Joan Hawkins: My name is Joan Hawkins. I'm a professor in the department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University Bloomington; soon to become the Media School at Indiana University Bloomington. It is March 28, 2015, and I'm here in the city of Montreal at the Queen Elizabeth, the Reine Elizabeth, Hotel at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. I'm here to interview Professor Scott MacDonald who works in the Department of Art History at Hamilton College.

Professor MacDonald is well-known for his publications “Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema”, “Adventures of Perception: Essays/Interviews” and one of my favorites, “Canyon Cinema: The Life and Times of an Independent Film Distributor”; but he has published widely, particularly well-known, I believe, for his Critical Cinema series which was wonderful, wonderful collection of essays and interviews about Avant-Garde filmmakers.

Hello. I wanted to start out just by asking you about how you became involved in becoming a film media scholar. How did you get there?

Scott MacDonald: It's funny because we have these stories that seem like pivotal moments, and I have one. In 1963, I'm at DePauw University where I'm an undergraduate and we're standing outside one of the buildings. A professor is standing there with us, there's three or four of us there and the professor says, "You know, it'd be interesting to have a course in the movies." And all of us students laughed at the absurdity of this idea, that the movies could be studied seriously. So between '64 and '70, this miracle happens. It's got to be the first time in the history of academe that students demanded an academic field be generated. At the University of Florida, there was a demand for courses for which there were no experts; there were no trained people to teach. I had always loved movies; they'd always felt pivotal to me like everybody else in the '60s. It's just what we did is go to the movies. The call went out who would like to teach a film course.

I thought, being dumb and young, that I could do this. "I'll do it." I think I'd read one book about film, whatever the Arthur Knight book was. I knew nothing, except that I'd seen more movies than my students, probably not by all that much. For a lot of us, it did suddenly seem that if you could study the history of music, if you were a cultured person because you had studied the history of music or the history of literature or the history of painting, what would be the problem with studying the history of film?

I didn't get into Cinema Studies as a scholar. I got into it actually as a teacher kind of running away from the idea of scholarship. I was an English major and I was working on a PhD dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's short stories. That was okay, but teaching movies seemed exciting and new and different from scholarship. So I became a film professor before I knew anything about the field.

Joan Hawkins: Was that first class within a literature department-
Scott MacDonald: It was in a humanities' department; sort of general, freshman, sophomore kinds of courses. I have no idea what I showed, I don't remember what we did in the class. I don't remember a thing about it actually. But I did it, I know I did it.

Joan Hawkins: I remember, when I started, when I was an undergraduate, we had these renegade English professors who would bring 16mm projectors into the classrooms, so my early memories of any kind of film being taught in class was really with the sound of the projector in the back of the room. We all felt like we were being very radical just by doing that; the idea that you'd be seeing Maya Deren's "Meshes of the Afternoon".

Scott MacDonald: Yes. It was exciting to go to the movies in those days. If you went to see Antonio’s “Blow-Up”, the theater would be packed. There was real energy in the film scene, even in a place like Gainesville, Florida.

Joan Hawkins: I felt that too. I felt like there was almost this seamless quality. I was living in the Bay area and I remember there being almost this true continuity between movies and real-world politics. There would be demonstrations on the University of California Berkeley campus, there'd be demonstrations at San Francisco State and we would be there all day. We would go get something quick to eat and then we would go see a Godard film. It made perfect sense to us that these two things went together. Unbelievable.

I'm supposed to ask you about training and what training proceeded your first teaching job, besides writing about the Hemingway short stories...

Scott MacDonald: There's a real back asswards dimension to this that I think, looking back, is kind of interesting. If you do a PhD in literature, and mine was on narrative perspective in the Hemingway short stories, how the point-of-view of a story informs it. In order to do that dissertation, you had to read everything on point-of-view that had been published. I had to read everything that had been published on every one of the stories; Hemingway wasn't particularly prolific so it's fairly easy compared to what people have to do now.

It took me eight months of sitting in a carrel in the library in a little cage, taking notes; it took me, 8:00 to 12:00 in the morning, 1:00 to 4:00 in the afternoons, 7:00 to 10:00 at night, five days a week, to do that writing and note-taking so that I could be allowed now to write what I thought. I was very rigorous about it. When I came out of that experience, I remember looking back even then and I thinking, 'I don't believe I learned very much from this.'

I mean, in terms of the amount of effort that I put into it, what I know now that I didn't know from just reading the stories on my own or reading other literary figures on my own, it's not worth the exchange. I came out of the process with a very bad attitude as a scholar. I thought scholarship was, or at least critical writing about literature (there wasn't much about films, so I didn't even know if there was critical writing about cinema) was just about making your way up the...
economic ladder in the industry of academe. For a '60s person, this was not such an attractive thing to be doing.

So I got my first job, ironically... I had a PhD in American literature from Florida and had taught this one film course (and I attended a two week summer institute on cinema the summer following my graduation), and on the basis of that one film class, I got a job at Utica college. They wanted somebody that could teach English, but there was a huge demand for film courses; they needed to have someone that could also do films.

So I get the job and now I'm in the world of publish or perish, which is the world we all live in now. We don't even have the phrase anymore because it's just what the world is. I was dumbfounded about what I should do because I hated the idea of doing this kind of writing. I did turn some of my Hemingway chapters into articles, it just felt like such a waste... Anyway, I was looking around for a way to get into being a scholar that didn't offend me. I don't know how else to put it.

Some of the Hemingway scholarship offended me. “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” used to be Hemingway's most written about story and scholars had actually gotten the story changed so that the dialog reads differently than it did when Hemingway wrote it and saw through many editions. This was the final straw for me. If this is what scholarship does, changes the story because the story is easier to analyze this way than it was the way he wrote it, I thought, I don't want to have anything to do with this.

I remember going to the library for one last check on my essay where I attack the change in the dialog in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and am looking up recent articles and I see a title focusing on exactly the same thing I was doing. The minute I saw that this other person was on the same track as I was, I was depressed and remember thinking to myself, 'This is what I hate. I'm supposed to be a teacher and I'm upset that somebody understands something. This should not be the way it is. You should be happy that somebody knew this, not depressed because you can't market your idea.'

Anyway, I really didn't know what to do and then I discovered, by accident, that around me there were things happening in cinema. Ninety miles south is the State University of New York at Binghamton (I'm just now finishing a book about this experience [Binghamton Babylon]), and the Cinema Department there announces a university-wide film symposium on a spring weekend in 1972. I'm completely ignorant about film and I'm teaching it and I figure I'd better go to this symposium because I can't help but learn something—anything I learn would be a help.

A couple of friends and I drive down to Binghamton and we walk into this big auditorium. It's got mostly students, but there's adults there; probably 100 people, 150 people. In one fell swoop we see five films. We see Ernie Gehr's
“Serene Velocity”, I think we saw Ricky Leacock’s “Happy Mother’s Day” (That’s on the printed schedule and maybe it was shown; I don’t actually remember seeing the film that afternoon). I remember “Serene Velocity”, I remember Ken Jacobs’s “Soft Rain”, Larry Gottheim’s “Barn Rushes” and then the pièce de résistance, “The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes” by Stan Brakhage. So, boom. That screening was like being punched in the face.

I was so furious after the screening and I thought, “When the lights come on, everybody’s going to stand and attack these assholes that would have the gall to bring us all the way down from Utica to see this crap!” That’s the way I felt. The lights come on and nobody seems to notice that anything unusual has happened! I had that surreal dream feeling that, ‘Wait a minute, this is normal?’ My friends and I left, though there was some event in the evening we didn’t stay for, but on the way back, I spent the whole trip pontificating about how horrible this stuff was. “It wasn’t really cinema. It wasn’t art. It wasn’t blah, blah, blah”, but in the days that followed, I couldn’t get the films out of my head.

In another week, I thought, “This would be really fun to show my film students.” Here the filmmakers at Binghamton were, 90 miles south, they were neighbors. Ken Jacobs and Larry Gottheim. I learned that Hollis Frampton was living 20 miles from me in another direction, and I learned. Bob Huot was 30 miles south. I was finding out that I was in the middle of this world of independent filmmaking; at that point, I couldn’t even have said what it was “independent of”!

I don’t know anything about film, so I can’t even conjecture why people would make these films. So, even though on some level this was not a good career choice, I decided to go try to interview these people because I figured they could tell me what they were doing, even if I didn’t understand it. That’s where the interviewing came from, it was an act of self defense.

Joan Hawkins: I just think it’s a fascinating trajectory that your career has taken because that’s how I first got to know your work was through the interviews that you had done with people whose films I was working on. And for my own troubled history with academia, I’ve become increasingly interested in this idea of the interview as its own kind of critical form because if it's done well, it isn't just, "What kind of violets do you like in your garden?"

It really is asking people to draw conclusions and I find it really fascinating. I’m not quite sure even how to pose this as a question, but I was hoping you would talk a little bit about that. How you fell into doing interviews; what prompted you to go on doing them?

Scott MacDonald: Well, this was a place where actually my literary training was useful. Looking back I realize that in those days, I had the sense that if you did an interview with a filmmaker, my colleagues, especially colleagues in other fields, didn’t take that seriously as scholarship.
They felt that all you did, to do an interview, was record on your little tape recorder and give it to your secretary. She transcribed it and that was it, you sent it to a journal. But I realized right away that I couldn't go to Hollis Frampton's house and just talk with him in general. And I could see that; for one thing, nobody could transcribe this stuff because they wouldn't know what he was saying. I was terrified. I knew I didn't know anything, which is a useful knowledge to have, so I did a lot of preparation—and I took a six-pack of beer with me with my tape recorder when I went to see Hollis Frampton.

By the time I did that, I had looked at every Frampton film many times. I had written out the films, I had drawn pictures of every image. I had done with the films what I had done with the Hemingway stories. I had taken them apart, looked at them really carefully so that I could ask in depth questions because I had a million. I was lucky because Hollis had just taught a course on his own work at Buffalo, so he was like raring to talk; Hollis could talk anyway. Oh my god.

I decided to make interviewing a form of scholarship, a form of research in the sense that you couldn't do an interview until, I remember I finally conceptualized it, until I could ask questions that would surprise the filmmaker, that would suggest that I knew something about the films that he/she didn't know; that I would know them well enough to do that. Then I would let the person talk for as long as they wanted to talk.

For me, it was not about trying to get the resulting conversation into a manageable size. I would transcribe the results myself so that I could get the voice of the person into it; these are the days when you had the little foot pedal and the earphones. The interview process took a period of time then this transcription process took forever. So then I would have this kind of master and I would start to revise it and figure out what I think the person was saying to me and try to get it into a shape that would be understandable.

Then it would go back to the filmmaker, come back to me, go back to the filmmaker, come back to me; so it was a very, very long process. I didn't conceptualize it as a literary form at first, but over the years not only did I come to think of the interview as a literary form, but I realized that my literary training had fed into this in two different ways.

When I was at University of Florida, the big field there in English studies was 18th century. Aubrey Williams who was on the Norton Anthology Board and stuff, he was the big cheese at University of Florida. Thomas Preston was an expert on Boswell. His argument was that “The Life of Johnson” was the first nonfiction novel and that Boswell is actually making himself a character, a Scottish provincial from nowhere who comes to meet the great man and record his words. I figured I was the perfect position to be the Scottish provincial from the middle of nowhere talking to the great man--I know I was conscious of that.
My interest in Hemingway was also relevant. One of my big interests was that like Henry James and to some extent Steven Crane, Hemingway wanted a completely dramatic story, a story that could be told entirely in conversation. “The Sun Also Rises” is, on a certain level, an action novel but is told entirely in conversation. When I started to look back on my interviewing, I started to think, "Well these conversations are literary. They can be made into a literary form."

At a certain point, once I'd got used to doing the process, I started to think, "Well, I need to really structure this, make this work as a kind of entity, as something beyond just a seeming record of what somebody said."

Joan Hawkins: It's brilliant and you were really pioneering something ahead of its time. I was thinking of Bon magazine which came out in 1980-81, the idea was that this lower east side group would have artists and writers and filmmakers interviewing artists and writers and filmmakers. Often, you would pick up the magazine, as much for the person who was doing the interviewing as you would for the person who was being interviewed.

But there was something in that, there was a synergy that developed in between these two things and where you realize you always feel, I always feel when I'm reading those interviews, that I'm coming in in the middle of a conversation that's already been going on for a while.

Scott MacDonald: The Bon interviews?

Joan Hawkins: Yeah, but I feel that way with yours too, that there's something that's already been established almost and a relationship with the person.

Scott MacDonald: That's really true because there are some interviews that took years to finish, because they would back and forth over and over and over. I'd get a call from Morgan Fisher. Morgan has very good manners but he's tough as nails, "Hello Scott, it's Morgan." I'd know immediately he's got a problem with something and if I don't change it, I don't have the interview. It would take, in some cases, years to get these things done and they would go through many, many processes; so, on some level I think, the history of going back and forth between us shows up in the final version as an implicit dimension.

Joan Hawkins: That's really interesting.

Scott MacDonald: I hope.

Joan Hawkins: You've done a lot of curatorial work, too and the same thing as much as I see, find it very interesting that the way in which the interview form can be a kind of critical format. I always feel about curating that it's a particular kind of pedagogy and I was hoping you would also say a little bit about...

Scott MacDonald: I think the biggest failure... Let me jump back; this book on Binghamton, that came out of that moment when I’d begun teaching film. It's called “Binghamton
Babylon*, it'll be out in September. What I learned from that visit to Binghamton was that that act of curation changed my life. Looking back, I understood that a very astute thoughtful group of films had been arranged in a devastatingly powerful way. I think I'm going to do that show if I travel with the book. I think it would get the same reaction from people now as I had.

One of the things I mean to do in the Binghamton book is to chart the change from America having a film culture--because by the end of the 60s we had a film culture; every town had a theater that played European and independent film, documentaries were making it into public theaters. But by the end of the 70s when film had become professionalized in academe, that film culture seemed to disappear.

Now, I think there were other factors, television was offering more and more channels, there was more and more programming; older people didn't go to the movies as much, et cetera et cetera. But I think that one of my problems with the field at this point is that we spent a generation demonstrating that you could write as complexly and as in depth about film as you can about philosophy or as you can about literature, but curating is a lost art among academics.

Curating is not considered academic work. If you do a film series, you don't get tenure on the basis of the quality of the film series you do and I think that's a tragedy for the field.

Joan Hawkins: Yeah, I do too.

Scott MacDonald: I think, looking back, it's funny because for the SUNY Binghamton Cinema Department, filmmaking was film theory. Curating was film scholarship. I mean, I think this also comes out of Cinema 16; I think Amos Vogel was a great film scholar, but in a way that we need many more of. I think every major academic institution should have a film series, not just one that students run, not just a second chance to see a first run film, but a brilliantly curated, complicated required nexus within the institution.

For a while, I taught at Bard College and it was a wonderful place to teach. I mean the students were amazing. I had to re-learn how to teach because I would show a Bruce Conner film or a Bruce Baillie film and be ready to argue why it's worth talking about; I'd walk into the class and they'd loved the films. What do you talk about when you only know enough to argue that it's worth talking about?

But in Bard, at that time there were not financial resources for programming, for me to do programming. I feel very much that being an academic in film studies requires you to do public programming or at least programming that's for the institution at large. So, I've always done a lot of that. Also, I've needed to do it because if a filmmaker comes to show a film at Utica New York, I've got
them all to myself and I can do an interview. It was also self defense, a way of continuing to learn about film.

Joan Hawkins: I've always thought of just the setting up of the syllabus, the screening list for a syllabus per class is a kind of curating, but even that's become harder and harder to do now. I find that students are less willing to sit through double features than they used to be and that used to be one of the ways that I would try to get them to think differently about a film, by pairing two films together.

Scott MacDonald: I think that way all the time but I rarely do it. I don't know whether the students have changed or whether we've stopped assuming their passion. Because at Binghamton there was no limit on how long a course could run. So, their courses were scheduled to be nine hours a week, three three-hour periods and if a filmmaker came to town over the weekend, they were required to go to everything; expected to go to everything--it was a real-life commitment to study film at that opening moment.

Joan Hawkins: I remember when I took my first actual film class at UC Berkeley, it was just expected that we went to the regular screening of the film, but there was also a second subsidiary screening down in the language lab and it was given to us to understand that we really weren't prepared to talk about a film until we'd seen it at least twice. I can't imagine doing that to my students, I think I would have a revolution.

Scott MacDonald: I had this funny thing happen about a semester ago. My intro students write extensive journals because at least that forces them to articulate about the films so they can hold on to them a little bit. Film can be so evanescent.

Joan Hawkins: Do you give them specific problems for the journals?

Scott MacDonald: Sometimes, but mostly it's a record of their thinking and I don't want to direct their thinking so much as let them find their way into the work. So I was getting this one journal that was fantastic and I couldn't understand how with one viewing, anybody could write this stuff. So, I said, "Are you going to the library and looking at the films again?" She says, "Yeah." I said, "That's fantastic." She said, "Well, I just figured everybody else gets it on one viewing."

She thought it was a weakness in her character or in her intellect that she needed to go to the library to look at the films two to three times before she wrote about them. I thought, I'm not doing my job! I mean, some how we have to get them to be more involved and looking at stuff if they want to call themselves film people. If they don't, that's fine. But, anyway, easier said than done.

Joan Hawkins: What's it like teaching film within the context of an art program as opposed to teaching within the context of a humanities program or other program?
Scott MacDonald: Well, the reality at Hamilton—and I think this is true of most small colleges, and the more prestigious the college, the more true this probably is—film is always a bit of an outlier. I'm the one person who calls himself a film person. I mean, there are other people teaching film and a few others are actually writing about film, but they do it as an adjunct to their real field; they're in Asian Studies and Religious Studies...

On the other hand, I get a lot of support for renting films and bringing filmmakers to campus. I've never had a budget I had to worry about for film rentals; I can get what I want, so I have a lot of support there. We do these events, it's pretty well-known on campus the events I do, so it has some punch.

Joan Hawkins: So once you saw that initial grouping of the films at Binghamton? What were you starting to watch then as you were making this transition into film studies?

Scott McDonald: I started to think of these films as theoretical experiences within the classroom. It was like, addiction's not the right word, but I was totally fascinated. This didn't mean that I didn't like everything else I knew about film. There was a person teaching in Hamilton in the mid 70s, I showed him my syllabus and he was disappointed I wasn't teaching only avant-garde film. I said, "You don't want me to teach Keaton? Really? Wow. Are you out of your mind?"

But I found that in my teaching, what happened in the classroom if I showed one of these avant-garde films, was a completely different thing than what happened if I showed a Keaton or a Chaplin or whatever. The other thing, and this kept ringing in my ears during this period of about five years, where I was trying to figure out how I should function as a scholar: How can I function in a way that would make it fun to be a scholar?

It was that era where Bob Dylan had become religious and there was this popular song “You've Got to Serve Somebody” and it kept ringing in my ears. I'd think, 'Well, how could my scholarship serve somebody. Who can I serve?'

When I look back, I wasn't serving Hemingway by writing about his stories, he doesn't give a damn, he's dead. And if he were alive he might hate what I wrote. I'm not serving him.

I'm not serving the Hemingway audience; they don't need me. He's on every bookshelf in every bookstore in the world; nothing that I could do could change that. So, who can I serve with my scholarship? It seemed to me, pretty quickly, that what happened when I used these unusual forms of film--I'm trying to get away from term 'avant-garde' because it ghettoizes the work. I taught American Lit for many years; I used to teach Gertrude Stein, Richard Wright and Hemingway and Faulkner. I never talked about them as experimental literature, avant-garde literature, it was just literature.

Anyway, these films that felt unusual to my students. I felt that that was serving their educational experience in a way that nothing else I showed them did. It
was certainly serving me to learn about film. When I showed “Serene Velocity”, I had to learn what a zoom lens was and how it worked, so I'm learning about cinema on the most basic level and much to my excitement, I realized that if I wrote about these films or if I interviewed the filmmakers, they liked it.

It mattered to them, so I was serving the filmmakers. I thought, 'Oh, this I can do. This is not embarrassing because I'm actually doing it for somebody. It actually serves.' And I thought, 'It's maybe a service to the field because I'm not the brightest guy, but a lot of this stuff puzzles everybody. Any interview with these people is going to help.' Suddenly, scholarship in cinema seemed to be a service occupation and I could throw myself into it.

Joan Hawkins: That's wonderful. And it does help. I find that students feel so much better coming to class if they've read something about the film that we're going to be discussing beforehand; otherwise I ask the first question and it's just dead silence. People are afraid to say something that will make them sound stupid. I keep telling them there's no such thing.

Scott MacDonald: If you think it, a considerable percentage of normal human beings also think it.

Joan Hawkins: Yeah, I know. So, I'm to ask you the venue of your first publication and something about the dynamics of film and media publishing during your early career phase.

Scott MacDonald: My first publications were about Hemingway short stories and they were in “Studies in Short Fiction” and standard literary journals ... I mean, this is in the 70s, so a lot of journals are coming into being, some of them lasting and some of them not. So, I published a number of Hemingway things. I did a collection of articles, including some of my own on the writer Erskine Caldwell, who nobody knows anymore, When I was a kid, he was the most popular writer of all time. This was during the period of when I'm trying to figure out what to do as a scholar because I thought, 'Well maybe I'll do stuff on writers that aren't getting attention anymore or have been lost from the canon.'

I was going to do James T. Farrell, but then this film thing took over and my first film publications were in Downtown New York little magazines that circled around Collective for Living Cinema, little pieces on Frampton or on Gottheim or whatever. When I did the interviews, I started to find, and this was also much to my shock, that they were very easy to get into print; people wanted this kind of stuff. “Quarterly Review of Film Studies” was one of the earliest places where I published things. “October”, when Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss started it up, I did write for them for a while.

Then I met Chick Callenbach, who they memorialized yesterday at the session. I didn't want to write just for the choir, I wanted to write for a more general audience and especially for more general film readership and “Film Quarterly” seemed perfect. It wasn't journalism; it was readable scholarship and
Callenbach was a great, subtle editor, a wonderful person to work with; very supportive. It was in his interest to create a body of writers because he created this journal and he needed people to write for it.

So “Film Quarterly” became, and still is, one of the places I most like to write for because the readership is the readership I think I can serve. So, I wrote for “Quarterly Review Film Studies,” “Film Quarterly,” and for years I wrote for “Afterimage”. Actually it was wonderful writing for “Afterimage” because it was like a newspaper-style publication and you could visually design a piece, which was really fun. You could use lots of images. It came out of Visual Studies Workshop, so it was a photographically-oriented journal.

By the end of the 70s, I was in gear and there were all these places to write for and it was like the world just exploded for me in terms of all these filmmakers that had been making films since forever. I still haven’t caught up to the 50s and 60s and 70s.

Joan Hawkins: Was it easier to use images then or as hard as it is now? Harder?

Scott MacDonald: No, nothing to it. Nobody worried about images, or even film clips. I had Chuck Workman do a talk at Hamilton recently. Do you know Chuck?

Joan Hawkins: I do know Chuck.

Scott McDonald: His “Precious Images” won the Academy Award. When he went to get the rights to show that film, which is made up of clips from other films, he made two phone calls. Nobody cared about clips from other films. Nobody thought of this as having any value whatsoever. Now, it’s like a freaking nightmare to get rights to use a photograph or a clip. But in the early days, nothing to it. Filmmakers, especially the filmmakers I was writing about or interviewing, wanted their stuff in print and their images seen.

I remember realizing that filmmakers who made great stills were the ones that got the most attention; and I think that Beth and Scott B. got further with fewer films because they made fantastic stills.

Joan Hawkins: That’s absolutely true. Actually Beth B. Was at IU just recently and she did a very nice presentation of her new film—“Exposed”

Scott MacDonald: How is it?

Joan Hawkins: It’s good. It’s a very interesting film. In fact, I had my students go see it and then I showed “Freaks” afterwards and that was a very interesting discussion because she’s talking about people who are pushing the envelope on burlesque performance, including people who have physical disabilities, but also a lot of people who are doing a lot of sort of gender performance in drag. But she also did this very nice talk where she was showing stills from her early work, clips
from her early work, so trying to give the students a sense of continuity of her career.

And also talking about some of the more commercial work she's been doing recently for CourtTV.

Scott MacDonald: I should bring her up.

Joan Hawkins: Yeah, she's great. But the stills from those early films, they're still unbelievable.

Scott MacDonald: Really good.

Joan Hawkins: Unbelievable. Knock your socks off. Talk to me a little bit about what you were reading during all this time when you were sort of developing yourself as a scholar.

Scott McDonald: I remember running into Peer Bode ... Do you know Peer? ... He’s a video guy who came out of Binghamton and he runs the Program and Media Studies at Alfred University. He told me that he remembered telling me one time, when we ran into each other at a party somewhere, that he was reading some media theoretical text, and asked, what are you reading? And I said, "Moby Dick." He laughed because it just seemed like, Why would a film person be reading “Moby Dick”?

What was I reading during those early years? There wasn't so much to read. I think I mostly read sort of general histories of film. I still, when somebody comes out with a new book about “Birth of a Nation”, that's fun to read. I was not reading a lot of theoretical stuff because I thought the films themselves were theoretical; they were my theory. I was less focused on reading than I was on watching and I was still a literature professor so a lot of what I was reading was serving my teaching of Faulkner, my teaching of whatever course I was doing. [After this interview, I remembered what I was reading; see “Film Catalogs as Epistemology—a Memoire,” “The Moving Image” (Fall, 2016).]

Joan Hawkins: You know, I think about 60s and early 70s as this time of the great critic wars. Pauline Kael was sort of sniping at Andrew Sarris and... Were there particular film critics that you were reading during that time?

Scott MacDonald: I read Sarris. I was definitely a Sarrisin if that's a word. Not because I always agreed with him, I remember thinking that to say that a bad film by an auteur is better than a good film by a non-auteur was preposterous. But he's the most valuable critic in my lifetime because you knew how he measured things. He helped me find my way into American cinema because most of us were snobs coming out of the 60s. We were into European art cinema, I met Sarris in the two-week workshop that I took at Kent School, a little prep school in Connecticut, in the summer of 1970.
Sarris came and he showed Buster Keaton. He was the one that brought Buster Keaton films back into the mainstream, and I found Keaton incredible. I laughed so hard; I've never laughed that hard. So I was a devoted “Village Voice” reader from early on. I read Sarris, and I started to read Mekas; he was also very important for me. The “Village Voice,” before its recent incarnations, and then the “SoHo Weekly News,” they were bibles. And the “Canyon Cinemanews” was a bible for me, too.

Joan Hawkins: I didn't know about” Canyon Cinemanews.” I love the book you did on Canyon and I'm also just deeply appreciative of the work that you and Michael have done in helping to save that institution. It's so important.

Scott MacDonald: This is a failure in our field. Just because you can make an electronic sound that sounds like the oboe to most people, doesn't mean we get rid of oboes. They're expensive and they need maintenance, that's like a 16mm movie projector. We shouldn’t have let our tech people tell us that we didn't need 16mm. Something happened there in the midst of all this writing-about-cinema that I think was really sad.

Joan Hawkins: No, I agree. It's interesting. A few years ago, Dave Leiberman came to IU with his quartet and he was doing a master class over at the music school. I think I was on sabbatical that semester, so I went to see the master class. I was like the only person not affiliated with the music school who was there I think. What was fascinating to me was that he came in with his quartet; they just began playing, it was just a jam; it was not any recognizable tune. Then he stops sort of mid-piece and looked out at the audience of music students and said, "Who were we listening to on the way down here?" For a while there was silence and then somebody sort of tentatively said, "Ornette Coleman?"

He said, "Yes." I was sitting in the back thinking, 'I don't think I could do this unless they chose somebody really obvious, I don't think I could do this with film students.' I couldn't show them like a loop of film that I had put together and say, "Who have I been watching?" It's really interesting. Unless it was like a Hitchcock overhead shot or something.

Scott MacDonald: You mentioned the Canyon book.

Hawkins: I love that book.

MacDonald: My book on Cinema 16 was the first book I did and it took me 10 years to get it published. UMI Research Press actually accepted it, announced it and then cancelled all their contracts at some point; but I could not get that book published because nobody cared about institutional histories.

At the time, doing a book on an independent cinema institution was another bad career move, but I started to think that the only reason that I'm a film person and can function as a film person is because of some of these
institutions. If Canyon didn't exist, I couldn't teach with these films. If Cinema 16 hadn't existed, there wouldn't have been the film culture that was so powerful for me. So, at a certain point it felt like a service to the field to do institutional histories; partly because these institutions either had disappeared and were in danger of being totally forgotten and could still be formative.

I mean the Cinema 16 method of programming is still a great model for programming and could work in academe, I think, beautifully. But Canyon was an organization that needed help and was in trouble even then and we could see more trouble coming.

Joan Hawkins: Well, it's been in trouble for a very long time I know. I first started teaching at tenure track job in 93, and I was using a lot of Canyon's films and I remember that Dominic Angerame was just operating on a prayer at that point. One of the films had been damaged in the process of projection and I remember talking to him about it and it just became clear to me somehow in this conversation that like, “No. He has to have the money upfront because he has no money to fix the film.” It's just awful.

So, what do you recall about the technologies of teaching and studying film early in your career? How were you getting films? Was it mainly through distribution companies like Canyon?

Scott MacDonald: Because I was working mostly on these unusual forms of film that came to be called avant-garde film, still are, I was mostly working with Film-Makers’ Cooperative in New York with Canyon and with the filmmakers themselves. I would get prints and (now I look back on this with some horror) as I was taking notes, I'd go forward and I'd go back, then I'd go forward. I don't think I damaged prints, but how could I not have damaged sprocket holes, you know, sort of worn out the print.

But everybody was so excited to have their films looked at and written about. It was actually very easy, it's always been very easy to get work to see; especially if you're working at the margins of attention, with people that don't get the attention they deserve.

Joan Hawkins: How did you end up at Hamilton? We started to talk a little bit about what it was like to be in an art history department, but you've taught actually in a number of places.

Scott MacDonald: Yeah, I taught for years at Utica College, that was my first job and I was there for 27 years. It was okay, there weren't jobs. It was then like it is now I think. I remember applying to 140 places when I got out of grad school, and I got four interviews and one offer. Personal life stuff kept me there, I mean I never really thought of going anywhere else, plus by the time my life was under control and I might have thought about going someplace else, there were now PhDs in film
which I didn't have. I just assumed that there was no opportunity for me beyond the job I had.

Utica College was fine, I did a lot, brought a lot of filmmakers there; it was a lot of fun. I retired from there in 1999 and since then, I've been sort of a nomadic prof. I've taught adjunct at Hamilton since '81 and I've been there pretty much regularly since 1981, but for a while I was at University of Arizona, I was at Bard for a while, just one or two courses. I'm not full-time now at Hamilton, but I'm close to full-time now partly because for my research I need a program, to bring people in and see how audiences react and all that.

Joan Hawkins: Well, I was going to say that when you do finish this book that you're writing on, the Binghamton project, you were saying you wanted to recreate that curated series, I really hope you come to IU because we have this wonderful cinema now.

Scott MacDonald: It'll cause a ruckus. I promise you.

Joan Hawkins: But it will be a good ruckus and we have this wonderful cinema now so this would be a absolutely perfect place for you to do exactly what you'd like to do to talk about the book and also to do that thing.

Scott MacDonald: One thing I want to say because I've never really said this out loud. I think of my writing history as first there were the interviews, then there were these institutional histories, but more and more, as I've gotten older, I've become more pretentious in the sense that I've been realizing recently that my whole life has been running away from the expository essay. Not always, the book I did on Cambridge documentary filmmaking ["American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn"] is expository essays, but my hope for scholarship is that it can get looser; that it needs to be serious, devoted scholarship but it should be readable beyond the field.

Scholarship should be interesting as an aesthetic form and one of the things I've tried in this Binghamton book--I call it a non-fiction novel which is really what it is because I interviewed all these people, but they don't know what context I've created for what they say; I've just arranged this—is to have it read like a conversational novel. For me, I look back and I think of the Cinema 16 book, also the Canyon book, they have a quality of graphic novel to them.

I mean I think it's important for scholarship to not just be just edited collections or a certain kind of academic treatise. I think scholarship needs to move more fully into curating, and scholarly writing needs to create literary forms that are fun, that are aggressive and alluring.

Joan Hawkins: So, any key films that you consider particularly important for the development of the field? I'm interested in what you were saying as film as a theory in and of itself. I was wondering if even to push on that a little bit more, like thinking
about the theoretical ideas the films themselves embody or articulate. Are there key films that you think-

Scott MacDonald: That's always such a difficult question because there's so many films that have been important to us. I mean the first film that flashes into my mind when you ask that question is “Window Water Baby Moving.” Just because it's a wow film, it always works, it's an incredible experience to go through. I can't imagine how many times I've seen it. I still don't mind looking at it again. “Our Trip to Africa”, Kubelka's film. “The Flicker”; oh god, there's just so many.

I mean I think Keaton is also totally theoretical and as we get further and further away from his time, we realize how personal those films actually were, how they really were charting his rise and fall as a producer and director in Hollywood. But, there's just too many.

Joan Hawkins: I find “The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes” a very teachable film for me and that's one that I find to be just, it raises so many issues; it always raises so many issues.

Scott MacDonald: I show it every year.

Joan Hawkins: Yeah, it's a wonderful movie.

Scott MacDonald: There are films I can't teach without and that's certainly one of them.

Joan Hawkins: I've never not had a good class discussion and it often does start with students just being appalled and horrified and feeling like I've brutalized them.

Scott MacDonald: That's what drew me to this kind of filmmaking. It like you can't show “Window Water Baby Moving”, the lights come up and nobody has anything to say. It's either, "I'm never going to have a baby" or "I almost fainted." It's immediate discussion because it's viscerally energizing. I think the Hollywood stuff and even European art cinema comes with this weight of 'you have to be educated and intelligent in order to talk about this'; whereas when “The Flicker” is over, it's like, "It gave me a headache." It's not about intelligence, it's about having experienced something that you now have to work through.

Joan Hawkins: Well, if nothing else, just the impact of time on the body. When I think about Michael Snow or I think about even “Jeanne Dielman”, Chantal Ackerman’s film, you know this idea of just having to experience time in a very different kind of way-

Scott MacDonald: Let me tell you about a film I saw recently. James Benning has moved to digital; now there's no limit to the length of a film or of a shot. There's a film called “BNSF”: Burlington, Northern and Santa Fe, it's a railroad line. It's a three-hour, twenty-minute single shot. I'm going to try it on my students a little later in the
semester. It's like you're doing yoga. It's cine-yoga. Can you stretch yourself this far?

Joan Hawkins: I can't imagine. It's great.

Scott MacDonald: One of my favorite films is “Thirteen Lakes”. Do you know “Thirteen Lakes”?

Joan Hawkins: Yes.

Scott MacDonald: Whenever I introduce it--I'm going down to Bucknell to talk about in a couple of weeks--I say, "During the second 10-minute take, you're going to find yourself faced with a decision." It's a little bit like when you go to a horror film and you realize it's actually going to be scary; now you have to decide whether you really want to be scared or not. Stay or go? There's many films that are like that. You realize, okay, am I going to do this or I'm not going to do it.

But I find that with “Thirteen Lakes”, everyone who does it feels it's a really important experience for them. I was so delighted to see that the Library of Congress listing this year has “Thirteen Lakes” on it.

Joan Hawkins: I didn't realize they had it. What about Marker? Was Marker important for you?

Scott MacDonald: “La Jetée”. I keep trying with “Sans Soleil” but I don't much like it, but “La Jetée”, very important. Marker, all in all, is not so important for me. Don't know why.

Joan Hawkins: These are matters of taste as much as anything else too. The key political debates that effect the field, what would you say that they are? Or do you have a sense of?

Scott McDonald: You mean now?

Joan Hawkins: Yeah and like maybe how it's changed from the time when you first started teaching.

Scott MacDonald: Well, this is a moment that's a little bit like that moment because in the late 60s early 70s, we didn't know what film studies should feel like. And on a certain level, I mean, imagine going into a classroom where nobody knows what a class on film is supposed to be, so you're going to invent the whole thing for better or worse. This moment is different, but the current sub-proliferation of hardware, software, ways of doing media--it feels like we've all been dropped down in the forest in the Wizard of Oz.

It's not exactly a debate, but it's a real challenge to figure out what this all means and what this all means to the field. I think the thing that the sort of the semi-demise of 16mm predicts... I mean all this hardware, all this equipment
that's being used to do this interview, how long is this going to last? Will anybody be able to look at what we're doing here in 10 years?

Joan Hawkins: That's a good question.

Scott MacDonald: So, that's not exactly a political argument.

Joan Hawkins: I mean the issue of platforms and operating systems is huge and I don't think there's one that we've completely taken into account yet; the fact that we're digitizing everything, but that mandates that you have somebody that is always also migrating them to the newest platforms, making sure that you can still access them or else we're going to lose everything.

Scott MacDonald: One of the effects of the media sphere is that there's a lot of sessions this week on trans-national issues, and I think that's all very important, but (and this may be a function of my generation), I know that it is specific films that got me to be a film person. Just as it was specific books that got me to be an English major. I did a piece recently for a book on Amos Vogel-

Joan Hawkins: I love him. It wouldn't get anybody tenure but it was enormously influential: “Film as a Subversive Art”.

Scott MacDonald: You just put your finger on it. That fact that that would not get somebody tenure, is unbelievable to me. That's the subject of this Vogel piece I'm working on. I call it “Film Comes First” because if you don't have films or particular media experiences that matter to you on some really fundamental level and say, "Okay, I want to do this with my life" why bother with cinema? For me, the excitement always come what individual works have to show me about myself and about where I am, where the world is.

Joan Hawkins: I still have a very visceral memory of studying for my doctoral exams and I was studying in the little café at the University of Art Museum at UC Berkeley and I was literally starting to nod out over whatever it was that I was reading and then I picked up this book that I just taken at random off the shelf of the library and it was Vogel's book. It was like having an extra jolt of espresso, it was amazing. It was a wonderful book.

Scott MacDonald: The thing that's fascinating about it is that you can't possibly read it from beginning to end. You follow the imagery, so reading the text is the last thing you do. It's an amazing book.

Joan Hawkins: Even now, you're going through these lists of movies and thinking, I've never seen this film and have no idea how I would get this film. I've never seen this film, that's why it was fascinating.

Scott MacDonald: So, on that level, it's really a work of scholarship because it's a textual, visual archive of all kinds of stuff we never preserved or we don't know where it is.
Joan Hawkins: Plus, he does the kind of curating you were talking about earlier that you’re doing in your class, putting things cheek by jowl in a way that you wouldn’t necessarily expect. A soviet film that I’ve never ever heard of is next to a Cassavetes film or something else. Or a Buster Keaton film. I’m glad that you’re writing about Vogel. I think he’s so important.

Scott MacDonald: We’ve got to get “Film as a Subversive Art” back into print.

Joan Hawkins: I used it for class recently, so I think that there's some sort of print company that's got some copies-

Scott MacDonald: There was an edition, basically a facsimile of the original edition, that came out about five years ago, but it sold out, which should have meant they printed another edition but that hasn’t happened.

Joan Hawkins: Are there other factors or variables that you think about sort of left out of the discussion of where we are now in film studies or where film studies is as a discipline? Things that we need to be talking about that we've neglected?

Scott MacDonald: Well, I mean the obvious thing is, what everybody's talking about, is where are all these students of cinema going to go? What kind of lives will they have? None of us has the answer to that. People do seem to get jobs, it's just that it takes them much longer. Even when I came out of grad school, I was 28 when I got a job, so I'd been in school, in college for 11 years by the time I got my first job. These days, people get their PhD at 37 or 38 and have had little job security up to that point.

So I don't know how long that's sustainable as a model, but I don't think anybody has the answer to that. I think in some places, film has real purchase. And I think the irony is that it tends to not be the most prestigious institutions. I've got to be careful here, but Ivy League schools have not been in the forefront of film studies in terms of building departments. Even at Harvard, where I've taught a couple, three times, the film department there is very marginalized. Virtually nobody had tenure until very recently.

Cinema Studies seems like an adjunct to the real campus, whereas University of Indiana, University of Wisconsin, big public universities have found a more substantial place for cinema. I don't know, there's a lot of work to be done still to get film studies into the heart of academe. I did a visiting gig at Johns Hopkins a couple-three years ago and there was nobody on their film faculty that had tenure. So everybody's nervous all the time about whether their contracts going to be renewed.

It's hard to work under those conditions because you have to be on the lookout for the next thing if this doesn't come through; this is Johns Hopkins and these people have been there for a very long time. Maybe now that all the rest of the humanities are starting to struggle, maybe they say, “Oh, come on in. We really
"You need you." The industry of academe and cinema's position in it continues to be a real challenge.

Joan Hawkins: One of the things that we're dealing with now at IU, we're in the process of making this new media school and that's raised issues of professional training versus humanities training and the inter-relationship between social science research and humanities research. Because we're so in the thick of it, I'm assuming that that's impacting other places as well.

Scott MacDonald: I'm sure.

Joan Hawkins: Who knows how we're going to sort it all out. Are there any individuals that you would single out as particularly important for the development of the field for your work?

Scott MacDonald: For me, Amos Vogel, "Film as a Subversive Art." Jonas Mekas. Some of the obvious people. Sitney, as someone, sometimes to rebel against, but also he did really important work. Tom Gunning.

Joan Hawkins: That was a wonderful speech that he made last night.

Scott MacDonald: Yeah, Tom's always good; he's ridiculously good, he's like a rockstar. You can't make an auditorium big enough. I think Annette Michelson was important to me in a very indirect way. I think everybody in my generation in the field remembers those *Artforum* issues that brought a level of attention and a level of respectability to avant-garde film that it really needed at a certain moment, early 70s. I guess those are the people probably.

I think it's mostly filmmakers though. I mean, Brakhage and Frampton and Robert Huot, these people have been very important to me. They're people that I've learned a lot from.

Joan Hawkins: Anybody else who you haven't mentioned? Any other filmmakers that you haven't mentioned that you feel were really important to you?

Scott MacDonald: Well, there's so many that have been important, I was thinking last night that I went to a panel this morning? It was either yesterday or today.

Joan Hawkins: I think we were next to each other at the first panel....

Scott MacDonald: Oh, that's right. I don't know why I didn't interview Marlon Riggs. I don't know why I didn't interview Shirley Clarke. I mean, I was thinking the other day, the best interview book ever written is all the people I should have interviewed but didn't. Everybody I interview, I feel very influenced by. Because you just immerse yourselves in this work. For me, if I have to choose whether to read an article or to go see a film, I always choose the film. In some ways it's not a good choice, it's a problematic choice, but I think so is the other choice.
I tell my students the job of being a student is to figure out what you cannot keep yourself from doing and then just go do it.

Joan Hawkins: Are there certain things that you do, written pieces, pieces of criticism that you do teach regularly or that you feel are essential?

Scott MacDonald: I use interviews whenever I teach. I usually have them buy one interview book; I don't check to see if they're reading it, that would be too embarrassing somehow. In my intro class, I give them almost nothing to read. I want them to have the experience of the film and try to articulate the experience in writing. They do a lot of work. The problem, and this is especially true of Hamilton students because writing for them is god, if they read an essay, the films become illustrations for the essay. The essay becomes primary.

For me, the job--since every film students see is surrounded by text that teaches them what they're supposed know about it--is to go the other way. You have to deal with this film on your own. When I do other kinds of courses, I mean I'm teaching a course on Alfred Hitchcock, Ross McElwee, and James Benning this semester. So, in that case, I gave them one of Rothman's chapters to show them how much you can do with a Hitchcock film.

I gave them a chapter from The Women Who Knew Too Much.

Joan Hawkins: Tania Modleski.

Scott MacDonald: So I do some of that to give them an idea of the types of writing that are done, but I mostly want students to deal with the film itself, with the experience they have and what they can make of it.

Joan Hawkins: How did you come up with that particular pairing of three? That's an amazing group.

Scott MacDonald: I thought they'd be interesting together. They make for a lot of interplay (narrative fiction/documentary/"avant-garde"), and I wanted to bring Ross in person and I've wanted to bring Benning too. I thought okay, I'll bring these guys and I'm bringing the Alloy Orchestra to play with a Hitchcock film because, alas, I couldn't drag him in. It seemed like a really interesting triad and so far it's been kind of a blast.

Joan Hawkins: That sounds great. The other question I had that you had mentioned earlier about your teaching. You said that you have them keep really long journals. Can you talk a little bit about that? Like how make the assignment? What it is you're looking for?

Scott MacDonald: Yeah. I'm pretty dedicated to this and in a way it's a pain in the butt because it's a tremendous amount of reading, but I know from my own work that unless I sit down in front of the film with a pad of paper and do the stop/go thing, taking
notes on the film all the way through. I'm not ready to write—and I kind of hate that process. I first think, "I know what I want to say. I don't need to do this!" Then "No, you've got to go do this!" So I do this tedious thing and the minute I've done that I realize I didn't know the film at all.

So, I thought what can I do with these students that's the closest thing to that, that they will do? Now Hamilton students tend toward the workaholic; you can get them to do a lot of work. So, at the beginning of the semester I say the journal is a cumulative grade. If you get an 'F' the first time or a 'D' the first time, and you will, and a 'C' the second time and a 'B' the third I see it, and an 'A' the final time I see it, the grade for the course is 'A'.

That allows me to be totally brutal early on. "This is garbage. Get to work. You're just saying platitudes. What did you see?" And there's a process of about a month, month and a half of learning how to do this; then by the end, I'm getting 150-200 pages of writing. Actually, often really good stuff that teaches me. It's so helpful to me to see all these different ways of thinking through these films. I don't give them a lot of direction. I do want them to see my “curating” of the course as an attitude and as a theory.

When sound comes in, I have them do a sing-along with Popeye. They're very varied kinds of experiences that then they have synthesize in these journals; but the way which they synthesize depends on what area of academe they're coming from. I have very few film majors, mostly people from other fields. The journal thing really works. This semester, for the first time, partly because I have almost everybody in the class has been through that process, I decided to try having them make something. I don't know how I feel about it yet. We'll have to see how the assignments turn out.

Joan Hawkins: I've had good luck with that with certain classes. When I do the history of America avant-garde cinema class. I usually make it grade contingent, so if they've earned up to a 'B' by the time we hit the midterm, then they can substitute creative work for the final critical piece. And I find some really interesting projects that way. And I do make them write a short piece that goes with the production that they've done sort of justifying it; so it's not just, "Well, I just sort of went out in Montreal and I liked that building so that's why I took a picture of it”. They have to think about it a little. How often do you collect the journals?

Scott MacDonald: I read them usually four times over the semester.

Joan Hawkins: I'm gonna steal this. It's a great idea.

Scott MacDonald: What I do on Saturdays is read the damn journals, but I find it's very intimate. I can really give them feedback. It's like the conversations we don't really ever have with voice. Students seem to really like the process when it's over; I mean there's always one or two that just hate that they have to write all this because
they’re an artist and they got into making art precisely because they don’t want to write. I empathize, but the process works for almost everybody.

Joan Hawkins: Anything else you’d like to bring up as we’re closing? Any advice you’d give to people?

Scott MacDonald: Advice. I don’t have advice.

Joan Hawkins: Bleats of pain.

Scott MacDonald: A good friend of mine who’s a great scholar— I shouldn’t name him in this context—told me, "I hate to write." And he’s actually written some really important stuff, but I thought, "God, spending your life doing something you hate, what a horrible thought." For whatever reason, and I don’t really understand this, I love writing. If I’m off for the summer and I have nothing to do, I want to write. I think as you get older, you want to do the stuff that you love to do. I don’t travel much anymore. But I would say do what you love. Typical 60s BS, I guess.

Joan Hawkins: So once again, I’m Joan Hawkins and I teach at Indiana University of Bloomington and currently in the Department of Communication and Culture but we are moving into the media school and it’s been my pleasure and honor to talk to Professor Scott McDonald today here at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal as part of the SCMS conference for 2015.