Kathleen Karlyn: Hello everyone. I'm Kathleen Rowe Karlyn. I'm a professor emerita from the University of Oregon and today, I am at home in Philadelphia, and this is May 10th, 2021. I'm here to interview my friend and colleague, Professor Linda Mizejewski, who is a Distinguished Arts and Sciences Professor of Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at the Ohio State University. We have agreed, because we are great friends as well as colleagues, to keep this informal and just enjoy it because we always enjoy visiting with each other. I'm going to just touch on the highlights of Linda's career in general, and then we will launch into a conversation about her work, about how she got to where she is, and where she is going.

Just summarizing the highlights of her career: she's been at Ohio State for 30 years. She also had time in Slovakia and Romania as a Fulbright lecturer. She's the author of numerous books from prestigious presses, including award-winning projects: *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*; *It Happened One Night; Hardboiled and High Heeled: the Woman Detective in Popular Culture*; *Ziegfeld Girl;* and *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles.* She has also edited an anthology on women's comedy with Victoria Sturtevant. She has another anthology coming out on Carrie Fisher as well as a TV Milestones book on *The Americans*. She's won numerous awards for teaching and has articles on topics ranging from Calamity Jane to Meryl Streep, Queen Latifah, and even Arnold Schwarzenegger early on. Do you remember that, Linda?

Linda Mizejewsk...: Oh, yes.

Kathleen Karlyn: In the breadth in this career, there are common threads as well, and I hope in the course of this interview, we can map out both how Linda got to where she is and what those common threads are. What are the themes that have preoccupied you from the beginning? As you've moved from popular fiction to film, television and a broad array of popular texts, what are the things that pull those together? I also want to ask about your history in film studies and your work as a feminist. Well, just tell us the origin story. How did you become interested in film and media studies? Where did it begin?

Linda Mizejewsk...: Oh, good heavens. I have loved movies my whole life. I loved movies as an experience that's bigger than life, those big-screen moments of drama, close-ups and epic movement. I loved all of it, but I never thought it was anything you could study, that you could take seriously. Think about this: in the 1970s, in English departments, where I grew up and where I got my degree, there was a lot of snobbishness about pop culture. I was at a small college. At other places, in more avant-garde places, film studies was being taken seriously, but not where I was. As a literary person, devoted to fiction and poetry, I thought pop culture was a guilty pleasure, so I loved movies, but I was also kind of embarrassed that I was so invested in them.

Because of those kinds of prejudices, in the 1980s, I didn't even watch television. I got an MA in literature, then an MFA in poetry writing. I mean, all this was very far away from film studies.

Now, the thread through all that was feminism. In the early '70s, when I was in college, I was right there as “women's literature” began to be a rubric. I was excited. "Women's literature? Gender is a thing to talk about in a college class?"

I was exhilarated to be part of that. When I signed up to go to grad school, my understanding was that I was going to be this new thing, a feminist scholar.

Eventually I did an NEH summer seminar with Gilbert and Gubar, so I was on my way to a PhD program to study modernist poetry. But when I got to the English Dept. at the University of Pittsburgh, I took a film class with Lucy Fischer and published my seminar paper in *The Journal of Film and Video*.

Kathleen Karlyn: Oh!

Linda Mizejewsk...: The English department there had also just changed their rubric to Critical and Cultural Studies, so when I said, "I think I want to write a dissertation on film," I got a resounding "Yes, of course you can do this, of course you can." It was Lucy Fischer, Dana Polan, and Marcia Landy. They were great. I was the first person to get a PhD in this new rubric . Everyone was very welcoming, there was never any doubt that I could do it, and I was astounded that it was possible because I had no idea that you could get a PhD and actually focus in film studies in an English department. Lucy was just starting the film program, and of course, the course that she offered was in feminist film theory.

Kathleen Karlyn: Wow.

Linda Mizejewsk...: There I was, thinking I was going to do feminist work in literary studies and suddenly realized there was all this exciting feminist scholarship happening around film. I started the program in 1985 when feminist film studies was very much in the throes of psychoanalytic theory. Remember all that?

Laura Mulvey, God bless her. I love Laura Mulvey, and she also really inspired my dissertation. Her famous passages on showgirls as female spectacle in her big breakthrough essay-- that spoke to me. Now, what I didn't want to admit was that I *adored* female spectacle. I love showgirls.

Kathleen Karlyn: Tell us more about that, Linda. What did you write your dissertation on?

Linda Mizejewsk...: Showgirl Sally Bowles! I've always idolized all those campy movies: Busby Berkeley, feathers, choreography But the movie that had gotten me very, very intrigued was *Cabaret* because we had this fabulous showgirl, Liza Minnelli, every inch Judy Garland's daughter, and she's belting out this stuff out there on stage, but the camera goes behind her and we see shots of the audience. By the end of the movie, there are swastikas in the audience, and the whole point of the movie is that being a spectator is political.

Kathleen Karlyn: Right.

Linda Mizejewsk...: I adored that movie. I just loved it. But it also really didn't work with Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory. She has that wonderful, lovely, evocative line about showgirls, saying that when the look of the diegetic audience is the same as the look of the movie audience, all directed to the showgirl, the movie takes us to a "no man's land outside of time and space." That's the quotation. "Outside of time and space." How could you be outside of time and space? Where are you? Well, for Mulvey, you're in your head, because this is psychoanalytic theory, but in *Cabaret,* I thought, "No, you are not outside time and space, you're in Weimar," and it's really crucial that this diegetic audience is in Weimar and that this female spectacle is a historical sign.

Once I got interested in that, I realized I had a dissertation project because no one had studied the Sally Bowles adaptations-- the Christopher Isherwood short story that became first a play, *I Am A Camera*, in the 1950s, and then a movie, *I Am A Camera*, then the big stage play, *Cabaret*, and then the movie by Fosse Wow. I had a dissertation there, a conversation with Mulvey that began: "The psychoanalytic explanation may work, but it's just not the whole story."

I started this in the late 1980s and other people were also beginning to say that Mulvey's male gaze theory needed some qualifications, so I see myself as having been part of that conversation.

Kathleen Karlyn: What is so fascinating about your work is you were pushing at the dominant paradigm of feminist theory at the time. You were also really looking at the historical meanings of movies, and you had this interest in female spectacle. Then what? Let's maybe trace your research, the history of your research, then maybe talk about the institutions where you did this research. Where did that lead to?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I didn't get showgirls out of my blood, so I went to 1930s musicals and the Ziegfeld Girl. That book project got me into showgirl history in the early 20th century. After that, the scholarship that really influenced me was Linda Williams' "Film Bodies," about the relationship between bodies and genres and what happens to the female body in melodrama, in porn, and in horror.

Kathleen Karlyn: Horror, yeah!

Linda Mizejewsk...: Linda Williams got away from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and used theories of fantasy in that essay. I found that really useful, and that got me started on women detectives just because I love to read women detective stories, so I wanted to do a project on the fantasies involved with that genre, the pleasures of it for women. It also made me realize I was interested in the intersection of bodies and narratives. What bodies can show up in which narratives? In romantic comedy, what bodies do we not see because they're not eligible to be the bodies of romantic heroines? What bodies can show up as detectives in that genre? Those are the things that really intrigued me, and continue to intrigue me.

A couple major shifts happened as I was starting out in the early '90s. First--queer theory hit. Do you remember the first time you picked up that incredible anthology *How Do I Look?* And I was hired at Ohio State by then and Judith Mayne was here doing that astounding new work on lesbian films and spectatorship and Dorothy Arzner. The university took film studies really seriously because of her prestige. We had a world-class scholar here, and she was in feminist film theory! And of course, having her as a colleague meant that I was reading and teaching queer and lesbian scholarship that I might not have done somewhere else. Working with Isherwood and camp and Sally Bowles meant I'd always been interested in queer bodies, so I was ready for queer theory as it developed.

The other thing that happened in the early '90s was bell hooks' essay on the "oppositional gaze." That changed all of us, didn't it? She really called us out and said, "You feminists doing this psychoanalytic film work on female spectacle ... whose bodies exactly are you looking at? What color are those bodies? Where do black female bodies and spectators have a place in this theory, and are they important at all to what you're thinking?"

Kathleen Karlyn: So you were writing about first queerness and then race in your first two books.

Linda Mizejewsk...: Yeah, the main premise of *Ziegfeld Girl* was the centrality of whiteness in the Ziegfeld project of the Glorified American Girl, so I had moved from the historical work of what a showgirl meant in terms of decadence, camp and Weimar into what she meant historically in terms of race and nationalism. Later, as I got interested in comedy, I began to ask about the whiteness of rom-coms.

And I've got to say, Kathleen, another really important thing that I read in the mid '90s was your essay "Comedy, Melodrama, Gender" that came out in '95. I think I've taught that essay every year since.

Kathleen Karlyn: Wow.

Linda Mizejewsk...: I've used it to organize one of the main courses I teach here on women in Hollywood cinema. Your essay got me thinking about comedy, and of course your book had come out around the same time. I was also influenced by Lucy Fischer, because she'd been interested in comedy from the start. Her first book, her dissertation, was on Jacques Tati, and when I was her TA in film analysis class, she always did a lot on comedy. But that essay of yours really changed the course of my research. Pretty soon, I was looking at *It Happened One Night*, the mother of all rom coms, for a book project.

Kathleen Karlyn: Well, I'm very honored to hear that, Linda. It just is wonderful, also, how you took my work and carried it forward with two big projects. I laid out some foundation, but there was a lot of work that needed to be done and continues to need to be done on the subject. Tell us about *Pretty/Funny*, what your thinking was on that and then the *Hysterical* anthology which, again, is moving the study of comedy into new terrain.

Linda Mizejewsk...: With *Pretty/Funny*, it was fun to be in conversation with you and with The Unruly Woman. My question was, what happens if the unruly woman is Black, Asian or queer? What are all the inflections? I think once you set out the theoretical framework, this was the natural next step. I was delighted to do that.

Then, I met Vicki Sturtevant at SCMS, and Vicki had written a brilliant article about hysterical laughter in *Thelma & Louise*. I had been teaching that article ever since it came out. As Vicki says, there's a lot of female pleasure in that movie. And a lot of hysterical laughter. Well, we put our heads together and we realized we needed to do something on women's comedy. It was a delight to work with her as the co-editor of our anthology *Hysterical*, for which of course, you wrote the preface. It was great to get feminist scholars together to talk about women's comedy from silent cinema all the way up through *Girls.*

Kathleen Karlyn: You have not been afraid of moving into new territory, and moving from fiction to film to television allowed you to cover a lot of terrain, and doing it all with really strong critical skills and your writing, which I would also say is a model of academic writing.

Linda Mizejewsk...: I was a writing teacher for years. I was in an MFA program, so I like teaching writing workshops, and I still include workshop days in all my courses including graduate seminars. It's rewarding to teach people how to write better.

Kathleen Karlyn: I agree, and that's evident in your writing. Talk to us a little bit about what it was like to teach in the early days. You were in an environment where film studies was supported and valued, but what was it like getting films? What was it like getting classrooms?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I was very much welcomed in the English department at Ohio State. I was hired to develop film studies, and the chair, Morris Beja, had already published some work on film and adaptation. So when he hired me, he said, "Whatever equipment you want, whatever you need, we'll figure out a way to do it." Now, I was lucky enough that by the time I got into film studies, at least I wasn't dealing with 16-millimeter film and carrying projectors around like Lucy Fischer did at the beginning of her career. But I did carry around a laser disc player. Do you remember those things?

Kathleen Karlyn: Oh, yes.

Linda Mizejewsk...: There was no place to keep it except on my desk at the office, and I had to lug it around from classroom to classroom, and the laser discs were these big things that were like long-playing albums.

Kathleen Karlyn: It's Interesting that, if you have been in this field long enough, you've gone through many iterations of how to show, how to see, how to lug around a movie. I do remember those laser discs. They were something else to manage.

Linda Mizejewsk...: Right.

Kathleen Karlyn: One interesting question that I've thought about lately is what was available on film to teach or study. Was your research determined or shaped in any way by what was available to you for working on?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I was very lucky that I got in there in the '80s when things were available and I wasn't working on something that was so esoteric that I couldn't find something. Even when I was working on the Sally Bowles project, I had to dig around for some German propaganda films, for example, but there were some libraries that had them.

Kathleen Karlyn: Let's talk a little bit about teaching.

Linda Mizejewsk...: Teaching generally is a big part of my life and a really important one. At some point at Ohio State, I moved from the English Department over to Women's Studies, where Judith Mayne had been teaching for many years, and because of Judith, we always have had a tradition in this department of teaching film as film. In other words, even though it was a Women's Studies department, nobody here was teaching films as just examples of bad treatment of women or examples of feminism. No, we've always taught film analysis here in Women's Studies. I'm so happy to be here.

Really, a major thing that influenced me to turn to media studies was that it is the place where we learn about gender and sexuality. I find it really gratifying to get students to pay attention to that. Because pop culture is everywhere, their

tendency is to think that it has no meaning. It's just there, it's just the air that you breathe. Once students become aware of tropes and conventions, it's gratifying to see them learn to think about what they're seeing.

I also taught overseas a couple times, once behind the Iron Curtain in Romania.

Kathleen Karlyn: You wrote an essay about that, didn't you?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I wrote an essay about what it was like to be under surveillance, to know that we were being watched, and it was a cultural studies essay, too, about living in a place where sexuality, sexiness, and the senses simply were not prioritized at all.

After I published it in *Harper's*, there was a very odd letter to the editor two months later that said, "Well, why is this American going over to Eastern Europe and looking for sexiness? This is really very American, isn't it? This is all they can think about." I found out later that it was the KGB that wrote that in a weird attempt to discredit me!

Kathleen Karlyn: Wow.

Linda Mizejewsk...: The reason this is relevant at all is that when The Americans came on TV a couple years ago, I immediately recognized its atmosphere of surveillance, secrecy, and deceit. I really loved the series. So my current project is a book on The Americans for the TV Milestones Series from Wayne State University Press, which should be out in about a year.

Kathleen Karlyn: Connecting the dots of your career, this makes me think of the notion of visibility and being watched, from the showgirl to being the object of another kind of camera that's hidden. That essay about Romania won a prize, didn't it?

Linda Mizejewsk...: It won a Mencken Award for best human rights essay, 1985.

Kathleen Karlyn: That kind of positions you as a public intellectual as well as an academic intellectual, and I have admiration for doing that kind of work. You have another book coming out in a completely different universe. Can you tell us a little bit about this one?

Linda Mizejewsk...: It's an anthology on Carrie Fisher called *Our Blessed Rebel Queen: Essays on Carrie Fisher and Princess Leia*. The thread here actually is comedy. I've always been interested in Carrie Fisher as a comedian, and Fisher herself said that the older she got, the more she thought of herself as a comic writer more than as an actress. Really, that was her gift. She was an incredibly good writer and a really funny comedy writer. Her memoir and stage play, Wishful Drinking, are hilarious and heartbreaking.

The anthology is also about Carrie Fisher as a feminist icon and mental health advocate. She wrote blistering feminist critiques about how she was treated by the film industry. And think of the Women's March in 2016! Princess Leia was on placards that said, "Join the Resistance." She was also one of the first celebrities to come out as bipolar and to talk about her struggles dealing with that disorder. One of the pieces in this anthology is an anonymous essay by somebody in the film industry who writes that, as someone with bipolar disorder, she credits Carrie Fisher for saving her life. And we have several essays on Carrie's relationship to Princess Leia because she wrote about this eloquently.

Kathleen Karlyn: Your press is very excited because they're anticipating big sales in the *Star Wars* universe, which we all know is huge. I think this is going to be a great feminist intervention into that world.

Linda Mizejewsk...: Yeah. It was a learning experience for me. I got into this because of my co-editor, Tanya Zuk, who's finishing her dissertation, God bless her, while she's working on this anthology. I met her at SCMS. She very much identifies as a geek girl and goes to conventions like Dragon Con that I know nothing about. She has taught me a whole lot about the feminist strands of fandom that are out there and the feminist strands of fandom attached to Princess Leia.

Kathleen Karlyn: Your essay on Liz Lemonism was dealing with divisions within feminism. Do you have any thoughts about where feminism is these days and where film and media studies are going? You're in very close touch with women's and gender studies students. What's their thinking?

Linda Mizejewsk...: One of the reasons I love working in a women's studies department is that faculty and students are focused on what's happening right now with threats to racial and sexual minorities.

Every single film course focuses on questions of representation and exclusions. So when I start my class on women in Hollywood cinema, my first questions are, "What's the color of glamour? At the very beginning of cinema, who could be a star, and why was it that, when cinema began at an age when there was a lot of black sexiness around--in black Broadway, in jazz and the Harlem Renaissance--why did that black sexiness never get into film?"

Kathleen Karlyn: Great!

Linda Mizejewsk...: My students are also really aware of trans rights and crises with trans populations. That issue also is included all our courses. I always teach *Tangerine* now, as well *Fantastic Woman*, the one that came out of Chili and was the first Academy Award-winning film that starred a trans actress.

I teach a lot of classes that fulfill general education requirements. It's going to be the only place that a lot of students hear about these issues. I think that it's an important part of what we do for the university.

Kathleen Karlyn: Maybe even 10 or 20 years ago, it was harder to open the eyes of the gen ed student who hadn't self-selected into courses in feminism to point these things out but, probably, our political world has made these issues a lot more obvious in the last five or 10 years. Are there any other movies or books that you particularly enjoy teaching or you find students respond to?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I teach *Thelma & Louise* and *Silence of the Lambs* every year. Today's students don't know those films and are surprised and love them. The first time I taught *Thelma & Louise* after Me Too had hit, I screened it in class because it's such a beautiful movie, and when Louise shoots the rapist, students broke out into cheers.

Kathleen Karlyn: Oh wow.

Linda Mizejewsk...: I was shocked. Then, when I asked them about it, somebody said, "Well, he was asking for it."

Kathleen Karlyn: That is a sign! It appears that the culture is really backsliding in terrible ways but then, you hear these stories that make me have a lot of faith in our young people today. They really have come a long way. You and I have talked about *I May Destroy You* and *Promising Young Woman*. I think there's a whole genre of those films, and I would call them the revenge of the oppressed instead of the return of the repressed. I think that's a very exciting development in film.

I would like to know what's on your to-do list? I asked you once, "Are you going to retire, Linda," and you just laughed. What's next?

Linda Mizejewsk...: I'm really intrigued by *Queen & Slim* in relationship to *Thelma & Louise*. I also have on the back burner a project about key moments in women's film comedy having to do with resistance to the law, beginning with Mae West as a thinly-disguised prostitute and ending with the black trans sex workers in *Tangerine*. I see *Thelma & Louise* and also *Nine to Five* in between. It's not a book project, but it would be a fun essay to map this out in terms of funny women, criminality and the law.

Kathleen Karlyn: I love starting with Mae West and the underside of comedy or the flip side of comedy as always a resistance against the law. Always. That's, I think, the essence of comedy. Whether you look at it from the comic lens or the more melodramatic lens to shape the story, but the core is right there.

Linda Mizejewsk...: I so much appreciate your journalistic expertise in this interview, Kathleen! It's been as much fun as I thought it would be.

Kathleen Karlyn: Well, it's always fun to talk with you and I have to say, going back and having a more formal reason to dig into your career.