



Director Ross McElwee in a new screening room in Sever Hall. The projected image is from his autobiographical film *Bright Leaves*.

Cinema Veritas

IN THE CARPENTER CENTER theater last May, a seminar-size class in “Filming Science” is scattered among the seats, waiting for an afternoon screening. A “hybrid, mutant” course given by Peter Galison, Mallinckrodt professor of the history of science and of physics, and documentarian Robb Moss, Arnheim lecturer on filmmaking in the department of visual and environmental studies (VES), it’s a semester-long “conversation,” says Moss, “between reading, making, and looking.” Students watch *cinéma vérité* classics such as *Near Death* (Frederick Wiseman’s six-hour documentary on life in intensive care), *pe-ruse Michel Foucault’s Birth of the Clinic*, and craft short films on subjects ranging from plastic surgery to designing robots.

Today the class is viewing the first act of *Secrecy*, a feature-length documentary-in-progress about the vast world of government secrecy—co-directed by their two professors. “We wouldn’t be doing *Secrecy* if we weren’t teaching this class,” says Moss. The idea originated with Galison’s article “Removing Knowledge,” which argues that the sum of open knowledge is far smaller than the “classified universe” of perhaps a trillion pages (200 times the holdings of the Library of Congress). The film investigates the architecture and logic of the enormous classified-data industry in the wake of 9/11 tensions between national security and open democracy.

The challenge of making *Secrecy* is profound. There’s “not a more visually inert subject than secrecy,” says Moss. “Secrets are hidden, out of view. Film is about *seeing*. What to film? What does secrecy *look* like?” To make the invisible visible, he and Galison are using interviews with prominent national security figures and critics (shot with *chiaroscuro* lighting to convey the mystery/revelation dichotomy), music, news clips, headlines, and footage of



Long “underground,”

Harvard’s unique

film program shines

anew in our

image-driven world.



by Harbour Fraser Hodder

the life cycle of secrets: vats of shredded documents are compressed into bales to become recycled paper. But they’re also employing animation: an endless row of file cabinets shutting one after another, for example. To represent documents being declassified, thick black lines hiding censored texts erase themselves, revealing the words beneath.

It is fitting that a film about truth, knowledge, and what should or shouldn’t be seen or known has emerged from Harvard’s film culture. *Secrecy*—in its hybrid beginnings in cinema and science, its co-auteurship, its synergistic use of visual languages to interrogate the world—itself reveals the secrets of the University’s unique film community. Here, films are documents of artifice *and* truth. Here Plato’s “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and art finds resolution in what we might call *cinema veritas*.

VES situates filmmaking in a long documentary tradition, with roots in the visual arts, nonfiction *cinéma vérité*, and philosophy. For 40 years, the department has developed generations of auteurs—directors and filmmakers with signature styles—such as Mira Nair ’79 (*Salaam Bombay! Monsoon Wedding*), Darren Aronofsky ’91 (*Pi, Requiem for a Dream*), and Jehane Noujaim ’96 (*Startup.com, Control Room*), yet its film program has been largely invisible. It’s hidden away in the basements and “attic” of two of the most magnificent pieces of architecture on campus—Le Corbusier’s modernist Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts and H.H. Richardson’s Romanesque Sever Hall. But a long-awaited film-studies concentration, recent renovations that have created new production

space in Sever, and a proposed doctoral program in film and visual studies are finally bringing this subterranean jewel aboveground.

Light and Communication

"It's AN ENORMOUSLY EXCITING TIME for the arts at Harvard," says VES department chair Marjorie Garber, Kenan professor of English and American literature and language and of visual and environmental studies. Harvard may be "a little belated" in having a film-studies program, but "we have other unique advantages. We have a remarkable film-studies faculty, we have wonderful students, we have the Harvard Film Archive, and we have makers and artists on site. The time is certainly right for the development of film studies here on the undergraduate and graduate levels."

The history, theory, and analysis of films as cultural and aesthetic "texts" became a legitimate academic field in the late 1960s, leading to a 1970s boom in cinema-studies programs across America—but not at Harvard. Although the College ventured into film studies through a General Education course and subsequent courses at the Carpenter Center, there was no degree program. The University "skipped a whole moment of film studies being housed in literature departments or its own special department," says professor of visual and environmental studies Giuliana Bruno. Many campuses now have film studies, but fewer offer much filmmaking, and those that offer both frequently do so in different departments or schools. Harvard is "almost unique in having film study and making 'cohabiting,'" says Hooker professor of visual arts Alfred Guzzetti, a documentary and experimental filmmaker who has taught in VES since 1971.

"What's also unusual about the Harvard configuration is that filmmaking was here first," says Guzzetti, "[almost four decades] before film studies—which is historically curious at Harvard," where theory generally precedes practice. Art history has been a department in the College since 1875, but art *making* was offered only sparingly until the early 1960s, when Harvard founded a Bauhaus-influenced program of education in "visual studies," including studio arts, the designed environment, film, photography, and the then-new medium of television, as well as in history and theory. VES has offered an honors-only concentration with programs in studio art, environmental studies, and film/video production since 1969, and a VES track in the history and theory of film was approved in 2004.

In the film-studies program, students learn how to "read" films as complex historical and aesthetic artifacts. D.W. Griffith's Civil

War epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), might be analyzed as a cinematic masterpiece of framing, continuity editing, *mise en scène*, and narrative structure, as well as a palimpsest of U.S. racial history: its positive depiction of the KKK was highly controversial but didn't extinguish its popularity. Students examine national cinemas, film theory, and special topics such as film and philosophy, or the human body, or architecture. And someone interested in, say, Japanese film must also take other courses about Japan. "[That] is a way of making absolutely clear to students that the world isn't all filmed," says assistant professor of visual and environmental studies and of English J.D. Connor, who is also assistant director of undergraduate studies for film studies. "It's not that film is inter-

disciplinary. It's that its discipline involves the representation of something."

The film/video academic track teaches the creative and technical rigors of such representation through hands-on *making*. Students master the fundamentals of film, video, and digital media through nonfiction and animation assignments, then pursue ambitious projects in documentary, fiction, digital art, and animation. In "Film Production," each student develops a script in the fall while learning the technical aspects of 16mm filmmaking, sound recording, editing, and sound mixing; in the spring, they prepare, shoot, and edit a 10-minute film based on their scripts. Students inform their practice with film history and theory as well as a studio art such as painting or sculpture, but most of all they *produce*. Some productions have a life beyond the Yard: five recent animated shorts were shown at the New England Film and Video Festival in October. Says animation artist Lorelei Pepi, a visiting assistant professor of VES, "The goal of the concentration is to create that

process of experimentation across borders."

"Our studios are really more like laboratories than anything else," notes Garber, who is also director of the Carpenter Center. Students need all-hours access for collaborative projects involving film technology. "It's very analogous to how some of the sciences work," she says, delighted that the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) has renovated Sever's cramped quarters to accommodate screening rooms, animation and computer studios, a video library, and office space "for our expanded film faculty." Film/video and film-studies concentrators shuttle across Quincy



Robert Gardner with the Dani people in the highlands of New Guinea in 1961. Using a 16mm Arriflex camera, Gardner was shooting footage for his celebrated documentary, *Dead Birds*.

COURTESY OF ROBERT GARDNER



Stanley Cavell (left) and Robert Gardner, old friends and dual patriarchs of film studies and filmmaking at Harvard, stand at the ramp of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

Street between Sever, for production and seminars, and the Carpenter Center, for lectures and screenings. The Sever redesign unites animation and live-action editing, where state-of-the-art digital editing tools like Final Cut Pro software allow animation and live action in the same scene. Will this facilitate more cross-fertilization? Says Pepi, “That’s absolutely the hope.”

Cross-fertilization defines the department. “VES was founded to create that conversation between critics and makers,” says Garber. That longstanding dialogue, she adds, “has been for us an enormously productive coming together of mutual interests.” Says Eric Rentschler, Porter professor of Germanic languages and literatures and a specialist in German cinema, “What makes us distinctive is that film studies at Harvard both emanate from VES” and also incorporate courses from many other departments. Should the proposed doctoral program become reality, “What will make [it] unique, and maybe unreplicable anywhere else,” agrees Connor, “is the tight relationship between our filmmakers and our faculty of film studies.”

The Harvard Film Archive is another unusual resource. The HFA is a *cinémathèque* in both senses of the word: as a library it collects and preserves rare, independent, and classic films for teaching, research, and public access; as a theater it exhibits this vast collection for students, scholars, and the wider Harvard and New England communities through its

prizewinning film series and through lectures by filmmakers. Very few U.S. universities boast such an institution, which together with Harvard’s museums and libraries offers unrivaled opportunities for new scholarship.

The interdisciplinary film-studies faculty—with its “built-in intellectual promiscuity,” says Rentschler—distinguishes Harvard’s approach as well. It includes scholars from the comparative literature, history of art and architecture, and East Asian, Slavic, Germanic, and Romance languages and literatures departments, to name a few. Because film is a “syncretic and hybrid art form,” Rentschler says, “we see film studies as something that reaches out in a number of different and not always obvious directions. We want to consider the different roles that film plays within society, culture, and history, as well as the world at large.” With the undergraduate track in place, this diverse faculty is pursuing a cross-discipline graduate program

that would also teach skills to meet the exploding interest in “the visual” in doctoral projects in other departments.

At any level, this generative conversation between filmmakers and film scholars is fulfilling the promise of the original name for the film/photography/video workshops in VES. As former department chair and Carpenter Center director Robert Gardner remembers, “My title was coordinator of ‘Light and Communication,’ which I loved.”

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The Philosophy of the Camera

"FILM STARTED AT HARVARD in the basement of the Peabody Museum" in 1955, says Gardner. After finishing at the College, he made short documentaries, including one on the Kwakiutl nation in British Columbia, before returning to Harvard for graduate study in anthropology; the innovative film seminar he led was nominally given by the director of the museum, because Gardner was still a student. "Once a week from 7 P.M. to 10 P.M. about half a dozen people would come from all over the University," he recalls, "and we'd look at films, and we'd talk about how to make them, and even try to make some."

At the time, documentary film was beginning to change. Ever since 1922, Robert Flaherty's classic *Nanook of the North* had defined ethnographic film as staged documentary. But the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology had 200,000 feet of observational film by the late, eminent filmmaker John Marshall '55, then a young man who had been shooting film on the Peabody's Africa expeditions with his family since he was 18. The museum enlisted Gardner to help shape this material.

But Gardner envisioned more than a film. He proposed that the

Peabody establish a "research unit" that would "use cinema as a way to interrogate and to explain the world," he says. "The idea was to make films that were as significant as possible and as penetrating as possible about the human condition. That sounds like a piece of windbagery, but it was my great desire to apply visual means and visual methods—a visual language—to the expression of any ideas that can be gained from the observation of people."

The Peabody agreed, creating the Film Study Center (FSC) as its "visual wing" in 1956 and naming Gardner (still a graduate student) as director, a position he held until 1997. (Gardner joined the faculty in the late 1950s, and President Nathan M. Pusey appointed him to the standing committee to help plan a program for the arts and filmmaking at Harvard. Later Gardner personally endowed the FSC, which is now affiliated with VES and still supports nonfiction filmmaking from its new quarters in Sever.) In 1957 Gardner accompanied Marshall to the Kalahari Desert and helped edit the center's first production: *The Hunters*, Marshall's film about a giraffe hunt by !Kung Bushmen, which became one of the most popular documentaries since *Nanook*.

In 1960, Gardner embarked on his own film project in the

"IT'S ALI BABA'S CAVE," says internationally renowned filmmaker Dušan Makavejev of the Harvard Film Archive (HFA), "thousands of brilliant, fantastic prints, many of them very rare." Says Bruce Jenkins, former Cavell curator of the HFA, now dean of undergraduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, "The Harvard Film Archive has one of the premier collections of independent film in the country." For independent filmmaker Andrew Bujalski '98, the HFA was "a tremendous education—films that I'm not going to see anywhere else theatrically." Beloved by students, scholars, and makers of cinema, the HFA is at the heart of Harvard film culture.

The University wanted a film library as early as 1927. The Graduate School of Business had asked sometime Hollywood producer Joseph Kennedy '12 to organize a course on the movie business with Cecil B. De Mille and others. The just-opened Fogg Art Museum, hoping to create a first-of-its-kind film collection, negotiated a film library agreement with the producers. As Peter Decherney writes in *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, this was "the perfect meeting of commerce and art"—for Hollywood. But because the producers refused to relinquish control of their films, the agreement never moved beyond the printed page. If it had, its proposed annual competition to select films "worthy of preservation" suggests that Harvard could have been home to the Oscars, which began two years later, in 1929.

Half a century later, Robert Gardner and his colleagues in the department of visual and environmental studies (VES) succeeded at the project that had foundered in the silent era. "You can't do anything in film without a library of film, a *cinémathèque*," Gardner recalls saying when asked to help Le Corbusier plan the "Light and Communication" department in the rising Center for the Visual Arts in 1958, "so from the very beginning I reserved space for it in the basement." Later, and over time, Gardner, with film producer Michael Fitzgerald '73 and cofounder Stanley

The Harvard Film Archive



Cavell, raised \$1.3 million to buy an extraordinary collection of more than 2,000 35mm prints of the world's most important films. On March 16, 1979, the HFA inaugurated its exhibition schedule with a restored print of Ernst Lubitsch's 1925 silent version of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

"Without Robert Gardner, the HFA wouldn't exist. He started it and put it in a condition in which it could flourish and actually be a pedagogical instrument," says Cavell, who also "gave a lot of my life to it." (He helped attain additional HFA funding from the Luce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities.) In 1980 Gardner took steps to honor Cavell and secure the archive's future: "I felt the way to make it solid, to give it substance," was to establish an endowed, tenured position for a curator/professor "whose work would be to have the vision that guided and led the HFA."

Henry Rosovsky, then dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), agreed, and Gardner personally endowed the Stanley Cavell Curatorship.

The founding curator, meanwhile, was HFA cofounder Vlada K. Petric, a senior lecturer in visual and environmental studies (VES) whose collecting and programming helped create the archive as it's known today. (Petric's position, like that of HFA cofounder and VES film scholar William Rothman '65, Ph.D. '74, was funded by Luce and other grants, which meant that the Cavell endowment was not then needed.) For 15 years, Petric, a film scholar and a filmmaker, expanded the collection and established a wide-ranging, year-round, nightly schedule of international films, American studio cinema, independent fiction, animation, and experimental film/video screenings that was highly regarded in the film community.

When Petric retired in 1995, it became necessary to appoint the first Cavell curator. After a long search, Bruce Jenkins was hired in 1999. "I was brought in at a very exciting moment," says Jenkins, who accomplished a great deal in five years as curator. The HFA now meets international guidelines for worldwide film

highlands of New Guinea, an epic examination of the Dani people as they engage in ritual wars. *Dead Birds* was “a major anthropological event,” said Margaret Mead in 1963, and it is still regarded as one of the most important ethnographic films ever made. Now on the National Film Registry (the Library of Congress’s list of iconic American films), *Dead Birds* made Gardner an “ethnographic film guru.”

While Gardner’s work was helping define modern visual anthropology, European and North American documentary filmmakers, spurred by Italian neorealist depictions of everyday life, sought spontaneity over direction, immediacy over restaging, letting-events-speak-for-themselves over narration and commentary. The single most influential work of “direct cinema,” as it became known in the United States, was *Chronique d’un été* (*Chronicle of Summer*), Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s 1961 ethnographic film about ordinary Parisians explaining their lives. It called itself—after the 1920s Soviet newsreel series Kino-Pravda (“film-truth”)—*cinéma vérité*. The term stuck.

Meanwhile, Harvard had been examining its historic resistance to art-making. The University “tends to take a dim view of

the artist as an intellectual,” but the “artist is a creative intellectual,” not an “inspired idiot,” asserted the influential Brown Report in 1956, written by the Committee on the Visual Arts at Harvard, chaired by John Nicholas Brown, formerly of the Board of Overseers. To balance a curricular deficit in art practice, the report urged Harvard to build a center where making and understanding would be “intimately connected.” When Alfred St. Vrain Carpenter, A.B. 1905, donated \$1.5 million to this end in 1957, Harvard commissioned Le Corbusier to design what would be his only building in North America.

The Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts opened in 1963. Le Corbusier was a “cinematic architect who understood architecture to move,” says VES’s Giuliana Bruno, author of *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. “He constructed buildings with long windows so that a panorama would develop as you moved through. Look at the ramp—this is a building that’s designed to be traversed in movement. This architecture that was built to connect the visual to the spatial arts was the place where film should be located—physically, intellectually, philosophically, theoretically, and practically—because it’s perfect.”

exchange; offers pristine viewing with upgraded exhibition facilities; owns more than 9,000 titles; and has a conservation program. “We went from doing film conservation on the rewind bench of the projection booth to having a full-fledged, beautifully outfitted conservation lab in Watertown,” he recalls (see “Film Archive Goes Silver,” January-February 2004, page 57).

The archive was celebrating its silver jubilee when the film community suffered what many experienced as a cataclysm. In January 2004, FAS dean William C. Kirby announced that the HFA would be absorbed by the Harvard College Library and managed henceforth by the Fine Arts Library. Neither the VES faculty, the Film Studies Committee, nor the HFA board appear to have been consulted. The news came less than two weeks after the undergraduate film-studies track—decades in the making—was finally approved; Kirby cited the need to address budgetary issues and satisfy both the demands of the new concentration and film use throughout the curriculum.

A chief concern for the VES faculty has been the HFA’s public programming, which sustains a vibrant film culture that’s essential for teaching, filmmaking, and scholarship. “Why does the library have any more books in it than those that are on syllabi? That’s the reason you have a *cinémathèque*,” says Alfred Guzzetti, another cofounder of the HFA. “Film culture is the total harvest of world cinema, in all of its history and all of its glory.” If an archive simply serves courses, he says, “You’re shooting yourself in the foot. You won’t get any interesting scholarship. You won’t get people seeing things they don’t already know about. You close the windows on the world.”

Thus far the College Library has supported the HFA’s prizewinning exhibition. But “there’s only one venue on campus right now for the showing of 35mm films, and we can’t continue to expand our curriculum offerings with this limitation,” says VES chair Marjorie Garber; the University may need more than one state-of-the-art screening space.

Repositioning the archive has helped ease financial constraints, says HFA film conservator Julie Buck. Since the library has swallowed the enormous expense of storing films at the Har-

vard Depository, the HFA is accepting collections again—more than six were donated last year, including a Fort Devens collection of military propaganda from the 1950s and ’60s; a Somerville High School collection of old educational films; and 25 films from the German Bavarian Film Collective.

The most pressing need remains finding a new curator. Jenkins, who had come to the HFA to work within a robust arts-education environment, resigned soon after the restructuring, and no one has been found to take his place yet. “It’s a double whammy,” says Guzzetti, who’s on the search committee. “We’re saying, ‘We’re coming to you because you’re a very distinguished person; when you come here, you’ll be an employee of the library, and you won’t be able to do the things that you’ve done to become a very distinguished person.’”

With the HFA transfer and Jenkins’s resignation, Gardner, who had built and endowed film programs for 40 years, “sort of lost it with Harvard,” he says. He can laugh about it now, but at the time, he wrote what a veteran dean called a “zinger” of a letter to Kirby, asking him to freeze any use of the curatorial endowment. This past May, after 16 months of negotiations, the story reached its denouement. The original endowment, which has grown to \$5 million since 1980, “is now being made available by agreement between myself and the dean to do two wonderful things—two things that they don’t have,” Gardner says. First, a new visiting position in nonfiction film theory and history will bring to VES “a truly gifted filmmaker or a truly gifted writer about film, somebody who is not necessarily just academic but who lives the experience of nonfiction film,” he says, with the additional opportunity to use any available funds to acquire significant examples of the genre for the HFA. Second, a semiannual fellowship at the Peabody Museum will fund an established photographer “to create and subsequently publish through the Peabody a major book of photographs on the human condition anywhere in the world.” For Gardner, this “means that the importance of the practice of art to the humanities at Harvard is recognized, which is something that has been more important to me than anything else.”

Bruno thinks of the Carpenter Center as “the actualization of an idea,” a “tradition of thinking about film at Harvard from [the perspectives of] philosophy” that runs from Hugo Münsterberg to Rudolph Arnheim to Stanley Cavell. Münsterberg, a German philosopher invited to the University in 1892 by William James to help create the field of experimental psychology, “discovered cinema late in life, but when he did, he realized that everything he’d been thinking about in philosophy and in experimental psychology was realized in film, that film was *the* medium for memory, imagination, affects, and attention,” says Bruno. Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, published in 1916, the year he died, is one of the first treatises of film theory. “The work of Münsterberg was breathtakingly important,” says Bruno. “He really understood everything about the work of film, because he treated it not only as an aesthetic object but as a projection of our own mind.” Arnheim, a Gestalt psychology pioneer and author of *Film as Art* (1932) and *Visual Thinking* (1969), was the Carpenter Center’s first visiting professor of visual theory.

Philosopher Stanley Cavell regards film as “the last of the great arts.” Now Cabot professor of aesthetics and the general theory of value emeritus, Cavell calls film and philosophy “those two loves of mine.” When he joined the Harvard faculty in 1963, he and Robert Gardner soon recognized each other as kindred spirits. After they taught a freshman seminar together, Cavell started giving film-study courses in VES that formed the basis for his now-classic works of film theory: *The World Viewed* (1971) and *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981).

While Gardner taught the art of cinema truth, Cavell taught Hollywood’s Golden Age “screwball comedies” as texts of philosophical truths. “Film was almost made for philosophy,” Cavell likes to say, and his popular Core course, “Moral Perfectionism,” made his case in weekly pairings of philosophical and Hollywood classics: Plato and *His Girl Friday*, Kant and *It Happened One Night*, Emerson and *The Philadelphia Story*. (The course’s upshot was Cavell’s 2004 book *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*.) Philosophy tries “to get you to understand what you already know,” says Cavell, but film allows you to examine what you’ve been missing. “Once you see that film actually matters and is intricately succinct and coherent and profound,” he says, “you are suddenly looking at your ambitions, your passions, your relationships. You’re thinking about life and death and happiness and despair—all reflected in a way that is so immediate that you ordinarily miss it.”

Cavell endeavored to make film “part of the consciousness of all the humanities, all the social sciences,” he says, but Harvard was “suspicious” of film’s intellectual worth. As Gardner puts it, “Film is dirty, film is a part of industry. It’s a part of gossip and celebrity.” Movies carry the lowbrow baggage of massive popularity. “There’s a fear that if you introduce film,” says Cavell, “you are—if not advocating, you are providing—room for laziness, if not indeed for subversiveness of seriousness itself.” Yet America’s special relation to film means that it functions as a “major revela-

tion about America as such,” he says. America is unique as “a major contributor to the world art of cinema,” because of “its particular absorption by film. So *not* to understand ourselves as having produced these objects [creates] a blindness to ourselves.”

Auteur! Auteur!

HOW IS FILMMAKING TAUGHT AT HARVARD? “They send you to boot camp, essentially,” says VES alumna Amanda Micheli ’95. “Your sophomore year you start making a film. We were shooting on 16mm film, 10 of us all making a film together. It’s not about how to set a light, it’s more about wrapping your head around what it means to make a film, which is a lot harder to learn.”

At big film schools like UCLA, the University of Southern California, and New York University, 18-year-olds may arrive with “scripts in their back pockets,” as Micheli puts it. At such places, stiff competition for limited resources often means that only one student gets to direct. The rest work on light, sound, cinematography, screenwriting, or editing, preparing for Hollywood-style moviemaking where specialists write, direct, or shoot. This can lead to a “formulaic, factory feeling,” says Nina Davenport ’89, a

prizewinning maker of personal documentary. But at Harvard, she says, VES “emphasizes the idea that the film is made first through the camera and then in the edit room, so you have to learn all aspects of filmmaking.” Starting with image-making rather than scriptwriting leads to certain kinds of films, notes Alfred Guzzetti, such as experimental film and video, independent animation, and, of course, documentary—“which has always been the real backbone of what Harvard does,” says Andrew Bujalski ’98.

Last April, eight sophomores sat at a conference table in the Sever basement screening room, discussing title sequences and end credits for their entry in the annual screenings—an exhilarating four-night montage of more than 65 VES class projects and senior theses that takes its audience through a challenging terrain of documentary, fiction, animation, experimental film, and video. The

sophomores were beginning the final push of VES 50, the year-long course in which each student learns the art of filmmaking from the ground up. They began in the fall by shooting light itself on black-and-white film with a silent Bolex windup camera, worked their way toward sound and color, then plunged as a group into making a short documentary. This class had chosen a foam-cutting factory in nearby Somerville as their subject. Assisting each other with sound and light, everyone shot and edited individual 10-minute rolls of 16mm film. Now they were about to pool their footage and group-edit what would become their 14-minute class project, *Foam*.

“It’s a rather insane process, eight to 10 directors shaping a film,” said Robb Moss, their instructor. But “in the end they’ve not only engaged every aspect of filmmaking, they’ve had to depend on each other, subordinating themselves—and their feverish authorial desires—for the good of the project, which is a big part of learning how to be a filmmaker.” As the class viewed their footage, Moss deftly interjected signposts to that end: “Success-

“On film, everything
acts—the actor,
the window, the
lights, and the move-
ment. The pile of
potatoes and the
falling leaf as well.”



Film scholar Giuliana Bruno in the newly renovated space for visual and environmental studies in Sever Hall.

ful shots reveal without trying too hard to create meaning” and (after some beautifully filmed manufacturing sequences) “Perhaps the heart of the film is in the machines.”

In VES, everyone in film/video learns to direct within this collaborative model. “We were not all being trained to be little dictators,” notes Bujalski, director of the popular independent comedies *Funny HaHa* and *Mutual Appreciation*. In the process, says Lorelei Pepi, a Harvard film student paradoxically becomes “what we call an ‘auteur,’ which is the filmmaker in complete form.”

In the fiction-film industry, the model auteur is the writer/director, which seldom means the person who shoots the film, says Guzzetti, author of *Two or Three Things I Know about Her: Analysis of a Film by Godard*. In VES, however, “we do think of film as a visual art, which means the person who makes the images makes the film, in the same way that the person who makes the painting is the painter.” Film students take at least one course in photography or studio art. As Davenport learned from still photography, “It’s possible to tell a whole story with just one singular image. The rigor and discipline of doing that influenced me to try and say as much with the image as possible.”

The difference between film and theater, says Yugoslavian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev, is that “on film, *everything* acts—the actor, the window, the lights, and the movement. The pile of potatoes and the falling leaf as well.” Makavejev, most famous for *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), taught fiction, documentary, and how to combine them in VES in the late 1970s and the mid 1990s. He recalls being very happy there, because

film was (and is) taught as a visual, not a performance, art.

When teaching an art as complicated and multifaceted as film, one could start anywhere, Guzzetti points out, but “here we start with nonfiction, so that you’re not also worrying about learning how to write and direct actors on top of everything else.” He tends to avoid the term *documentary*, however, because “it’s gotten so attached to PBS and Ken Burns. People think that’s what we’re doing and that’s what we’re teaching, but it isn’t. [We’re really teaching] everything that doesn’t involve fictionalization” (imagined characters in a fictional world). He prefers the “bigger, vaguer” term *nonfiction*.

Harvard’s strength in documentary is due to Robert Gardner’s founding work and its proximity to Boston, “one of the great centers of American and world documentary,” notes Guzzetti. Many nonfiction masters have lived and worked here their entire lives, including Gardner himself, John Marshall, Frederick Wiseman (“There’s no more major figure in the U.S.”), and “my colleague Ross McElwee, who has changed the shape of documentary,” Guzzetti adds. With fiction film’s mainstream industry based in Los Angeles and its independents in New York, fiction filmmakers “don’t live here or want to,” he continues. To compensate, the VES program invites renowned fiction filmmakers, including Chantal Akerman, Miklós Jancsó, Raúl Ruiz, and Hal Hartley, to visit and teach advanced courses for a year or two.

McElwee, professor of the practice of filmmaking, emphasizes that “we don’t demand that students make films in any particular

way, and in fact a lot of them go on to make fiction films, and quite good fiction films,” both as students (about half of film/video theses are fiction) and after graduation. “Even the fiction films are somewhat risky and experimental and willing to take chances,” he adds. Like Andrew Bujalski’s, whose directing has been compared to that of John Cassavetes, director of *Husbands* and *A Woman under the Influence*. “I make fiction films,” says Bujalski, “and yet the methodology of the production and also my philosophical approach as a filmmaker are shaped very much by having an education in documentary.”

Many students are also deeply influenced by personal documentary, a form in which Guzzetti, McElwee, and Moss all work (see “Faculty Filmmakers,” page 102). Nina Davenport remembers seeing personal documentaries for the first time in VES. “It was before the current craze of confessional television and reality TV,” she notes, “so to me they were revelatory and some of the most moving, amazing creations I’d seen in my four years at Harvard.” She went on to make *Always a Bridesmaid* (the title describes the plot) and *Parallel Lines*, about a cross-country road trip filmed shortly after 9/11 in which Americans of all stripes tell their stories. The “off-the-cuff” intimacy of personal documentaries makes them look easy, Davenport says, but from

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the cadence and delivery of the voiceover to the creation of a persona, “it’s actually extremely difficult to get it just right.”

McElwee gently discourages his students from his own forte, autobiography, when they’re just starting out. “I try to encourage them to film things they have strong feeling for, emotionally or intellectually, and to use that connection to spark the film,” he says. “It needn’t be autobiographical, and it needn’t be sensational in terms of its execution or the subject.” Whatever they film, he adds, “we encourage students to see what’s complex and in-

teresting about everyday life, and this harkens all the way back to the legacy of *cinéma vérité*.”

Cinéma vérité teaches students to be ready for chance revelations, to trust the moment and their own instincts—which involves a bigger lesson. Harvard students “have to be trained to embrace failure,” says Makavejev. “They work like hell, it’s unbelievable,” he recalls. “For gifted and ambitious people, it’s difficult to enter a field filled with dangerous moments. When you work on a film, with so many variables—actors, machinery, environment, crew—things go wrong all the time. Every second it is much easier to fail than to succeed.” Makavejev tried to liberate his students “from the obsession of being successful” by helping them see that “if something goes wrong, find how to use it. It’s a

“It’s possible to tell a whole story with just one singular image,” says Nina Davenport ’89, an award-winning director of personal documentaries.



Gypsy way—or if you prefer, Columbus’s. That is how America was discovered. Follow what actually develops, what is created in front of your own eyes.”

Bujalski has made Makavejev’s art of accidents a “huge cornerstone” of his philosophy. “As a director you needn’t feel ashamed of happy accidents, and in fact it’s your job to create an environment where happy accidents can happen,” he says. “It’s not my job to go in with a meticulous storyboard and then just get everybody to act out this rigid fantasy in my head.” Lorelei Pepi tries to teach her students to fight a tendency toward “the intellectual” by encouraging them “to open a space that will allow them to get to that *instinctual* process.”

The films of VES alumni reflect a “patience with observing the world, as opposed to trying to control that world and set it up in such a way that it conveys your message,” says McElwee. With sensationalism driving Hollywood, “It’s increasingly difficult to adhere to this desire to present the world more or less calmly and in its complexity without sensationalizing it,” he says. “If there’s an operating quasi-philosophy coming out of the department, it is that there are other ways to go about interacting with the world as a filmmaker, and that a different kind of film can be achieved.” Thanks to Gardner’s legacy and Guzzetti’s success in protecting and building the film program, says McElwee, “These forms of filmmaking have been more than just nurtured, they’ve really *thrived* here, and our students have gone out and really made their marks in these areas.”

And how has VES left its mark on its students? “That’s like asking, ‘How did your parents affect your personality?’” Amanda Micheli says with a laugh. “First and foremost, I think, Robb [Moss] and Ross [McElwee] in particular instilled in me a kind of filmmakerly integrity that’s really important, a love for the process of documentary, and a solid commitment to making documentary films.” Micheli, who made the award-winning *Double Dare*, an action-packed documentary about Hollywood stuntwomen, adds, “It’s not that I would never make a fiction film—I love fiction films. But I think what I really absorbed from them is that a documentary film and a fiction film are the same animal. You’re still telling a story, it’s just that you don’t have actors, you have real people. And real people are often better actors than actors, because they’re just being themselves.”

How Harvard Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Movies

“YOU CAN LOOK THE WORLD OVER, and it’s hard to find places where theorists and makers really do have a deep and sociable dialogue,” says professor of visual and environmental studies David Rodowick, who has taught in America and abroad. The film faculty may reside in different buildings, but their headquarters is the Carpenter Center. “The genius of Le Corbusier is that everything interpenetrates and light reaches all rooms,” he says. “The architecture of the building really encourages the kind of intellectual and artistic communication that goes on there. In the

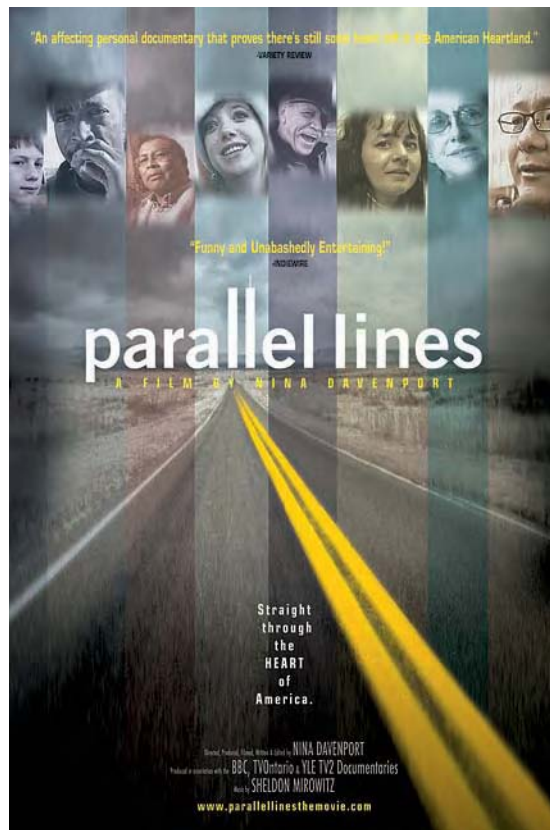
past, sometimes it’s worked less well, sometimes it’s worked better—right now it seems to be working at peak efficiency, as near as I can tell.”

Harvard was precocious in filmmaking, but its pace was “glacial,” as Eric Rentschler puts it, in establishing a film-studies program. “Even if this was a spark of total utopian imagination and experiment, it always takes time for things,” says Giuliana Bruno. “It’s not that film studies hasn’t existed, it’s just that it was created from underneath” by faculty initiatives. If the doctoral program is approved, one of its first questions should be, “Why *did* it take so long?” says Stanley Cavell.

While Harvard waited, visual culture exploded. When the Lumière brothers projected the first motion picture show in Paris in 1895, “the stillness of representation was forever broken,” says Bruno. Today, such images have “infiltrated every single square inch of our lives,” Lorelei Pepi says—computers, televisions, cell phones, handhelds, planes, trains, minivans. They’ve become the “way in which we see our world,” says Bruno: “There are screens on the façades of buildings. If you walk into any art gallery, it’s no longer only painting, it’s also moving images. When you go to a doctor, you get a screen of your body—they literally penetrate inside of you.” Visual art has become “the currency of our world,” she adds, “the way in which ideas circulate—and films are very important as that kind of language.”

Bruno works with many students in the Graduate School of Design who

can “no longer think of buildings in a static way,” she says. “Look at Frank Gehry’s buildings—these buildings move. So the history of cinema represents for [design students] a way to create a space in motion, a space that tells stories.” As Marjorie Garber notes, there’s “tremendous interest in (please turn to page 102)



A poster (above) and movie still from Nina Davenport’s *Parallel Lines*, a road-trip documentary of conversations with Americans after September 11, 2001.



using film information” across the University. “To be literate is to be film and visually literate as well as to be book literate: that is the culture that we’re living in right now,” adds Garber, a Shakespearean scholar who’s been using film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in her classes for years.

Such pervasive cultural change demanded an institutional response, and Harvard did respond, at a grassroots level. Despite cautious foot-dragging, the University tacitly endorsed film studies via faculty appointments. As early as 1972, FAS formed a standing committee on film to fill junior faculty positions funded by grants obtained by Stanley Cavell and others. More recently, Tom Conley, a professor of Romance languages and literatures who teaches French cinema, was appointed in 1995. In January 1998 Bruno, whose work on film, art, and architecture has generated major interest in this field, was tenured in VES, which for decades had only revolving-door appointments in film studies. That July the German department tenured Eric Rentschler, author of *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*, among other books.

Efforts to establish a doctoral program in film studies originated with that early committee, recalls Alfred Guzzetti, a participant. “The model was interdisciplinary and humanities-

based—very much the model we are using now. In that sense, the current project is ‘ancient.’” Harvard has been granting doctorates in various departments for film-related dissertations since the early 1970s, but the University wasn’t ready for an undergraduate or doctoral program in cinema.

With the turn of the millennium this “ancient project” picked up speed. Regular meetings among faculty members from a number of departments gave rise to a formal Film Studies Committee sponsored by VES. “We had this incredible richness of film-studies classes on campus—and not just in VES,” says Rentschler. To make the case to the University that it already possessed the resources for formal programs, the committee debuted a comprehensive brochure of faculty and courses in 2000.

Beginning in April 2001, a new VES chairperson helped further the cause. Jeremy R. Knowles, then dean of FAS, appointed Marjorie Garber. (Garber’s term began in a storm of controversy. Her predecessor, painter Ellen Phelan, professor of the practice of studio arts in VES, had revitalized that component, but the dean unexpectedly removed her over staff and administrative crises.) Many wondered whether a literary scholar could lead a visual-studies program, but Garber quickly became a dedicated advocate. “She has taken the role of being a very energetic, very effective administrator, trying to help VES do what it wants to do,”

“THE PEOPLE I WORK WITH HERE are the filmmakers I respect most in the world. To watch their work evolve and to have them watch my work evolve has been a tremendous asset as a filmmaker,” says Ross McElwee, professor of the practice of filmmaking, whose acclaimed work is credited with popularizing personal documentary (it accounts for 40 to 60 percent of the 500 documentaries submitted annually to the Sundance Film Festival).

For 40 years Robert Gardner directed the Film Study Center, “a place at Harvard where the object is to make significant films,” he says, in the same way that scholars are empowered to make significant books and discoveries. The FSC has assisted numerous faculty documentaries, including his own oeuvre since *Dead Birds*, such as *Rivers of Sand* (1974), on Ethiopia’s Hamar people, and *Forest of Bliss* (1985), about cremation rituals on the Ganges in Benares, which many consider his masterpiece: essayist Eliot Weinberger called it “the most artistically crafted of all ethnographic films.”

Alfred Guzzetti, Hooker professor of visual arts, a student in Gardner’s first Carpenter Center filmmaking class in 1963, is now working on a cycle of experimental videotapes. Guzzetti’s career encompasses his autobiographical trilogy of domestic observation—*Family Portrait Sitings* (1975), *Scenes from Childhood* (1979), and *Beginning Pieces* (1986)—and political documentaries about the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, *Living at Risk: The Story of a Nicaraguan Family* (1985) and *Pictures from a Revolution* (1991), both collaborations with his late colleague Richard Rogers and photographer/filmmaker Susan Meiselas, Ed.M. ’71.

Rogers, “one of the most wonderfully gifted teachers of film that Harvard has had,” says Gardner, died in 2001. (He was a senior lecturer in VES.) In addition to the Nicaragua films, Rogers documented New York City painters, as well as poets William Carlos

Faculty Filmmakers



Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others. He made a documentary of *A Midwife’s Tale*, by Phillips professor of early American history Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (see “A Midwife’s Tale,” November-December 1995, page 12), among other films. His career began with *Quarry* (1970), about a Quincy, Massachusetts, swimming hole, and included self-portraits such as *Elephants* (1973), on his alienation from his privileged origins. He was working on *Windmill*, about his summer community on Long Island, when he died.

In *The Tourist* (1991), Robb Moss, Arnheim lecturer on filmmaking, juxtaposes encounters he had while shooting films for other directors all around the world with the journey he and his wife made through miscarriage and infertility to the adoption of their daughter. In *The Same River Twice* (2003), he films five friends during a five-year period as they live their lives and comment on their past as chronicled in *River Dogs*, his 1982 documentary about 17 friends and lovers rafting through the Grand Canyon.

McElwee has been filming “chapters” from his life in a series of feature-length “home movies,” starting with *Sherman’s March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Love in the South during an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation* (1988, now on the National Film Registry). He began by emulating cinéma vérité, he says, but was “never entirely comfortable hiding behind the camera all the time, never hearing from ‘me,’” so he adapted what he liked, such as the calm observation of everyday life. In *Time Indefinite* (1993) he gets married, loses his father, and becomes a father; in *Six O’Clock News* (1997) he contemplates raising a child in a calamitous world; *Bright Leaves* (2003) unravels his family’s history in Southern tobacco. McElwee originally wanted to be a writer, and his voiceover narration and on-screen performance combine a photojournalist’s eye with a confessional poet’s “I,” an essayist’s insights, and a comic’s instincts.

Guzzetti says. Shortly after Garber's appointment, FAS approved two full-time positions in film studies for VES—"which, at Harvard, is like giving out gold bullion," says Guzzetti.

Despite film studies' new momentum, there was lingering fall-out from Harvard's historic resistance to the field. When the Film Studies Committee made a "dream-team double offer" to two highly respected cinema scholars, recalls Rentschler, both turned Harvard down. Tom Gunning of Chicago could not be reached for comment, but Linda Williams of Berkeley affirmed by e-mail that "the prospect of developing film studies at an institution that had been so slow to develop it seemed daunting."

Unused to rejection, Harvard was forced to "look in the mirror," as Cavell puts it. But in regrouping, the University's subterranean film-studies program realized its true identity. To underscore its interdisciplinary approach, VES converted one of its still unfilled film-studies positions into two joint positions in 2003: appointing assistant professor of visual and environmental studies and comparative literature Despina Kakoudaki, whose forthcoming book *The Human Machine* explores the history and cultural function of artificial people (e.g., robots and cyborgs) and animated objects; and J.D. Connor, assistant professor of visual and environmental studies and of English, whose current project asks "why Matthew McConaughey drinks Seagram's VO in *U-571*" and traces the histories of corporate self-representations in contemporary Hollywood films.

In 2004 David Rodowick, a self-identified "Johnny Appleseed" of film studies (he had already founded such programs at Yale, Rochester, and the University of London), accepted a senior appointment in VES. In fact, he says, "one of the things that really interested me about being at the Carpenter Center was that there are so many artists and important filmmakers. Right away I had a very strong rapport not just with my film-studies colleagues but also with the film and video makers." The rapport goes both ways: Rodowick is not only a film scholar, he's also a filmmaker, an artist, and a philosopher (his latest book is *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*). And he hopes to start making films again: "In the six months I've been here," he said last spring, "I've had a lot of ideas. It's just being in an environment with so many artists."

The most recent hybrid appointment is Lucien Taylor, assistant professor of VES and of anthropology and director (with Ilisa Barbash, associate curator of visual anthropology at the Peabody Museum) of *In and Out of Africa* (1992), an ethnographic film about the international African art market. Now working with Barbash on *Big Timber*, about Montana's dying sheepherder culture, Taylor is also associate director of the Film Study Center. During the last decade, he says, "visual anthropology has been transformed beyond recognition." Ethnographic film is experiencing "new cross-fertilizations" with the art world and is also fostering "indigenous and diasporic media-makers who often represent their own cultural predicaments more provocatively and faithfully." Taylor also directs Harvard's new Media Anthropology Lab, which will train graduate students from anthropology, other departments,

and the proposed doctorate in producing ethnographic film and hypermedia (interactive CD-ROMs, DVDs, and Web-based media). In fact, he says, doctoral candidates in diverse fields may soon write all-digital, paperless dissertations.

The intellectual environment that has grown up around the practice of art and filmmaking has created a tight-knit community of makers and critics that "gets on incredibly well together, because we're all interested in movies and we respect the discipline of what people do," says Connor. This conversation extends into the classroom, in "vanguard" courses rarely found elsewhere. This year Kakoudaki and filmmaker Robb Moss will co-teach a hybrid class called "Film Theory/Film Practice," organized around exercises like creating a film portrait without showing the subject's face. The course will tackle questions that have both theoretical and pragmatic import, like how film can visually portray a character's inner life.

This kind of "robust relationship" between filmmaking and film studies, says Kakoudaki, "feels most central to what film studies will be in the future." The field is at a "watershed moment," says Rentschler: the "theoretical arsenal" of psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches that helped legitimize film studies in the 1970s and '80s has become "superannuated." Harvard, with its unusual history and vast resources, its world-class film-studies faculty and internationally acclaimed filmmakers, is uniquely positioned to "reinvent and reconfigure" the field—and "compete with the very best of the dozen U.S. doctoral programs." Without that "spurious division between theorists and artists," he says, Harvard's faculty members think inclusively about "film's function in art studios and galleries, its extensions into video and digital production, and its place within visual culture at large."

"It might be tunnel vision on my part," says Rodowick, "but everything comes back to movies." Film has become a growth area in research and teaching jobs, he says, because "the moving image is so dominant culturally that studying contemporary human experience means taking the film experience as a baseline. So, at the major research university in the world, why would you *not* want to have a cross-disciplinary film studies Ph.D.?"

In September, 800 students applied for 200 seats in Rodowick's course "The Art of Film," which just joined the Core curriculum—a milestone in Harvard's film history. Although the University has waited until now to formalize the undergraduate study of film, "when film studies finally did happen, it happened at the perfect moment," says Rodowick. "The deeper you get into the 1990s, the more people are talking about *visual* studies. But what this brand-new and sexy thing called visual studies is is what the Carpenter Center has been doing since the late 1960s! Suddenly what the Carpenter Center has always done is being recognized as the cutting edge of what film studies should be as a research discipline." Has the academy at last caught up with Le Corbusier? "That's exactly it," says Rodowick, "the field caught up with the building." ▢

Contributing editor Harbour Fraser Hodder, Ph.D. '91, is making her first video.

"To be literate is to
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