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## The past is always changing: An interview with Tom Gunning

Malte Hagener and Annie van den Oever

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### Abstract

Tom Gunning is one of the most influential and widely cited film historians in the world with over 150 essays and publications on early cinema, the avant-garde, and film genres. He has published extensively on questions of film style and interpretation, film history and film culture, and on early cinema as well as on the culture of modernity from which cinema arose. In his seminal studies of the 'cinema of attractions', the concept he famously proposed, he set a new research agenda for early cinema studies by relating the development of cinema to other forces besides storytelling, such as new experiences of space and time in modernity, the relation between cinema and technology, and an emerging modern visual culture. Film culture, the avant-garde movements, the historical factors of exhibition and criticism, and the spectator's experience throughout film history are recurrent themes in his work. In this interview, Malte Hagener and Annie van den Oever talk with Gunning about his writing process and his inspirations, the people he considers his mentors (Annette Michelson, Jay Leyda, Eileen Bowser, and David Francis), the legendary 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton, and the future of film studies.

**Keywords:** film history, film studies, early cinema, cinema of attractions, media archaeology, defamiliarisation, Sergei Eisenstein, Annette Michelson, Jay Leyda, Miriam Hansen, FIAF, Brighton

Tom Gunning is one of the most influential and most widely cited film historians in the world with over 150 essays and publications on early cinema, the avant-garde, and film genres. He has published extensively on questions of film style and interpretation, film history and film culture, and on early cinema as well as on the culture of modernity from which cinema arose. By relating it to still photography, stage melodrama, magic lantern shows, as well as wider cultural concerns such as

the World Expositions and the major technological revolutions, he argued that the new invention called cinema helped to usher in modernity. In his seminal studies of the 'cinema of attractions', the concept he famously proposed, he set a new research agenda for early cinema studies by relating the development of cinema to other forces besides storytelling, such as new experiences of space and time in modernity, the relation between cinema and technology, and an emerging modern visual culture. Film culture, the avant-garde movements, the historical factors of exhibition and criticism, and the spectator's experience throughout film history are recurrent themes in his work.

In this interview[1], Malte Hagener and Annie van den Oever talk with Gunning about writing and his inspirations and the people he considers his mentors (Annette Michelson, Jay Leyda, Eileen Bowser, and David Francis), the 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton, which over time gained legendary proportions, and the future of film studies.



Fig. 1: Tom Gunning

**Hagener:** Are we correct in saying that Annette Michelson and Jay Leyda whom you met at New York University as a graduate student were both very formative for you? Could you talk about them, about NYU as an environment, and about how Michelson and Leyda shaped you intellectually?

**Gunning:** Annette and Jay are very different figures, but in terms of NYU intimately related. It was really Annette who brought Jay to NYU. When I first arrived at NYU with very vague ideas about my interest in cinema and primarily as an excuse for the fact that I went to three movies a day and spent all my time in movie theaters, I really didn't know about Annette Michelson. She had been teaching there for a year or two and I was immediately impressed by her. She was a flamboyant figure. I remember her explaining her courses and dramatically throwing her scarf over her shoulder. And I particularly remember her saying, 'Well, last year I taught a course on expressionism and film.' And then she threw the scarf over her shoulder, looked at us, and said, 'With the intention of destroying the term.' So I took courses with her.

At the same time, my interest in film primarily came through the influence of critics like Andrew Sarris. My interest was therefore primarily in Hollywood cinema and the idea of the auteur theory, so the encounter with her introduced something that was very different from what I had thought about. And whereas I had been interested in Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock, she introduced me to Jean Epstein, Stan Brakhage, and Hollis Frampton. It was a shock in a certain way. One of the first films she showed in class was Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, and it was totally unlike any film I had ever seen. I don't know if I would say I hated it, but I was very negative.

In those days I actually had a 16mm projector at home and about a year after I first saw *Wavelength*, I was watching it at home with my wife, who is a painter. I explained to her: 'This is a very strange film I didn't understand. In fact, I didn't like it, but I really need to watch it. And if you don't like it, just leave me alone, because I really have to concentrate.' Maybe twenty minutes into it, my wife stood up and I thought she was leaving, but she didn't. I thought, 'Oh, she's doing that thing, where you're trying to subtly leave and you're actually attracting more attention

than you would if you just stormed out.' So, after a couple of minutes, I said, 'Look, please, if you don't like it, you can leave, but I really need to concentrate and you're distracting me.' And she responded, 'Oh, no, it's just such a strong movie. I have to stand up to watch it.' She got it more quickly than I did, which I think was partly because she was an abstract painter and she sensed that there were the same issues. So, Annette introduced me to this whole other realm of non-narrative experimental modernism.

For the next couple of years of graduate school, I continued to take her classes. I took other classes as well, of course, but she really preoccupied my intellectual growth and challenged it, and although I still had a very strong interest in Hollywood and narrative cinema, I began to develop an equal interest in a different type of cinema and into issues of modernism. One of the courses that she taught was a critical reading of André Bazin in which she criticised his concept of realism but also took it seriously, which led to me reading Bazin a lot more carefully than I ever had before, and also thinking about other ways to approach what he was saying. I wrote a paper about how his idea of realism was in a certain way modernist and compared it to symbolists like Mallarmé. I'm not sure it made any sense, but she was at least intrigued by it and made me think that there were ways to think about these different types of cinemas that weren't just oppositional or binary, and that there might be something that they had in common at the same time that their differences were also important.

So, this was my exposure to Annette.[2] Anyone who ever spent time with her knew what a difficult person she was. Although I actually got along with her fairly well, it was difficult and fraught because she was intimidating. She was the only person who I was scared of in adult life and although there are many times when I found her just absolutely delightful to be around, I witnessed her treatment of other students when she delighted in terrifying them and occasionally reducing them to tears. Maybe it had a pedagogical method to it, but at the same time, that was something which I never wanted to do. And she became a kind of counterexample in that respect, but she also had a sense of irony and humor about her own persona.

## About Jay Leyda

Jay Leyda came to give a course three or four years after I had started as a graduate student. He did a course on the Biograph films of D.W. Griffith, and this became my dissertation topic and the topic of my first book. What he did was quite amazing. The first class was on the Biograph films of 1908. Jay was aware that all the films that Griffith had made from 1908 to 1912 were on deposit as paper prints at the Library of Congress which had converted them to 16mm prints. Therefore, one could watch all the films in order. So, we did a seminar where we were watching everything that Griffith did in 1908 week by week which was a very large number of films. He had made two or three films a week and we were no longer just talking about stylistics or theory, but one was actually seeing the week-to-week developments and also having a complete body of work to study. My dissertation was basically going through all of his films, which were almost 200 films, and just seeing what he had done. There are so many things about Jay that are extraordinary and that I've also written about.[3]

In the same way that Annette opened up a whole different realm of cinema, Jay opened up a whole different kind of methodology of careful historical research, paying close attention to chronology, to thoroughness, to completeness, and therefore making judgments and making ideas that were based very much on a thorough body of work and not simply on something that was selective or a canon one had inherited. We were looking at films ranging from acknowledged masterpieces to films that nobody had looked at and still probably very few people look at. This was a revelation. Jay had a thorough sense of what an archive was, the best word to describe him is probably 'historian'.

Years later, when I was being interviewed for a job at Stanford University the dean said, 'I see that you were a student of Jay Leyda's. I had some contact with him.' This was Arnold Rampersad, a scholar who has written a number of seminal biographies of African-Americans. He had written books on Langston Hughes, the Great African-American poet, and had interviewed Jay Leyda's wife Si-Lan. In the mid-1930s Jay had gone to Moscow to study with Eisenstein and was part of a

group of international artists and scholars who were thinking about the possibilities of a revolutionary form of art. There he met his future wife Si-Lan, a dancer, who was of Chinese and African-American ancestry but had been born and brought up in the Caribbean. She had been the lover of Langston Hughes, who was also in Moscow. So, Rampersad was interviewing her about Langston Hughes, and at one point she said, 'He wrote me wonderful love letters.' Of course, Rampersad as a biographer said, 'Where are they? Do you have them? Could I look at them?' And she said, 'Oh, I wasn't thinking about it as a historian. I was a young girl in love. He was my lover. Then I got another lover in Jay. I think I threw them away. I've lost them in any case. I regret it now.' And Rampersad said, 'Oh. And I regret it!' That evening, Rampersad got a phone call from Jay, who had been in the next room listening to the conversation, and he said, 'She thinks she's lost them. I have them.' And in fact, he had preserved all her love letters from Langston Hughes because that's the type of person he was. Arnold had these letters because Jay was somewhat illegitimately poaching on his wife and her love affairs.

Here is another story about Jay as a collector and archivist. Elena Pinto Simon, a very close friend of Jay, became his executor after his death. Ben Maddow, the great leftist scriptwriter in Hollywood, had called Elena soon after Jay died and said, 'I understand you're going to be his executor. Go through all his big art books and shake them and see what happens.' So she picked up all his large art books and out came these drawings by Eisenstein. In the thirties, Eisenstein would spend an evening with Jay, partly because he liked him, but also to practice his English. They would talk and Eisenstein, who was an extraordinary caricaturist, was also a total doodler. All the time that they were talking, he would be doodling on toilet paper. And as he finished, he would crumple up the toilet paper and throw it in the garbage. As soon as Eisenstein left, Jay would smooth them out and put them in a big art book. And this is what Elena had found. And I realised, these were Eisenstein drawings that nobody has seen except for her. And indeed, here on this Stalinist toilet paper that probably was giving people anal cancer for generations and that looked like it would survive a nuclear war were these little caprices by Eisenstein, and they were fascinating. A number of his drawings were semi-obscene. I think his drawings are admirable. They're often very derivative. You can see Picasso, you can see Matisse, you can see Cocteau, you can see that he's imitating

people. But these toilet paper doodles were not mindless, but also not intentional artworks. They had a freedom and spontaneity that was just amazing. I've never contacted Elena to ask what she's done with them. Maybe they are among Jay Leyda's papers at NYU. I know some people have gone through that material and have found some very interesting drawings. In fact, at the conference on Leyda held at Mount Holyoke College in 1971, Charles Musser showed a sketch of Leyda he found among his papers at the Tamiment Library which both Yuri Tsivian and I identified as a drawing by Eisenstein.



**Eileen Bowser, David Francis, Brighton 1978, and the paradigm shift in film studies**

**van den Oever:** For most of us, Brighton 1978 is a non-personal reference to what we have come to know as a paradigm shift in film studies, which brought about early film studies as we now know it. As you suggest in your first answer, early cinema studies was already very close to you. But we wanted to ask you from a personal perspective, what did the FIAF conference in Brighton 1978 bring you in terms of archive-driven research? Also direct contact with technologies, with devices, and perhaps also with cultural and media archaeologies? There are of course



many references in film studies to this particular moment in time. But our question is, from a personal perspective, what did the Brighton conference mean to you when you look back on it?

**Gunning:** Well, here we're dealing with another mentor – two in fact – that had an enormous effect on me. Eileen Bowser, the curator of film at the Museum of Modern Art; and along with her David Francis, who at that point was at the NFA (National Film Archive) in London. And the two of them basically had conceived of the Brighton project. They were going to have this project of looking at early film. In fact, Eileen, I think, entitled her essay for the FIAF catalogue 'Fresh Eyes', with this idea that they wanted to look at early film with fresh eyes. So, they went to recruit people – myself, Charlie Musser, and André Gaudreault, still graduate students, and a number of other people – to look at early films. Like Ledy's paper print Griffith project, the idea was to look at everything from a specific period, to be as complete as possible rather than selective. It had really a very specific topic: films from 1900 to 1906. This had broader ramifications. I'll get a little bit into why those dates.

The project was to look at fiction films in FIAF film archives from that period. So, in a way it was defining its borders very clearly. The reason to opt for 1900 was that they didn't want to get into the issue of cinema's invention. That period, in the 19th century, the first five years of the cinema, was very important, but they were going to avoid it due to all the controversies it could generate. We later went back to this period when Eileen Bowser held a seminar specifically on the years 1896-1900. But in this initial Brighton project, it was excluded. Secondly, Brighton was specifically focused on fiction film, which is almost indefinable. Maybe the easiest way to talk about it would be 'arranged' scenes; or maybe using the phrase that Méliès used: artificially arranged scenes; in other words, not actualities, not the Lumière type of film, but films in which something was obviously directed.

So rather than getting into the issue of 'is it fiction, is it not', this idea of an arrangement is, I think, particularly important. But then the other thing and, for me, the most important thing was to look at everything that existed in film archives. Now, things had been found since; and there were things that, of course, weren't in film

archives or weren't in the FIAF archive. So, there are things that weren't included. But the idea was to be very inclusive; not to create a canon; and particularly not to follow a canon, but to look at everything. And that's what we did. Eileen set it up; and Paul Spehr, brought a large number of films from the Library of Congress paper print collection. The screenings and discussions went on for several weeks. Screenings every day, for hours, and of everything that we had in American archives, which would be the largest portion because the Library of Congress, the paper print collection, had hundreds of films. But there were also many in the Museum of Modern Art, in the George Eastman House, and a variety of other American FIAF archives. We looked at hundreds of films and began thinking, okay, what are the issues here? And I wrote an essay on what I called the non-continuous style of early film in which I was trying to think about patterns of editing and how they had a different approach from later continuity editing. Just looking at the raw data, in effect, at the films themselves and trying to figure out what patterns suggested themselves. Of course, it was very, very exciting.

### **Previously film history, early film history, was a history of texts**

I guess the significance of Brighton was putting early cinema on the map and correcting the attitude that, basically, before Griffith there was not much of interest and that early cinema was kind of boring. Yet we found that, on the contrary, it was very, very exciting. Not so much at the conference but later on (at that point I was deep into my dissertation research on the Biograph film, which was about the kind of foundations of narrative cinema), I was trying to indicate that in early cinema, particularly before Griffith, there was a kind of non-narrative style, which eventually I called 'the cinema of attractions', that was much more dominant and had a different attitude towards what a shot was, towards what the relationship to the viewer was, towards what space was; a whole series of things that were radically different and an alternative, in an important sense, to the kind of myth that cinema had a kind of infancy, a kind of chaotic start, with interest only insofar as it began to lay the pattern for a later, narrative cinema. Yet, attractions were an alternative approach not focused on telling a story.

Now, this viewpoint, of course, like any polemical viewpoint, I had to somewhat modify. My emphasis ever since has been on the interaction between what I call attractions and narrative; the two are very different, but they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, and there are many films that combine them as well as films that keep them separate. So that was what Brighton did for me. Although, if we're getting down to what would be the essence of the experience, it was the sense of total immersion, of looking at the actual material itself, and in enormous numbers.

**van den Oever:** You didn't mention devices, though.

**Gunning:** This was not an issue at all for Brighton. There was not very much of an interest in them, I mean exclusively in them as a separate thing. Many years later, I took an interest in them, especially when I was at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, where they had a collection, partly based on material held by the great German collector Werner Nekes who had sold part of his collection to the Getty, supposedly secondary stuff, but still it was amazing. At the Getty, I looked at all the material and then a year later we had a special event where I brought in filmmakers and scholars and a variety of people to spend two days talking about the devices and playing with them and thinking about them. So that was an interesting point because the emphasis shifted. We can almost put it this way: previously, film history, early film history, was a history of texts. You know, at first students like me read, they primarily read, the printed secondary sources. We looked at some films, but the primary approach still was very much part of a print-based culture. Preparing for Brighton we hardly paid attention to what had been published in secondary sources. Of course, we had already read them, but reviewing them was not what our project is. We're going to look at films, look at films very fully and exclusively. Then later, we looked at the devices themselves, and I don't think it's even a parallel moment, although the moment in the Getty was a kind of exemplary case. In other words, we moved through stages of different emphasis: from print sources to software (the films themselves), and finally hardware (the devices by which they were shown).

**van den Oever:** That's a very interesting development. And of course, you see rich reflections on the material and on this sense of total immersion during the

[Brighton] screenings itself. You didn't yet mention the profound historiographical critique that sprang from this, and that André Gaudreault and you have phrased and published later.

**Gunning:** Right. Yeah, absolutely. At Brighton there was the week of viewing. Then there were a couple of days of conference at the very end of Brighton. We presented papers that presented our views of the material including Charlie Musser, André Gaudreault, myself, and a number of other people. You know, we were trying to make sense of it all. For instance, my concept of the cinema of attractions actually came a year or two later. My first paper delivered at the Brighton conference dealt with the 'non-continuous' style of early film, focused mainly on early patterns of editing. I still embrace that term, but later I thought, why was 'non-continuous' editing important? What's at the core of this issue of non-continuity? And I realised that it's not just the formal aspect of continuity or non-continuity in editing, but a global difference between films which primarily are designed to attract attention, of foregrounding the act of showing, which is attraction, while narrative is a different type of thing with a different style. A number of things led to this conclusion. I spent a year in 1984-85 teaching at Harvard and had a young man named Adam Simon as a teaching assistant, who later became a Hollywood scriptwriter. Actually, through talking with him, we came up with the idea, the term cinema of attractions, which partly came from Eisenstein's idea of a montage of attractions. Eisenstein's avant-garde concept of breaking a play or film into moments of non-continuous attraction was very important to me.

So, as you say, it isn't just the [FIAF] event, it's the aftermath of dealing with it that gave birth to the cinema of attractions. Discussions with Andre Gaudreault were essential for developing the idea. And then, of course, that led to André and I collaborating on a number of things such as dealing with the beginnings of editing, and then also some kind of debate or polemics between myself and Charlie Musser. He initially disputed the idea of attraction. He still wanted to cling to the idea of narration as the primary motivation for editing, although I think he acknowledged eventually that at least there was some relevance to the idea of attraction. Annette Michelson's influence, her courses on Eisenstein certainly came in here.

### **The dialectics between theory and history**

**van den Oever:** We were also saying to each other that Brighton brought you closer to early cinema and it brought you, coming from New York, closer to Europe. We don't know how much you traveled before, but it seems to us that the visit also brought you to Paris, to film scholars in the UK and in France and several other countries. And that's also an exposure that seems to have been relevant to you, has it not?

**Gunning:** Certainly. I mean, we're talking about the period of the late seventies and early eighties, Brighton was '78. And so, this all coincides with the academisation of film studies in the United States, in Britain, and Europe; particularly the explosion of film theory in the seventies, you know, the models of semiology and the general desire to create a sort of grand theory of cinema. And what happened in Brighton partly was dialectical in the truest sense of the term, I think, because in a way we were historians looking at data. We were looking at empirical data, documents, films primarily; but we were informed by the theoretical perspective, particularly informed by the kind of close attention to issues of editing and so on typical of early Christian Metz. Of course, André had studied with Metz. And although I met Metz a couple of times, I never had a relationship with him. But there was definitely a difference between earlier historians, even Jay [Leyda], and what we were doing. We were partly working theoretically, we wanted to expose the theory underlying early film practice. The change was that we suddenly submitted theory to the discourse of history and to the experience of history. This was very, very important. When the first essays that André and I co-authored, although it was in French and André, I would say, was the main author, the title, which I think actually was mine, was...

**van den Oever:** Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History?[4]

**Gunning:** Yes. There are a couple of very specific things in it, for instance, Christian Metz. I'm a great admirer of the early work of Metz.[5] I've just been looking at his work again, at how precise it is. But it also made historical assumptions, you know, he assumes cinema is a narrative art by its very nature. That was one thing we

discovered by looking at films from 1900 and 1906. We thought, 'Narrative as primary? Maybe, maybe not.' And what do we mean by a narrative art? For Metz, this wasn't even a theoretical claim. It was an assumption. And it was that type of assumption that was challenged, a challenge that we felt film history gave us the right to make.

### **Early cinema and the avant-gardes**

Likewise, in the seventies, the grand theory of the meta-psychology of the film spectator, the subject of cinema, had developed. I think the French theorists all assumed that all film viewing was like looking at movies in Paris in the sixties in a movie theater. We were interested in saying film is not only theoretical but historical; there were other ways, other ways films were made, other ways they were shown. This led to the issue of different cinematic devices and the assumption that a film subject existed that ahistorical, beyond history, was totally questionable. It was not an assumption that went without saying. The film viewer or subject of cinema was not constructed either in our cognitive structure, the brain, or in the ideological structures of society. It was something that was changeable and transformed.

A figure that was enormously influential in all of this for me was Noël Burch. Burch, of course, had been one of the first people to look at early cinema and probe it for its roots, seeking out this kind of theoretical film subject. His attention to film and to these questions was an important influence, but my answers were rather different. For him, early cinema already had this kind of [classical] film subject contained in them. Admittedly, he would say: not quite formed. And I thought, well, maybe some other possibility was there, maybe not just unformed, but an alternative, something else. That partly constituted my interest in the cinema of attractions: to relate early cinema to the avant-garde and to indicate that there were ways that early cinema was admittedly very different from the avant-garde, but that it was in many ways more related to some of its practices than to classical Hollywood cinema. So, these are the dialectics of what I think was a kind of paradigm shift of looking at history. You know, I do worry that in some ways we have lost sight of this interrelation of history and theory a little bit. It's almost like we

have returned to the divide between empirical film historians and film theorists and, you know, they don't talk to each other in the same way. Part of my interest has been to continue that dialogue, which I think is interrupted, in the sense that it has not been finished and has not been directed to some of the possible – I won't say conclusions, but developments or lines of inquiry which I think are still vital.

**Chicago: Walter Benjamin, Miriam Hansen, and the issue of modernity**

**Hagener:** We have talked about two places now: New York and Brighton. There is a third place that we would like to mention – Chicago, and what it means in intellectual terms for you. You moved to Chicago in the early 1990s and at least to me as a distant observer, the University of Chicago stands for a specific kind of approach towards visibility and history, if we think about colleagues such as Miriam Hansen and Yuri Tsivian, but also W.J.T. Mitchell as a scholar and as editor of *Critical Inquiry*. How was this whole configuration of people and institutions and of a kind of interdisciplinary critical historiography of visibility, if you want to call it that, important for you?

**Gunning:** The central figure for me at Chicago was Miriam Hansen, whom I first encountered in New York and who was doing a fellowship at Yale at that point. In any case, we were at a conference at Yale, and I had just written the 'Cinema of Attractions' article and she read it. I was particularly interested in having contact with Miriam because of her intense involvement with Walter Benjamin and her inaugural essay in *New German Critique* on Benjamin. We exchanged those essays. Both of us were extremely excited by the other's work, even though we had different approaches – Miriam is mainly a theorist and I'm mainly a historian. We were recognising things of relevance in each other's work.

And soon after that she went to the University of Chicago, and not long after that I went to Northwestern in Evanston, very close to Chicago. And so, we saw each other more frequently. And she began to work on bringing me to the University of Chicago. Indeed, Miriam brought both myself and Yuri Tsivian to Chicago to form a film program. There was a sense for the three of us that we were – and it goes back

to what I was talking about – that we were devoted to the idea of bringing together in a Benjaminian sense the specificity of history and theory.

What was exciting to me in Benjamin's work was this idea of looking not just at large categories of theory or just the empirical data and patterns of history, but to look at the very specific practices of cinema and of other aspects – this issue of modernity. Even though we all had different orientations in some ways, I think we were all interested in exploring the idea of film as something that you had to look at both historically and theoretically. So, we saw ourselves as a third paradigm in film study. The first paradigm had been this very French and British approach of grand theory, and the meta-psychology of the film subject which had become ingrained in certain American institutions. The alternative and opposition came out of the University of Wisconsin at Madison. David Bordwell and a number of people at Wisconsin were saying, no, no, no, that type of grand theory is too vague and too all embracing. And what we need is piecemeal theory (a term I think Noël Carroll introduced), and we need to look at history and archives, to be very empiricist in putting these things together.

But at Chicago we saw ourselves as the third alternative – these two things actually are only interesting when they're brought together, and not just as a kind of synthesis, but as a kind of methodology of looking for the theoretical implications of specific practices in film. There was Yuri's intense awareness and knowledge of both Soviet and Russian cinema and of other aspects of silent film in particular; and Miriam's interest, particularly in the Frankfurt School and the issues that Benjamin and Kracauer had raised. And then my interest in both early cinema and the American avant-garde, and also in Hollywood genres and stylistics. That's how I would characterise the Chicago context. We never had a manifesto or an agenda, but then all of us were teaching and our students were in many ways essential for developing the ideas and for carrying out elements of this approach.

**Hagener:** And what about W.J.T. Mitchell as a scholar working on questions of the image, but also editing an important journal such as *Critical Inquiry*.



**Gunning:** He is a good friend and an important interlocutor. Although he's interested in film, it's kind of a secondary thing to him. He's much more involved in the idea of the image. But speaking personally, in relation to this book on the invention of cinema that I've been working on (which is a little bit, I hope not stillborn, but at least on pause) what has been very influential is his idea of what the image is. I'll just give you a brief example: one of my main points in the last 20 years has been to emphasise the uniqueness of the moving image and how important this is as a technical and aesthetic and perceptual innovation. But it's funny because with Mitchell, when I say this, he answered: 'I'm sorry, excuse me, all images move. Paintings and still photography – they're all moving.' And I say, 'I know what you're talking about. There is a kind of movement and that's very important, but it isn't perceived movement and that's what film introduces.' So, in other words, we have a kind of debate there, which has helped me to sharpen my ideas, but to some extent, I'm not sure he's convinced. To some extent, it's more a general large category, but the idea of the image, which I'm very interested in, the historical specificity and technical specificity of the device, is the moving image.

**van den Oever:** Yes. You've written quite a bit about the historical and technical specificity of the moving image, of course. In fact, in your recent lecture at Groningen,[6] you pointed at some very specific, evocative, and provocative ideas about how to approach the problem of cinema being so important in the 20th century in these terms. This provides another question I would love to go into more deeply. But I think that for this interview it would be good to ask a different question, one which in as far as I know you are rarely asked, which is that you seem to be very invested in writing and inspired by the writing process, whereas we can easily defend the claim that many academics don't like writing all that much. But reading you from early on, I would say there is something going on in your writing that goes together well with your thinking process and is closely related to it. Well, you have Viktor Shklovsky as a favorite writer too.[7] You know how he tended to go back to a crucial idea or thought and would approach it all over again in a very different context, while writing about something very different. He would return to a certain idea and probe it again. Some of his ideas he would continue to return to for 60 years. Could you tell us a bit more about your personal relation to the writing process?

**Gunning:** Well, you're right. I don't know if anyone has ever asked me about that. And it is very important and very personal. I don't mean private in the sense of secret, but I do mean intimate. Writing is very important to me. Probably it's true of a lot of scholars. You scratch and there's the hidden desire to have actually been a novelist. I wrote some poetry, luckily unpublished. The play of words is my great delight. The interest, of course, is in taking ideas and figuring out the words that articulate what these ideas are. That's why I'm in this business.

### **Inspired by the writing process**

I think for any writer, it's true that you can be delighted with the process of writing. And then the next minute it looks just horrible. I think with every essay I've written, I've had a moment where I thought, this is wonderful, this is profound – and in another moment, this is ridiculous, this is terrible. Hopefully the truth is somewhere in between. But it's curious. There are a couple of things I might just mention about this. I do have a strong, we can say devotion, a commitment to trying to be as clear as possible. But in the seventies, when cinema became an academic topic, its models very often were terribly obscure, both from France and from Britain, and their acolytes in America. That was something that disturbed me because I really felt that writing should be clear.

Now, it's maybe a little bit of a background that my father was a journalist. So, he was a writer, but at some point, I guess during my early childhood, he moved from writing for newspapers to writing about writing. My first book was about clear news writing as he actually wrote a book back in the fifties called *The Techniques of Clear Writing*.<sup>[8]</sup> He invented a system which, in fact, for a long time was on people's computers. It was called the Gunning Fog Index, which was a way of testing how clear your writing was.<sup>[9]</sup> I knew what his principles were, and I knew what his process was. There were many ways it certainly had an effect on me. At the same time, though, I should emphasise, and this was not contradictory to things that he believed in, too, but I also thought that writing should be playful. For instance, someone whom I greatly admire, although have often had a lot of disagreements with, is David Bordwell. I think his writing is very clear – and occasionally a bit bland, you know, particularly his kind of textbook writing. He and I have

even talked about this a little bit, that I believe that writing should be more playful. David is in fact an extremely witty fellow!

As much as I had a problem with the obscurity of the critical writing in the seventies that was coming from France and England, there were ways to it, and I had some admiration for it, too, or at least felt that there were things that worked and were interesting to learn from. For instance, someone very interesting to me was Steven Heath. I only met him a couple of times. Colin McCabe and Adam Lowenstein arranged a discussion between us one day at the University of Pittsburgh (which I think Adam actually transcribed). I often found Heath's writing very difficult, although interesting. But talking to him, I noticed patterns in his speech that made his writing suddenly comprehensible. He paused in ways that were parenthetical. If I began reading his stuff and hearing his voice, it made a lot more sense. I guess I would say that what I delight in is in writing exactly, the play of language, hopefully making it as expressive as possible, which means both: clear, not obscure, but being willing to risk a kind of defamiliarisation.

**van den Oever:** Yes. To provoke and evoke. Beyond the clarity, in the end.

**Gunning:** Yes. Definitely. When I write an essay, the issue of the writing is as important to me as anything that is being written. That's the wrong way to put it, because there's no difference between the two. The other thing, though, and it's funny because I thought at first that maybe you were asking about this: I'm very interested in the idea of writing, the material aspect. In fact, I value very much the essay I did for *Critical Inquiry* on comics and caricature[10] and the idea of drawing, calligraphy, and writing as interrelated. This is something I'm very interested in exploring. The great French anthropologist and archeologist André Leroi-Gourhan brings together writing and gesture and the physicality of all this and the interaction between writing and pictorial expression. This relates to some of the most profound questions about cinema, going back to the early theory of Vachel Lindsay seeing cinema as cinematography, as the writing of motion. Lindsay is a writer who I take seriously, even though he's hard to take seriously at this point. I have written on his theory about cinema as hieroglyphics, which is partly just kind of crazy.[11] He actually thought that he could look at Egyptian hieroglyphics and

make a movie out of them. But I think his ideas also contained great insights – maybe I should say intuitions. He thought that in 1916, America was a new modern society with a hieroglyphic civilisation. And he saw this not only in movies, but in billboards, advertising, and comic strips: this kind of idea that there was a new kind of picture writing that was emerging and, you know, it is so true today that no one notices it, or no one thinks to comment on it as anything other than an obvious fact. I think it's important to kind of think that through. So that's another aspect of this idea of what writing is in relation to cinema. Miriam Hansen picked up on that in *Babel and Babylon* of course. I don't mean that she was drawing it from me, only that we were in a strong conversation when she was working on the book.

### **The invention of cinema**

**Hagener:** I was going to follow up on what Annie was asking and talk more about publications, about the specific methods of publication. You mentioned your book on Griffith, and the other book that you've published is on Fritz Lang, a book that I admire a great deal. But apart from that your work has been published in articles, which might be typical for a young field like film studies was, maybe still is. You mentioned earlier an anthology of some of your essays that is about to come out. I am surprised that it wasn't earlier, because in a way it seems so obvious. So I was curious why it never happened before? But I was also thinking, is there a particular way about your thinking that is maybe more attuned to the essay as opposed to the book-length study? Or is this rather how it happened as you were going along?

**Gunning:** It's a very good question and one that I often get and that makes me slightly uncomfortable, which is funny because I know that it's a compliment. Daniel Morgan, my former student and now actually the chair of the department in Chicago, is editing this anthology. And in fact, we just got a note today about the illustrations and the permissions. So hopefully, it's coming out fairly soon. Although I realise that getting the illustrations together is going to be more of a pain than I thought it was. But anyway, in his introduction that he wrote to the anthology, which is really wonderful, Daniel says that Tom Gunning is more in tune with the essay than the full-length book. In fact, I wrote a little preface which he edited,

and he added a line which I objected to, which was saying something like, at heart I am an essay writer. And although in the preface I talked about how important the essay is to me, it makes me a little uncomfortable because I would much rather have the big book that puts everything together. But there's no question – it was a charitable comment on your part, that young fields generate essays. There is also this sense that essays are more about writing than just about the argument. And there certainly is a way that the essay allows me to make the point through writing as much as through argument, and that I delight in that. There's also, of course, the basic idea of the essay which we have through Montaigne, and in an interesting way Godard, of thinking about the essay, the essay as an attempt, as an experiment.

And I do feel that all of the essays are kind of probes and even in parts will, if I were very honest here, contradict other essays, although sometimes they would agree. It may be a process beset by foggy thinking or in development, but more often hopefully that it's a slightly different angle of approach in one essay than another. And so, you know, one thing rather than another will be emphasised. And particularly, since for me the whole issue of narrative is very ambivalent, because in many ways I am strongly committed to the argument that in cinema there are other things than narrative and that narrative should never be considered as what Metz called the 'royal road', you know, the predetermined pathway of cinema. And yet at the same time, I am fascinated by narrative. I love it. And so it's that kind of dialectic that fascinates me. Essays do allow me to explore approaches rather than conclusions in a certain way. So, I think maybe that is an answer to what you're saying.

You know, I have written and published over 150 essays, and there are probably another 50 that haven't been published, and there are two books. But there is a certain way that I love the books because they are kind of a totality. And then there is this long book that I've been working on for more than a decade, which I sometimes call 'The Invention of Cinema'. Parts of that book have become essays, as the book has never been published, never been finished. And there is a kind of feeling on my part at points of, wow, maybe this is better as a kind of feeding ground for essays rather than as a large tome, in that kind of sense. Okay, here is what the invention of cinema meant.

**van den Oever:** What you say seems very apt to me. It comes close to the way I read your work. So it makes absolute sense.

**Gunning:** That makes me happy.

**van den Oever:** We have a question which we particularly kept in mind for the younger readership of NECSUS. That is to say, not only the younger readership, but we think they would love us to ask what you think about the future of the discipline.

**Gunning:** I would have to say this is very important to me, because if I am an historian, it's because I'm interested not in the past but in the future. That is to say I'm interested in the past as it opens up the future. And this is a theme that I've mentioned several times. I often have related it to an end. Someone told me about Romania under Ceausescu, the last Stalinist type of tyrant who was still involved in the process of rewriting history so that there were always these new correctives of what the history of the revolution did in Romania. You know, people who would disappear from the official record or accounts, like Trotsky did under Stalin, or people who would be elevated, events that would be omitted and things like that. Supposedly, a Romanian intellectual once secretly said: 'The only thing we can count on is the future, because the past is always changing in the corridors of power.' That was meant utterly ironically. Yet, it is actually, for me, kind of a motto. The past is always changing.

### **Finding roads that were not taken**

You know, I looked at early cinema differently than other historians did. I think a lot of historians recognise my view now at least partially. But when I prepared for Brighton, I saw these films differently than say Sadoul or Mitry had, and I have very little doubt that this was partly because I grew up watching television. Rather than thinking about movies, as I think the French theorists did in terms of the movie theaters they went to on the left bank – you went to a dark, silent place and saw a movie that was a narrative, and it was coherent – I was used to the idea of

turning channels, and all of this made the idea of attractions a much more natural kind of thing for me than it was for people who had just grown up in theaters. So, I believe that not only is your present experience going to influence the way that you look at the past, not just in the sense of your mindset changing, but really that new things become relevant, new things become exposed, almost like stuff that's found when sea levels recede, revealing layers that were not visible before. Therefore, I think that whereas many film historians have a kind of basis in nostalgia – and I'm not denying that I love to think about the past and have romantic investments in the past in some ways – it's not what drives me. What drives me much more is the sense of finding the roots of what I'm seeing and even the roots of possibility in the past that may blossom in the future. You know, finding roads that weren't taken.

**van den Oever:** Are you thinking of cultural archaeology or media archaeology?

**Gunning:** I think media archaeology is an important approach and is in many ways influential, although it's not primarily a term that I've used. But, indeed, it is something that I'm very sympathetic to and very impressed and influenced by. But what is important to me is this idea of things that were maybe not done constantly. I find this, of course, in Benjamin, that you look at the history and see these unrealised possibilities as being as important as anything that was realised. I'm very interested in the term virtual – in the concept of the virtual as the possible, and this being something that is often more important than the actual. I think there is a way I'm trying to develop, particularly in the [Groningen] lecture that you just mentioned, of thinking of cinema as innovative, a radically new type of image; and that that radical newness is something that has continued to develop and continued to create new situations, many of which we aren't aware of because we live in them. They're kind of natural. We don't necessarily reflect on them, but that's what history allows us to do: reflect on our present and our possible futures.

No question, there are ways that I regret the demise of the projected 35mm image. There are things that were rich about it that I really value. At the same time, I also value the enormous range of things available now and the different contexts in which images are flooded. You know, they are our environment now. What does

that mean? Like anything, it has dystopian possibilities, but it also has utopian possibilities. And the thing is, it's important to keep track of both. And I do mean both. I mean, I don't want us to be optimistic optimists of utopian possibilities. Some new media theories are not interested in the dystopian, but only see the bright utopian possibilities. Well, the images that we're getting have new possibilities, for good and evil. That newness is, to me, still something very, very important. Admittedly, I'm more likely to look at old movies than I am to spend hours in video games and YouTube. There is so much there that it's hard to see what's good and what's boring. I'm sure this was true in 1908, you know, finding the good films that were made in 1908 would have been very difficult because so many were bad. Not that I want primarily to promote evaluative criteria here, but my point is just precisely that I find the sense of innovation, of making it new, that basic impulse of the modernist movement is still relevant. Even though some things that are happening worry me.

Generally, I have to admit my view on the nature of our situation is much more apocalyptic than hopeful. But nonetheless, I think the technologies of imagery and sound are important and extraordinary. I'm more an expert on imagery than sound. The only reason to be a historian is to uncover the roots of those things and find new possibilities so that the future is a wonder, this wonderful thing.

You know the famous quote by Hollis Frampton. He was not only one of my favorite filmmakers, but also one of the most profound thinkers about cinema that I've ever encountered. He said: The reason that Lumière felt in 1895 or 1896, if he ever really said it, that cinema had no future, it's because it had no past and we only have a future when we have a past. It's exactly that circularity of future and past that is important. You know, cinema was not a failure, nor is it an antiquarian curiosity. We need to recognise that what we will find valuable in the past is what we can use in the future.



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## Notes

- [1] Thanks to Charlotte Bösling for assistance with the transfer, transcription, and editing of this interview.
- [2] Tom Gunning's tribute to Annette Micelson after her death is 'Film's Radical Aspirations and Primitive Origins: Lessons from Annette Michelson', Tel Aviv University Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, International Conference Adventures in Film Studies In *Memory of Annette Michelson*, May 2019.
- [3] Tom Gunning, 'Jay Leyda, Hanna Frank and the Erotics of the Discovery of Details', a paper given at the conference A Curious Man: The Life and Work of Jay Leyda, November 2017, Mount Holyoke College, Hadley, Massachusetts.
- [4] Gaudreault & Gunning.
- [5] Metz 1966.
- [6] The lecture was titled 'The Cinematic Image: A Radically Novel Form' and it was presented online by Tom Gunning to the research theme group Arts, Medium, and Moving Images from the University of Groningen on 7 June 2022.
- [7] van den Oever & Gunning 2020.
- [8] Gunning 1952.
- [9] See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunning\\_fog\\_index](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunning_fog_index).
- [10] Gunning 2014.
- [11] Gunning 2015.