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This newsletter is the Cinema Department’s first effort at reaching out to its growing list of alumni and friends. We have come a long way since the department’s illustrious beginnings in 1969 with Ken Jacobs and Larry Gottheim, and we would like to keep you informed of some recent developments and initiatives. While still a relatively small department, our curriculum has expanded and our undergraduate majors and minors have grown to 100. We offer courses in film, video, sound and interactive performance, alternative approaches to animation, curatorial practice, installation and a wide variety of engaging topics in film studies. Our current faculty includes Vincent Grenier, Tomonari Nishikawa, Monteith McCollum and me in production; and Brian Wall, Joyce Jesionowski and Chantal Rodais in film studies. Adele Brown manages the technical needs of the department, with the help of Hank Rudolph, and Nancy Wlostowski is our ever-welcoming secretary.

The production students have a wealth of creative tools at their disposal — from hand-cranked Bolex cameras to DSLRs with a variety of lens choices to whatever else they can find around the department that may help them produce an image (we keep everything!). They assemble their work in our Mac lab with Final Cut Pro, After Effects and Ableton Live, and with splicers and tape for 8- and 16-millimeter film. They show their work at student run film/video shows and at downtown Binghamton galleries such as Don DeMauro’s Spool MFG and the Know Theater. Cinema students joined the art students for a show in the Rosefsky Gallery during Homecoming Weekend in the fall.

We have paced out our progress slowly and carefully in order to preserve small classes and weigh all changes relative to the overall mission of the department. We have been impacted by the expense of new equipment, computers and software, as well as by the difficulties inherent in hiring during financially tough times. We have managed in spite of an operating budget that is smaller than it was in 1990, with periodic assistance from the Harpur dean’s office and the provost’s office and from a generous gift of support from Jonathan Plasse, which you can read about in this newsletter along with highlights on Emily Russo, Stephanie Barber and current student Julia Jin.

We hope to continue to provide a productive faculty and resources necessary to keep the program strong and vital for our students. We are discussing the possibility of offering an MFA in production and a graduate certificate in film studies. Both of these ideas could help elevate the visibility of the program and enliven the critical discourse among all students and faculty. Hosting a symposium to celebrate the department’s fifth decade is also high on our to-do list. We would like to start an alumni advisory panel to help plan events, such as the symposium, or to contribute in other ways, both of which would be of great value to current students and recent graduates.

But one thing has remained constant over the years: in this great and affordable public university, the Cinema Department persists as the place where independent-thinking students can explore new areas of knowledge, take creative risks and feel at home. This is still a very special place populated by passionately engaged students with whom many of you would undoubtedly feel an affinity. It is my hope that this newsletter will serve as the start to a new era of dialogue with you. Your history with the department, your lives since moving on and your perspectives in reflecting back are all valuable and welcome. I invite you to reconnect and let us know what you have been up to. Come for a visit, get involved; consider helping us to form an alumni advisory panel. We welcome your new ideas and new opportunities to create further options for our students.

You can contact me at any time at mcger@binghamton.edu or check out the department’s new Facebook page.

Ariana Gerstein
Department Chair,
Associate Professor of Cinema

“This is still a very special place populated by passionately engaged students with whom many of you would undoubtedly feel an affinity.”

— Ariana Gerstein
It opened my eyes,” she says of the American Cinema course. “Films are really powerful. Images are everywhere and influence our ideas and the way we think. When you watch a film for entertainment reasons, you don’t think about the ideas it is sending you or reinforcing. But it does that with subtlety.”

Jin then took two introductory, core courses before making the leap to cinema major.

“I thought that if I went through my four years without majoring in cinema, it would be something I would regret,” she says. “So I decided to take the risk and do the second major.”

The 21-year-old from Flushing, N.Y., who will graduate in spring of 2013, has grown into a student leader and role model for others in the Cinema Department. Jin is president of Film Salon, which screens short, experimental films on campus every Thursday night. She has served as a programmer for the Student Experimental Film Festival, which shows dozens of works by U.S. college students in downtown Binghamton. She also does public relations for the Harpur Cinema Film Series and works as a production intern for Fox News 40 in Binghamton.

“She seems passionate about what she is doing; she has been an active programmer of Salon screenings and initiating an after-screening discussion,” says Tomonari Nishikawa, assistant professor of cinema.

Jin admitted that she had never picked up a video camera until her first production class.

“You point and shoot and hope in two weeks when you get your film back that there is something that shows up,” she says. “I had no idea what I was doing! It was very, very new to me.”

Jin’s first film was about making tea: “I remember spending hours before class in the lab trying to make sense out of my footage and put something together with structure with rhythm. It was a learning experience, but my professor liked it.”

Jin’s films now primarily explore the theme of transformation.

“There is always a start and a beginning,” she says. “You travel from point A to point B, so there is always a change.”

Nishikawa has observed Jin’s works at student film shows and has come away impressed.

“Her videos express transient moments through delicate camera work, emphasizing her presence behind the camcorder, full of textures, colors and often super-imposed images that would enhance the sense of two-dimensional surface of the screen,” he says.

Jin praised the cinema faculty, saying that its members have helped her acquire the passion necessary to make films.

“The faculty are so excited about the courses they teach,” she says. “These people love what they are doing. That inspires me. They all love to learn.”

Jin says she is looking forward to submitting her works to film festivals this year, while also taking an image manipulation class that will hopefully allow her to branch out into animation.

“Those films have a magical quality to them,” she says about animation. “They created worlds and expanded my imagination.”

For Jin, the Cinema Department has enabled an introverted student to express herself and grow over the past four years.

“When I came to Binghamton University, I didn’t expect to be able to do all of this,” she says. “You don’t understand how much you are going to change. I never thought I would have this kind of impact. This has been quite a journey.”
Even though Emily Russo ’81 spent only three semesters at Binghamton University, she said she was “totally immersed” in cinema.

“I remember being very at home in the Cinema Department,” says Russo, who transferred from SUNY Albany to pursue a cinema degree. “It was a cohesive group. I came in late in the game, but still felt welcome. I still have friendships today with people I met in the department.”

Today, Russo is co-president of Zeitgeist Films, an independent-film distribution company based in New York City. The company, which Russo founded with Nancy Gerstman in 1988, specializes in the distribution of documentaries and foreign-language films, many by new filmmakers. Zeitgeist distributed the first films of renowned directors such as Christopher Nolan (Following) and Todd Haynes (Poison). Six Zeitgeist-distributed films have been nominated for Academy Awards, with Nowhere in Africa winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2003.

“We take on five to six films a year and give a lot of attention to them,” Russo says. “We’re still identifying new talent and working with first-time or fledgling filmmakers.”

Binghamton University enabled Russo to delve into cinema history and film theory. She says she wrote her senior thesis on the legendary filmmaking team of Albert and David Maysles, whom she met and interviewed.

“That helped me to understand, appreciate and develop my interest in documentaries,” she says.

Russo urges cinema students to “follow what it is you have a lot of passion for.”

“Hold on to your vision and find a way to make it work,” says Russo, adding praise for faculty members such as Maureen Turim.

“Whether it’s making films or becoming involved in the film industry in some other way, recognize what drew you to film and stay focused. Things will fall into place if you keep that perspective.”

Russo’s vision and passion have enabled Zeitgeist Films to thrive in a business that has seen many distribution companies struggle to survive.

“We are doing what we love to do,” she says. “We get to meet wonderful people and we’ve been involved in some terrific projects. I feel incredibly lucky and grateful that we’ve been able to keep the company going for almost 25 years.”

Stephanie Barber ’91 has some simple, but important, advice for cinema students.

“Work really hard and work all of the time because making art is more pleasurable than most any pursuit,” she says.

Barber has worked hard and often the past two decades as an artist, writer, filmmaker and poet. Now based in Baltimore, Barber’s films and videos have been featured around the world at places such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Tate Modern in London and the Paris Cinématheque. Her poems and essays have also been published in books and online publications.

Barber’s films and videos are “very focused on language,” she says.

“I make conceptual, visually pared-down, minimalistic videos inspired by my work in poetics,” she explains.

A recent highlight for Barber was a project at the Baltimore Institute of Art in summer 2011. For “jhana and the rats of james olds or 31 days/31 videos,” Barber moved her studio into a gallery at the museum and made a new video each day. The video was then shown daily to museum patrons on monitors.

“The piece was structured around approaching art as a daily meditative process, as well as a performance piece in which people could watch me work,” she says.

Barber came to Binghamton University planning to become a poet. She decided to double-major in cinema after taking an experimental cinema class during her first semester.

“I was moved by the emphasis on artistic experimentation and the rigorous pursuit of creative endeavors,” she says.

Working with faculty members such as Ken Jacobs, Larry Gottheim and Maureen Turim was especially inspiring and made an impact on her career.

“They were exciting professors to have,” she says. “They were exciting artists who worked outside of an academic setting. They put the emphasis on artistic production.”
Student's award-winning project to examine historic Marconi Tower

By Leah Ferentinos

Was the first text message sent in Binghamton?

Binghamton University junior Patrick Schechter is working on a documentary project to answer that very question. The cinema and psychology double major from Scarsdale, N.Y., is a recipient of this year’s Summer Scholars and Artists Award, an award offered through the University’s Undergraduate Research Center to support student scholarship, research and creative projects outside the classroom.

Schechter, a SUNY Albany transfer, plans to work with Binghamton University faculty mentor and cinema professor Tomonari Nishikawa and a local nonprofit, the Center for Technology and Innovation, in the course of his project.

“This is going to be my first time producing a [larger-scale] fully funded project,” says Schechter. “As a student filmmaker, getting funding is an amazing, yet rare opportunity.”

The documentary’s focus is the Binghamton Marconi Tower, the last remaining of three Marconi Company wireless transmission stations commissioned along the Lackawanna Railroad system in 1913. The Binghamton landmark is the site of the first successful transmission of telegraphic signals between two moving trains. This breakthrough generated a direct line of mobile communication between two moving vehicles and cut out the intermediary step of contacting tower stations prior to relaying responses.

“This is the beginning of mobile communication as we know it,” says Susan Sherwood, director of the Center for Technology and Innovation.

It all originated here in the Southern Tier. The local historical significance is what attracted Schechter to the project. He plans to use the Marconi Tower as a starting point to cinematically trace innovations in modern communications technology.

“This is a pretty big undertaking,” says Schechter of the task to chronicle such extensive technological history on film. But he’s looking forward to the challenge.

Nishikawa also believes his student will succeed, citing Schechter’s previous work.

“He is a diligent and hard-working student,” says Nishikawa. “I am confident he will have a promising future [in cinema].”

Prior to the Summer Scholars and Artists Award, Patrick made films for class as well as the campus television station, BTV6, where he is the downtime director and co-founder of the student-produced sketch comedy show, “Binghamton Bro Code.”

Schechter sees this as a chance to get his feet wet in the field of documentary cinema, and is most looking forward to the experience this project will afford him in producing independent projects.

“I have been interested in film and television for as long as I can remember,” he says. “This project will really help me branch out and grow as an artist.”

The film is expected to premiere this November at the Center for Technology and Innovation in Binghamton for the centennial celebration of the Marconi Tower.

In its time, the Marconi Tower experiments were hailed as the beginning of a new technological era. Improvements in the transmission and reception of wireless signals that resulted from these experiments have even gone on to save lives.

“Had the Titanic been able to communicate with other nearby moving ships like this directly, they’d have known in time that rescue was possible,” explains Sherwood.

Documenting that historical impact is exciting for Schechter.

“It’s the ultimate experiential learning opportunity,” he says. “I’m really glad there are programs like this here at Binghamton.”
Brian Wall is glad his 8-year-old is finally out of that Disney princess film stage. And he doesn’t always look forward to watching the latest blockbuster, either.

It’s the downside of the medium — films are made for profit. “If Hollywood is going to invest X millions of dollars, it has to appeal to everybody, which means it doesn’t appeal to anybody,” says Wall, an assistant professor of cinema and art history at Binghamton University.

That sounds like what his latest research interest — Theodor Adorno — might say. Adorno, about whom Wall is writing a book, was a composer and neo-Marxist social thinker of the Franklin School who turned his attention to popular media.

“The sheer idiocy of a mass product created especially for you assumes the character of a ghastly necessity,” Adorno wrote. “Individual needs have been so ruthlessly eliminated from the product that they have to be involved like magic formulae to prevent the customer from becoming aware of the murderous ritual of which he is the victim.”

Wall argues with that view in Theodor Adorno and Film Theory: The Fingerprint of Spirit. He looks at four films, The Maltese Falcon, Kiss Me Deadly, Repo Man and The Big Lebowski, to suggest that film, while an industrial product, can be art in its own right.

Heavy stuff for a guy who’s as interested in Cary Grant rom-coms as he is in films of the Weimar Republic, which evolved into the film noir that still fascinates him (Kiss Me Deadly is his favorite film, at least today), and influenced modern filmmakers such as Quentin Tarentino and Steven Spielberg.

Wonder about that? Watch 1922’s Nosferatu, Wall says. See how it uses light and shadow to tell the story. See how it plays with the idea of the living and the dead. See how it comments on Jews and anti-Semitism in Germany, given that the vampire turns into a pile of gold and physically resembles Germany’s ethnic Jews.

Watch The Maltese Falcon or Kiss Me Deadly. Same techniques. You’ll find them in Raiders of the Lost Ark and throughout the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

What were the filmmakers trying to say? And in what social and political context were they saying it? That’s as much fun as the roller coaster modern film can be.

Now consider the need for profit and the context. A typical multiplex film costs $100 million to make and distribute. Social commentary is ditched in favor of commercial appeal, which is why Wall scrambles for a pen when told of The Gamers: Dorkness Rising, a sub-$100,000 film that used its Internet fan base to fund both production and distribution, skipping the traditional route.

That’s what Wall took with him when he watched one recent blockbuster: The Dark Knight Rises. Director Christopher Nolan made the crew watch The Battle of Algiers, a 1966 film commissioned by the Algerian government after its revolt from France. It portrays both sides of the conflict as sympathetic characters in an exercise of, as Wall says, “political schizophrenia.”

Maybe it wasn’t so bad, after all.
Babe Ruth built it, as they say, and millions of fans filled it.

The old Yankee Stadium was sacred ground to many, yet to the dismay of baseball purists, the New York Yankees razed it after the 2008 season, evicting the ghosts of Ruth and Gehrig, DiMaggio and Rizzuto, Mantle and Maris.

Now, those that frequented Yankee Stadium only have memories. But they can also buy a book of black-and-white photographs of the park taken by Cinema Department alumnus Jon Plasse, who graduated from Harpur College in 1972.

SUNY Press published *The Stadium: Images and Voices of the Original Yankee Stadium* last August, and in April, Plasse’s exhibit featuring 10 photographs taken in the Cathedral of Baseball’s final four years of existence opened in the Elsie B. Rosefsky Memorial Art Gallery on Binghamton University’s campus.

“It’s all about my dream to recreate my experience of when I was a kid going to Yankee games,” Plasse says.

Each year Plasse would go to games with his father, Herman, making the trip from their home in Long Island. For Plasse, there was something particularly special about the first sight of the stadium — from afar and from within.

As visitors of the exhibit walk through the gallery’s doors, they are greeted by a wall quote from former American League umpire Bill Valentine: “And there it was, the Stadium, gorgeous, just a palace of baseball.”

Plasse’s first photograph in the exhibit was taken in a hallway leading to the upper deck. From that vantage point, you see a relatively empty set of upper deck seats. It emits the vibe that you have arrived during batting practice or well before first pitch. Only a glimpse of the field is visible, creating a sense of excitement as to what you’ll see next.

“You’re just about to come out, and when you come out, I mean it’s a black-and-white, but when you come out in real life it was this gorgeous green grass,” Plasse says. “And it was enormous, there were thousands of people. It’s that moment right before you have that experience.”

The rest of the photos ranged from artsy shots of seats taken at a diagonal angle to a wall of graffiti outside the stadium, featuring depictions of Ruth, Gehrig and DiMaggio. Though anyone can appreciate Plasse’s work from an artistic standpoint, people who had their own Yankee Stadium experiences could enjoy it all the more.

Plasse’s roots in film originated at Binghamton, when he was an undeclared freshman. He was inspired by Ken Jacobs, distinguished professor emeritus of cinema.

“I was taken away like with a hurricane,” Plasse says.

Plasse met his wife, Bea, in a film class, and after graduating, he initially looked for work in Vestal. After spending time screening films and shooting women’s softball games for a local cable station, Plasse decided to pursue law.

Clearly, though, the embers of his passion for art never flickered.

He says he was hardly proficient with a camera when he first started the Yankee Stadium project, but photography has developed into an important part of his life, liberating him from the plotting and thinking of law.

“To me, the photographs are just totally instinctive. There’s no thought,” he explains. “It’s just using the camera to express your emotions and recreate emotional experiences.”

And because of Plasse’s ability to do so, the House That Ruth Built will live on forever.

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**Cinema alum’s work takes art fans out to the ballgame**

By Ari Kramer

Jon Plasse ’72 (right) and President Harvey Stenger

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“About eight or nine years ago, [when] my kids had grown up, I was looking for something different,” Plasse says, “so I went back and started focusing on reliving my efforts at being a filmmaker, this time as a photographer.”
Jonathon Plasse ’72 is an accomplished litigator (partner at Labaton Sucharow) and photographer with a beautiful new book, The Stadium, a collection of black-and-white photographs of the original Yankee Stadium, released by SUNY Press in September 2011. Plasse has been a generous supporter of the Cinema Department and we wish to take this opportunity to publicly thank him for his efforts, which have had a transformative effect on the vitality of the department. Our students benefit from the Ken Jacobs Scholarship, set up by Plasse, which supports talented cinema majors with financial needs. This scholarship helps students pay for the tools they need to create and grow, and it has proved a source of great pride for its yearly recipients, who are chosen by the faculty. This past year, Plasse helped provide the support the Cinema Department needed for hiring a much-needed new tenure-track faculty member. Tomonari Nishikawa is an award-winning filmmaker and an influential curator of Asian experimental cinema. His energy is already reaping benefits for the University as a whole: He started the BU Film Salon, which meets weekly and involves both majors and non-majors from throughout the University in discussions about experimental cinema. He has also been developing curatorial practice as a new area of study in the department. Nishikawa’s Curating Film and Video class has created the Student Experimental Film Festival (SEFF). This festival draws applicants from around the country and has screenings at different venues in downtown Binghamton as well as in Lecture Hall 6.

Starting in fall 2013, Cinema will launch a new Artist Residency pilot program. This exciting new experiment will bring a different artist to the department each year. The artist will be charged with engaging cinema students in a project of their own design, to be fulfilled over the course of the semester and shown off campus. A workshop open to all students, a lecture on campus and greater community engagement are also part of the position responsibilities.

The Harpur Cinema (Harpur Film Society) Series ran in the fall semester with the theme of “Growing Pains” — films exploring the joys, challenges and passions of growing up. Thanks go to Professor Joyce Jesionowski for her tireless efforts in programming and running the series through times of financial difficulty and the shifting of cultural viewing habits (so many wanting to stay home and stream)! The series brings international cinema to campus, but has been open to the community going on 50 years.

The Visiting Artist Series continues to bring experimental film and video makers to campus to show their work and interact with the students through CINE 122. This season kicked off with a visit from British filmmaker Ben Rivers and will include Ute Aurand, Laida Letxundy and Chris Sullivan. Last year brought Ben Russel and a return visit by Professor Ken Jacobs. It is always wonderful to bring Jacobs back as he continues to electrify our students. We also had a fantastic evening presentation by Larry Gottheim years ago, and hope to bring him back soon.