could you share that with us?

Michael Renov: At San Francisco, first I want to mention the San Francisco State part, then I got my PhD at UCLA, but those were the ... the state years were very formative for me and I was in no hurry, because I wasn't careerist. I took my time. I was also in a political collective for two and a half years, so it wasn't as though I had my eye on getting a PhD and getting a job in teaching, it wasn't really that. It was intellectual and it was political.

But the people who really moved me. John Fell who is no longer alive but was a great film historian, he had a book that came out in '74, so I was there called *Film and the Narrative Tradition*. He's a great film historian and a really great pedagogue. I would say more about that, if I could ever be half the teacher John Fell was, I'd be good.

Then I had Brian Henderson, who unfortunately just passed away, just earlier this month. I was just lucky as could be because he was fresh out of his PhD program at the history of consciousness, HisCon program at Santa Cruz. He had an amazing background, Brian did. He had a law degree from Harvard, he had been a captain in the Army in Vietnam. All of these things together and then studying film theory at Santa Cruz and writing these just so important, so central, these essays that were mostly in *Film Quarterly* on critique of cinestructuralism part one, critique of cine structuralism part two. Towards the nonbourgeois camera style about Godard. And about film language.

He was a semiotician, he had studied philosophy at Johns Hopkins, he was a great lover of film and he taught this very intense seminar that I took in my first semester and I loved it. It was wonderful, we were reading early Barthes, we were reading Grema [Gramsci?], we were reading Todorov, it was structuralism, we were reading Levy Strauss. And it gave me a great foundation for what later emerges as post-structuralism, but kind of learning structuralism in a really deep way and in a way that made it exciting.

And then the third leg of the stool at San Francisco State for me was Peter Kubelka. Peter Kubelka was this wonderful, experimental ... he hated that word, just a filmmaker who some people would categorize as being part of the avantgarde or something of that sort. But he was Viennese, he had a very healthy ego, he had perfect pitch, he had been part of the Vienna Boys Choir, and he made these very meticulous films that were really very short, intense films that were conceptualized and created, literally frame by frame. So he's famous for a film called *Arnulf Rainer* in 1960, which was an early flicker film. *Unsere Afrikareise* a little bit later in the '60s, which was, now I realize, something like an experimental documentary.

And because Kubelka was there and James Broughton was also there, it was a magnet at San Francisco State. So Stan Brakhage and others would come
through on a regular basis. We would go over to the San Francisco Art Institute and so there was a lot of back and forth, so for me, call it the avant-garde, was something that I was learning at the same time as I was learning theory and this is important for later, I now realize, believe me, this was not something I was conscious of. But the fact that documentary became something so important to me from the get-go, this other way of thinking about cinema very meticulously in the way that Kubelka did and others, who are making this more kind of artist-based work. To me, I was not separating that from documentary.

In fact, maybe the first paper I wrote in grad school was about Jean Vigo and I continue to teach Vigo to this day, and so for me, those are the some of the important forefathers, the early Joris Ivens. So many others who bring together interests in, call it experimentalism or seeing what the true capacity of cinema could be, its potentiality. And an interest in the real.

So from the very beginning, I never wanted to make, and never in my mind made a distinction necessarily between this kind of non-narrative, for the most part, experimental, but also interested in representations of reality. And encountering Grierson's creative treatment of the real, creative treatment of reality for me was never ... that makes sense to me. Creative treatment. How creative? How creative can you be? It's all part of the same conversation.

Patricia Z.: So can we move up a little bit to graduate school and I believe you mentioned there was another transformative professor that you encountered in graduate school.

Michael Renov: Yes, when I moved to UCLA for the PhD and again, just lucky after having Henderson right out of his PhD program, Dudley Andrew came for a year, from 1977 through '78 that year and I was in his seminar in the very beginning of my ... it was my first class at UCLA and it was on critical methods. And Dudley, I feel like again, not that I knew this at the time but now I look back and I see, I got a good strong dose of what folks were doing in Iowa. And for that generation of film scholars, that was the kind of gold standard program.

So he had us reading everything that was kind of at the cutting edge at the time and for me it was the first time I had read Derrida, for example, reading Derrida, Foucault and the later Barthes, if I'd been reading Elements of Semiology, now I was reading The Pleasure of the Text in SC. And it was again, very eye-opening and an essay that I wrote for that critical methods seminar was one of my first publications.

Patricia Z.: What was that?

Michael Renov: It was a Derridean analysis of a film noir film, D.O.A. It wasn’t a documentary topic but it was still engaging with kind of Hollywood ... I was at UCLA, surrounded by Hollywood films, but thinking of how something like deconstruction could be a tool for understanding Hollywood cinema.
Patricia Z.: Let’s continue our journey to your first job, UC Santa Barbara. And I wonder if you’d be willing to share a little bit about how you got that job, and then what happened in the job. Because it's so different from the way cinema, media studies jobs look now, where departments are formed and there's areas that seek particular kinds of faculty. Could you share that story?

Michael Renov: I had been at UCLA in the PhD program, Janet Bergstrom was a year or two ahead of me, had been in France studying, came back and took her qualifying exams at the same time that I did and we got to be friends. She was ahead of me, she was hired at UCSB and was still finishing my dissertation, UC Santa Barbara. And after one year, she was offered a job at UCLA.

And very casually I think, said to folks at UCSB, I can think of a couple of people I would recommend to take this job and it was a great job, but it was a visiting lecturer job. You had the great, good fortune to teach seven classes and get paid such a small amount of money, I can’t even say it.

But I was one of the people she suggested or recommended. They got in touch with me. I took the bus up there. I spent the night on Patrice Petro’s couch, she was a grad student at UCSB at the time. They interviewed me, I got on the bus and went back, they hired me and that was my first job. I was teaching seven courses a year on a quarter system.

And one of the first classes that they asked me to do was the second half of documentary, it was cut up as up to World War II, Chuck Wolf, a wonderful colleague was teaching the first part of documentary history as it was thought, and then I took post-World War II to the present.

And I discovered that my students were just so much more enthusiastic and energized in that class than they were in any of my other classes, where they might be interested and they might find pleasure or curiosity, but they were ... there was a political energy around documentary film, which I think has always been the case. And that's what I think launched me in the direction of being interested in documentary, it started in the classroom.

Patricia Z.: I wonder if you could expand a little bit about the political energies around documentary film at that moment. What year are we in here, and what are the larger political energies and currents that are filtering into your classroom?

Michael Renov: It’s 1981, Reagan has just been elected in November of 1980. So there was a kind of chill in the air and there was a kind of undeclared war going on in Central America. So issues around the Contra, places that we didn't know much about because my generation was still thinking about the Vietnam War. But the younger generation was focused on what was happening in Central America and our support of the Contra and what was happening in El Salvador, what was happening in Nicaragua, what was happening in Guatemala.
Those were the main places and there were some amazing films, like I still remember *When the Mountains Tremble*, which was about Guatemala and about Indigenous people there. And *El Salvador: Another Vietnam*, that was another title of a film that you probably remember, maybe taught.

**Patricia Z.** I actually collaborated with the director Glenn Silber on a previous film, so I know that film very well.

**Michael Renov** That's right. I remember that now. So those were the films that were kind of ... felt very of the moment and there were other classic ... now, I feel they're classic but the films that were being made in the Women's movement, *Union Maids, With Babies and Banners*, those were kind of late '70s and into the early '80s. *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*. So you had kind of sexual politics and you had what was happening very actively in Central America.

And that convergence was pretty exciting and it was a young generation of filmmakers. We were kind of beyond the direct cinema folks, we were beyond the kind of older white men and it was women and it was people who were working collaboratively, often, with people in the region. And they were on the road showing their films too, and it was an exciting time.

**Patricia Z.** And so this is probably a good place to transition into your transition from kind of being trained in various forms of continental theory. I think you wrote your dissertation on Hollywood, which maybe some people aren't aware of, to documentary. And one thing we had talked about is this category of this sub-field, documentary studies, did not really exist at all when you and I were in graduate school and in our early jobs.

Could you maybe paint a picture of what the landscape looked like, both in terms of places, conferences, symposium, where people interested in documentary would go, journals that were taking the risk to publish this kind of new area, previous work. See if you could be a cartographer for us of that moment of what it was like to work in documentary, to study documentary, in this volatile period of the '80s.

**Michael Renov** Thanks for that question. I would say that we were in a moment of a kind of a lag. There was a growing interest in documentary, there was a growing body of work that was kind of brand-new and the best books, and the only books really had been written quite a while before. So in the '30s ... so Louis Jacobs had written an important book, there were other books that were interview books, but the key one I think still, which was Erik Barnouw's documentary entitled *Documentary*, and it was a kind of global history, came out in '74. And there was a newer edition later, but it really was the best book.

But it kind of stopped at the early '70s and there was a book by Barsam, there was a historical book by Jack Ellis, there were a few, but they weren't really up-to-date. They did not really have much to say about, let's say, anything post-
direct cinema. And Barnouw was great about the global reach, he really understood the importance of talking about the entire kind of international context, but his strength was not in the more contemporary, but more the classic.

Now Bill Nichols in 1981 came out with *Ideology in the Image*. Some of that was on documentary, a good part of it. And there were some important essays that were published, let's say, in *Screen* magazine and Ed Kuhn had written an important piece in 1976. And Bill Nichols had come out with one of his first efforts to talk about documentary, modes of documentary exposition. That was something, he was giving us a language.

But there wasn't really a lot else. And at the same time, film studies had become pretty evolved and it was through the 1970s it had absorbed French thinking and French continental philosophy, generally, and also *Screen*. So it was almost like Parisian intellectual thought filtered through *Screen* magazine, imported to the United States and that's what we were all ... you and I, our generation, we were raised on that, we read all of that.

But like Christian Metz, for example, had said pretty famously that what was important to study was the narrative fiction feature film. And that was the king's road of cinematic expression and that's what we needed to understand. We needed to have a vocabulary to really talk about that and semiology was really very focused, the centum, film language was really meant for that kind of filmmaking. And documentary seemed to be set off to one side. I think of it as a more sophisticated approach that incorporated all these ways of thinking that we had developed, so-called, in film theory in the 1970s.

And so that's when I started to feel a kind of ... there was a gap, and there was that moment when that gap needed to be filled. We needed to have the same sophistication of thought in relationship to what was happening in the realm, the larger realm of nonfiction, of documentary. And that was what appealed to me, and it was just ... it was because that was my training and now I was very focused on documentary and I realized that we needed to bring these things together. We needed to wed them.

And I think that began to happen by the late 1980s, and then a real important, for me, moment was a conference, and you asked about places you could publish. Well, I was able to start publishing about Newsreel film and Bill Nichols had written his both master's thesis and dissertation on the left-wing radical documentary group, Newsreel Collective. And I was also interested in Newsreel, did some research on that, started writing about that group. And one could publish in places like *Afterimage*, was really key for me, that was at Rochester, the visual studies workshop. They published regularly and they were very open, *Wide Angle* was another important publishing venue, they had wonderful conferences. I met you there, I met probably a hundred colleagues, I met at those early conferences. So that was in Athens, Ohio, then they had this
wonderful journal that came out four times a year, *Wide Angle* and they again were very open to a lot of different ways of ... and subject matter or topics.

Then I want to point to a conference at Ohio, which was in 1990, and a shout out to Gini Hall, who organized the conference at Ohio in 1990. It was called *Fiction / Nonfiction*, but my recollection is that it was really about nonfiction. It was a way of saying that nonfiction had this relationship on the other side of the slash to fiction, and it was the first time any of us I think could remember and maybe there hadn't been anything in the U.S. or North America, it was a lot of people coming together and we all shared an interest in documentary.

And it felt so great. William Glynn, I remember, Bill Glynn was there, he had just published his book. Bill Nichols was a year out of his important publication, *Representing Reality*. I was already starting to put together the pieces for *Theorizing Documentary*, that took a few years to wrangle. And so all of that was in my mind, in our minds, and it was just ... I think it was a watershed moment. And a bunch of us got together afterwards, we were in the airport in Columbus, Ohio, waiting for our airplanes to go home, and we said, this was so great, this was just a great experience. We need to do this again.

And that was the seed from which the *Visible Evidence* conference sprouted. It took us a few years to get the first one off the ground and that was Jane Gaines in Durham at Duke, 1993. But it was born out of that conference that the late Gini Hall organized in Athens, Ohio. And that, as I say, it gave us a space, it gave us a platform, and it made us realize that there was a lot we had to talk about, and that there was a lot of excitement in the air. I remember it so vividly.

And from that came this *Visible Evidence* conference concept, which we're now in the 24th year. I'd like to say a bit about it, because I think it's just been so instrumental in the growth and the creation of something like documentary studies, like you say, that phrase didn't exist. But now it does.

And so the thing that has made documentary studies and *Visible Evidence* conference and the book series so important is that even though we were interested in theory, we were always also interested in practice. And so from the very beginning, we wanted to have a lively, ongoing dialogue with the makers, with practitioners, with curators, with distributors. And we wanted it to be international. There was something about documentary and I think always has been. If you think back to Joris Ivens and others who were going everywhere around the world, thinking about, well, what's the hotspot? Where do I need to be?

So documentary has never been nationally bound. So we've always wanted to explore what's happening in the documentary studies scene and the making, the practicing in as many places as possible. And so the conference is traveled, it's annual, we've been on five continents, New Delhi this summer, in August, our summer, their winter, the 24th edition of *Visible Evidence* we'll be in Buenos
Aires. It's the second time we've been in Latin America. So we've been in Istanbul and Cardiff and Stockholm and Bozeman, Montana.

Patricia Z.: And Los Angeles.

Michael Renov: And Los Angeles. Several times. So the thing that was exciting about it always, there was nothing programmatic about this, it wasn't preconceived. It was truly an organic expression of a deep interest and I got to say, passion, for the subject and a need for us to find a place where we could really all kind of collect and exchange ideas and engage in a back and forth. And from that, the writing and the literature, and I'm happy to say you have a book in the Visible Evidence book series. There are other people at this conference, many of them who've been published and part of, either have books in the series or been to the conference.

This year, I've talked to several people already, who've never been to Visible Evidence, who are going for the first time. Like Ann Kaplan is going to Visible Evidence. I never thought that would happen, but the fact that Linda Williams and Tony Case and Thomas Elsaesser and Ann Kaplan and others would discover Visible Evidence and find it a place that's intellectually compelling is ... it's a great honor and it's a great excitement.

Patricia Z.: A great contribution to stretching what we think of now as screen studies, as though it's putty, pulling at it, moving it in other kinds of directions. I want to go back to this idea of a milieu, because as you're talking about those conferences at Ohio University, in some ways, they resonate with and echo your own experience in San Francisco in that Ohio University, for our viewers who don't know this, ran a film festival, the conference was connected with the film festival. I know when I used to go to that conference, I would also see lots and lots of films and kind of sneak out at night, and connected to a journal.

So it was not a terrain that was exclusively academic, and I also remember many of those conferences having panels with filmmakers mixed in with theorists. I remember, we were there with Trinh T. Minh-ha, for example.

Michael Renov: Peter Goodall.

Patricia Z.: Frederick Wiseman, I think I saw there. Joel DeMott and Jeff Krines. So it is, I think an example of not just film studies, but the vitality of film culture with scholars, makers, distributors, programmers and editors.

We had talked a little bit about Wide Angle, which is now defunct. I was on the editorial board and I was very sad when Ruth Bradley decided to retire and not do it anymore. But we both talked about how important Wide Angle was three decades ago, for publishing work that might not have ended up in Cinema Journal, Quarterly Review of Film and Television and maybe even Screen.
They were very, I think, have very much a programmer sensibility of what’s boiling up. I know we both, many of our early articles in *Wide Angle* on documentary, on experimental film, on different ways of ... I actually published I think one of my only articles on narrative film in *Wide Angle*. So it was a different milieu.

I also remember the affect I felt at those conferences, which were really more like a symposium, I think, in that they were small, they were single stream. I don’t know that we would have met each other if it was multiple streams of 20, like SCMS is now. I remember them being very social. I remember people really being on fire about pushing film studies, thinking film studies was feeling kind of old and dusty from the ’70s. And the same with *Afterimage*, it’s connected to visual studies workshop. And these are two publishing venues and places that really, besides ideas, brought people together for embodied, sustained conversation, where you experience something from start to finish with a group.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how that kind of experience informs some of what you do with *Visible Evidence*. Because you’ve been such a key figure in this rather anarchist, non-organization organization, and how it might inform some of the ways you do your own work.

Because I know you often work very closely with filmmakers you write about, so it’s kind of a big question to wrangle, but I’m trying to get at, in a way these milieus that we come out of, are very different than the SCMS of 2017 with 20 panels and SIG groups and all of this. That's not to criticize that, it's just a very different kind of affective economy.

Michael Renov: The blessing and curse of growth and success is the numbers, the sheer numbers, and you're right, there was something about the intimacy of those Ohio conferences and you could be in a room for several days, successive days, with people you might disagree with, and yet you formed human relationships. I know that was where I met David Bordwell and even though I may have had, over the years, differences with David on many topics, my relationship with him was always rooted in a basic level of friendship that was established in sitting in a room together for days on end and listening to his jokes and all of that.

So I think *Visible Evidence*, one of the reasons why it was successful when it was in the early ’90s, probably that was the time when SCMS as well had gone into it another growth phase. And so I know that having gone to a few MLA conferences in the early part of my career and being a little overwhelmed by just the volume of things, it’s a little bit ... SCMS has developed in that direction with being ... and it’s great that the new generations and lots of different ways of coming at things, coalesce with SCMS. But one needs refuges, a smaller setting, where you can have more kind of direct connection with people and that it can be less organized in a way.
But I come back to and I want to give credit to Peter Layman for the early years of my experience anyway at the Ohio University, *Wide Angle* events and the journal. He was a real open minded and great collaborator in many ways and really a visionary. With the *Visible Evidence* conference, we started off with one stream and we stayed there for a while, but now we're in a way, victims of our success.

And so this year for example, I know in Buenos Aires, a very large number of papers were accepted and partly because the Ford Foundation gave a grant to the organizers and in Buenos Aires that will cover registration for any Latin American participants. And so they've opened the door pretty widely and they're going to be hundreds of papers. On the one hand it's like, great, there'll be so many people to meet, so many things to hear and on the other hand it's like, well, in a way, I don't want to sound like a nostalgic old guy, but in a way there is a loss, there's a gain and there's a loss.

And I think that really the SIGs are a great idea. I feel the vitality very often is in the scholarly interest groups now with SCMS conferences, where you've got again, a small number of people in the room, who want to organize, who maintain a connection throughout the year, and they have shared interests, they have things they want to work on together. And that's just really important, it's creating community. I really want to stress that. It's really important that there be a place to develop community in the broadest sense and culture comes with that. So I think that's what's happened with documentary is that there's been a community that's been created, there's a culture that has grown to sustain that community and you're absolutely right.

I want to say one thing that I haven't mentioned and this is something that you've really been a pioneer with, I think, with the *Visible Evidence* conference, is your interest in how, what used to be called new media, well, now it can't really be called that anymore. But digital media and then other forms of interactivity, websites, performance, and use of kind of documentary material in museums and performance spaces. All of that has been part of the conversation really for a very long time at *Visible Evidence*, not just the film people. It's not just people who watch documentary films by the same handful of filmmakers. It really is as expansive as it can be and very open to whatever people were interested in.

I've always said that it was a site. It's just an opportunity for people to get together and share with one another whatever it is they're working on and what moves them. And so gains, serious gains. All of these are very different venues and avenues for how people represent the real, in a variety of different ways, and I think the openness of the conference is partly that there hasn't been anybody ... there are no gatekeepers.

And wherever the conference has been hosted, we have always just ... the unspoken guidelines, really, are that if you have it together to organize one of
these things, you pretty much get to make the rules. And you'll take the blow back if you do something wrong, like if you charge too much for registration, because you couldn't get your dean to contribute. Then people will be unhappy with you. And if you want to go big, go big, and if you want to keep it more intimate, do that. Because it happens on an annual basis and it travels, then if you're not happy one year, maybe you'll come back in the next year and it'll suit your taste a little bit more.

I have to say though that I've gone to each and every one of them and that's one of my proudest achievements and I'm hoping that I won't like break a leg or something and not be able to go, because it's great to be ... to have the personal experience of having gone each and every time.

Patricia Z.: It's a good point about Visible Evidence and it has a heterogeneity and elasticity, in terms of what documentary is. It's not just fixed analog objects anymore. And in fact, I was thinking back to one of the conferences, the one in Toronto and there were more papers that were analyzing digital interfaces and immaterialities of software than there were films. I actually counted because I'm that kind of person.

I wonder if we could just circle back a little bit about something you mentioned that provoked me. Is this idea of the growth of SCMS and the need for these refuges. When I started teaching in '81, in upstate New York, there were very few schools that had film and media programs. Maybe three or four. Now, the number of programs for film and media across the country have exploded, and you no longer need big studios, like the schools we teach at, and all this tech. People are teaching media without the tech. So I think as we see so many more institutions, instituting programs, we're seeing many more people needing these professional organizations like SCMS.

Because I was looking through the program, because I have not been, full disclosure, to SCMS in 17 years.

Michael Renov: I find that shocking.

Patricia Z.: It is a little shocking and partly it's because my film festival happens at exactly the same time. The other reason is, I prefer smaller, where I can know people and where there's more time for discussion. So when I'm dividing up my time, I'm more on the refuge side than the professional side.

But one thing I noticed is looking through the program, people coming from schools 15 years ago, those schools did not have film and media programs. So there's a kind of importance and urgency for these big organizations, as our field becomes just de rigueur in schools, big and small, four-year liberal arts schools. When I started out, you were in a communication school or a big film school, and now the field has migrated in many different realms.
So this idea of the other side of it, and I don't really think it's even a binary of the refuge in the smaller, perhaps special interest group conference, is it's a dialectic movement between them. I had a Dean who said he felt any scholar's career should organize your year with small, medium and large conferences. And he felt that you were not really an intellectual if all you did was large. And that if all you did was small, you weren't learning some of the professional modalities involved in teaching or getting promoted.

And I thought that was very wise to think about and your notion of the refuge, I think is really key.

Michael Renov: Can I mention a couple of other ones? Because what now comes to mind is Consoling Passions arose at around the same time and that was really hooking into people who ... remember there was that moment when SCS became SCMS, but there was a question should it be the Society for Cinema and Television Studies? People weren't quite ready to embrace television, so media became a larger umbrella term. But the TV studies people were like champing at the bit and they formed their own refuge, which has also grown.

And I think Orphans is probably another one where people who want to do somewhat out-of-the-box media objects and practices, they find their place, their community there. And then Pordenone is another place where people ... and that's very international, of course, but the people who do early cinema, early film history have migrated every year, like swallows to Capistrano. They go to Pordenone. So I think you're right, you need to have your area of specialization, your special love, but you do need to I think keep your finger on the pulse and SCMS is after all, the place.

And there's something to be said about the legitimation of the discipline. When I first started going to SCS, it was still mostly the home of an older generation, they were almost exclusively older men and white men. And it was a generational thing, and when the baby boomers came into their own, then we needed to have an organization that reflected who we were and what our interest were. But we also really desperately needed to have a kind of discipline and I know that those accreditation processes that happen every decade or so, film studies is still called an emerging field. It doesn't have the legitimacy of history, comparative literature, communication studies. Those are much more legitimate in the eyes of higher education, writ large.

So we still are in an emerging discipline or emerging field. And it's odd to say that because we have thousands who come to a conference annually. So it's something to keep in mind is that we really need to have the profession, it's part of what makes us truly fully fledged, fully vested members of higher education, in at least North America and I think probably in the world, differently in other places, of course.
I want to say one another thing, which is that as we became more professionalized and as we became more institutionalized with SCS and then SCMS, and I know you know this very well because Ithaca College and USC or two places where there was this divide between those who went to University Film and Video Association, UFVA, which was more the practitioners, the practice-based people would go to that conference.

Patricia Z.: And industry people.

Michael Renov: And then SCS, then SCMS. And in 1988, the two had a joint conference and there was some amount of intermingling, but still not all that much.

If you think about that split, that split doesn't exist in the same way in other places. In Europe, for example, and in Brazil or other places, where those who teach theory are very likely also to be able to teach practice. Maybe of necessity, not in some of the bigger universities, like in the University of Sao Paolo. But in some of the smaller places in Latin America, and certainly I think even in the UK, there's the need to be able to do more than just one thing. And practitioners end up getting PhDs, so that they can get academic positions. But they are hyphenates in a way that we've specialized more.

So I think there's an impoverishment in that we haven't been as embracing of, oh, you're just a filmmaker, you don't do film theory? And so the fact is that in something like Visible Evidence has been a real, I think, wonderful place where that split just doesn't exist. And then it turns out that all of the ... I can think of so many filmmakers who are so smart and who write very important pieces and books. Trinh T. Minh-ha, of course, and Susana de Sousa Dias more recently. But it really goes across the board and goes back to our roots. Vertov and Eisenstein and all of them, what makes us think that we have to make that distinction? I think it's been an impoverishment for our field.

Patricia Z.: We both come from schools where people do ... there is really that divide between UFVA and SCMS, which I think is still there and then I think there's a third organization, which is ICA, International Communications Association. So in my large school of comm, those are the three camps and the artists just go to festivals.

But one of the founders of UFVA was my first chair at Ithaca College and that was founded based on the land-grant institutions that were building programs to train people in training films for agriculture and development. And a lot of those people in those programs have been trained in World War II units.

And so they were people who were not quite industry people in a Hollywood sense, they weren't in television, they had been trained in the war, moved in to do these films about how to irrigate your field or whatnot.

Michael Renov: You're describing USC in the '50s.
Patricia Z.: I think USC, by the way, one of the professors might have been involved in that first group.

Michael Renov: Herb Farmer.

Patricia Z.: Yes and so a lot of those big institutions that we think of that are the big R1 institutions that teach film, a lot of their roots go back to these GIs, who were trained, who ended up in these ancillary film units. And many of those early UFVA people wanted to get together to figure out like what kind of equipment do you use, and what do you do with the Bell & Howell?

And I think that that's an interesting history which I had to follow because we sponsored a UFVA at Ithaca College that I was assigned to program, and one part of the program I did was called pioneers in the field of cinema. So I interviewed a lot of these people and I put them all on a panel together and I learned about this, it was my mind-blowing. Because my world is more a theory-history world and I didn't really know anything about that. But I think many of those people, I used to go to UFVA because they did more panels on documentary than SCMS did. So I was always looking for where are the spaces and places for doc?

Let's move a little bit to, as we talk about all these different organizations, I'd like to circle back to documentary studies. Because I think that's the one area, the academy you and I both care so much about. Three plus decades of real advocacy for creating space and place for this.

I'm wondering, as you look at ... I'm going to use the word documentary, because I think documentary studies maybe sounds very academic and you've been talking about filmmakers and artists. So if you don't mind my little intervention, if we just say documentary, what seismic changes have you seen in these three decades? What debates have you seen emerging that we've maybe moved through? What are those tectonic moments where the plates really shift and erupt?

You talked a little bit about early documentary studies, which we've both been so dedicated to, in a passionate way, being kind of post-cinema verité and in some ways, post-political compilation film. I remember the '80s being a time of hybrid documentary forms, very exciting mixes of experimental and documentary. But this is a kind of question, I'm really curious, if you could look at it and say, what are some of these shifts and debates you've seen?

Michael Renov: I think one of the things that had a big impact was feminism. I'm a great believer that the impact of feminism not only in film theory, film studies, but it was also felt very strongly in documentary practice. In fact, those films that I was just mentioning that were kind of breaking the mold and changing the conversation away from direct cinema, which is for good reason, beloved, and it's really important, and remarkable work was done. But it was largely done by guys.
And then Newsreel, which was this more kind of left-wing version had a very strong female contingent, that sort of splintered off. And then there were others, who were coming up through the ranks in the anti-war movement and the student movement, people like Julia Reichert and Jim Cline come to mind. But others, Connie Field, others who are making these films that were on feminist subject matter, in dealing with women's lives, revisionist histories.

But there was a change that was happening that had to do with what kinds of films were they interested in making? And also what was the relationship between the filmmakers and their subjects? Because the direct cinema folks really wanted to hold things at arm's length for the most part. And they saw themselves as scientists. Leacock was so proud of saying, I studied physics at Harvard.

And really that entire generation, they were psychologists, they were physicists, they had a kind of scientific rhetoric that went with what they were doing about observation. And this new generation that started with the feminists, but then it included queer filmmakers and video-makers and really video artists as well, who changed the whole equation, because they didn't want to have that neutral stance. They didn't want to have an invisible wall that separated subject from interlocutor.

And so a trend that I've certainly been very focused on for decades is the interest in subjectivity. And so for me, that was a big change, because starting really in the '70s and accelerating through the '80s and '90s and till now has been this realization that documentary had, in a way, wanted to scaffold itself through a claim on the real. And that claim on the real seemed to be bolstered by some stance of objectivity, that it could be something related to a kind of science or evidentiary or something of that sort. And that subjectivity, in some ways, was a contamination. That it kind of got in the way or that it was a divergence from what really had to be, which was to make change, or to tell the historical reality.

And so filmmakers became very much more interested, maybe here's where the kind of avant-gardism and mixes in because artists have always been about their vision. And documentary began to be much more aligned with this interest in what's going on in that important encounter between the filmmaker and the subject. What's going on inside people's minds, what's going on not only how they behave, what they do that's visible and exteriorize, but what about interiority?

And I think that documentary made this leap some time in these 30 years or so that we've been thinking about it, to being very focused on how people behave and what you can see, and then trying to plumb the depths to get inside of experience, to understand the back and forth between the filmmaker and what his or her subject might be. And also to be able to use the camera as a kind of
tool to investigate some interior experiences, and maybe even irreality, to try to understand what it means to go through death and dying.

Those were not issues that were very interesting to people who were that first generation direct cinema, who really wanted to show us, like Wiseman or the Maysles, who wanted to show us public behavior and our relationship as individuals to institutions. And those kinds ... very important, can't take away from it in the least, but it left to the side so many other things that began to be explored.

So when animation becomes just the next extension of how one is able to get inside experience and to ... okay, so it's not the same indexicality exactly, but whatever the tools may be, but they're still about exploring people's experiences and their realities and their everyday lives, their existences. And even I would say with animation maintaining this connection to an indexicality, but now really on the soundtrack. So often it was the voice.

And so I think documentary began to explore the interstices, the in-between, the everyday life, bottom up, diaries, experience in lower case. And then when Act Up and other movements, gay rights, began to become front and center in the '80s and into the '90s, documentary was there, as was the technology. Because now we had digital, things were smaller, more portable, inexpensive. And we had already broken down these assumptions about what documentary needed to be, that it needed to explore something out there, and that it was more the in-between and the inside, the in there.

Patricia Z.: I thought you were going to talk about theoretical and historical debates in documentary study, debates in documentary studies and I'm struck by how you talked about documentary practice. And I think this leads us full circle back to where we started, where you talked about your early experiences at Pacific Film Archive, where for you, and perhaps for many people of our generation, scholarly work was not amputated from film and media culture, but part of a milieu. And in this last passionate moment, you've shared with us, of this sweeping 30-year historiography of documentary. It's a really good example of that. It's just interesting that your default was really to be so excited about all these works.

Michael Renov: But I have to say also that it may sound like it's practice, but it's so much about theory. Because it also brings something to bear that I've always found so central to documentary and that's ethics. You've got ethical philosophy that's an important branch of philosophy, that has tried to make sense of, and theorize what that I-thou relationship, what self and other owe to one another, and in documentary, it's just happening.

I think the documentary scenario is one in which all kinds of theoretical constructs are actualized. And so it's a false, I think, distinction to say theory-practice at that point, because really we have to have a kind of theoretical
apparatus and language of vocabulary for us to make sense of a film like *Camera Person*. Kirsten Johnson's film in which she shows... makes an autobiography out of material that she shot for other filmmakers, just as a cinematographer. Because it's about what happens from behind the camera as she's shooting for other people in far-flung places. And what we see is it becomes a kind of journey into her relationship, a series of encounters with people in all kinds of places, including her own mother.

And so it requires us to really have a language, that's a language that is drawn from various corners of theory, including, I think, ethical philosophy.

**Patricia Z.:**

That's a really good point and I think maybe we'll just wrap it up here and I think your passionate exposition on these last two answers suggests that there is a way in which these filmmakers you're describing are engaged in a theoretical inquisition of the real. But similarly, the theorists like you, are engaged with a practicality of theory to locate us in ethics.

So in some ways, both of your answers on both ends of the spectrum show that there really is not a binary or an opposition and I'm going to be careful here and just limit the scope and say, at least for many of us in documentary studies. I don't want to expand that.

You used three words that I think provide a good summary for your trajectory as a scholar and also in our pre-production phone call, in our decision to spend more time on the field of documentary studies than on your personal life. And the three times you used, I think, just sum up what our time together, we hope, will contribute to the history of the field.

: And one is the idea of plumbing the depths, figuring out what's there, and to plumb the depths, we actually need the tour guides of theory. So we can understand what's significant. And the other is this idea of the interstitial. I was struck by almost everything you said is about living in the interstitial zone. Between Pacific Film Archive and graduate school, between filmmakers you admire and theories that turn your thinking in new ways, churning up new ideas. So the interstitiality is such a vibrant zone in documentary, and I think a lot of your research has really probed that.

And the last word that you used that I'll just end with is explore. There you are, someone very senior faculty member, and I need to put for the record, recently named endowed chair, the Haskell Wexler endowed chair, someone who's now an academic administrator. And the theme that emerged from our time together is this passion for exploring, and I hope that our field, all the big field of cinema and screen studies can learn from your model of passionate exploration, rather than thinking we know everything.

So thank you so much for this hour and thank you SCMS for inviting professor Renov and I to plumb the depths, go into the interstitial, and explore with you.