Sean O’Sullivan (1965-2023)

Our colleague and dear friend Sean O’Sullivan passed away on October 17, 2023, after a more than year-long battle with glioblastoma, an aggressive and incurable form of brain cancer.

Sean O’Sullivan was born in Rome and spent his first few years in Italy. He grew up in Boston and attended Princeton University, where he majored in English. After graduation, he spent some time as a sports writer for The Boston Globe, and then returned to school, completing an M.A. in Drama at the University of Bristol, and a Ph.D. in English at Yale University. His first faculty position was at Clemson University, where he spent six years; in 2008, he moved to The Ohio State University, where he spent the remainder of his career teaching English, film, and television. He was an integral part of OSU’s Project Narrative, which he directed for three years, and he twice co-directed its Summer Institute.

Sean’s scholarly work connected the fields of film, television, narrative theory, nineteenth-century British literature, and serial storytelling. His first book, on the British filmmaker Mike Leigh, was published in the University of Illinois’ Contemporary Directors series in 2011. At the time of his death, Sean was working on a book project titled The Sonnet-Season and the Transformation of American Television, 1999-2015, a study examining the television season as a newly productive storytelling shape since the turn of the millennium. He also published essays on aspects of serial narrative in such diverse works as Kieslowski’s The Decalogue, the novels of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, Ingmar Bergman’s Scenes from a Marriage and Fanny and Alexander, and various television serials including Mad Men, The Sopranos, The Singing Detective, and Breaking Bad.

Sean is remembered as one of the foremost authorities on serial narrative theory and analysis. As his friend Jason Mittell reflects, “There is nobody I enjoyed talking about television storytelling and narrative theory with more than Sean, as he always approached topics with a sense of good-natured intellectual curiosity and passion, along with a spark of playful debate. He was always interested in exploring ideas and experiences together, whether concerning theoretical concepts, pedagogical strategies, or wandering the streets of a new city hosting a conference.” Jim Phelan, his colleague at Ohio State, remembers engaging conversations with Sean: “I loved talking narrative and narrative theory with Sean, especially when we were disagreeing. I remember with great fondness a long argument we had, shortly after he came to Ohio State, about the ending of The Sopranos (which I thought was terrible, and he thought was fascinating). Sean combined careful listening and rapid countering in a way that I’d never witnessed before—or since, except in other arguments with him.”

In 2018, Sean attended the Scholarship in Sound & Image workshop at Middlebury College and subsequently produced a videographic essay, “One to Another,” which explored the use of rack focus in Deadwood. He presented this work publicly at the last conference he attended, Theory and Practice of the Video-Essay, at University of Massachusetts in September 2022.

Sean will be remembered for extraordinary warmth and modesty, his energetic and stimulating conversations, and the happiness with which he engaged and shared his intellectual interests.