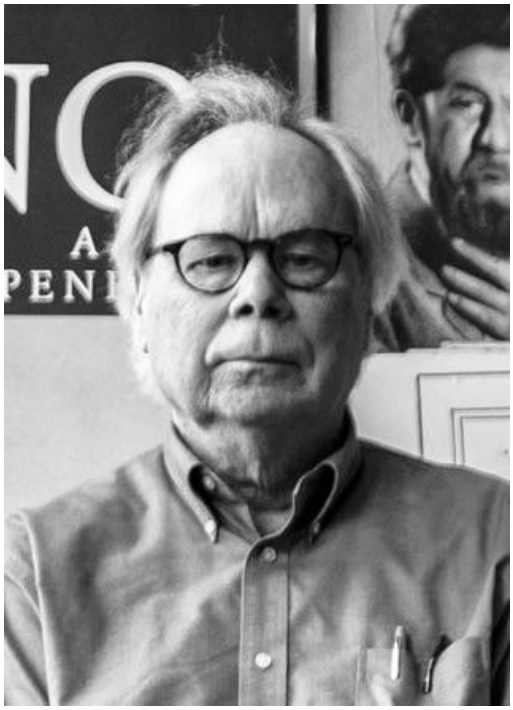


Photo © Sam Vladimirsky (detail)

The Department of French and the Program in Cinema Studies are deeply saddened by the passing of Professor Alan L. Williams, our beloved colleague of many years, on August 16, 2023. A Memorial Service, in the form of a traditional Sukhavati ceremony, was held on August 26.

Here are some words, however insufficient, to honor Alan's memory and unique legacy.

Alan Williams received his B.A. and M.A. in French from the University of Washington (Seattle) in 1969 and 1971; followed by a Ph.D. in 1977, from SUNY-Buffalo, with a thesis later reworked into his first book: *Max Ophuls and the Cinema of Desire* (Arno, 1980). He arrived at Rutgers in 1981, as an Assistant Professor of French and Cinema Studies, was tenured 6 years later, and promoted to Full Professor in 1993, a year after the publication of his masterpiece: *Republic of Images. A History of French Filmmaking* (Harvard University Press, 1992), now in its 7th printing. In the words of a former colleague, now at Johns Hopkins, who taught film alongside Alan in the French Department:

> Alan ventured to tell the full story of French cinema to English-language readers. In *Republic of Images*, he did so better than anyone else had, and better than anyone has since. […] This was in no small part because Alan was an unshowy, economical writer who cared about and respected his reader. His writing seamlessly brought together economic and institutional history, biography, stylistic analysis, audience reception, and even industry anecdote. He delivered chapter after chapter of remarkably concise syntheses penned from just the right distance, and the right angle. As a result he spoke as much to the first-year university student as to the seasoned scholar.

Almost as seminal was a collection of articles by leading scholars that Alan imagined, assembled and edited on the question of *Film and Nationalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2002). His own essays on film-related matters, from narrative patterns to the uses of sound, from the "camera eye" to the economic history of French cinema, to studies of individual directors (Lang, L'Herbier, Renoir, Clouzot, Ophuls, Truffaut, Malle, Godard…), were published in

such journals as *Yale French Studies, Film Quarterly, L'Esprit Créateur, Contemporary French Civilization, Screen, Quarterly Review of Film Studies, Camera Obscura, Revue de l'association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma*; as well as in a number of important edited collections and proceedings.

Alan was one of the world's foremost experts on early French cinema, and played a central role in the rediscovery of the extraordinary woman he called its "midwife," the director and producer Alice Guy-Blaché. On the transition from silent films to "talkies," on the cinema of the 30s, on the Occupation period, on the "Tradition of Quality" as well as on the New Wave (its enemy), on comedy generally, which he loved in all its forms, his knowledge and insights had few peers among his fellow specialists – including French ones, whose writings he not only quoted, but unstintingly translated for American audiences.

For Alan's expertise knew no borders: he was a comparatist at heart, measuring for example (to use his own brilliant metaphors) the "imperfect republic" of French cinema against Hollywood's "one-party state." It is not by accident that he reviewed, as a young critic, films by Robert Altman, Jonas Meekas, or Satyajit Ray. Or that he was, since 1985, an Associate in the Columbia University Seminar on Film and Interdisciplinary Interpretation. Or that he sat, for more than 40 years, on the Board of Editorial Advisors for the ongoing *History of American Cinema* project. Or that he served, twice, for a total of 9 years, as Director of our Interdisciplinary Program in Cinema Studies, and was one of the key forces behind its expansion.

Alan's principled and sincere oecumenism also explains how he managed to feel at home in his other home, a literature-oriented department. His intelligence, generosity, and sense of humor made it seem natural, to us at least, while it was anything but. Alan's citizenship in the French Department meant that he might have to sit, at the drop of a hat, on the jury of an undergraduate thesis on Rabelais or *Le Roman de la Rose*; or to become Acting Chair, as he did in 1991; or Graduate Director, as he did in 2017 – and remained, with great dedication and courage, almost to the end. In this latter capacity, Alan recruited students, fought for their admission and support packages, and helped them through rough patches, administrative or personal; which he did with unparalleled skill, tact, compassion – and discretion. He also had to run, many times and among many other things, a comprehensive M.A. exam that comprehended no cinema. Such dissonances could certainly (though rarely) make Alan angry, but we only became aware of it when he let us know – matter-of-factly, with a smile – that he was. No irony was ever lost on him (this is also true of his scholarship, which keeps pointing out unseen flip sides and unintended consequences). Yet his lucidity never got in the way of his kindness. Both were forms of understanding; both, no doubt, helped him keep his cool throughout his decades-long balancing act.

We all knew that it was impossible to name an extant film, much less a French one, that Alan had not seen. Of all the ones he admired or liked, of the many that he found intriguing even as he disliked them, and of many more still, he owned copies that he would instantly lend upon request. Or even sans request, as one of us recalls:

> during the pandemic, I had mentioned at a meeting that I was thinking of working on a piece on Josephine Baker, who was getting pantheonized. Alan was Graduate Director of the French program at the time, and he was continuously over-burdened with a never-ending onslaught of pandemic-related administrative matters. To my surprise, one day I received an email from him telling me that he had set-up for me a Box Folder where I could access his entire digital collection of Josephine Baker movies! I was working remotely from France back then and was strictly confined at home for weeks at a time. This box folder suddenly appearing in my mailbox felt like a gift from the gods of relief! […] This thoughtful and lovely gesture went a

> long way to alleviate some of the stress I was under at the time, and I'll be forever indebted to him for that. This is the kind of man that Alan was: passionate about cinema and about sharing his knowledge of it; discreetly and deeply caring of the people he worked with.

This applies, in particular, to those of our colleagues who taught film in turn: with them, Alan shared everything he had, while leaving them utterly free to teach whatever and however they wanted. Indeed, sharing (as opposed to throwing around) what he knew, for Alan, was inseparable from knowing it. It was a spontaneous movement, yet one that implied care and caution as much as enthusiasm; restraint, silence even, as well as dialogue. For sharing, first and foremost, meant *showing*: Alan understood that the experience of watching a film – one's intimate reaction, unfolding in real time – cannot be preempted. Telling comes next. About what was lost, and gained, by the "talkies," he noted the following: "the addition of recorded sound" made "the image harder to see *as image*"; the trade-off was that "synchronized sound and image" gave "greater weight and presence to represented objects and actions." Either way, we might add, interfering commentary breaks the spell, risks making film – be it a mere fragment – harder to see, whether "as image" or as representation. Accordingly, the courses that Alan conceived and created from scratch, then taught year after year, had to balance his own interventions with the need to let cinema operate on its own. Alan's art of yielding time, by design, not only to his students but to his *content*, so as to allow the *event* of their encounter – that is what defined him as a teacher; what made this self-effacing expert such a gift.

Lest we underestimate what this means, what this accomplishes, let us hear one of his many former Doctoral students:

> I have absorbed so much of his approach to teaching that I could never pinpoint where his lessons end and my own inventions begin. Just like as a parent, when talking to my children, I so often hear the echo of my own mom and dad, as a teacher and especially an advisor, when I meet with my students, I hear Alan speaking through me.
>
> Probably the most important idea that he demonstrated, by clear and consistent example, is that whatever goals we might set for our students, our scholarship or our own path through the profession, we must understand ourselves and everyone else firstly as human, with the incredibly vast amount and variety of circumstantial pressures that this humanity entails. Alan saw the humor in everything, and the potential in everyone. He connected both of these to the urgent need to bring where we are and what we have experienced to whatever we aim to do next.

In truth, the peculiar set-up of film classes and seminars was also a perfect match, and a perfect work-out, for one of Alan's key talents: concision. As the directors of old did with the title cards of silent films, he chose his moments, knew how to get his points across in time windows that would barely allow some of us to clear our throats and get started. The very depth of his convictions, moderated by his unerring sense of context, made him weary of prolixity. Whether he was teaching, speaking, or writing, his preferred style was *le mot juste*, elegant without frills, striking without ostentation; yet often paradoxical, at times koan-like. That is why e-mail, which he did not like much and used sparingly, was in fact a good medium for him: today – to our sorrow, to our relief as well – his pithy messages still carry his voice. The things he said and wrote always felt fresh, effortlessly original; their only adornment was wit.

It is fitting – and the least we can do, in helpless gratitude – that we conclude by returning to Alan's core intellectual interests and lifelong research project. The strategic importance of his scholarship, to Rutgers and the Humanities at Rutgers, cannot be overstated. As one of our colleagues put it, on the French side:

> Alan's arrival, more than four decades ago, radically changed the French Department and, almost overnight, put it at the forefront of French cinema studies in the country.

The same is true of the Cinema Studies program; the loss to both is incalculable. Yet it is obvious that Alan's legacy will keep rekindling, for Rutgers, the gift that his presence was.

Here is how – soberly, of course: for him, ambition meant prudence – Alan himself described his approach:

> I try to tie together ways of studying cinema that are normally considered distinct: theories of spectatorship, economic history, study of film genres, the influence of social events and configurations on filmmaking, and so on. I am particularly interested in crisis points in film history—'overdetermined' moments where striking changes at apparently different levels occur in a relatively brief space of time.

Reviews of *Republic of Images* were unanimous in stressing precisely this point. One of them admires Alan's ability to "tie together" all the internal dimensions and external connections of cinema in a single paragraph on the art of Marcel L'Herbier, sharply compared to that of another Marcel. The great critic Michael Wood, in *The London Review of Books*, praises the way in which the "history of France itself" is brought to bear, with respect to the *Belle Époque*, the Occupation, or the advent of the Fifth Republic, "not as a mere bland background but as active context, thoroughly worked into the discussion of the films," down (or up) to the "level of style," of signature stylistic and thematic details, such as what Alan called "the Occupation cinema's obsession with immobility."

Neither "history" nor "France" were treated by Alan as self-evident, anchoring realities, but as uneasy, shifting ones, sets of questions and problems – national identity, for one – that movies (fictions most notably) helped raise, explore, experiment with, more than they drew or leaned on them. "Must French Cinema Be French?," one of his lectures asks memorably; "Is There Such a Thing as a 'National Cinema'?," asks another one. The last words of *Republic of Images* evoke what may happen "long after the 'grand illusion' of French nationhood has passed into history." As Wood puts it, the author's "generalizations have clearly been hesitated over, thought about." Earned in every way: limits and caveats included. Alan never overstated anything, and warned us against overestimating not only the reflection of their time in movies, but the influence of movies on their time – the persuasive "power" we tend to endow them with. Weighing this hypnotic assumption against contextual evidence, he would often find the latter scarce or ambiguous, and would say so with typical candor.

It is not by coincidence, on the other hand, that Alan was conceptually attracted to "crisis points" involving films *and* their times, as living parts *of* their times: wide-ranging, multi-layered mutations crystallized in "brief moments." His own mind excelled, hesitating no longer, at capturing such moments in just a few pages of unsurpassed density and clarity. This – in addition to its scope, and along with the dry humor, or gentle irony, also noted by all, which allowed him to find, and keep, just the right amount of distance, no matter how deep his immersion – is what made *Republic* an instant classic, both as an exhaustive reference book on French cinema and as a brilliant reconfiguration of its subject.

Alan was working on a sequel that would bring its narrative arc to the present; it is our fervent hope that this second volume – or parts of it at least – will see publication.

One of the most beautiful sentences in *Republic of Images* goes as follows: the early French director Léonce Perret, Alan wrote, "could make people and things shimmer in his images, seem to float on the very light by which one sees them."

It is through a light of this sort – the "very light" of Alan himself – that our memories of his life, work, and wisdom will continue to shine.

Here, then, are some images of the Alan Williams we knew, without presuming to know more – than a few glances or inferences, for most of us – about the rich, full life of the very private man he was outside Rutgers; Alan the infinitely loving, absolutely dedicated, husband

and father. To his wife, Liz, to their sons, Gregory and Nicholas, all we can do is tell, imperfectly, how much we share, with a part of their grief, the sense of having lost far more than a colleague, be it an exemplary one.