Haidee Wasson: Hi, I'm Haidee Wasson, Professor of Cinema, Concordia University in Montreal. I'm here in New York City at New York University to interview Professor Dana Polan of Cinema Studies in the School of the Arts at NYU. Polan has earned doctoral degrees from Sorbonne Nouvelle and Stanford University. He has taught at the University of Pittsburgh, University of Southern California, at the Sorbonne nouvelle and also here now at NYU. He was editor of "Cinema Journal" from 1987 to 1992 and has served in multiple capacities in relation to that journal since. He is author of ten monographs with his scholarship being translated into multiple languages including Chinese, Turkish, Hebrew, French, Czech, Swedish, Italian, Hungarian and frequently reprinted in English. He is a translator of significant works by Deleuze and Guattari, Barthes, Armand Mattelart, Sartre, Bellour, and Marie-Claire Ropars, including others. He is author of 164 book reviews and over 70 book chapters and articles. He has had a highly diversified career, serving on multiple award juries, program assessments, editorial boards, making multiple press appearances and overseeing dozens and dozens of PhD projects. I'm here to interview him today for the Field Notes project of SCMS. Hi Dana.

Dana Polan: Hi Haidee. Thank you for doing this.

Haidee Wasson: Thank you for being here. I thought we might start with kind of an open ended and simple question, which is just how did you become interested in being a film scholar?

Dana Polan: I should say my actual practice of being a film scholar started as an undergraduate in the 1970s but like a lot of scholars in my generation and the generation before, and I think you see this in some of the other interviews that have been done by Field Notes, there is a very strong influence of 60s film culture. As a middle school kid and then especially as a high school student, I grew up in upstate New York, fairly conservative. I don't mean only conservative politically but just conservative in every day life, your options, what you were going to be. My school was divided, the boys were divided into those who would do machine shop and they were going to go on to very

utilitarian jobs and then those who went onto electronics, who did electronics instead of machine shop. They were going to be engineers, professionals, doctors. Those were the things you could do. Either be a professional or a mechanic. In that world, culture didn't matter very much.

It was sort of the leavening or the little bit of sugar, but growing up not far from New York City, we knew of New York film culture, we got Time magazine. I assume the critic then would have been Richard Corliss and even though Time wasn't very deep, it was reviewing the newest films. This was a period where on the one hand, Ted Perry talks about the influence of Nick Cleese [inaudible] on his life. I was hearing about films. On the one hand it was European film. European, Asian especially Kurosawa and *Rashomon*. I was hearing about those, but you were also hearing about American films that started to be more cutting edge and less the old Hollywood, *Bonnie and Clyde* for example, *The Wild Bunch*. These were often films I was hearing about, not seeing. Sometimes they didn't get to us. Sometimes they were considered inappropriate for us. My school class, this was also the period of Vietnam, we had a liberal teacher who took us to see Richard Attenborough's *Oh, What a Lovely War* and then got roundly denounced, there were all these letters, why was she taking us to see something so unpatriotic. Some films never made it to, I grew up right outside Peekskill, New York. Some never made it, some made it but you couldn't see, et cetera.

There was this sense of something's going on. There were these films that are different. I remember reading about but not seeing *Point Blank* for many years, it was one of those, "I really want to see *Point Blank* it sounds so different." Again, growing up in a kind of conservative environment or an environment with limited options, we had very utilitarian high school guidance counselors. They would meet with you, ask you about your hobbies and then they'd try to match your hobby to a career. If you said something like, "I like to dissect frogs" they say, "Oh biologist" or "Veterinarian." In my case, my two hobbies when I was growing up were going to movies, but that was not so much a hobby, it was just something I did. Then I was an

amateur radio operator. They said, "Amateur radio, you should be an electrical engineer." I started as an electrical engineer. My first year in college was at Rensselaer Polytechnic. And I didn't really have aptitude for engineering. I had built radios and things like that but again, it was the guidance counselors trying to match as best they could. "You work with radios, that sounds like engineering."

But I got to RPI, discovered I had no aptitude for math, none at all. I just didn't understand slide rules and things like that. Was sort of floundering but there was a film course. I think my guidance counselors in high school never imagined you could do anything with film. There was no such thing as teaching film, studying film. You can make films but that wasn't what interested me. I got to RPI and there was a professor, Wayne Lazano, who I think was in philosophy or media or something but was teaching a film appreciation course. I remember nothing about it except the very fact it existed. It was fascinating to me and I took it and liked the idea that you could teach film. There was another professor who I don't remember but he had a 16 millimeter projector that you can freeze frame and do a lot of, you could freeze a frame and then say, "Look at the composition." We'd do sort of art history composition study. I always kept wanting to ask but these are moving images and they're not static but still, the idea that you could think about film visually was very, very important. That got me interested in film. I realized you could teach film and to teach film clearly you had to have studied it.

The other influence on me at that time had been on PBS. There was Channel 13 in New York in particular, Charles Champlin, who was the LA Times film critic at the time, had a show and I don't remember the name of it but he would introduce films. They tended to be films from the Janus collection. *The Seventh Seal* I remember very, very strongly. It's interesting, I've never gone back to the show but I remember him, at least in my memory, which is probably completely wrong, I just remember him coming out with this confidence, sitting in a chair and saying, "Tonight we're going to look at Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and the themes of this are"… Y'know, we saw Fellini's *La*

Dolce Vita and the one that really, really, really influenced me was *Jules and Jim* which I haven't re-seen in years and I'm sort of dreading what it's gender politics would look like to me now, but I just remember a sense of an energy of cinema and an energy of cinematic resources. It just really, really struck me.

Haidee Wasson: And so this is as an undergraduate student…

Dana Polan: That would have been…

Haidee Wasson: At Rensselaer?

Dana Polan: … probably in high school moving towards RPI. I'm at RPI and clearly you can only take so many courses with Lazano and this other guy so I decided to elsewhere. This is again, a period where, you have to remember we're talking pre-internet so there's no way to really research what colleges offer film courses so it's more, I had two friends at Cornell so I said, "I'll go to Cornell." I transferred to Cornell, I liked the idea of a liberal arts college. And the professor there, the main film professor was a guy who just passed away last year, Don Frederickson, a Jungian film scholar. And I proposed a, what they called self-designed major. They didn't have film as a major, so I proposed literature-film-theater. Don took me on as advisee. For me, Cornell, there were two things very important about Cornell. Cornell had a very active film society that showed films every day. On the one hand commercial films on the weekend but then artsy films on other days. Don was very anti-Hollywood. I got an education again in the Fellinis, the Bergmans. The other thing at Cornell was, this was the beginning moment of, I mean it was a little early but it was very strong at Cornell at the moment was French theory. It was sort of everywhere in the…

Haidee Wasson: Across the humanities.

Dana Polan: Yes. The French, Cornell was where, the French department was where the journal *Diacritics* was being published. There were constant visitors. It trickled down through the curriculum. For example, I took, when I took French One and French Two,

instead of reading a basic conversation book, they had us read Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. And *Mythologies* has always been one of the strongest influences on me. I just, to read that, I must have been a sophomore or junior. This book that's looking at popular culture, taking popular culture seriously and offering concepts that I still find very useful like the notion of naturalization of what is actually historical. So that book was absolutely formative for me and that's the kind of thing we were constantly reading. Cornell had an intellectual historian named Dominick LaCapra who I just loved. I took his 19th Century Intellectual History course. Cornell I think also had the benefit of being a physically isolated campus. Ithaca is in the middle of nowhere. There was what we called the fishbowl effect which was, you can only go so far unless you wanted to go out in the woods and explore nature. You were basically on campus. And I remember LaCapra's class in particular, he'd mention a text, the class would let out and you'd see everybody running to the library to be the first one to take out whatever text he had mentioned.

And that was very exciting, the sense of the ideas in the air and what you want to do is read. I remember his classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays. On Tuesday one week he said he had just been reading this new Derrida translation, "White Mythology." Just the idea of him talking about something he was just reading for me was also so exciting. To see the ideas as they're fermenting. He was grappling with it. I often, sometimes deliberately but I think it's also my style, I'll talk to my students about something I'm reading right now. They find that exciting to think it's not just settled, fixed wisdom but wisdom in process. *Diacritics* was constant, every year they had a conference. We saw all these figures. I think Foucault came through once. Umberto Eco came a number of times. My senior year they decided to do it on film and I was the student rep to the organizing committee for the Diacritics conference on film. I don't remember a lot but Peter Wollen came, among other people. Wollen's book [inaudible] also talks about this, I think incredibly useful for a lot of people. I remember getting the book-

Haidee Wasson: "Signs and Meanings"?

Dana Polan: *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* in ‘69. One thing Don Frederickson was not sympathetic to was new theory but he wanted to understand it. We did at undergraduate senior seminars or undergraduate seminars and in one of them we did *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema*. I remember getting this book and I thought, "It's going to explain all the meanings." I thought it was going to be some kind of taxonomy. You know, I was young and I didn't realize you can't have a list of all meanings and this means that. So I read it and it wasn't about that at all but the chapter on semiotics and the distinction of the index symbol icon, very very useful. Very exciting. You’re seeing some new stuff. Don, in one of the undergraduate seminars, we read, had managed to get proofs of Metz's *Language and Cinema* before it had come out and we did an entire seminar on that. Roman Jacobson came, I remember. The other thing that happened, because there was all this excitement, there were all these great seminars and as a kind of, I think being somewhat pushed by Don, I was kind of the precocious undergraduate who sat in on graduate seminars. I remember LaCapra and comp-lit professor Rupert Roopnaraine did a Sartre and Flaubert seminar that was really important. Rupert, who was a Marxist, did a Marxist theory seminar. These were graduate seminars that I asked for permission to sit in.

My junior or senior, probably my senior year, David Grossvogel, in French, did an entire seminar on *S/Z*. I was sitting in on it and they didn't have enough enrolment. He asked me to actually take it. He said, this is kind of corrupt, he said, "I need, this class is going to get cancelled. Take it and I'll guarantee you an A." "Okay." We did a close reading of a book that was about close reading and *S/Z* was, for me, a formative book.

Haidee Wasson: You described the ferment at Cornell as intellectual, was there an equal parallel sense of political foment or student activism happening that shaped, in a way, the excitement about thinking through film in relation to the theory you were looking at?

Dana Polan: I think Cornell was clearly a very politicized campus at the time, very strong, as we know very famously involved in Black liberation struggles. I think, at that point, I was just so trying to keep up with film culture, that was a period where I was seeing 11 films a week and reading everything. I wasn't much involved in the campus politics. I think what also, this was probably also my generation of film scholars, this was also the period where *Screen* was beginning to move more towards the left and was being able to translate French theory and there was this idea that theory is political in and of itself and it doesn't need a corresponding practice. You would read Althusser, but you don't need to do anything other than read it and think about the limits of bourgeois ideology. We were reading a lot of stuff that made us think we were political even though we were not demonstrating, occupying buildings, going to the President's office, that was a different faction on campus.

Haidee Wasson: Can I ask you a nerdy, unintellectual question?

Dana Polan: Yeah.

Haidee Wasson: 11 films a week, how did you manage to see 11 films a week? Where were you seeing them that you could see that many?

Dana Polan: Cornell Film Society had films.

Haidee: It was that active a society?

Dana Polan: It was every night. I think sometimes there were two films, then you'd see a film in class. This is pre-VHS so we're seeing 16 millimeter stuff. People would rent things. You could watch on TV, I remember including stuff on TV. I mean, the other thing and I don't know if any of the other interviewees talk about this but Scorsese talks about this in interviews. If you grew up in New York, especially near New York City, you were getting all the TV channels that showed movies. The one that he talks about was decisive for me also, was my mind's gone blank. I think it was WOR, it might have been WPIX. Every day at 4:30 had the million dollar movie. They'd use the *Gone with the Wind* overture (hums “Gone with the Wind” theme) and then

they'd show a movie. The interesting thing was, in part because it wasn't a network channel, they would show the same movie five days in a row and it was basically to fill up space. So they'd show, at 4:30 on Monday, Jack Palance movie and then 4:30 on Tuesday the same Palance movie. My cousin, one time, got the flu and had to miss school. And it was *The Jolson Story* and by the end of the week he had memorized *The Jolson Story*.

You would see these films and Scorsese talks about this also, by the fourth day of seeing the same film, you don't need to watch the narrative or keep track of things narrative-wise, you can start looking at mise-en-scène. You don't know that term, of course, but you start thinking, "How do they do this?" For me, the decisive one, I don't think it was Million-Dollar Movie because I think I only saw it once, but the decisive movie I saw on TV was *Strangers On A Train* which I must have seen in '68, '69 even though I was also seeing European art films, this was a Hollywood film but something clearly interesting was going on. I just remember watching it, not having the language to understand it or to verbalize it to myself, but where I could see aesthetic choices being made. I still remember the moment when there's the tennis match, maybe it's not the match, it's maybe a warmup and everybody's eyes are going back and forth except Bruno's, is looking straight. Just to think that someone made this choice, it's as much screenwriter as director but it really made me aware of the presence of people making aesthetic choices in film.

One of the first film books I've got and other people in FieldNotes have talked about this, of that generation was the *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, which I devoured. I just read it front and back. A director being interviewed about decisions, about aesthetics, about technique. I think that book was incredibly powerful for a lot of people.

Haidee Wasson: So you went from Cornell to Stanford directly into a PhD program?

Dana Polan: Yes. I knew I wanted to do something around cinema. I was very, I think similar to what happened with my guidance

counselor who said, "You should be an engineer", Don said, "You should go to an interdisciplinary program." And these are Oedipal figures who you follow. I think in retrospect I might have been better served by a straight cinema program. I did apply to Iowa, I don't remember if I applied to UCLA. But Don, I think was projecting into me that he would have wanted to do this these, he said, "You should go into something interdisciplinary." There weren't that many at the time. There was the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz, where ironically my spouse did her degree after me. There was history of ideas at Brandeis, but that wasn't exactly what I wanted to do. There was Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford. I applied to those. I applied to Iowa I remember because I did get in. But I picked Stanford. One advice I do give to students is, when you can, if you've done your undergraduate or earlier degrees on one coast, think about going to a different coast just to get a different perspective on life and not always being an Easterner or Westerner.

Haidee Wasson: What was the difference of perspective for you?

Dana Polan: Stanford wasn't the greatest place. I think it would have been different in southern LA. I have student now, if I have students now working on American film, I say, "Go to L.A. Even if you're not going to do a Hollywood dissertation, just to see how Hollywood operates." It's very sobering. It nuances you'll work on American film. Stanford wasn't that. Stanford, I just found was a strange place. It wasn't the ideal place for me. There was a lot… there wasn't as great on openness to theory. For example, the equivalent of LaCapra in the history department at Stanford was a guy named Paul Robinson, who'd done a book called, *The Modernization of Sex* on Marcuse and others. He was rabidly anti-French theory. The people in film tended to be from the Comm department, which was an old style doing contract work for the government. Henry Brightrose was one of the people I worked with who was very conservative. And so you had to find people here or there. My dissertation director was a woman named Jean Franco in Spanish who was a lefty, Verso, sort of the Verso type. She was a Jameson type. Look at

literature for its political unconscious. She was great at that level but couldn't give me guidance on film.

There were, again, pockets of interesting people. So there was a man in Slavic named William Todd who did a course on the Russian Formalists, I took that. That was a great course. We read a lot of Shklovsky, Tynianov, those people. The one thing with that program and my spouse certainly found the same thing with her program, History of Consciousness, is a lot of what happens in an interdisciplinary program where there's not really a central identity is you have to forge the identity and you forge it with professors but you also forge it with your cohort. So a lot of my interaction was not with my professors but with a cohort. Tania Modleski who was in my year in modern thought. Peter Gibian, who did a popular culture study after, came, I think, two years later.

Haidee Wasson: Dana, while you were at Stanford as a graduate student, can you say a little bit about the other kinds of things that you may have been reading? Other journals, other books that were key at that crucial moment?

Dana Polan: Let me back up and say one thing about the Stanford experience. So I wanted an interdisciplinary program, Stanford's program was Modern Thought and Literature and had been founded only a couple years before Tania and I got there. It had been founded out of the English department by a professor named Albert Guérard, who did modern literature, Woolf and after. He saw the program as simply an extension of English. So it was *modern* thought and literature. The modernist tradition. He went on sabbatical the year the admissions committee accepted me. The admissions committee, again you asked before about political foment, the admissions committee had more than one student on it. It was like, three professors and three students because that was very 70s. The students were all going for hip new people rather than what Albert would have wanted, which is simply people doing Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, et cetera. So suddenly there was this cohort of people like Tania. Peter Gibian after me. Sarah Kozloff was one year after me. People doing film. That's not at all what Albert

Guérard had envisioned the program to be. So when he came back from sabbatical there were all these fights where he wanted us to be reading canonic texts and wanted us to take comps on modern British literature.

We were required to take a 19th century novel. So I took that with Ian Watt who interestingly, writes about the novel in ways you would think would make him open to new forms of communication like film but I think every generation, well not every generation, but often generations fight for some culture, some form of popular culture to be accepted into the academy and then they turn on the next form. So English professors of a certain sort fought for the novel. The novel was not a credible form of literature. They lead this fight for the novel but turn against film. That was constant at Stanford. We were battling, not finding a home on campus and turning elsewhere. For me, the three influences or three places where I felt I was finding what I wasn't getting on campus. First of all, Pacific Film Archives. I actually worked as a projectionist even though I had no technical background. But that got me into all the screenings there. So I would, three or four times a week I'd drive up to Berkeley, to project. I specifically projected not in the public projection but for researchers. You would do this thing, you'd go in in the morning and there'd be a list of films that researchers wanted pulled from the vaults. I'd project for them. That was a way of seeing stuff.

Some of it was very, very useful. Some of it was not so useful. I remember there was two African American scholars working on an actor who played in Hollywood films but they were only interested in the scenes he was in. So we'd start watching the film and they'd say, "Go forward." I wanted to see the whole film. But we saw a lot of Brakhage that way. I don't want to go off in digression but one of my favorite things was one morning I go in and there were a list of all these Brakhage films to pull from the vault. It always said the films and who it was for. This time it has Brakhage, California School for the Blind. It was a class of kids, most of whom were completely blind, a couple who were partially sighted and they were going to screen abstract films for them because they could see shapes but the

other kids would feel left out so everybody went to the screening. I'm projecting and the kids are looking in all different directions, they're not looking at a screen. Anyway. So I did PFA, I worked there for two or three years. Got to see a lot of things there.

In going up to Berkeley I got involved with *Jump Cut* and became one of the editors of *Jump Cut*. That was very, very interesting because it was very anti-Hollywood at that point. That's also sort of matched, even there was no love lost between *Jump Cut* and *Screen*, they were both in a kind of anti-Hollywood position. That was, for me, very energizing. One of my first essays on Brecht and Daffy Duck was published in *Jump Cut* and I got a certain amount of mileage out of that. So I was on the editorial board, we would go up, I think every two weeks and work on, we'd actually cut things because I forget the mechanics of printing but we actually did the cutting of things, putting things together, editing essays, etc., etc., etc. Sort of inspired by the model of putting *Jump Cut* together but also feeling that there wasn't really a journal that looked at mass culture more broadly, Tania and Jean Franco, my dissertation advisor, later Peter Gibian and some others, we decided to create a journal that was kind of critical study of mass culture. Some of us were more Adornian, some were more celebratory but we created a journal called *Tabloid: Journal of Mass Culture and Everyday Life* that had about 14, 15 issues and actually got a certain amount of attention. Every so often we'd see it cited. Routledge did a *Tabloid* anthology at one point.

So there was this work on a journal and there, in my case, you could see the influence of *Mythologies* because I wrote a number of very short pieces. One was on Charlie the Tuna, Sunkist Tuna and sort of the suicide impulse in Charlie who keeps wanting to get caught, which is basically condemning himself to death. Anyway, the idea was all different formats of writing. Short things, long things. Throughout my career I've always been interested in long form, the book, the essay but also short form, a meditation, a mythology, a small piece, a reflection. All that's going on.

Haidee Wasson: So *Screen*, Jump Cut, *Tabloid*.

Dana Polan: And I must say, at that period, all of us are regularly reading *Screen*. Waiting for the next issue and devouring certain essays. In one of the seminars, we had a seminar, again very 70s where it was the whole, all the Modern Thought students had to take a pro seminar. Each of us was responsible for a text. There was no unity except what the students proposed. I did, in my session we showed *Young Mr. Lincoln* and read the *Cahiers du cinema* piece translated in *Screen*. That kind of stuff going on. Incredibly decisive, I think, for many of us and I think for film studies at that time and I know some of the other interviewees talk about this, is Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" which comes out in 75. I think I must still have been at Stanford when it came out. It's issue two that year. I think it was out while I'm at Stanford. For the various problems of that essay, still found it *very* exciting. Number one, this idea that you look at gender, but number two, you look at gender textually. It's not just the image of woman in, it's the camera looks, the woman is looked at.

For me at that time, I think this is part of why my dissertation was on the avant-garde, there's kind of anti-Hollywood bias and I think you see that in the Mulvey essay, we have to break down pleasure. Although I think between the lines you also see this kind of cinephile in Hitchcock, von Sternberg, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And if you know Laura, she actually has a love of cinema that they're all trying to work through. But I think we as students reading this stuff, don't have that kind of between the lines. You're sort of kind of blanket rejection of Hollywood or the Comolli/Narboni argument, you reject anything that's not category C, the films that are interestingly against the grain. Even though I had grown up watching European art films *and* watching Hitchcock and going to the popular cinema, *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Midnight Cowboy*, there was almost a way in which I felt I had to do a dissertation on the avant-garde and it had to be rigorously screened, rigorously anti-pleasure and breaking down pleasure, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Haidee Wasson: You moved on from Stanford and went to the other side of the pond as we say. You moved to France.

Dana Polan: Yeah. So in… I should say that I think, going back to what I was just saying, something decisive for me was reading Brecht, the "Brecht on Theatre" volume and then some other Brecht texts and seeing that the critique of illusion and the critique of representation wasn't in fact also a critique of pleasure and fun, that there was a fun in political distanciation. That had been dropped out, it seemed to be, by many writers at *Screen*. My second essay, and it was my first SCS presentation, it was Northwestern and I want to say either in 76 or 77, back at that conference I gave the Brecht and Daffy Duck paper. That was trying to find the limits of a *Screen* argument, or what I saw as the *Screen* argument about Brecht and an anti-pleasure argument. I think that started opening me up to more engagement with American film. I haven't gone back to my dissertation in years but it's rigorously Brakhage, Oshima, Eisenstein, but then there's also these mini-moments where I think I do a very good reading of *Grease* in part because I saw *Grease* several times that year and took Jean Franco to the drive-in, she'd never been to a drive-in. Then we did an ideological analysis of it while sort of denouncing it but also knowing we had fun at it and trying to work that out.

In 79, having finished course work, wanting to do a dissertation on the avant-garde, I got a grant to go to France. France is where I went to do my dissertation. Again, on the avant-garde and the idea was to do theory, it would be rigorously theoretical. I had no interest in film history at that point and the *Screen* generation was emphatically not doing studio history, doing archival and empirical history. Empiricism was a curse word, "You're an empiricist." I remember going to a used bookstore, it must have been L.A. or New York in the 70s and all I wanted to do was find used copies of current theory, like, "Find me a copy of *The Imaginary Signifi*er whereas everybody else is looking for Leo Rosten or Margaret Thorp. I was like, "I don't want that stuff here, that's antiquarian, who cares. Give me new theory." Paris was very decisive for a lot of reasons. One is that such a cinephile culture, if you're going to continue to be a

movie goer you have to see a lot more American film than you'd probably seen in the US. I was constantly seeing Fuller and Mann and Nicholas Ray going to the cinematheque and rethinking a kind of *Screen* denunciation of… or, well, a so-called *Screen* denunciation. Actually reading *Scree*n now you see much more subtlety but-

Haidee Wasson: Also television. We kind of forget that *Screen* was also interested in theories of television.

Dana Polan: Yes. Especially *Screen Education*. Yeah. Seeing a lot of film, if I was seeing a lot of films I was seeing more in France. It was amazing how much you could see. And then, even though I wasn't in the Paris Center for Critical Studies, I hung out with those people. Michael Renov, Lea Jacobs was there that year. Lea became a close friend. The essay that she did that was eventually published in *Camera Obscura*, on *Now Voyager*, she and I, this was a period again pre-video, there might have been a 16 millimeter somewhere of *Now Voyager*, but in France she decides to work on it, it was showing at some theater and we just had to keep paying. She talked to the manager at the theater, "Can I get some kind of discount?" They said, "No." So she just would go and we'd pay and see it again and again and again. There's some love letter in the film where we had to, actually each of us scribbled a different part of the letter to get it down for note taking. And then there was, in the program, in the Paris program, was a guy named Ed Lowry who passed away in the 80s. Ed did his dissertation on the filmology movement. It was published by UMI. He taught at Southern Methodist University and died of AIDS in the 80s.

But Ed, interestingly, was almost the reverse of me in that he had seen everything Hollywood and every cult film and every little film and decided to do a dissertation that was rigorously theoretical. I had done rigorously theoretical stuff and then more and more wanted to engage with Hollywood. But seeing and hanging out with Ed and talking about film and especially film noir. This was also the moment where people started to think that film noir is the interesting genre because it was contradictory and it wasn't completely buying into Hollywood

ideology. I no longer completely accept that, but that's, as I was finishing my dissertation, I knew the next thing I wanted to do was some engagement with film noir. I should say that one thing that was maybe different for other people is that before I went to France, so while I was still ABD, I went to the job market and I think it was premature in there were a number of jobs where I was clearly not ready, but University of Pittsburgh was beginning to build a film program.

I went on an interview, when I got there it was clear that Lucy Fischer, who was already acting director of film studies, was the logical person. I had just been brought in because they were bringing in three people. But because, and that was fine, but because they were building a program and I did actually interview well, they went to the dean and said, "Could we hire him also?" The dean said, "Yes but not this year." So I got hired for the following year. I was contracted to started in the fall of 80. But I was contracted before I went away to write my dissertation. I was able to write my dissertation knowing I had a job when I finished. So that was very good.

Haidee Wasson: Pretty unusual at the time, too.

Dana Polan: Yeah. I mean, the one thing that I think also is different and since I know one function of these interviews is to inspire students, to give them lessons about the past is all of us were doing our dissertations in five or six years. I mean, there was no question that you went, there was no idea that you would go, beyond that. I started the Stanford program in 75, I defended in 80. Five years. That just was logical. Two years of course work and then you write your dissertation. The idea was, be expedient about it. In this case, I had a job so I had to finish. I spent a year in France and again, inspired by theory, I and then the people from the Paris program, we went to, not only every film, but we went to every class. We took an Étienne Balibar class, we went to Derrida, we went to Foucault's lectures at the College du France, and Bellour, et cetera, et cetera. A lot of it we didn't understand. A lot of it when you were there, for me the big sobering this was to discover what seemed like a unified

movement when you reading it in *Diacritics* or in *Screen* was actually much more dispersed.

I got into a private seminar at the Collège de France with Derrida and at one point I asked him, "Could you let us know if there are other events in town that we should go to or other lectures?" He said, "I don't follow those things. I just do my work." I had thought of post-structuralism or structuralism as a movement. They didn't see it that way at all. I found the same thing later when I started taking classes with Metz. Metz did not follow people beyond very small group of semioticians. You would ask him about so and so, he'd go, "I have no idea."

Haidee Wasson: I'm curious a little about your time in Paris and the number of American ex-pats let's say or American residents living there for a short period. Were you encountering a lot of European based young scholars who were also similarly engaged? Did you have a feel, in other words, you describe it as a kind of American-

Dana Polan: I think we were more just an American group hanging together not knowing how to interact with the French that much. You'd asked before about politicization. Again, there was this idea that *Screen* kind of work is political in and of itself. That was very different than every day politics in France. My joke, but it was based on a reality was, every class you would go to, no matter what the topic was, there'd be some French person in the class who would, at some point, jump up and say “Où est la question palestinienne dans tout cela,“ "Where's the Palestinian question in all of that?" It could be Balibar's class on German ideology or Marxist theory, but they'd always ask the Palestinian question. There was real politics but that was something other than what we were doing. I don't remember much interaction with the French students. That came a little later for me when I started, when I started going back regularly. I should mention that, in that dissertation year, I had met my first wife who was a French woman. She came to live with me in my first job in Pittsburgh. She had an apartment in Paris and we would go back every summer.

So starting in 80, up to her death in 96, we spent four months every year in France. And sabbatical years and leave years. Knowing I was regularly going back, I started doing, and I think, becoming a little less eclectic like I had to go to every Balibar seminar, I have to go to every Macherey seminar. It became much more pick and choose. One of the things I did, I may have done this in my PhD year, I think it was after that, I think it was when I was already at Pittsburgh, we were going back for a half year, I think I had a half year leave maybe my third year. I got into Metz's seminar. You had to write to Metz, wrote to him saying I would like to be admitted to your seminar. I was accepted into Metz's seminar. Every time we were in France I would then start regularly attending the Metz seminar. It was both very, it was strange. I talked about this recently, there's a translation of Metz's last book on enunciation, I wrote the… not the foreword. The afterword. I talk about being in the seminar. Metz was meticulous as a scholar in a way that can become infuriating.

The first year, it was a seminar on the notion of jokes and the relation of unconsciousness, not just on Freud, but especially centering on Freud. The only French translation of *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* was a very bad translation. We spent endless seminar sessions where Metz would say, "Now on page 4" because we all had to buy the bad French edition, "Cross out blah blah blah and put in blah blah blah. On page 12 ..." The kind of stuff that in the age with computers you could easily do and you could have given people a handout. But we just would do this day after day. Some part of me was thinking, "I'm wasting my time." On the other hand, one of the things Metz was very good about was guest speakers. He would start each session asking people, "What's new? What have you been reading lately? Give me some citations." People would talk about other things and it didn't have to just be on psychoanalysis. So you'd say, "I've been reading this. I've been reading that." It's like an information clearing house. The other lesson that I got from Metz, we can come back to this because I think it relates to my own career, much later when I was coming up for tenure, so 1985-86, I, with great trepidation,

went to Metz and said, "Would he consider writing a tenure letter?"

I thought this guy must be so busy and so many people must be asking him, there's no way he's going to accept but it doesn't hurt to try. He said, "Of course." It wasn't about your work is good it was… He said, “When I became a professor, I took on obligations like that. They are part of the job. You just do it.” For me that's always been a thing. There's some things that come with it, even if it's going to be a constraint on your time, you still do it. I never, I rarely say no to things because that's the lesson I learned from Metz.

Haidee Wasson: Well, thank you. Thank you, Metz. Let me ask you a little about service or what we might call a fulsome commitment of being a professor. It is one of the things that stands on in your record to my eye. It's right around this time in the mid-80s that you become editor for *Cinema Journal*. This is part of your long commitment to the Society for Cinema Studies, which it was then called and is now called Society for Cinema and Media Studies. I'm wondering if you might say a little bit about your time as editor for the journal and what it was like given the state of film scholarship, the state of the association, the journal, your work as an editor and what that involved.

Dana Polan: I guess I should say I was involved with SCS from my time as a graduate student. Actually, I may have been a member as an undergraduate. When I joined SCMS, if you were a student, or SCS when you were a student, if you were a student you had to be nominated by two people. I know Don was one of my nominators, I don't know, Don Frederickson. I don't know who the other would have been. As I said, my first conference was ‘76 or ‘77, Northwestern SCS. So I'd always been involved. When I was at Pittsburgh we hosted two SCMS or SCSs at Pittsburgh. I think 83 and I forget the other one, I think the other one might have been 86 or 87, it was right before one of my sabbatical years. So I've constantly been involved in SCS, been on various committees. I don't what held me to want to do *Cinema Journal* but it's this thing you do. The two things that happened during my tenure as editor that I'm proud of, one is

sort of morbid but I'm proud of it, is a number of people in the field passed away and I got other scholars to write obits. We had, for example, Stephen Heath did something about Raymond Williams. Bruce Kawin did something about Gerald Mast. I forget, there were like, four or five of those. I didn't want just, "I like this guy" but a real scholarly appreciation.

The other thing, I didn't have much to do with it except we ran it in *Cinema Journal*, was that Kristin Thompson's committee on fair use was convened during that period. As editor, I edited the document and it's become sort of standard in the field. It was a great document about fair use and I think breakthrough in many ways. I didn't write an opening editorial, I didn't want to intervene that way. I don't think I shaped any tone to the journal except I tried, at that point to always have something American, something non-American, something theory. TV was not yet that strong. The debate about adding the M to the SCMS came after that. I'm trying to think about what else I could say about SCS. I should mention, because I know this came up as a question in some other interviews, what were the big issues or controversies? One other person, I think it must be Janet Staiger talks about this, but I remember a joint book project with AFI, before being editor, just as a regular member of SCS, I remember through the 80s and into the 90s, one of the big issues was the AFI. Janet talks about this also.

The AFI would constantly reach out to us and say we have to do more with academia. They would make a promise about some project and then they would not follow through. There was this period, we would joke about it, is some representative from AFI would come to the SCS meeting. It was usually some young woman. It was maybe this kind of gender thing going on. She'd be very perky and energetic and present some project. And then following year it would be someone else. We'd say, "What happened to so and so?" "Oh she got fired." It was this revolving door but every year they'd say, "No this is the year we're committing to academia. And we really want to do this." There would be some starry-eyed person at SCS who thought it was great and then everybody else would be yelling at them and saying, "They screwed us over. Don't do it again." I remember

that as a constant thing. The bait and switch by AFI where someone would get enthusiastic and then it would drop.

There was a period where, I think with AFI help, there was going to be an ongoing translation project through SCS with Indiana University being the place to publish. A couple things came out that way, the Mitry, the condensed version of Mitry was I think was originally an SCS. That sort of fell through. There were fights within the conference, especially around theory. So I think the '77 conference, my first one, Martin Walsh, a Canadian working on Brecht went over time on a theory paper and some old conventional guy said, "I'm going to not get my paper because these theory types dominate." There was some of that going on.

Haidee Wasson: One of the things, to pick up on something you said earlier that struck me as kind of interesting, I'm curious to have you say a little more about it, the way you were talking earlier about the seeming divide between history and theory as something that you always knew, that there were always people battling that out not so much as film scholars per se but across the humanities and the people you were encountering throughout your graduate career. In the 80s, were these parallel debates? Were they intertwined? Were they happening at the same time? Often when this period is narrated, it's the era of theory and the history of history is frequently not told at the same moment.

Dana Polan: Some of it is debate, some of it is kind of mutual antagonism where you're off doing your thing so there are… In literary criticism, there are people doing theory and there's the *Diacritics* crowd. Then there's the old style philologists and antiquarians doing their work. In film, I think one of the ways the split worked itself out was there was an older generation that was doing solid history that probably now would also be seen as not good enough but they were just historians of film and media and pretty much ignored by the theorists. So Raymond Fielding and the history of technology, now everybody is interested in that but the idea that we would read that was kind of anathema.

Haidee Wasson: What about the early cinema stuff?

Dana Polan: The early cinema, the breakthrough of early cinema was slightly later as I remember it. There was something I was going to say. There was a very, not really were there separate camps but I think in theory there was very strongly an anti-history bias. Very influential for *Screen* and then the people reading "Screen" was the Hindess and Hirst *Pre-capitalist modes of production* where they talk about the past has no impact on present so we shouldn't do historical work. I'm simplifying it but that became sort of, you don't do history. You theorize. If you're Foucault you talk about the history of the present. I like that concept but I think it also exempts you from having to think historically.

A number of things happened, I think. A breakthrough and change in '85, the Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger, which very solidly historical but looking a lot at discourse. I reviewed the Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger in *Journal of Film and Video* and said they don't refer to Foucault but it's very Foucauldian because they're reading discourse. They're not Foucauldian, but they're reading discourse and you can do that without being Foucauldian. But I needed, in that theory moment, I needed to bring it back to theory.

I should say that, this is what I was going to say before, I think this is one of the ways the split between old style film study and new theory was also working out was in the split between SCS and the *Journal of the Film and Video Association*. They were practitioners, but to the extent there were scholars there, they were the nerdy empiricists looking at history of film programs, doing books on where film is taught, those kinds of things. On the ground pedagogy. Sort of in the same way there's *Screen* and then there's "Screen Education Notes." There's *Cinema Journal*, *Screen,* and then there's the *Journal of Film and Video*. There are these splits. You would not find theory essays in *Journal of Film and Video*. I only reviewed for them and I did a lot of reviewing for them because Don Frederickson was their book review editor. I was just doing my own thing, almost sort of inside the enemy camp sort of way.

I think the Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger, there were lots of questions I would raise about it but is a breakthrough in a lot of different ways including actually looking at documents, looking at records, reading the *Journal of the SMPE*. That's something no "Screen" person would have thought to do when Ed Buscombe publishes on color or on Columbia Pictures in *Screen*, that's again seen as kind of intruder into high theory.

Haidee Wasson: Let me change the tone a little bit. You've mentioned book reviews a couple times just now. One of the things that really stands out about the overall contribution of your scholarship is the book review. You have an inordinately high number of book reviews in your past. I'm curious as to what your understanding of the importance of the book review is and why you invested so much of your own scholarly and intellectual energy in that moment of writing.

Dana Polan: That's a good question. A lot of different answers. I should start by saying I think it's easy to overestimate the role of book reviews. I'll come back to the importance, but the overestimation, this is something I constantly say to my graduate students, I say do some book reviews. Often now, in seminars, instead of having them write a seminar paper, I ask them to write a potentially publishable book review. It doesn't have to be on the seminar topic but they read an additional book. Virtually every seminar in which I do that, at least one publication comes from it. I think it's very empowering for someone who is not yet published, suddenly to find that they've published. The advantage of book reviews especially in the online age is that there are solid, rigorous online venues where they can publish and they can often get accepted very quickly. I had a student who sent something to *Senses of Cinema* and it was online the next day. She's like, "I'm now a published author." It's a line on a CV that's very inspiring. But I do think you don't want to, if you're a student, you don't want to spend your life doing book reviewing. It's very time consuming.

It can create enemies very early on if you, I always say to my students, "If you write a million things in praise of a book and then have one reservation, that's what the author is going to

remember, not the million praiseworthy things." I don't think it's the end-all. I think it is time consuming. I've probably spent more time on some book reviews than I should have. There are books that I reviewed that I don't remember a thing about, so it is wasted time, in a way. But I also think engaging with scholars' work is important. I find it sad when books disappear. A book comes out and no one talks about it. I think that goes along with another side of my work in history, which I'm fascinated with lives that are forgotten or ignored or never came to light. On one hand I write on mainstream scholars and critics but I'm also interested in the oddity figure. *Scenes of Instruction*, my book on the origins of film study, I was interested in the places that are known as venues for film pedagogy but I was also interested in the guy in Syracuse, Sawyer Falk, who teaches a course that no one knows about. Or the weird discovery of this guy at USC, Boris Morkovin, who, totally wacky figure and sort of forgotten to history.

Books have, the risk of books is that they can get forgotten to history. I think that is a problem right now where there's so many books, so many venues, not everything can get reviewed. So very important things will come out and no one pays attention to them. One of my tasks, or one of my self-assigned tasks is to take account of what people have done and give it some attention. I love books and I love giving them respect. I think it probably mattered that I was book reviewing early on so writing book reviews for Don Frederickson at the *Journal of Film and Video*. Those were my, probably, my first publication before, my first essay was on Eisenstein published in *Cinema Journal*, but I think some of the book reviews must have come out before then.

So it was something I had done always. It's always been part of my routine. It does take time, usually when I review a book I read it twice and then write up the review. I don't like to talk about my own work but I think what I am good at, when I do book reviewing, is figuring out the logic. What is the purpose, what is the point, what is this book's values? Not if it's a good book or bad book but what mark does it make and where is it coming from? And I've always liked doing that.

One very strong inspiration for me is F.O. Matheson, the literary critic has an essay called, "The Winter Critic" in which he talks about book reviewing. He says that the function of a book review should be give some flavor of the book by judicious quotation. Give some sense of its logic and organization. Situate it. And then he says, "*And* judge it." I've always thought that is the least function. Because the book, if you've done those other three things well, if you described a book well, situated it well, the reader can say, "Oh that's a book I want to read" or "That's not a book I want to read." You don't need to say it's good or bad. You can, but anyway. On a minor, trivial level because I love books, I also like as a reviewer to get them. I like opening an envelope, seeing a book come out, feeling it, holding it. I hate when I get proofs instead of the book. I hate when they send it to me only electronically. When I do tenure reviews I'm always saying, "Send me the book." Recently I was asked to do one and they said, "We'll send you the file electronically." I said, "Could I please have the book?" For me, that's part of how it fits the career is what the book physically feels like.

I think some part of me, I know you want to talk later about the public intellectual or intellectuals, organic intellectuals. I'm not a public intellectual or an organic intellectual in the way, I would never presume to be, in the way that say, Edmund Wilson was, but I like thinking that like Wilson, he would go to his mailbox and there'd be the book he'd been assigned to review. He'd open it up. I like that. Someone, Noah Isenberg at *Film Quarterly* will ask me to review a book and then it comes. That's part of the trope is, it's in the mailbox. You're Susan Sontag reviewing something or Edmund Wilson or whatever.

Haidee Wasson: The other thing it does though, it demonstrates a degree of breadth in your own thinking and writing. That you have well over 150 books reviews also suggests a sense of engagement with a wide-open field. It's not like you only review books on a single filmmaker or within the areas that you're currently working on as a scholar and a writer but with a whole field.

Dana Polan: Some of that, I think I've been, this I think relates to the other questions you were wanting to ask. I've been lucky generally, in that both as a graduate student and then as a professor, there's been rare cases where I've *had* to work on something, or I've *had* to teach something rather than I get to pick it. So I've been able to follow my own inclinations. There's some exceptions. When I was at Pittsburgh, we all had to teach freshman comp. We had to teach service courses.

Haidee Wasson: Comp. Composition writing?

Dana Polan: Composition, yeah. But you could fill out the content with your own thing. In the same way, with book reviewing, generally it's been either someone saying, "Would you like to review this?" And in some cases I've said, "No that's not really my area." Or it's been me saying, "I would love to review this, would you be interested?" A lot of the things on that are either it fits my work, it's something I want to engage with. So when I reviewed Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger it's because I wanted to review that and I asked *The Journal of Film and Video*. I said, "Can I do this?" Then I got the book because I knew I had to engage with that book.

When I started more as a hobby getting interested in food studies, I did a lot of reviewing for *Gastronomica*. If you look at my CV, there's clumps of places where I reviewed at a particular moment. It's sometimes a new area of interest and then I just became the reviewer or a reviewer for that journal. So *Gastronomica*, I had about 10 reviews of books in food study because it was a field I wanted to learn more about… I simply proposed one. Or I said, "Would you like a review?" and they said, "Sure, try this book." And then they started asking me to do others. I would turn down something, if it was on Italian food I know nothing about that, but most of it was stuff I couldn’t connect to interests of mine.

Haidee Wasson: Let me ask you a playful question. What's a film scholar doing reading food books?

Dana Polan: Well, I think, as I say, for me it was more, it started more as a hobby. People can have scholarly interests and then side interests. In my case, I read a lot of biography, probably more than any other kind of literature. I specifically like multi-volume biography. I don't know why, but I don't want to read just one volume. I live for Robert Caro. I love the Robert Caro. I'm right now reading the two volumes James Kaplan on Sinatra. Vaguely thought about writing a biography but I couldn't figure out who. Very little of my reading of biography impacts the scholarly work except if it's a figure, like I just read the first volume of the Bing Crosby, Gary Giddins biography. There's some things about Crosby in the film industry that's useful for my scholarship but it's more I just like reading biography. In the same way, one of my hobbies has been cooking and I got interested in thinking about writing on cooking. I find, there's very little I read for fun. I don't read novels. I read food narratives.

I'm reading things, there a book called *The Fourth Star* which is about a restaurant, Daniels in New York, hoping for its fourth star. I found that an incredible page turner. The Anthony Bourdain, the Ruth Reichl. To the extent that I have any time for diversionary reading, it's that kind of thing. So that's where the food stuff, some part of it is diversion from other things but then it started becoming itself a scholarly area for me. I think one syndrome, one pathology I have is turning hobbies into scholarly pursuits and then it becomes an obligation. I actually, if you look at my CV, haven't reviewed for *Gastronomica* in quite some time in part because it started seeming more like a duty than a fun thing.

Haidee Wasson: Well, you also wrote a book on Julia Child's *French Chef*. So you wrote about a television show based on food. A very early and important one, so in part my question was playful because one of the things that's quite interesting about your arc as a scholar is being very much at the center of a very important moment in the history of debates in film studies and then traversing the extent of your career to date, then ending up writing about television quite firmly. The kind of writing you've been doing about television is very cultural, it's industrial, it's

quite a bit different from your early writing. And it's about television. Some of it is historical, *The French Chef*, some of it more recent history, *The Sopranos*. I guess I'm interested in asking you a little bit about saying a little bit about that arc from film theory to television cultural history to food studies include culture. How do you think about that as a scholar and as a trajectory?

Dana Polan: I guess some part of me would think there's not an arc. Again, this goes along with just whatever interests me at a particular moment. Again, I've liked thinking of my work as an intellectual. One of my gods is Edmund Wilson although I think his sexual politics were pretty bad but I love this voluminous writer whose constantly writing, he writes about Russia, he writes about the Dead Sea scrolls, he writes about Abraham Lincoln. And I love that kind of capaciousness and that sense of, what comes along will be the thing you'll write about. I often have welcomed invitations to write on things that I hadn't anticipated in advance, I'd write about. I tend not to like that at the level of essays because I find that essays where someone says, "Write about this. We need you to write this essay for this" I find that, because essays take a lot of time and I find it a constraint. The couple times where I've written an essay completely to demand has not been happy for me. I'll mention one although it involves mentioning names. Murray Pomerance asked me to write, he was doing an anthology on bad film, it was something called “Bad”. And he meant, on the one hand, this real aggressive film, films of bodily assault. So bad in the sense of morally bad or a certain cultural… but then he also wanted stuff on the aesthetically bad, just the not good film.

He asked me to write, because I'd written for the BFI on *In a Lonely Place*. He asked me to write a chapter on Nicholas Ray's *Born to be Bad*, a film that I don't find very interesting. And I found that a very burdensome assignment. I don't think my essay is that good. He wanted it because bad is in the title of the film, because I'd written on Nicholas Ray. I don't know if you know *Born to be Bad*. It's a melodrama with Joan Fontaine. She's a bad girl and sort of is a femme fatale and doesn't get her come up… or only partially gets her comeuppance. It's just not

an interesting film. And I actually talk about what does it mean to, how would we engage with a film that's not bad enough to be interesting and not good enough to be good. I think I start the essay by saying, "One lesson we know from Leonard Maltin's *Movies on TV* is a movie that he rates as four stars is going to have something interesting in it and a movie he rates as bomb is going to have a lot of things interesting. But the one that's going to be deadly dull is the two and a half star. *Born to be Bad* is a two and a half star."

Anyway. I just hated that, writing that essay. I just couldn't get into it. It was because I don't think the film is that engaging but it was also that I had been given the topic. That's a little different than book reviews where, even though I spend a lot of time, the writing is short. It's different than occasional pieces I like doing, occasional pieces I didn't expect. A good example, recently I was asked by a former student of mine, a Spanish man, he's doing a Spanish anthology on Michael Mann and he said, "Would you write the preface? You can write anything you want." I thought, it was not on my list that I was going to do anything on Michael Mann but I said, "This is a chance to go back and see all the Mann." This was about three weeks ago, I watched 12 Michael Mann and wrote a 7 page thing on it. And I really, thoroughly enjoyed it. In part because it was 7 pages, in part because even though he said, "I need something on Mann" there was no specification of what I had to do.

I'm getting off the subject of your question. So on one hand, I like capaciousness, I like how I don't consider myself a public intellectual. I do things that are in public, like media commentary but I like some of the randomness of that. One thing that happens if you're a professor in L.A. or New York is you get on lists of media outlets and you become go to. Especially NYU and USC, where I was before, have very strong PR departments. So they'll get contacted and they'll contact cinema and say, "Someone wants ..." Like, three weeks ago, this is a good example, or no, whenever it was. A month ago, two months ago, when Prince died, we all got a thing from the PR office, some news service is looking for someone to comment on Prince's movie career. *Purple Rain* and *Under the*

Bridge or whatever it's called. None of us were available to do it but you constantly get that kind of thing.

Luckily in that case, I had just come back from giving a talk at Indiana and one of my former NYU students is there doing a dissertation on the rock and roll movie. And I emailed him about something else that morning so I wrote to the person that, I think it was the Associated Press, I said, "I'm not available, I don't have anything… it's not that I'm not available, I have nothing to say. I haven't seen the films recently but you might try Langdon at Indiana." The woman contacted him and if you read the article it's filled with quotes from the guy. I felt glad to have given her his name. Anyway. I do these media appearances. I take them very seriously. I like to do scholarship. All of the things that I do that I haven't planned to do, doing a tenure review. Someone will say, "Do a promotion case for Haidee Wasson." "Here's a book that's come out." "Here's a Michael Mann anthology." I welcome those if I can fit it into my schedule as a chance to think and learn about a topic. So I do research.

I remember when we were at USC, George C. Scott died and somebody contacted me and said, "Would you comment on George C. Scott?" That, for me, was a chance to think about his career. I didn't just say, "Call me back in 10 minutes." It was a, "Call me tomorrow." I went to the library and I re-looked at *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Strangelove*, *Patton*. So I like doing those kinds of things when I can.

Haidee Wasson: Fast forwarding to the present, a question. Part of-

Dana Polan: Let me go back to the question here. To an extent that there's an arc rather than just following unpredictability and being open, is I do think that one arc in my work is not about where film studies is but where films are. I started getting disillusioned about American film and, interestingly that I don't think you need to like a particular film to write about it, but you're spending a lot of time when you go to the movies. You have to get up, get to the movie, sit there for two hours and come back. I'm of that generation that doesn't like what happened with *Star*

Wars and after, the franchise movie made for kids. I'm sort of in agreement with the Robin Wood argument about the infantilization of American film. I started disliking a lot of American film after the 70s and in the 90s there were a number of sort of, I remember seeing *Mars Attacks*. I had just recently been widowed and I think I was emotionally vulnerable, but I hated *Mars Attacks*. It just seemed to me silly, indulgent. I thought it looked great but it could have been anything. They discover that some Merle Haggard song or something makes the Martians blow up. I just thought it was random. I remember coming back home and just feeling so despondent. Like, this is where the culture for my study is.

So in the 90s, a number of people starting thinking that television was taking up the slack of narrative from film. The long form serial of *The Sopranos*, let's say. So I got interested in that and TV became what I wanted to do for a while as a way of not having to deal with recent cinema. We were talking before, you started to turn the microphone on about *Independence Day*. I re-watched, just recently the original *Independence Day*. I find it an atrocious film. Not atrocious ideologically, although it is that also, just the jokiness of it and the Harvey Fierstein character doing this kind of homophobic, I'm a scared gay man, the jokiness of film that's about millions of people getting killed I just find obnoxious and it doesn't interest me as cinema. For a while, I was more interested in television and that's one arc.

Haidee Wasson: Bringing that so-called arc or one of many arcs to the present, we are in a kind of interesting moment vis-a-vis the field where we have to make film scholars now sort of need to be friends with television to a degree if not just as a distribution platform. How do you counsel your students as they're developing dissertation topics vis-a-vis the state of the field and the question of discipline versus inter-disciplines? How do you help them navigate that?

Dana Polan: That's a very good question. I don't think there's an absolute answer and I'm constantly prefacing anything I say to students by saying that the humanities are not a science. I mean by that

not merely that they're different than scientific fields but they don't have that, "Here is the automatic answer." Should you be doing TV study or film study. I, every so often, will have a student who says, "I notice that all the jobs are in new media, should I tool myself into new media?" And I say, "First of all, the new media you tool yourself in is probably not going to be the same new media by the time you finish your dissertation. And you shouldn't be doing this just for expediency, don't write a dissertation, you don't pick a topic just to get a job. It has to be something that you want to work on and interests you." I would never say to someone who is doing American film, "Abandon it and study a new media because that's what is going to get you a job" when you don't know the job market.

I tend to be, even though people talk about a crisis of the humanities, I tend to be optimistic that if you do good scholarship of whatever sort, there will be something for you at some point. It may take a while. This may sound vain but I'm teaching at a school that has a certain reputation behind it. So NYU students will have a shot in the job market, someone comes from NYU, whatever their topic. I say, "Start from that basis. You can afford to be less pragmatic about your topic because you already have the competitiveness of having been from NYU. If you want to do classic American film or you want to do whatever, NYU students generally do well in the job market." When I was at USC, we always had a USC student placed in every job that came up, good job that came up somewhere. They didn't always get it but they were at least one of the finalists. So I tend to be optimistic of good students from good scholarly programs getting something at some point. I would never say, "Pick a topic for the purposes of the job market. Pick what you want to work on." I say, "Some things about new media you can learn on the side, that wouldn't be a bad thing. But new media do change very quickly."

My spouse who teaches in a communication department, the advice she gives to her students, which I think is good advice for anyone working on new media is, "Write about the particular media form as if it's no longer going to be new." If you're going to write about the iPad, imagine that the iPad is no

longer current. What will still make your dissertation current, though? What will still be relevant about it? It's kind of thing when Stuart Hall writes about the Sony Walkman, he's using an example of how to do cultural studies even though it's still absolutely relevant even if the students reading it don't have Sony Walkman anymore.

Haidee Wasson: Dana, on the question of service, you also served as President of SCS. And I'm wondering, if in your long history of service to that organization or as President, if you might think a little bit about the importance of an organization like SCS, and now SCMS, for the field of film studies.

Dana Polan: I I wrote a book about the history of the discipline up to 35 scenes of instruction, it's clear that what disciplines often thrive on is having professional organizations. I think professional organizations can also come with certain drawbacks and there's also a drawback to the very idea of professionalization. I think SCS, and then SCMS, have been very energizing for graduate students. I know being able to give a paper at a conference, being able to publish in *Cinema Journal*, those are two of the very first things I did in my career was an essay in *Cinema Journal* and giving a paper at a conference that became my next publication, were incredibly empowering. Going to the conference and meeting people. Originally when I would go I went to a lot of papers, now when I go, I go to very few papers, more for just my time is spent seeing people, seeing friends and I always say, "If a paper is good, I'd rather read it and if it's bad, I certainly don't want to be sitting there hearing it." I think one problem of professional organizations is when they become too big. I think SCS, now SCMS has become very big. The conference is kind of unwieldy.

When we organized several of the Pittsburgh conferences, I think in particular the second one, Jane Feuer had joined our faculty and Jane was interested in television and decided to help with the conference organizing. She said, "I'm going to be a television programmer. And you don't program two comedies against each other." She would say, "We have an American panel, therefore we shouldn't have" she would do this, move

things around. Now you no longer can do that because when you have 24 or whatever simultaneous panels, it's impossible not to have overlap. Clearly any one topic can be defined in multiple ways so it's an auteur panel or an audience panel or a post-war panel. There's no way you can not have rivalry. I find the conference has become unwieldy but it is also very energizing.

I don't remember a lot of specific things that happened during my presidency, this is neither here nor there but it was not a happy moment for me. I had to step down, my wife took ill very early on in my presidency with a long, lingering illness. I eventually resigned from being the president and then she passed away. So it was a complicated moment. I was actually asked to run, last year or the year before, to run for president and it was too complicated for me emotionally. I declined. But I've always had the commitment to SCS, or now SCMS. I don't always go to the conference because it just kind of gets overwhelming.

Haidee Wasson: Great, thank you. Let me ask you a little bit back to the question of scholarly trajectories or intellectual trajectories. I do have a particular interest in your own formation in part because of your deep commitments both in the earlier days to film theory and then what looks, by most glances, to be a kind of historical turn and certainly you've been a practicing film scholar during some of the key moments in the discipline's formation as a diversified formation with a healthy historiographical set of debates and a healthy set of theoretical debates. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about your understanding of the development of that so-called historical turn in the discipline and how you, yourself, have found a place within that.

Dana Polan: Yeah. I'll start with my own trajectory although I tend not to like to talk about my own arc, I don't like to talk about my own work. When I have to talk about my own work, like I'm writing a job letter, which I haven't done in a while, but if I am, I have to figure out how do I present myself? I think that I'm doing kind of cultural study of film and related media and in particular, if I have to define more what I say is I'm interested

generally in two things. On the one hand, dominant cultural production itself or dominant moving image culture itself, especially American, that's the culture I grew up in and especially post-war. *Power and Paranoia* on 40s film, the Julia Child book on 60s culture, some things on 70s and 80s and 90s. Again, a lot of things I do because someone has asked me that doesn't really, I don't think of it in the trajectory, but if someone asked me to do Japanese film I'd probably say no because that's not what I do.

The one time I really diverged from my interests was I did a BFI book on Jane Campion and probably because I wanted to write on a woman, I wanted to do something non-US and I found it very hard. I think it's probably my least successful book, although I do think the chapter, it opens a with chapter on doing auteurist study that I think is good but the actual analysis I don't think works that well because it really wasn't me. I'm primarily an Americanist in studying moving image culture. I'm not an early cinema person although I've written a couple little things on early cinema. I'm primarily interested, maybe because of the time I grew up, my parents, I'm interested in post-war, although right now I've been getting more and more interested in the 30s. I'm teaching a 1939 course that may convert into scholarship. I want to come back to that course in a second. So on one hand, dominant moving image culture, that's both film and television. I think as a second interest it's been, what are some of the methods we could use to analyze dominant moving image culture? In a sense, I think through a lot of my work, from the first piece on Eisenstein and the piece on Brecht has been what are some of the available theories that will help us think out dominant moving image culture? Which ones have problems in thinking that out?

What are the limits of a particular approach to Brecht? Now, in my case that means looking at some of the known names or the canonic names, Eisenstein, Brecht, Metz, et cetera but I've always been interested in the underdogs, the forgotten figures, the people you wouldn't think of as canonic. Some of this is just maybe my personal biography, my own eccentricities. I've been fascinated by people who are forgotten from history as I was

mentioning before. That includes critics that at one time everybody read and now no one reads. An Edmund Wilson, who reads Edmund Wilson except Edmund Wilson scholars? Who reads F.O. Matheson, et cetera? I think that goes along, in biography, I'm interested in strange lives, eccentric lives. I also have an interest, maybe connects it to biography, in sort of the writers who write eccentric narrative portraits. One thing I'm very fascinated by Lytton Strachey and he'll write these five page, he'll write long things on Queen Victoria but then he'll write portraits and pictures. It will be five pages on some, this odd Victorian. Some of that, for me, was very inspiring for *Scenes of Instruction* where some of these people are eccentric. The guy at USC who invents this truth telling device. Boris Morkovin at USC, who is a total nutcase. Sawyer Falk who is kind of an eccentric out in Syracuse.

I just like writing veritable portraits of film scholars. I'm also interested in, what was I saying? I'm interested in people from outside film who write credibly about film. I think some of, going back to my generation of film scholars, one of the things we had to deal with is the battle for the legitimacy of film and I remember when, my first job at the University of Pittsburgh there was a professor who said, "I would rather have a bad course on Shakespeare than an excellent course on film" which I found appalling. So there's always been this battle of legitimacy but, which also then, by the very people who consider film illegitimate, often manifests a kind of poaching. An English department will want to teach a film course, even if it can't stand film because it knows it gets good enrollments. I've been always concerned about poachers and what I call people who don't do their homework. They work in film but they don't read film scholars. I probably shouldn't say this but one of the problems I've had with Stanley Cavell's work is its very intelligent engagement with films but almost a kind of emphatic desire not to read other people on the same films. Tania Modleski is not even cited though she's written on the same melodramas, and is ignored by Cavell and I find that bothersome.

I've been interested when non-film people write about film but do so rigorously. So for me, the Deleuze volumes on cinema were a revelation and I have lots of criticisms on what he actually says, but just that he had seen so much and read so much of the secondary literature, I was astounded by that. One of my essays in the 80s is on Sartre's writings on film. I love discovering film writings by a non-film person. I think one of my better essays is, I'm actually very proud of it, is one again in *Cinema Journal* on Raymond Williams on film. Everybody knew his television work, he had written some things on film. When you go to the archives, you discover how extensive it is. He did a course on Godard. Raymond Williams taught Godard, I find still kind of amazing. I've written a number of essays on non-film scholars. I've also written on people who write about film but are sort of unknown or forgotten. Another essay I'm very proud of is a thing I did a year ago, two years ago on Margaret Thorpe, who wrote in 1939, "America at the Movies" which I think, I'm not absolutely sure, but I'm pretty convinced is the first university press book on film. I can't find one earlier, yet. And Thorpe is cited by people who write on the 30s but not really studied. I just loved writing that essay. Everything fell into place. I like that essay a lot.

Haidee Wasson: Why these figures who aren't conventionally thought of as inside the film circle, what is it that it does for our understanding of cinema to look at it from these oblique angles or unknown figures?

Dana Polan: I think it does avoid a harping on the canon. I think it brings it a different perspective. I think it's also a lesson that you can, if you do some homework, be rigorous about film. Margaret Thorpe goes to studios, she does this work, she has a background. There are some questions about whether Deleuze has actually seen all the films he cites but there's a lot of scholarship behind that. I think that's a lesson about, I think it's maybe in my case, when I write about food I do the homework. I think you don't go into a discipline just sloppily. I remember a number of years ago getting a call from a professor, who I won't name, a theater professor, not film, who said, "My dean wants me to do a Shakespeare on film course" or "Wants me to do a

theater on film course. What are some films I should include?" He had done no homework at all. I was just thinking, if I had called him and said, "I want to do a Shakespeare course, can you tell me some of the plays" he would be astounded. But there's this idea that anyone can dabble in film. I don't think film is something to dabble in. You are rigorous about it.

I did want to say one thing, which is, I don't want to over emphasize my service, my teaching, but for me those are absolutely as important as scholarship. There used to be a joke of, when you ask a professor "What are you working on?" They never say, "My teaching" or "My courses." Increasingly a lot of my work is, I'm reading a lot of American film now that I don't think will ever impact any, or won't lead to any writing. In part because I don't know what I'm writing now. I'm not working on a book on whatever, but I want to read and screen in part, because I know one of the places where I do have an impact, or can have an impact, is teaching. Professors used to say, professors will often say, "I'm going back to the real world" when they leave the campus. I always think there's, the campus is a real world. If I estimate that I've taught 100 students a year, I've done large lecture courses so it may be more, I've taught for 35 years now, that's 3500 students. That's a lot of people to have talked to. It's an influence.

Haidee Wasson: What are your goals in the classroom? What is important to you about your teaching?

Dana Polan: I think I tend to be not very good at discussion, even in seminars. I lecture and it's some part of me, maybe it is vanity but I think being a professor means having a body of knowledge that's ever expanding, that's always in process. I was mentioning before LaCapra telling us that he had read this essay. I'm constantly doing that. I will say, "I'm just now reading such and such" but I think professors, everybody reads. Graduate students read. But professors, they are Edward Said talks about professors are people who have time to think and read. I want to come back to that in a second but to the extent that I have time to think and read, I hope or I guess that I often have more time to think and read than a lot of other people.

Therefore, my goal is to let them know what I've been thinking and reading. I'm right now reading Scott Higgins' book on 30s serials. If I was teaching right now, my 30s course, I'd be bringing that into the course. For the 39, I'm doing this course on 39, which I'm going to be doing again in the fall, I've been reading a lot on the 30s and especially screening, I'm trying to screen as much of the 39 corpus of films and just this morning made it to 16%, I'm very proud of that.

Some of my friends, Jon Lewis and Scott Bukatman keep saying I should write about all these films because otherwise it's wasted time but it's not wasted because it's going to show up in my teaching. One thing, and this goes back to the question about service. I'm on a lot of committees and things like that. I generally don't complain. I do think that one problem of academia is the amount of bureaucracy and we're seeing, if there's not a crisis in the humanities, we're seeing a kind of bureaucratization, icorporatization of the humanities. For me, a very breakthrough moment and it was obvious, it's an obvious point but for me, when I was able to articulate it, a breakthrough sad moment was when I realized that there's a distinction to be made between being a scholar and being an academic. Which for me being a scholar means doing research, thinking and also then imparting it to others. Being an academic includes that, but it also includes all the committees you have to be on. I don't mean dissertation committees, I mean the space committee or the oversight committee. It now makes sense to me but some part of me still is appalled when I learned that there's a thing called the committee on committees at universities.

I like doing scholarship. I think I've done good scholarship. I think I've published a number of things, but there are days where I'll come home and I'll say, "What did I do today that was for my scholarship or for my students?" It will be, "No I was at that meeting from 9:00 to 1:00 and then I went from that to blah blah blah. Then I have to write six letters of recommendation." I will always do those but a lot of the, I mean I think there's a lot of intellectually wasted time in academia now. That's something I've seen increasing since I started. My department, I'm in a

good department but an issue will come up and we'll say, "Let's form a subcommittee." That's the first thing we say. USC more than NYU. When I was at USC, the provost could create initiatives and they would be a lot of work and a lot of data collecting and then the initiative would disappear a year later. The one thing that's really soured me in academic life is bureaucracy and non-scholarly work.

Haidee Wasson: So let's go back to the teaching then. Give me a run down on what is it about teaching? How do you think about the classroom that distinguishes say your class from a non-class or another class? What is it? How do you treat the classroom as different? As a space?

Dana Polan: I don't know that I can really articulate that again, because it's hard to have distance from that. I know, I see myself as having a body of knowledge, not necessarily a fixed objective, true, fully true but a knowledge and process I would like students see me working that out, see me imparting the parts of it that I think have been worked out. Struggling with others. Again, to the extent that there is that arc of looking at dominant media culture and then looking at methods, my teaching has often been about those two things. I've done courses, when I do the Hollywood ‘39 course, it's on what was actual media production in or what was cinema production in ‘39. On the other hand, something I started at USC and have continued at NYU and have been very proud of are courses on particular theorists or bodies of theory. Again, given my interest in people from outside film, I did a Barthes course, I've done Foucault a number of times. One course I like a lot, and it changes slightly is an Adorno in America or the Frankfurt school in America.

Part because there's a side of me, we haven't talked about this but there's a side of me that's very strongly Adornian and curmudgeonly about the culture industry. I think maybe it goes along with my sense of the infantilization of film in the 70s, but Adorno isn't a film scholar and is not very rigorous when he writes about popular culture but there's a substantial body, well he is in some cases, there is a substantial body of writings by Adorno on American popular culture beyond the culture

industry that I find actually quite interesting. I think the volume *Current of Music* which collects all of his writings on radio music in the 30s is actually quite, quite good. He has a book on right wing radio in America in the 30s, small book that you read it and it's exactly Donald Trump today.

One essay of mine that again, there are things like the Bad essay that I don't think are very good but there are essays of mine that I like. One thing I like very much, again it was an occasional piece, I like these small pieces. *Velvet Light Trap* was doing an issue on failure and they asked me to write something. Some people wrote about failed films or failed production ventures. I wanted to write about failure in theory but also write about failure that looks like failure but actually isn't. I wrote about the notion of the Culture Industry and my argument was, a lot of people think this is a bad essay, it's judgemental, it's blanketed, it's a condemnation, but first of all I don't think Adorno is as simplistic as people think. There are moments when there is an affirmation of American popular culture in Adorno. He likes the laughter of the Marx Brothers for example. But another part of me says, shouldn't we at some level be somewhat condemnatory of some of the things that American popular culture has been and is becoming? Especially, I talk about, this is right after the Bush election. Adorno reads differently when Bush is president than in the democratic moment in the 40s when Roosevelt is president. Maybe what was a failure in understanding American culture in the 40s might be a success today. Adorno helps us understand the turn to the right. That, how does this relate to teaching?... but those are some of the kinds of things in my Adorno in America course.

Again, as I said, I've been very lucky to, at Pittsburgh, USC, NYU, generally to have been at places where I've been able to do my own work and that includes teaching. Pittsburgh was the only place where I was specifically asked to do service courses. Even there, as I said before, if I did freshman composition I could have film be part of it. I've always been able to choose my own courses. I don't think that's always good for the discipline. This is something I've been thinking about. For

example, at NYU, one of the failings of our department, I've seen it everywhere, is professors come up with their own courses and then that's the curriculum. There's no dialogue about how everything fits together. Gerry Graff, in his book *Professing Literature* says departments grow by accretion rather than by active thinking out their mission. If you discover that you don't have something, multiculturalism, if you don't have feminism, you hire that person. You get them to teach their courses but you never think out how it relates to the rest of the curriculum. I think, the downside is that we're never asked to think about, we're told, "Come up with whatever you want and if it fits on a Tuesday, you're teaching it." We're never asked how does my Hollywood ‘39 course fit something else.

That's the downside. The good side is I've always been able to follow my interests, including using my courses to explore new areas. That was especially true at Pittsburgh where there was, one of the dogmas of the department was no one owned a course. For example, there was a moment where I was interested in the fact that a number of Marxist critics like Raymond Williams and Jameson were writing about science fiction and I'd never been interested in science fiction but I said, "I want to teach the science fiction novel course next year." So I spent the summer, I bought Asimov and Phil K Dick and whatever, and I spent the summer just reading science fiction and then taught it. It was working through it for myself.

Haidee Wasson: That's a great example of integrating a general scholar's disposition with the classroom and pedagogy.

Dana Polan: It impacted my writing in no way. Or actually I did a couple, I never wrote about science fiction. I did do a couple book reviews for *Science Fiction Studies*. And again, it was at that moment but that, I'm not reading science fiction now. One course I would love to have had have a sequel when I first got here at NYU, Kristin Ross in the French department and I co-taught a course on the detective story on film and fiction. That was a way of going back to Chandler, Hammond, and Kristin is one of those people who are constantly reading. She reads the newest thing and goes to the mystery bookshop and says,

"What's out this week?" I got to read some of the stuff I didn't know about. Marseille detective fiction and regional detective fiction. But it's not something I regularly follow but for a moment, that was what I was energized by.

Haidee Wasson: So let me ask you a two pronged question that is future oriented. Since you've brought up teaching as a significant component of what we do as professors, let's say, what is the future of teaching in the classroom vis-a-vis film and media? Do you see it as a healthy place? Is it going in a good direction? What is it going to look like?

Dana Polan: It's very hard to prognosticate or predict. I think at the broadest level, I've been mentioning the idea of a crisis in the humanities, I think it's on the one hand overrated, on the other hand I'm skeptical when people say we're in another crisis of the humanities because I don't like cyclical languages as if it's coming up again. I think if we're in a crisis it has its own structure, its own particularity. I do think there are going to be problems for the humanities as we move further into the 20th century. I think for example the recession of 2008 is going to rebound in academia for a lot longer than it's going to rebound elsewhere. In part because I think universities and especially STEM parts of universities can use budget problems as kind of payback against women's studies, resources going to women's studies, film studies, cultural studies, American studies. I think we're going to see a lot of pressure on cutting edge humanities areas including cinema although cinema has become a bit more vulnerable, not vulnerable, venerable. And maybe in some ways it is vulnerable.

I think we're going to see it kind of tightening around STEM. I think we're seeing an increasing emphasis on the pragmatics of what will this get me for students whose parents are, we need a major that will convert to a job. Although most, at least in the US, most people will end up having as their last employment something that's very different from what they majored in. So I tend to think the best undergraduate major is a liberal arts, open major. But I do think there's pressure on what is this going to produce. That shows up in film study at the undergraduate

level, in many of our undergraduates, even when they're taking critical studies courses are thinking towards industry. There's not going to be enough jobs for them. I think, I don't know how to predict where we're going.