Scott Curtis: My name is Scott Curtis. I'm associate professor in the Department of Radio/Television/Film at Northwestern University. It is Saturday, March 28th, at 10:16 a.m. I'm here in Montreal, Canada at the Fairmont Queen Elizabeth Hotel for the 2015 SCMS Conference. Where I'm interviewing Professor Tom Gunning, who is Edwin A. and Betty L. Bergmen, distinguished service professor in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago.

Professor Gunning is well known for his work on early cinema history and film theory. He's the author of two books. The first, “D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years of Biograph,” was published by University of Illinois Press in 1991, and won the Theater of Library Association Award. His second book, “The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity,” was published by the British Film Institute in 2000 and won the first CINEMA and Cie Award.

Both have changed our thinking about these directors, and even about auteur studies should be conducted. But his essays, over 200 of them in journals, collections, and catalogs, have had arguably a greater influence on the discussions in, and directions of the fields over the past 40 years. They span topics ranging from 19th century detective fiction to experimental film, but coalesce around questions of form, historiography, and the culture of modernity. His contribution to the field has yielded many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Jean Mitry Prize at the Giornate del Cinema Muto, a Mellon Distinguished Service Award, and an SCMS Distinguished Career Achievement Award. In 2010, Gunning was named to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

So, let's begin in the beginning Tom. How did you become interested in film? And further, how did you become interested in it as an object of serious lifelong study?

Tom Gunning: Well, there is a temptation to dwell a lot here on my childhood experiences, I'll try to keep that brief even though I do think it's essential. So, I think most of us have a relationship to film that is founded very, very early. And certainly, growing up in Midwestern Ohio in the 1950s, it was the era in which I think my parents bought their first television the same month that I was born, in 1949. Watching films and other things on television was certainly part of my childhood experience as well as going to the movie theaters. I loved the movies from very early on, and was fascinated from fairly early in them as ... I don't think I would have thought about it as object of study, but I read ... This always sounds obnoxious, but I read "From Caligari to Hitler", I think when I was 13. And ... Or at least bought it and looked at the pictures, and had a sense of tracking down silent films, and films that I had read about in books.

I think the book that a lot of us read at that point, the first one I know David Bordwell said this to is, Arthur Knight's “The Liveliest Art." And I remember when I was about 16, I lived fairly near to Ohio State University in Columbus.

And going into the campus to see a screening of “Zvenigora” by Dovchenko, and kind of a college audience. The auditorium was emptied by the time the film was over. And I was totally entranced, and just went, "This is extraordinary". And that was one of that many moments where I think I had this kind of sense of "This is what I want to do".

And whenever I would visit New York, I had a sister who lived there, and my parents loved the city. And particularly from 14 on, when I would go I would go to as many movies as possible; seeing things like “M”, and “Ugetsu,” when I was about 14, and being fascinated by them. And to a large extent, the decision I made to go to NYU was because New York was the city I wanted to be in, and that was partly because the movies were there.

When I started my undergraduate work... Because then, I mean, I guess this is essential too. I was interested in movies as soon as I got to New York, was seeing a lot of them, but in a somewhat unsystematic way. I mean, I mainly knew about art films because that was the current thing; Bergman, Fellini, things like that. You know, even things... Japanese film Kurosawa, Mizoguchi. But I had just heard, because I would read the Village Voice... I think it was partly the Kurosawa, I loved John Ford, and I remembered it as a little kid, because I loved westerns, that I had liked “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.” And I watched it again and went, "Oh, there's something going on here".

So I began to have a little sense that there was also this American cinema, but that was ... So, I kind of catalyzed by my sophomore year at NYU by a girl. A girl... Well, she was probably 19. There was a young woman who had just come back from being in Europe, and being real cinephile, going to the Cinematheque Francaise, and being aware of Cahiers, and really taught me what the auteur theory is. And she took me... I remember, to a double bill of “Shock Corridor” and “Phoenix City Story,” and everything was different after that.

It took me a long time to, actually, get back to Fellini and Bergman, who I do revere in many ways. But at that moment I went, "Throw them out. This is the most exciting thing I've ever seen." And she really fostered in me this habit of seeing three movies a day whenever I could, which... Which also sometimes included something on television. But I think most of my undergraduate years, I watched about three movies a day, and it was voracious. And as I said last night in my acceptance speech, my friends and family were rather worried, and that's partly why I went into film studies. As I say, more as a kind of excuse for what I was doing than that I actually knew what I was going to do with a career's program of study.

Scott Curtis: Well, let's talk about that program of study as you entered graduate school at NYU. What forces, positive or negative, attracted you to the path that you took?

Tom Gunning: The path that I took? I'm not sure I know. Well, no, I understand the question, but I'm just suddenly thinking I won't get hung up on what path I took. Because I

meandered. It isn't as though there was a vision, a guiding light that was other than the projector beam maybe.

Going to NYU though, that did suddenly change things. And I guess I would say the biggest needed influence, that really was one of these points where I went, "Ooo, maybe I don't understand what I thought I understood", was taking courses with Annette Michelson. Partly because her, she had almost no interest in classical American cinema, which for the last few years had been my passion. I'd always been interested in, from “Zvenigora” and watching Potemkin on television when I think I was 13, on the public television station. In the silent film, and in Griffith, I had seen “Intolerance” and “Birth of a Nation.” “The Birth of a Nation,” probably when I was 13 on a trip to New York.

So, I had some idea that there was something other than just classical Hollywood, but she made me aware of a whole modernist sensibility, which to a large extent had always been very important to me in painting and literature, but which I had not really thought of in relation to film. And that was one of those moments where you kind of worried that everything you'd thought you knew is going to dissolve. But then you begin to kind of broaden your whole horizon and put things into place. So, that was a major thing, I mean I think the first course I took with her was on Soviet film. And it was a kind of revelation, even though I had seen a number of the films. But just her whole sense of its relation to constructivism, and to politics, and so on, were things that I had not thought about.

And then, of course, her opening up, although, this was a little later for me, the American avant-garde. I think the very first class I did take with her probably, I think I took two courses with her the first semester, and one was on Soviet film, but the other one was kind of on modernism, or something. And she showed “Wavelength,” and I remember just thinking, "What bullshit!" Just almost trying to stare the film down in fury, you know? And it's funny because, leap forward, I changed my mind later, and one of my favorite stories... I suddenly realized it like the next year that I really had not understood “Wavelength.”

And I had a projector, I the 16 millimeter projector, which a lot of cinephiles did at that era, and would watch films at home. And I had borrowed the print from NYU of “Wavelength.” And I was living with my first wife, and there was a little area where I could project films, and I told her, "I want to watch this film." She was a painter, abstract expressions painter in a way. I said, "It's a film I really hated when I first saw it, and I realized I haven't understood it, and I really need to concentrate on it. So, you're welcome to watch it, but it's very boring, I think. And if you don't like it, just leave. But I won't pay any attention to you," kind of being obnoxious.

And after about 20 minutes into “Wavelength” I realized that my wife, Clara-Bell Cohen is her name, had stood up. And I thought, "Oh, she's leaving, but she's trying to leave slowly and it's actually more distracting". So after about three

minutes of her standing there I turned around and said, "Look, if you don't like it just leave, I'm trying to concentrate". And she said, "No, it's just such a strong film that I can't watch it sitting down". I realized, "Wow, she gets it. What am I missing?" But I have to admit, by the end of that screening I had seen something.

So, those were major shifts there towards the kind of sense that film could be involved with the kind of modern project that I already had some sense of, as I say in literature and painting, but not really in film. And then a lot of my thinking after that night, I would have to admit to this very day, is kind of the interest in balancing those two things. The avant-garde film and the commercial film. And one of the things that I really find so exciting about film studies is I don't... Certainly people who do art history can deal with salon painting and abstract painting. But there's a kind of different way that we can do both that I think is not contradictory. I think it's a real sign that it's still a vital medium, that it has both these, that it has this gamut.

And trying to understand, the first thing is you have to understand they're different. And when I was watching “Wavelength,” and waiting for it to become an interesting film. My idea of what was interesting was so limited by the idea of the classical paradigm. So, one has to understand they're different, but to try to think that somehow these exist in the same medium, in the same period of history, which is not true say with art history. You might do Vermeer and Cezanne, but you're dealing with historical difference. Is still to me a great challenge, and one which I think is really exciting to... Maybe one of the things that I most always feel I want to convey to my students, that they can love “Wavelength” and “The Searchers” both.

Scott Curtis: There's also a balance in your work between the avant-garde and the silent era. And tell us a little bit about your love for, or your introduction to that through Jay Leyda, Noël Burch and the rest.

Tom Gunning: Yeah. Well, as I say, I actually had an interest in silent film from childhood. My recent book on coloring, my picture book, I tell the story about one of my first introductions to film. And certainly film, rather than just watching something. And it was very early, I mean, I think it was before I began to read, was a book that my parents had from the 30s. Was put together by Paul Rotha, who of course is a famous British film historian. But it's an odd book, it's a book ... It was called “Movie Parade,” and it's almost all pictures. Stills, not large format, but maybe four or five a page, almost no text. And so, as a little kid I would pick it up and look at it, because it was a picture book. And get very fascinated, wondering what are these movies? You know, because I knew they were from movies.

And as I say in the introduction to the new book, the color book, which in some way aspires to be a similar book. I remember I had a nightmare about “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” when I was about six, without even knowing what the

film was. Having never seen it, probably not even knowing the name. But from this picture of Cesare in his coffin with Caligari leaning over him, that was in “Movie Parade.”

So anyways, I was fascinated, partly ... And I remember there was an image in “Movie Parade” from “The New York Hat,” the Griffith Biograph of Mary Pickford. And I remember my mother saying that she had seen the film, and it was very interesting and always wanting, “Be curious to see it.” So, there was this, this was one of the things, when I would go to New York I would seek out silent films. So, this was certainly not part of an academic thing. I mean, it got transformed by the academic.

And I really don't know that I could tell you why it appealed to me. I think there are a lot of kids who respond to silent film. Later on, kind of maybe lose it because it's not, But I remember various people telling me about showing silent films to their kids. Obviously things like Chaplin, but also thrillers, and serial, and so on. And kids getting very absorbed into it. So, I don't want to do the kind of essentialist, “Well it’s like the dream world,” although I think it's probably right.

So, then obviously coming to NYU, Michaelson's course in Soviet cinema was a real revelation. The availability of silent film with the Museum of Modern Art, and at other venues, made this all possible to really absorb. I've often thought, because I am in some ways a kind of Freudian, that there was some aspect of primal scene fantasies. If I knew about silent film, I would know how everything began. Particularly if I knew about the very earliest films, and that this was part of it.

So, then as you say, of course having… it wasn't until after I'd been at NYU for quite a while that Jay Leyda came. But it was towards the end of my course work, but he became my advisor. And of course, not only did he give this extraordinary seminar on Griffith's Biograph films, which inspired my dissertation. But he was, as I said last night in my talk, he was film history. I mean, this is a man who, I remember, they rediscovered a print of the film that he made in the early 30s, “A Bronx Morning.” He had thought it was lost, but they found it at the Museum of Modern Art.

I wasn't actually at the screening. Elena Pinto, who was our administrator, and who was very close to Jay, told me the story that when they had a screening at the Museum of Modern Art she said to him, "When was the last time you saw this?" And he said, "Well, it was in Moscow when I first arrived". And she said, "And who else was in the room?", and went, "Oh, Sergei Eisenstien, Dziga Vertov, Pudovkin, and I think Dovzhenko." I mean, wow! So he was an enormous inspiration on all those levels.

Scott Curtis: Tell us about your first full-time teaching position after, I know that you were teaching while you were a graduate student, but was there a moment when you

had got your first full-time position, and I think, was it at Purchase that you [crosstalk 00:18:23]?

Tom Gunning: No, by no means. Well, of course, it's a hard thing. And full-time, I understand why you're asking that question. But it actually, for knowing that the few people might actually listen to this would probably be graduate students. We begin teaching part-time, as teaching assistants, which of course I did at NYU. And then I got a part-time job teaching at Brooklyn College, and I'm terrible at dates, I have to admit that I probably should have brought my resume to give you the exact date on that, but in the 70s. And that then became a full-time position at Brooklyn College. And I taught at Brooklyn College for several years, and that was very important. I actually still have very close friends who were my students then. It's interesting.

And there was a time when Brooklyn College had open admissions. I actually had students in some classes who could not read. I don't mean couldn't read well, I mean they, I had to do oral exams with them, I was told. I don't think that was, I mean, I think they were being betrayed because you can get into Brooklyn College if you had a New York City high school diploma, and they would just pass people. So, they were betrayed, but in some ways it was fascinating for me to have that very... So, I learned to teach with very often intelligent and world wise students, but often with very little academic training.

And at the same time I had some brilliant students who went on and got PhDs, and so on. So, it was the full gamut, and that was exciting. I had classes of, I think maybe even the first... Certainly one of the first university courses on Hitchcock, and I had, I think 300 students including, as I say, the people I had to do oral exams with who understood Hitchcock pretty well.

So that was my first full-time teaching. Is there anything in particular I should say about it other than it was very exciting. I taught the American avant-garde, I taught Hitchcock, I taught gangster films, I taught comedy, I taught the full gamut.

Scott Curtis: Yeah. Well, this is a moment when film studies is being institutionalized in the academic environment. So, you were pretty much given free rein to teach whatever you wanted, and how you wanted to teach it?

Tom Gunning: If I was, it probably wasn't because of that, it's probably because my chair wasn't paying any attention. No, we'll keep that in. I didn't say his name. Actually, at points he'd go, "I don't think you should show that film, why don't you show this one?" But yeah, no, I was given some assignments, but basically... but you know, there was still academic constraints. I remember at one point I was going to teach a course on the avant-garde, and I think, I'm not even sure I made up the title, but it was called something like Avant-garde: Experimental and Underground Film.

There was a university committee that objected to it because the claim was that “underground” indicated tacit support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization. And I was, "I don't get it.” And, in fact, it was kind of handy that I pointed out that the first term, that the very first time that had appeared in print, “Underground Film,” was by Manny Farber, in a magazine that was sponsored by the American Jewish Association, or something like that.

Scott Curtis: During the early period of your career, at this moment in the 70s, were there any particular issues in the field that were especially important in shaping the direction of your research in teaching? Or from the development in the field in general? I know one of the things that you've always talked to me about is that you see your part in the field is part of a larger conversation. That publications are in some way a part of a larger discussion about certain issues. What were the issues that were shaping you at this moment when you were just starting to teach, and starting to publish, and working on your dissertation?

Tom Gunning: Okay. A couple things. One thing, which I think doesn't get commented on, partly because in some ways there are a lot of people who aren’t interested in it anymore, but in other ways also because it's just kind of commonly accepted. What Annette Michelson really introduced me to was close reading. The critics who I liked at that point, writing about Hitchcock and so on, like Robin Wood, were often very close readers. But they didn't necessarily do a shot count, or a shot-by-shot analysis. And a lot of what they talked about was more thematic, and character driven, and things like that. So, the idea of actually taking a film apart visually, which I always think partly is that I was lucky to have Annette as a first mentor because I kind of came into cinema with... I think many people come in through literature, and I was immersed in literature. But I came in more through an art historian, so it was more oriented towards image and figuring out how images worked.

So, that was in a large sense, the most important foundation for me in terms of my early studies at NYU. Also, Annette's sense of modernism was extremely important, and particularly in thinking about the avant-garde. And I was very interested in thinking about modernism in relation to romanticism, which was not so much her focus. I mean, she would have acknowledged it, but that was part of what I was already immersed in.

It's really interesting in tracing things like Kandinsky back to German romanticism and things like that. And then when P. Adams Sitney came to NYU a few years after my beginning, this of course was just wonderful for me to meet someone who could so perfectly explain this to me, this connection that I intuited.

But then what was curious, and I mentioned this last night in my talk, is that the discourse in the field broadly. Not necessarily centered at NYU at all, but more broadly, began to be partly filtered with the new French, and then filtered through “Screen,” British film. At that point I never used the term apparatus

theory, I don't know that anyone used it. I mean, it's in Baudry, but it is a handy term.

As I mentioned, I was both intrigued by that and repelled by it, particularly by its denigration of film viewing. I found it a really important thing to suddenly think about film viewing, which I was immersed in critically. And to worry about it. But it also seemed to me, as I've often said, really bad faith because there are all these people dancing it, and they were obviously totally driven to look at... If they had hated films and not watched films at least that would have been more honest, I felt. So, I felt there was an enormous, kind of almost, literal hypocrisy. But at the same time, there was something at the core that was really interesting there.

But to some extent, moving into early cinema was trying to think, "Okay, what I think they're really talking about is something that has to do with narrative film". Steven Heath was, I think, the other person who was really explicit about this. And, I was thinking, “But I'm not sure everything that’s at issue,” and this is something more that I developed later, is about narrative here.

Scott Curtis: Just as an aside, talking about close reading, and taking apart the image, was an analytic projector an important part of this?

Tom Gunning: I'm so glad you said that because it was almost, I would say, essential for the teaching. Although, to a large extent, and NYU had analytical projectors, and I think we had one in fact. And there'd be a fight about who got it. And obviously, if we're TAs, we'd fight on equal grounds. If it was competing with Annette, she got it. Not everybody used it, but Annette did, Bill Simon did, and almost all the TAs.

So this was important, but equally, NYU got Steenbecks, and a lot of our analysis was actually on the Steenbeck, which of course is much easier on the film itself. I mean, the analytical projectors were tearing the sprocket holes like crazy, and stuff like that. So, they were rough on films. But yes, that, Raymond Bellour in... What's it called? The Unseizable ... I can't remember the translation, the cinema, the Unseizable Text, that's not the right translation, makes his point, that we can't stop a film. We could, and that changed everything.

We did worry a little bit about does this distort, because this isn't how we experienced it. But in a certain way, I think everybody began to realize the critical process is different from film viewing. And although it probably needs to maintain a awareness of film viewing, it doesn't have to replicate it.

Scott Curtis: Tell us about the FIAF Symposium. It was 1978. How did you become involved in that? I know that you and Charles Musser were there as graduate students. But how did that happen?

Tom Gunning: Yeah. Well, it happened primarily through one of the most important relations in my career, which is with Eileen Bowser, who was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and an extraordinary, extraordinary person on every level. As a curator, as a figure. Wonderful person to interact with. In 74, I'd have to look at the date, the Museum of Modern Art had retrospective D. W. Griffith. And Ron Motrum [sp?] was one of the people who was selected to be involved with it. But he knew that I'd already, at that point, decided I was going to work in the Biograph films, and begun doing research. So he got me involved, we were kind of co-curators with Eileen Bowser, and Ilene and I formed a strong relationship. And she got very interested in what was happening in film studies. And I was very interested in archives, and their policies, and just being able to actually look at films.

There was a certain way in the era of grand theory, some people would say, "I don't need to look at films, I've got my ideas". Maybe here and there a film slips in to exemplify something. So, then when FIAF decided a couple years after that that they wanted to do this project on looking at films from 1900 to 1906, basically going through all their archives and pulling them out and looking at them again. She got me involved as the American coordinator. And we had a series of screenings with Paul Spehr, from Library of Congress. And the group of people, Andre [Gaudreault] came down from Montreal, that's when I first kind of met him. Other people, David Levy, Charlie Musser. We watched everything the Library of Congress and Museum of Modern Art had from that period, 1900 and 1906. And we selected stuff that would be shown at Brighton. And so the decision was that this was all in preparation for a FIAF conference in Brighton, England, which of course was the center of early film making in England.

In 1978 there would be a week of screenings, and then a couple days of presentations. And its mission was exactly to look at these early films with new eyes. And Charlie Musser, Andre, myself, some other people, some of whom were not continued with, John Hagen, Jon Gartenberg. I can't remember all of us, watched the films, and a number of us went to Brighton. And then there were more screenings from international archives, and with people like, including Noël Burch, and people from all over the world; archivists and scholars. And then finally we gave our presentations.

It slightly... How would I put it? Amuses me that there is this kind of epochal moment given to Brighton, in that people like Paulo Cherchi Usai who I think wasn't there, kind of go, "Oh, I wish I could've been there". But it was important, but I don't think anybody thought, "Oh, in ... what year is this? In 2015, we're going to be still talking..." Not still reminiscing, we knew it would be an important... But that students who weren't there will refer to it, which happens.

The key thing though about it was exactly this thing, and it's so obvious that its revolutionary nature is easy to forget, to look at these films. Most people, many film scholars did not bother to look at films. I mean, for instance, there was a

book on Griffith the Biograph written before my dissertation by a man named Robert Henderson. At that point, at least 400 of the Biograph films were available at either the Museum of Modern Art, or Library of Congress. I found his notes, he looked at 60 of them. And didn't think that was a problem. And I'm not saying because he was lazy guy, I'm saying that was the state of the field at that point.

And so... And most of film history, what people did was they looked in other film histories and said, "Okay, Griffith's first cut in this film", they never went to see it to see he didn't cut, or whatever. So, the main impulse behind Brighton was to look at these films, take them off the shelf in the archive, and have people look at them. And not just, "Yeah, okay. The print's okay, it doesn't have decay". But actually try to think what they mean.

Scott Curtis: Around this time you're meeting a number of colleagues, such as Andre, for the first time, and starting to collaborate. Tell us about this albatross, “The Cinema of Attractions,” essay, and the context from which it developed. And after that, tell us how you would situate it now.

Tom Gunning: Well, Andre as I say, I met through FIAF when he was a little ... Couple years younger than me probably, very enthusiastic. We were both graduate students, and he very much wanted to systematize a lot of the things that happened at Brighton. So, he worked on a filmography of everything that we saw. And trying to gather up everybody's notes, a lot of the people had tape recordings that they spoke into. I have to admit I didn't. He tried to gather those together. And he put them together, and it came out as a second volume of the proceedings.

And he's such a charming and terrific guy, we got along very well. And we were both very interested in narrative analysis, and certain kinds of semiotic concepts of narrative, I guess I would say. And so, we had a project to kind of figure out the beginnings of narrative in early film. Editing figures and things like that. And we met several times a year in Montreal, or I used to live in New York at that time, to discuss this. We came to put together other filmographies, he always had money for graduate students to be researchers.

And we had long discussions, I mean I remember at one point having this discussion about what a syntagm was, and he had a, wherever we were, I don't even think it was his apartment, there was a photograph of a parade, and I was saying, "Now, is that a syntagm?" Because there are people in a line. We were drunk on this. And then he was going to do a thing at [needs clarification – name or location – 00:36:24] on Méliès, I think. I'm not sure I've got this correct exactly. But it was something that we were going to collaborate on, but I knew I couldn't come to it, I was teaching at Harvard at this point, just as a visiting lecturer.

And he came down. I had a very brilliant TA. A man named Adam Simon, who now is a script writer for horror films in Hollywood. And I had been working...

Adam was very interested in horror films, and we'd been working on certain ideas, and I was interested in the idea of an attraction, which I took partly from Eisenstein. The idea that there are these kind of units of galvanizing the audience's attention, which he called attraction. Partly because he wanted to avoid the bourgeois idea of identification. And so, thinking of his plays particularly, as building blocks of these moments that would galvanize the attention of an audience. And that he related not to bourgeois theater, but to the fairground, and particularly to the rollercoaster was his prime idea of an attraction. And of course, this is fairground talk. I find this even more than I knew at the time that I used it kind of somewhat intuitively. That it was so much part of the vocabulary of the showman, you know, you do attractions.

So, Adam and I had kind of worked out this. Now Andre says he doesn't remember this, so take it for what it's worth I guess, but Andre... I think Charlie Musser at first used the term "early cinema", tried to get away from primitive cinema. And we'd used it, and Andre said, "You know, the French term cinema de premier temps, is kind of awkward". So then we said we use something as simple as early cinema. And I said, "Well, you know, I've got this phrase that Adam and I have been using, cinema of attractions", and he translated it in French and when, "Oh, this is good".

And then he particularly then looked at Jacques Aumont's treatment of attractions in Eisenstein, and integrated it into the first presentation of the idea, which we kind of co-authored. But he particularly brought in the stuff from Aumont. Although, I had said, "This is Eisenstein", but I hadn't, I think at that point, read Aumont, which was still just in French. So, that's to some extent... At least my memory of the origin of the term.

As I say, even though there are points where... Last night, you may remember that Don Crafton said, "He invented the term cinema of attractions, but we won't hold that against him." There are points where... Well, no, I don't regret it at all. There are points where I go, "Okay, there are other things we can talk about." But I still actually find it a very useful term. I've always tried to emphasize that it's dialectical, that it is that cinema is either simply narrative, or simply, I don't like the adjective term, "attractional," which Andre uses, but... And attraction. But it is the interaction. They can be separate, totally. I have to admit, I've watched some narrative films that had no attractions whatsoever. And there are certain types of films that I think do not develop a narrative at all. But it's also the way that they can be inter-related, but it is to me what makes it really a useful term.

There was a point, I think, where I kind of backed away from it a little bit. But, I'm finding it more useful now than ever in a way. Now, there is one thing. There are a couple things that I think might have to be revised, and this is preliminary because I've never quite worked this out. In my initial formulation of it, was very influenced by modernist ideas, and by Walter Benjamin's idea of... What's it

called? The ballistic sense of cinema. That the attraction was a kind of assault, which is Eisenstein too.

More and more, I think, although that might be like the central, the most pure form of the attraction, to think maybe it doesn't have to... Either it can be bifurcated into different elements, or that's a possible but not a necessary element. Because I'd begin to think, for instance, working a lot with phantom rights. There's a lot of it ... You know, the idea of a train is ballistic. The discourse, which I've emphasized is in trade, or I mean rather, catalog descriptions of possible collisions, and so on.

Those are all kind of fit into that avant-garde, modernist idea of an attraction. But there are also ones where it's kind of contemplative. And I more and more thought, "There has to be a space for that". And I think it's within attraction, sometimes I think I play with the idea, maybe there's another thing. But I think actually to proliferate terms it's madness, that's partly why I can't read Deleuze. Actually, I read Deleuze all the time, so. Partly because I can't figure out what he's saying.

So that would be my main modification. Is saying that it's not always the aggressive, in-your-face attraction. That there's also... I'm not sure where we can draw the line. But I'm fascinated by the rocks and waves films. You know, the surf images. Now again, if you read the accounts of the first viewing of people being afraid they're going to be wetted by the spray, that's pure modernist attraction. But I also think there's a way where people... it's like meditation, as Melville says, "Meditation and water are wedded together". And I'm not sure that there isn't that aspect of cinema. And it particularly opens up things in the avant-garde that have a different mode than confrontation.

So, if you think of something like the very great film by Larry Gottheim, “Fog Line,” which is a seven, eight, maybe even ten-minute shot of fog lifting over a landscape. I think I would like to include that as an attraction. Although, clearly it's not the in-your-face, burst of temporality that was my first understanding. But I'm not sure I've ever quite worked out this other space entirely.

Scott Curtis: Listening to you talk about the Brighton symposium, and the structure of that, leads me to think about the organization of Domitor, the founding of Domitor, as the International Society for the Study of Early Cinema, which of course I'm very interested in.

Tom Gunning: Yes. Right.

Scott Curtis: And so, could you tell me a little bit about that moment of the founding, or several moments, or did it come out of Brighton? Were you thinking about Brighton at that time?

Tom Gunning: It didn't come directly out of Brighton temporally, and I would have to... It was very much Andre's baby. And as I recall, it first was formulated at a conference that I was not at, in France. God, I almost remember the name of the town, but I don't, I wasn't there. But Andre and a group of people said, "Let's form an organization". And then, we met again... I'm trying to think what it was, maybe it was Pordenone, with some other international thing. And Andre said ... You know, they already thought about this, and their people like Steven Bottomore, and so on, who were involved. And I remember sitting in some restaurant kind of drawing up the idea of what it was.

Andre had come up with the term Domitor, which was of course kind of a joke. I mean, number one, it's not *Dorm*-itor, it doesn't have anything to do with sleep. It's Domitor, domination; trainer is actually the translation of the Latin, like an animal trainer. And it was, of course, this name for the cinematograph proposed by the father of Louis and-

Scott Curtis: Auguste.

Tom Gunning: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, what is the father's name.

Scott Curtis: Pierre… Was it Pierre?.

Tom Gunning: No, I think. No, I know I've said it's Andre, but I think somebody told me it's not Andre. But anyways, yeah, and I'm sure that's a Freudian slip with Andre. But anyways, Papa Lumière came up with it, supposedly with his good friend, the founder of Moët & Chandon. And you know, one of the traditions that used to be, Scott, was that every Domitor began with a toast in Moët & Chandon. Every meeting, both of the ... So I don't know if you'd continued that.

Scott Curtis: I'll work on that though.

Tom Gunning: Yeah, good, good, good. And you know, then of course, he didn't the like word cinematograph because he thought it sounded... It was difficult to say, and sounded too scientific. So, it was the idea, let's name our organization after... And this is actually I think really important in Brienne and Andre's part, after a road not taken. After a possibility that didn't happen, and that's important. I think vitally important, maybe even more than Andre intended, to my sense of what history is. That it's not just what happened, it's what might have happened. So, then there was this idea of getting things together, and we worked hard on doing the first conference in Quebec City, right? Yeah. Which, what year was that? You must know.

Scott Curtis: 1990.

Tom Gunning: 1990, makes sense. Which was on religion and early cinema. And you know, it's gone on from there. And it is amazing, one of the things that, particularly under your stewardship, is how many young people are interested in it. Young people.

[Laughs.] What a phrase! And that's very exciting to me. At the same time though, the thing that I think I've talked to you that always worries me about the study of early cinema, and particularly Domitor, is on the one hand, it is something that is very valuable. The careful research into local, and very specific circumstances. But there was also a way, and this was so vital for Andre and I, that we were asking questions about the nature of cinema, not just what was the cinema like in Toulouse in 1908? Which to me is essential, but also needs to be thought about in terms of, so what does that tell us about cinema?

I worry sometimes that as things become institutionalized, become niche things. I love people who are obsessed with little... Their local concerns, or only one year, or one company, or whatever. But at the same time, I never want Domitor to lose that sense of the broader horizon. That early cinema carries some key to what the nature of cinema is. That therefore, it is theoretical through being deeply historical.

Scott Curtis: You've taught at a number of institutions over the years, both as a member of the permanent faculty, and as a visitor. Were there programs or institutions that served as role models for the programs that you were involved in building?

Tom Gunning: Well, the program I built with Miriam Hansen, and my other colleagues, but particularly with Miriam. Of course, is University of Chicago, which would continue to build after her death, and which I have very strong sense of what's important. And this is developed in dialogue, I don't mean it was my sense but with all my colleagues. I would say, in some ways it's a unique model, now I don't mean by that that it's like a totally alien... Anyone would recognize it, but I do think it represents a kind of school of thought involved with the interrelation of theory and history, the importance of close analysis and the importance of aesthetics as well as social context. And the importance of a full historical sense of what media are. I wouldn't quite say I had that model at any place that I taught.

NYU and this is actually I think, still true, and I think it's really valuable. But in some ways it's the opposite, is, I felt, a wonderful smorgasbord. And I think it still is, it has a large number of faculty, and they do different things. And I don't think there's any sense... I mean, I'm not there, although I taught there not so long ago as a visiting person. But I don't think they have a sense of, "Okay, what's our philosophy?" Whereas in Chicago, I wouldn't say that we sit there and... But we do have a sense of it in our hiring, and our curricular, and our selection of graduate students it's based on it.

The other places that I taught... well, I mean, Brooklyn College that I said, was like this amazing chaos that I learnt so much from. But, then I had a wonderful year teaching at the Carpenter Center at Harvard. It was, as I say, interacting with Adam Simon there, and when Andre came to visit for a while, interacting with the students, that was very exciting. But there was no model there, it was actually BS, it was at that point just an undergraduate program. Although, I had

some graduate students in my classes, but it was very, very different. The one thing that it had, and then Purchase had, which is something that I believe in and have never been able to get back to, was integration with film production.

And the largest, until University of Chicago, the largest part of my life was spent teaching at SUNY Purchase, which was in a production program. So, certainly was not a model at all, but that was extremely important for my growth. And I have always hoped that an ideal program would actually have a production component because I think... I mean, I've said sometimes, I would like to know that everybody who ever gets a PhD in film studies has at least made one shot, and one cut. But then, very exciting for me, I spent a couple terms at, I think, three different times, teaching at the University of Stockholm. And the students I had there, the graduate students, most of whom have gone on to be professors, were... I had two seminars, one on early film, one on Fritz Lang, and they were really inspiring. But more through immediate contact than through the institutional element.

Being at Harvard, as I mentioned, and was that every place I've been? Northwestern. Yeah, Northwestern had the production component that I look for. I never felt it quite took the model that I wanted, and it kind of moved away once I left from an emphasis on history, and more of an emphasis on television, which I think is a balance. Although, I'm very interested in media, but I have to admit broadcast television is low on the list. Much more interested in radio, or let alone touchscreens and all of those things, which I think are pretty interesting.

Scott Curtis: Where do you feel the future of university-level film and media study and scholarship is headed? How do you envision the future of the field?

Tom Gunning: Well, this is always tricky because I very much am guided. There's a wonderful point where they ask Henri Bergson about... I think it's at the end of World War I, about the future of... I can't remember what it was, society, or art, or something. And he says, "Any such comment is absolutely antithetical to my philosophy because you don't look at what is happening now and extend it into the future. The future is exactly open, and can't be predicted".

Now at the same time, that can sound like you know... So, it's not interesting, which is the opposite of what Bergson intended. And of my own orientation, I believe that history is about the future. But predicting the future, saying where things are going is not only dubious, but can be pernicious. Because very often it doesn't allow for the kind of interventions where things change enormously.

I'm very interested in Gaston Bachelard's criticisms of Bergson, which always seem to me like, "Bergson, you should be more like Bergson". And he kind of has this idea of not just the future, but the event which really transforms things. And so, given that hesitation, I don't know where the future will be. I know what the future I envision is, which is to be very alert to this enormous technological

change that's taking place. Which I think, does have some negative aspects, but seems to have the possibility. And this is the whole thing about technology, right? It opens up an idea of future, but the question is, “Will that technology and possibility be harnessed to help people, or simply to only make profit, or to control?” They're related, but they're two different things. And that's partly why I wouldn't predict the future, because I think the forces of profit, and forces of control are very strong.

But what I hope is, and I’m not a utopian, where kind of “Oh well, the technology will solve it by itself.” But I do believe that the possibility of greater access, and interaction that the new technologies of vision allow, particularly if they're combined with people who also have a sense of preserving what older technologies had, and being aware of them. What 35 millimeter meant, what eight millimeter meant, what a mutoscope is. As well as what new media are.

So, being aligned to that challenge is, I think, the most important thing. And being aware that what we have to do is forge a sense of history, which is a sense of continuity. In other words, that you look back at the past and say I'm carrying this forward, and that, I think, is really our challenge.

I'm trying to think if there's something else here. I do, a little bit, think, and I worry about getting into this because it's not my area, but looking at the panels here, the SCMS, there are so many that are about ideological conceptions. And I think that's important, but I often get the feeling that overwhelms this concern with the medium, which I think is very, very essential.

My dystopian vision would be that people forget about the medium and they just talk about the politics, or the identity. To me, politics... Identity, I'm not even sure I like the word. But I mean, politics is very important, but it really has to be founded in a kind of materialism of experience. And I worry sometimes. The type of film studies, media studies, paper that I can't stand is the one where we all congratulate ourselves for being smarter than the text. And there's a lot of that. And maybe, who knows? Maybe that's what everybody will be doing in the future, I don't know. Being smarter than the text. God help us.

Scott Curtis: Those are words to end on, so thank you very much Tom, for taking the time to meet with us, and talk with us, and share your history.

Tom Gunning: Thank you Scott.