Linda Mizejewski:

Hello, everybody. I am so happy to be here. My name is Linda Mizejewski, I teach at Ohio State University, and I'm here today to interview Kathleen Rowe Karlyn. Professor Karlyn is Professor Emerita from the University of Oregon, where she was the Founding Director of the Cinema Studies program. She is now retired and living in Philadelphia. Kathleen is the author notoriously of Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter, the 1995 book that changed the direction of feminist film studies by opening up a line of questions and a topic that really had not been considered before. It was really a groundbreaking book.

And she followed that up with Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen. In that book, Kathleen extended the concept of unruliness to include race and class, to link generations of feminists, and to rethink feminism itself as a madcap struggle and ongoing story, equally replete with hysterical laughter and tears. Two very important books. She also published numerous articles on both comedy and melodrama, in places ranging from Jump Cut, Feminist Media Studies, Cinema Journal, Screen, Journal of Film & Video, and in multiple anthologies and collections.

Of those, her groundbreaking 1990 article on Roseanne Arnold was widely reprinted and remains a touchstone of early feminist television studies and studies of women's comedy. Another important essay was her 1995 “Comedy, Melodrama and Genre,” which argued for the importance of women's comedy in relationship to melodrama. I have used that essay to structure my film classes for the past 20 years. When I teach women in film, that is the template; everything is there, the comedy, the melodrama, gender. It is a classic.

In addition to developing the Cinema Studies program at Oregon, Kathleen is also renowned for her teaching, which included appointments in Italy and Argentina, and, most of all, for her mentorship. Her former graduate students, many of whom are now thriving as successful scholars themselves, remember her as a generous and inspiring mentor who embraced a pedagogy of inclusion and mutuality. We know about her teaching because a lot of those students showed up and testified at the 2017 Feminist Media Studies Symposium in Oregon that honored Kathleen's scholarship and teaching.

So, the big opening question is how did you get into film studies from journalism? You were an English major, you were a journalist, and then suddenly you're in a PhD program in Film Studies. How did that happen?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Linda, first, thank you for such a beautiful introduction. I have been so fortunate throughout my career because the people who have shaped it have just been absolutely wonderful. And, Linda, you are certainly one of them.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to have this interview, and thank SCMS for this. When I interviewed you the other day, we talked about our mutual enjoyment of the work we've done and our own friendship, which began, and has continued, through a shared love of outrageous woman and comedy.

So, how did I get into it? Like many people of my generation, I came from a literature background. I had studied English and American literature as an undergrad, then I taught it in a secondary school. I continued my education at Johns Hopkins with a Master's in Liberal Arts, which was also literary-based. But there, French theory was just coming across the Atlantic, and I had a French professor who taught Lévi-Strauss and a new way of thinking about the relation between social behavior and art. That idea started to germinate in my mind. I was really fascinated with tragedy at the time, but I was already thinking about genre in general and its connection with the social world.

Then, in my very non-linear life and career path, I took some time off, had children, then went back to work as a newspaper reporter and editor. I've always loved to write, but there I learned some important skills that I've tried to bring into my academic writing and to share with my students. When I moved to Oregon, my opportunities to advance in journalism were limited but I was invited to teach as an adjunct in Oregon's journalism school. Eventually faculty there told me that if I got a PhD, I would become a good candidate for a tenure track job.

I began the program in Oregon, which was then called Telecommunication and Film, with a communications orientation. But as I got deeper into the program, the pleasures of music, performance, the visual arts pulled me toward film, which offered much of what I loved about literature, and even more.

The program was very small, but with powerhouse people who guided and inspired me. Bill Cadbury may not well-known in film studies today because he didn't publish a lot, but he was brilliant and legendary in Eugene for being on the vanguard of film studies on campus and in the community. For a number of years, I was watching four movies a week for his classes, and that's where I got my foundational education in film. At the same time, Ellen Seiter was there. She directed my dissertation and had a tremendous influence on me. Julia Lesage was there too. We later became colleagues and she has remained close to me throughout my career.

Linda Mizejewski:

And then how about into comedy studies? Was comedy your dissertation topic?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Yes. There were a few key moments that turned me toward comedy, and to a feminist approach to it. Feminist film theory at that time was floundering, in a state of what Mary Ann Doane had described as "ennui." It seemed it had gone as far as it could with melodrama, the foundation on which most of it then was based, along with psychoanalytic theory.

At the same time, I was watching screwball comedies from the '30s, which I adored. Preston Sturges' Sullivan's Travels, which makes a compelling case for comedy. A Question of Silence, by Marleen Gorris, which ends with women's explosive laughter. And Roseanne was taking off in television.

So, I started thinking about the radical power of women's laughter, and that there were new directions to explore in feminist film theory.

I've thought a lot recently about how the unconscious drives us toward one project rather than another, and why I was drawn to comedy. I knew on some level it would let me do work that would be pleasurable in itself, and also contribute to a conversation that was already happening.

Linda Mizejewski:

But the conversation was barely beginning, Kathleen. You really jump-started it. And that was very big to move away from melodrama. And the other thing was television. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, television was the sad stepsister of feminist film theory. Good work was being done on soap opera, Patricia Mellencamp understood that I Love Lucy was important, and there were other things that were happening, but not a lot.

What was unusual was that you did both television and film. Now, we do that all the time. But, back then, that was not done a lot. And, in fact, when I was in grad school doing film studies, it didn't occur to

any of us to include TV. So, how did you come to that? You knew, somehow, that this was important, as well as the film topics.

Kathleen Karlyn:

At first, I was focused on film. It seemed there was plenty to do there. But Roseanne was just taking off and Ellen urged me to start paying attention to it. So I began recording all of the Roseanne episodes on VHS tapes, tracking her in the tabloids, and so on. And I believed, from my literary background, that there are structures or tropes that transcend the boundaries of different media.

I had always felt a bit of an interloper in film, never mind television, because I had been a literature person. I had to shake off my love of the printed word and really train myself to focus on the image and sound. But as I moved into my dissertation, I had mentors who gave me the space to follow my ideas and gave me the confidence to do so.

And, at the same time, I was holding on to what I had learned from journalism, so I interviewed Roseanne. It took me a year to penetrate all the layers around her. It helped to be able to send her the article I had published about her in Screen. When I finally got that to her, she invited me to come to LA to interview her. But then she decided to marry Tom Arnold that weekend, so we did the interview by a phone instead.

But it was amazing just to talk to her. She was so aware of what she was doing. I had said, "Can I talk to you for 20 minutes?" It turned out to be 45 minutes. And it confirmed the direction I was going in, building on what Lucy Fisher had written, and Pat Mellencamp, and Mary Russo, who had done a brilliant article on female unruliness. As I've told my students, there is so little original work that any of us do, we just find the right pieces and put them together in a new way. We bring our creativity to how we put those ideas together and push them forward.

Linda Mizejewski:

Did you have any other models of books? There was very little on comedy, and you named them, but who else was influential?

Kathleen Karlyn:

It was these essays, and I've always loved an essay because of the discipline of saying what you have to say in a short form. That preference shaped the latter part of my career too. And then other critics too, gave me confidence and inspiration. Bob Stam was the first film scholar I knew to use Bakhtin, in his book on Brazilian cinema. Andrew Horton on comedy and Tom Schatz were important to me. I developed a terrific relationship with the U Texas press that has continued all my career, beginning with Frankie Westbrook who first started to talking with me about my work when I was a grad student giving papers on Roseanne at SCMS (and every year Roseanne gave me great new material to work with). I was also reading Mary Ann Doane. Ellen sent me to The Desire to Desire because I really needed to understand melodrama before I could push my own ideas ahead.

Linda Mizejewski:

Then you came forward with the unruly woman as a model and a trope, which has become a really big deal, like "final girl" or "male gaze" or Butler's "gender is performance." Now, these days, if anybody

writes on women in comedy, that trope is pulled up the way that we would pull up, say, “final girl,” in horror studies. So, when did you realize, "This has legs. This is going somewhere"?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Thank you for that question, Linda. It may have begun with the British feminists, who were early enthusiasts for my work. But it took a long time, and I don’t think I fully understood it until Oregon did that symposium in 2017. My students were there, you were there, and so many others, and it was just so gratifying.

Before, it was hard for me to fully appreciate the impact of my work because I was operating very much in Oregon. Julia and I had a real partnership as colleagues, and she was always and continues to be a trusted adviser and dear friend, but we were off the beaten track. And I was absorbed with other parts of my life.

I had also wanted to do something different from that first book. I was interested in doing ethnographic research into other carnivalesque practices besides comedy performances. (Jackie Bobo, by the way, had been working on audiences when we were in grad school together). I wanted to do a post-colonial study based in the US, about how native cultures and rodeo culture co-existed at events like the Pendleton Round Up in eastern Oregon. I started going out there and videotaping a pageant put on by First Nations people who gathered there every summer. But I realized, at some point, that that was not the right project for me. And then as invitations started to come in about the unruly woman, I just continued along that path.

In those subsequent years, I also decided that instead of another book, I was going to write when I felt I had something I really wanted to say, and hope to produce a good article about it-- whether it was incest and American Beauty or Scream and teen girl culture.

Eventually I decided the time had come to write another book. And, again, just as Tom at Texas had supported me with the unconventional organization of The Unruly Woman, Jim Burr helped me put together Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Women. At that point, we were in the age of post-feminism, and my students were rejecting feminism. I was curious why. Are these just unruly girls rebelling against their mothers? So, I began the second book by returning to the issues I had been interested in for some time, and testing the argument of the first book against them.

I also felt that the issue of the mother and motherhood had been insufficiently theorized in feminism. I really wanted to dig into the ambivalences women have about the maternal, and whether feminism had internalized the matrophobia of the culture at large. So, I continued to think about female unruliness by carrying the concept into new areas and another argument that I wanted to work through.

Linda Mizejewski:

In thinking about unruly daughters, you had a stake in this because you raised three little girls at the beginning of your career. That's pretty unusual. And for a lot of us, for our generation, we grew up with an understanding that we had a choice: we could do a career or we could do children, we just can't do both. And then, of course, there were some who "Okay, I'm going to have one child." But you had a pretty big family. Clearly, having daughters influenced the second book, but what was that like to be a young scholar and to be raising kids?

Kathleen Karlyn:

I think it always helped me put my work in a certain perspective. My work was a major part of my life, but other things meant a lot to me too. As for having a big family, I had a foot in one world and another in another world that was emerging for women. But as with the work I did that wasn't explicitly related to film studies, the personal choices I made then formed who I am and the work I eventually did.

My work came to be a place where I could retreat into my own ideas and take a lot of gratification in that, but then step back into the craziness of family life. And motherhood… This continues even today with young women who believe, and rightly, that it's not the same for women, having to choose between an absorbing and demanding career, and a family. Things have not changed all that much, and I see with younger women, with my own daughters, similar kinds of questions and choices that they've had to face. So, I consider myself lucky that I did what I did. It was challenging. But in addition to the personal rewards of having my girls, it gave me a lot of first-hand material to work through, especially in the second book.

Linda Mizejewski:

You talked about the craziness of one world, the craziness of another world, but you and I have talked before about how our work, our scholarly topics are very personal to us, that the boundary is very fluid, really permeable. And I think this certainly comes through in your second book. Can you talk a little bit about a couple things that you're happy that you addressed in the second book, that you didn't get to in the first book? Because it's very unusual to have a second book that actually directly addresses in the title a first book.

Kathleen Karlyn:

I was aware, not that long after the first book, of where it fell short. With Roseanne, I was working on class, but race was just marginally present, even in thinking of the whiteness of the examples I studied. I'm gratified that scholars like you filled in so many of those gaps. In Pretty/Funny and Hysterical!, you took on race and queerness, and carried unruliness into new territory.

In the most recent presidential election campaign, it was impossible not to see how the tropes of unruliness and the grotesque can used in ways that are deeply racist. The campaign put not only sexism but racism and ageism front and center. My most recent article, on Wonder Woman, put the responses of female audiences to the film in the context of a national political campaign that was deeply hostile to female power.

My second book didn't have the organic wholeness of the first, but there's still so much that feminism has not done with the very notion of the maternal, and I'm happy to have explored that. For example, before the book went to press, I realized that I had written it as the mother of my daughters, not as the daughter of my own mother, because of my own complicated feelings toward her. As always, we write unaware of the blinders that limit our vision. So I wrote a little Afterward which, to this day, seems to touch readers in ways I never anticipated, women who have also lived in that space of unresolved issues so many of us face. What matters to me most about the book was urging intergenerational conversations and connections among girls and women, especially since we in American culture run away from history. We're in love with the present, with youth.

In feminism, we need to be talking about time, and confront our differences. There has been a lot of soul-searching among feminists of my generation about the middle-class whiteness of second wave feminism. So, my second book reflected my own efforts to confront some of the limitations in the first.

Linda Mizejewski:

Let's move on to your teaching and your work at Oregon. So, you got your PhD in Telecommunication and Film department but you taught in the English Department. What did that entail? Did you have to carry in your own equipment?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Yes, and my situation there will probably resonate with others, although how we made our way in that kind of environment varied from institution to institution. In 1992, I was in the last class to get a degree in Telecommunication and Film before the university closed the program, despite the hundreds of majors enrolled in it. According to some people, it was a “hostile takeover” by another academic unit, but TcF had been an unruly department, with progressive, left-leaning faculty who had caused a lot of ruckus on that campus, so some people felt that the administration was just waiting for an excuse to shut it down.

Ellen was transferred to the English Department, left the university, and eventually I was hired in her line. Soon after that, I met with the university’s president and offered to build a new program in film. He said, "Thanks, but no thanks." And so, I spent the next almost 20 years teaching film and media in the English Department. It was a traditional department, conservative, and even though I got along personally with my colleagues, most of them felt film really didn't belong in English. Thank goodness for Julia, who had also been transferred to English. And, of course, with Julia, I got Chuck (Kleinhans). He came to Eugene often (from Chicago), and we became close friends.

One of the benefits of our situation was that Julia and I could teach whatever we wanted to, as long as we were pulling students in, and we were, as film always does. We taught the highest-enrolling course by far in the department, which was opposed then to large lecture classes—except for our course in film history, which enrolled 150, 200 students. That course also helped us develop a cadre of grad students to help teach it, and they became important to our professional lives there. We also had colleagues in other departments like Comp Lit and Area Studies who were teaching film.

Julia and I do have some great stories. I would go to various administrators and plead for monitors in our classrooms, or room-darkening shades, or just to have one decently equipped classroom dedicated to film studies. Our students, of course, never stopped clamoring for a program of some kind, and eventually we put together a certificate program.

Then in my last few years, a few small changes made all the difference. Wendy Larson, a Chinese scholar whom I’d known for years because of her interest in Chinese cinema, had risen up in administration. Then when Julia retired, we hired Mike Aronson, who brought new energy into the department. About five or six years before I retired, I asked Wendy for money for little party for the faculty across campus who taught film. Julia and I had organized informal social events from time to time to help us all stay loosely connected. Wendy agreed, but then asked if I also wanted a grant to write a proposal for a new film program. And off we went.

And so, a few years later, in addition to being in the last class at Oregon to get a degree in film, I became the first director of its new program in Cinema Studies.

Linda Mizejewski:

So, was the program outside of English?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Yes. In addition to Wendy, we had a new dean in Arts and Sciences who supported the idea of a program that truly was interdisciplinary and international. So we designed a program that drew from three academic units: the College of Arts and Sciences; the School of Journalism, with Janet Wasko and others teaching communications; and Architecture and Allied Arts. With a year or two, I was able to make joint hires with other departments so we could add specialists in other national cinemas, which also strengthened our ties with departments outside of English.

I loved this time. Students were so excited, and within half a minute, we had a couple hundred majors. We had great faculty, administrative support, and plenty of energy and excitement. But our model was challenging for administrators because it was unique, and after I retired, Cinema Studies became its own department based in Arts and Sciences. I had been attached to the idea of keeping it outside of any single college. But I'm a bit of a utopian thinker.

Linda Mizejewski:

It sounds like you were really important as an advocate and as a jump-starter and as someone who was pushing things. Did you get pushed back? Students love film but sometimes institutions are not as enthusiastic.

Kathleen Karlyn:

That's right. And Julia had some skepticism about what you can expect from any institution, with good reason. But the tide at Oregon eventually changed. A lot of the more conservative faculty started to retire, younger Cultural Studies people came on board in English, and everybody, as we know, started including film in their own courses.

There were politics involved and negotiation in building the new program, but I loved the creativity of designing it, of arguing for it, of gathering support for it. I was never drawn to administering the program as much as to creating an environment where talented and passionate people could do their thing. In the end, launching that program was a terrific way to exit Oregon.

Linda Mizejewski:

Clearly, you were gifted as a teacher, as well as a mover and shaker. What were your favorite things to teach? What were the texts and films that just always worked and just always got you a good class?

Kathleen Karlyn:

Because Julia and I could create courses on pretty much whatever we wanted to, I developed new courses based on whatever I was interested in at the time. One was on indigenous people in film, when I was considering that research project based in eastern Oregon.

The history of motion picture became one of my favorites, despite the logistical challenges of such a big class. I especially loved the first term on silent cinema, because students were certain they were going to hate it, and then left with their eyes wide open. Vertigo was always a great film to teach. Singin' in the Rain. Red Sorghum. Persona. I'm not a huge fan of modernist cinema, but talk about waking up a class!

Some of my personal favorites were not so successful with students, but I was always fairly pragmatic about teaching, an approach I had learned from Ellen, and I avoided too many films I'd have to struggle hard to sell to my students. So, for example, Marleen Gorris's Antonia's Line, I adore. Moonstruck, too. Neither of those films really resonated with students the way they did with me. So I just found other

films that covered similar ground but were more accessible. Interestingly, students in smaller classes responded well to Gorris's A Question of Silence, which I had hesitated to teach because its politics are so radical.

The last course I truly loved to teach was on race and the musical, which I had first taught simply as the musical, but then realized that all of the films I taught either explicitly thematized race (as in Showboat, The Jazz Singer, West Side Story, Hairspray), or owed a huge debt to African American culture in their music and dance. The musical combines rich aesthetic pleasures with powerful political content, so I could guide students to see how popular culture processes and structures our world, and how hierarchy is built into entertainment. It's accessible, it's popular even with people who say they don't like it, and if you open your definition wide enough, students will love it.

With graduate students, I taught Richard Dyer whenever I could. Linda Williams. Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding." Julia's "S/Z and Rules of the Game," which was fantastic for literature students, whom I often taught on the graduate level. These scholars wrote foundational work that was clear, rich, meaty, and satisfying to teach.

Linda Mizejewski:

You're famous for your graduate teaching. Could you say a little bit about your strategies for mentoring grad students? It's such a big important part of what we do, and you were very successful at it.

Kathleen Karlyn:

Thank you, Linda. I ran away from teaching as a young woman after teaching literature in high school outside of Baltimore. The work load was just too much. But in the end, I came to love it. I learned about mentoring from what I had received in graduate school, when if I felt a spark of curiosity about an idea, I was given the support to go in that direction. And it's not as though I didn't get pushback, but that was part of what made the process so effective. And my mentors not only showed me that they had confidence in what I was doing, but they also had enough intellectual curiosity themselves to go there with me. Ellen told me she didn't much like comedy, but she never discouraged me from studying it myself.

I directed several dissertations on horror, and believe me, I do not like that either. In fact, the first and last dissertations I directed were on horror. But whenever my students were passionate about something I didn't know, I went down that path with them because it had been done for me. I never wanted to produce other versions of what I did, but to facilitate my students' work. And I learned so much from them while also working on their writing, argumentation, and making sure that they did their best work.

In fact, the ideas behind my second book began with a horror/slasher film, Scream which had become a cult among teen girls even though their mothers were horrified by it. That conflict interested me, along with the new cultural power of teen girls. At about that time, Jane Tompkins, a literature scholar, had written about her insecurities as a teacher, her feeling that she never knew enough about a topic to teach it. I realized that I could learn about teen girl culture by teaching it, and it would be a good opportunity to try a new approach to teaching. So, I began to put a lot more burden on my students to teach themselves, each other and me. I never relinquished my authority to shape the course and give students the tools they needed, or to be the "boss," but I put more responsibility them for the learning that happened in the classroom. They did phenomenal work in that course, and then in later courses too. Eventually I wrote a short article about the feminist principles behind that pedagogic model.

Still though, there's nothing like the power of the microphone in a giant class where your students have to listen to you. You can take questions, but you have a captive audience and you can say what you want to say.

Linda Mizejewski:

Kathleen, your inner career is stand-up comedian. Speaking of which, I can't end this interview without asking you, the goddess of the unruly woman and the queen of film studies comedy, what do you think about comedy these days, women's comedy? What are you watching and what do you like?

Kathleen Karlyn:

I knew you were going to ask me that, and I don't have a good answer. Comedy saved a lot of us during these last years. Late night TV was a reality check when we were living in a surreal world. I love the scholarship on comedy that's happening now. Maggie Hennefeld. Your work and Vicki's (Sturtevant). These days I'm watching a lot of film, and because of this pandemic, a lot of long-form television, especially from abroad.

Back to Wonder Woman, which is not a comedy but does center on an unruly woman. I was interested in why it caught so many women off-guard and made them cry. I was fascinated with how Wonder Woman's counterparts in the real world—Hillary Clinton, Michele Obama—were also coded as unruly women, but in deeply misogynistic ways.

Wonder Woman is part of a new group of films that might be called the "revenge of the oppressed"—films like Black Panther, A Very Promising Woman. Internationally, Parasite, White Tiger, Bacurau. On TV, I May Destroy You. Or maybe even the Spanish series The Money Heist. These works are using genres like horror but flipping them or hybridizing them to show the perspective of a class that's been put down. Even though they can be dark and brutal, the revenge they enact is utopian, which ties them to comedy, which is also utopian in the solidarity it implies, its social nature, or its destruction of what's old as a prelude to building something new. … What do you think, Linda? You're probably more in touch with comedy now than I am.

Linda Mizejewski:

Okay, you are not going to do that, people want to hear about you right now. You have just beautifully put together the threads of your work, running from horror, comedy, melodrama, Wonder Woman. I'm glad you brought that up because I know that you're giving talks about Wonder Woman, and that it was the subject of your most recent publication. Do you see yourself doing any more media work?

Kathleen Karlyn:

In these past few years, I've made baby steps toward a few projects. The musical is what most interests me most at the moment. I also think there's room for a book on female directors, something that could be useful in the classroom.

After I retired, I became absorbed in other interests and activities, but when we all were locked up during this past year, it was gratifying to find so many conversations related to my work that continue to interest me and to be invited back into them. And I continue to do that kind of editorial work that I enjoy very much and that keeps me connected with what people are writing and thinking about.

Linda Mizejewski:

Well, you are the unruly woman of film studies and feminist media studies, and unruly women do not shut down. I hope that we do hear from you more in the future. This has been a delight, and I really enjoyed your responses and also your ability to make connections and to look at the narrative of your work and define the threads that are personal, as well as feminist and scholarly. It's really a career to be proud of, Kathleen. I'm so happy that I've been able to share a friendship with you, and also to have profited so much from your scholarship and from your work. So, I thank you very much, and I'm really happy that this is going to be part of the SCMS project of the history of our profession because you're a really significant part of that history.

Kathleen Karlyn:

Thank you, Linda. This has just been a joy, and I knew it would be with you, so thank you so very much.