

## D a n D i n e l l o

*All right. It's March 23, 2004. This is an interview with Dan Dinello, full-time faculty member in the Film Department at Columbia College, and Dan—*

It's actually the Film and Video Department.

**Film and Video Department, thank you, okay. If you could tell us how you came to Columbia, and what the circumstances were that brought you here.**

Sure. I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where I had gone to graduate school. I'd actually been living in Madison for nine years because originally I went there to do graduate work in philosophy, and because of the—also I went there because of the political situation as I was political. And so I spent time in and out of various departments; that is, I went from philosophy to journalism to theater. In between I worked as a janitor. I had a family, wife and a child. And at any rate, I ended up in the Film Department after working a couple years as a sound person at the public television station in Madison. So then it took me several years, but I ended up with an MFA in film and video at the University of Wisconsin, which led me to stay there for a couple more years after I graduated as a sort of lecturer/instructor. And then I started seeking employment in the outside world. But a teaching job, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher for some reason, probably influenced by my brother and just the hours, summers off and that sort of thing.

But at any rate, I had accepted and signed a contract to teach at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo somewhat reluctantly. But it was the best offer I had at the time, and I was looking for a job teaching film production. I was a filmmaker mostly, although I had a—because of my background in philosophy and theater. I did have a big interest in sort of critical studies, but my passion was both writing and film making so I was looking for a job actually teaching production.

And so I accepted this job, signed a contract, and then I don't remember how, I think it was a student actually told me, I had never even heard of Columbia College, despite the fact that I come from Chicago. I was born on the west side of Chicago and grew up here. But I had never heard of Columbia College, but I was told that there was a production job there. And I was really unhappy about going to Kalamazoo because it was just like Madison. I didn't really want to, I didn't really want to go back to a college town because I'd been in Madison, you know graduated, did my BA in Champaign at the U of I. And so I'd been, you know, 13, 14 years on the college campus, and I was really wanted to be in an urban environment. Actually, I wanted to go to San Francisco, Chicago, New York or Los Angeles, and that's it. And so this job, my mom had just died unfortunately in 1977, but my brother and his children still lived here. I had family here, and I love Chicago. So I was like totally excited to hear there was this place where they taught film production and there was a job opening.

So that's what led me to come here and apply for a job. That job, Tony Loeb was the chairperson of the department. I believe this was fall, or in the summer of I want to say 1978, and you know one thing led to another, and I got offered the job. I actually sort of lied my way out of the deal at Western Michigan to be honest. I just didn't want to go there, and they were really nice about you know, not making an issue of my contractual breach. So that's how I ended up here, and I really walked into a place that I virtually knew nothing about other than my impressions when I came here to do the interview.

**Okay. And what were those impressions because I'm curious, you mentioned your political activism or sensibilities at Madison, and you came here because of the location and job**



**specific. But what unfolded for you, you know, did you feel at home or did you...**

Yeah, I mean I guess what—again, I was obsessed with filmmaking. So part of my objective in wanting to teach was, well actually a specific kind of film making which was more—my work was on the sort of surrealist experimental, political-ish, non-mainstream to put it generally side. And I had models at the time who you know I admired who were filmmakers and teachers because obviously my work wasn't commercial. I had no desire to make commercials and make money that way. I had no desire to be in the Hollywood mainstream.

So it just appeared to me that teaching and filmmaking went hand and hand. And so my impressions when I came here, I mean I do remember like walking down the hallway of the film department in the old 600 building. This was again, I guess I'm sort of in the second generation of Columbia people because I didn't grow up in the Lake Shore building, and the college that had fairly recently, I guess, moved to the 600 building. But I mean really it was walking down the hallway of the film department, which was just like brimming with life and energy and sort of people hanging around in the hallways smoking, and the doors to the editing rooms were open. Of course people were editing on film at the time, which mean you know chopping up pieces of celluloid and hanging them. And the doors would be open, and people are smoking and talking, and there just was this, you know this incredible sense of all this created energy plus it was so film production focused.

All the schools I'd been to, including Western Michigan, and typically you know, not the case say at maybe UCLA or the schools know for film production, but you know most academic schools at the time had—might have a film school, but it mainly was a kind of Ph.D.

program and production was sort of a side light, and generally speaking there was a—because it's so expensive to teach film production, typically in the sort of budgetary debts, film production people would be on the downsize and critical studies type of Ph.D. type programs would get the money. And this seemed liked the reverse of that. In a sense it had hardly any critical studies and that bothered me a little. But it was so production oriented. They had all this equipment, which was I don't know, I don't even remember thinking that it was whether it was sophisticated or not. They just had a lot of it, and it was a whole vision of like this hands on approach which totally excited me. Because I really wanted to get into, basically I wanted to make films and then I wanted to teach film production, and I wanted to be part of sort of a creative community. And that's the kind of impression I had.

I really got no initial impression of how say the kind of political, you know, the radical political origins if you will of the school. My only real contact was with the people in the film department who interviewed me, and I believe with Bert Gall maybe. I don't think I even met—I don't think I ever met Alexandroff. I mean, he was president at the time, but I'm basically somewhat of an outsider. I never really, I mean I really have never socialized particu-

larly with the people in the school. I can't say that I have social friends among my colleagues per se, and so I was never part of the sort of social part of Columbia. And that's why I didn't meet Alexandroff probably, but whatever.

My impression more was the sort of creative vibrancy of the place. And again, focused on the Film Department I knew nothing about the outside aspects. And although quickly I came to find out that there was this perception outside of the school as sort of like a trade school, and that Columbia was sort of fighting that. And I think even now they're still fighting that. You know, these first impressions I guess die-hard. And I don't even know if it was ever a trade school per se, but because I guess we are close to it, we are compared to the the Art Institute. Where the artists went to the Art Institute, the Ph.D. people went to Northwestern and the University of Chicago, and then sort of gripes and you know, the grunts of the film industry came out of Columbia, which isn't entirely fair. It's only slightly fair. But I mean, that really was my impression and that you know, it seemed like they were looking for obviously a filmmaker, and they seemed like they were looking for an outsider, sort of more experimental as opposed to someone who was a more narrative mainstream kind of.

So they seemed open to that, although once I got here I felt like I still was fighting battles in that regard. But, so I felt fairly—and I did have the impression of a kind of family atmosphere which later at times felt like a Mafia family as

opposed to like a really loving family. But well, I shouldn't say that you know, being Italian maybe I'm easy to say that. I mean a Mafia family can be loving, but there was sometimes a sense where you know, if you stepped on the wrong side of the dime you were in trouble and you paid and paid and paid.

But there definitely was, and you know again I gave you my first impressions before being hired, the sort of family atmosphere developed fairly quickly as I perceived. But I mean there was the Film Department, I mean I think you interviewed Judy Dyke, who was the secretary at the time. And she was really nice to me. I mean I was obsessed with getting the job because I really wanted—I didn't want to go to Kalamazoo and I really wanted to come back to Chicago.

So I was being diplomatic, but persistent as far as like what's going on, what's going on, where am I. And she was being I thought really honest with me, and really nice, not getting pissed off that I was calling. And so that really impressed me too. And then when I first got here there was sort of this helpful atmosphere in terms of you know, getting me adjusted. Although I was really thrown into the maelstrom so to speak as far as teaching. And it was way, way different than what I was used to at Madison, I mean shockingly so such that, you know, I spent a lot of time in catch-up mode so to speak.

I can go into that or you can ask another question.

**No, why don't you—I'm mean I've got some follow-ups that I want to ask, but why don't you continue with talking about the adjustments to teaching or what—**

Well, the big deal for me as a filmmaker, Madison was, again it was mainly critical studies. There were a few of us who were insane filmmakers, and we kind of banded together. There was no MFA in Madison at the time, but there was I believe there was four of us at the time who were really freaked on it. And we wanted an MFA cause we knew that, that was kind of the currency of academia in terms of being—teaching, you know, something creative as opposed to you know, the burden of the—not the burden, but the work involved wasn't, you know, you can't make a film as your thesis for a Ph.D.

So we banded together and organized ourselves and got the Art Department to collaborate with the Film Department, and that's how we got MFA. But still it was this kind of art oriented and experimental film which had a kind of like a—now they call it DIY or DYI, do it yourself kind of approach, a sort of punk approach where you might direct and shoot and edit, and it wasn't like the Hollywood sort of breakdown of labor where you had a director, a shooter, you know, you had a huge crew. This was more like guerrillas type shooting and sometimes without a script, sometimes with a script. And here it was along the lines—and so my technical knowledge really was more like as I needed something I would learn it. And it was practical and productive and important to the film I was currently working on, I would learn it. And there was no lighting classes. So there is no specific edit.

I just made films, it was great actually cause I, you know, my whole—that's all I did.

I mean I got like 12 credits and I just had to make films. And so I was pretty prolific as a grad student, etc. But when I came here like you know I got thrust into what was called Tech I, now called Production I, and it was like a six credit class. It met it seemed like 30 hours a week. It was like brutal. And I was teaching all this technology that yes, I'd had an acquaintance with, but I never like sat down and had to show someone how to thread a bolex or how to you know, how to arrange their film in a rewind. And so there was all this technology that was, you know, part of the curriculum. And I was presented with a sort of quasi syllabus, at least it was clear that the school really—and that I had been pretty casual about technology. And that again feeds into the sort of trade school aspect where technology, the means of production are valued as something that you need to get a grip on. And it goes hand and hand with writing the script and being creative and visionary.

But I wasn't used to that or having to teach it. So you know it was like staying up all night, you know, the night before I did do the Bolax camera lecture. And I had an assistant, but I couldn't depend on him. And he helped sort of through the logistics of making a film in the department, which you know anyplace you're at, the logistics of that is really complicated cause you need, you know a whole support staff, etc. You know you have to know who to talk to, blah, blah, blah.

So that was, I mean that was a striking to me when I first came in, I was both, you know it was horrifying at one level, but I kind of got into it. I recognized the value of it. I felt like it was over-emphasized in the department. I still think it is. I think people get side tracked by the technology and they take so many, because there's so many classes. Like there's Lighting I, Lighting II, Lighting II, you know. So there's all these subdivisions and so like you know, where does it all come together. And that gets lost. And people just, it's so much easier to take these classes where there's exercises then it is to actually make films and finish them.

So I think that's been a problem in the department since I've been here, but nevertheless I guess the other aspect here, and I value the sort of open admissions policy. And that was really made clear to me, and I was asked to sort of express myself about my, you know, my understanding of that. And that was always, I remember in the early interviews that was presented as kind of the linchpin of Columbia. And I valued that, and I still do because it definitely had that sort of idealism about it, that everyone deserved an education and that we would try to make up for the failings of the education prior to that or the way that, you know, the class system, the way the culture was prejudiced towards people, that hear you wouldn't find that. Anybody had an opportunity. I don't know that we always succeeded. Sometimes it seems we're sort of lax academically in order to sort of let some of that go, maybe standards aren't quite what they should be. It's difficult to catch people up. Once they're sort

of set in these habits, it's really hard to get them into more productive sort of academic habits.

So you know, but I think the idealism of it and some of the successes of it are worth some of the negatives that come along. But I guess like as far as like in terms you know, down in the mines so to speak, you know the classes were much more extreme in terms of, you know you'd have these really sharp really smart people, and you'd have these people that were virtually illiterate. And you ended up spending oceans of time with the illiterates and less time being say stimulated by the brighter kids. And you know that to some extent was okay. And you know if you value the open admissions, that's part of the territory. So I mean I valued that. But you know that can get tedious. That can make the classes just sort of move kind of slowly in some ways, and sometimes you're only moving at the pace in order to keep these other people aware and going on.

So that kind of extremes was also new because I didn't see that at the University of Wisconsin when I was teaching there. But I mean that can make it fun too because you obviously get people who are kind of you know, outsider types or from backgrounds that were unusual or that you wouldn't ordinarily like as a white male from wherever that I would come in contact with, and that would be stimulating. I mean in some ways it led me to a whole adventure that I might talk about later as far as going to Africa and such.

So certainly there was that aspect of the kind of both diverse in a good way, and then diverse in terms of the extremes of what people were bringing to the table when they came here, and how much remedial work I might have to do in any particular class, and that's sort of thing. I guess those were the two most things I had to adjust to.

**Can you tell me about some of the personalities in the film department when you came? You mentioned Tony Loeb, maybe you could start with him and what the film department was like when you came.**

Well, Tony was the chair. Chap Freeman, Michael Rabiger were full-time faculty people. There was another person here by the name of Jim Martin, and I was the fifth full-time faculty member. I don't know much about Martin. Actually, he appeared to be on his way out. Tony didn't like him for whatever reasons. I saw one film of his and I was like bored to tears. And so I had, being new, I didn't care too much about the politics that weren't affecting me. But it was clear he kind of got moved out to a different area, and then sort of I don't know, he may have voluntarily left the school at a certain point. So then it was just that core for males.

As I say, the department seemed to me heavily technologized in the you know kind of—and I don't think it was ever really like a trade school, but its emphasis on technology on the one hand made it seem like there wasn't over emphasis, or it was easy to slip into that cause you know that's a lot easier to teach than how to write a good script. You know the ambiguities of writing a good script are, you know

it's hard to even, you know what part does talent play and how much can you teach as far as creativity is concerned. That's, you know, a continuing struggle. Technology of course had a clear, you know, could they thread the film or couldn't they? Is the film in focus or isn't it? There are these clear sort of objectives. So it was easy to teach.

And I guess I felt like it was a little bit overly in that way. A lot of the films, I guess too there's still this sense that the department has this focus, and I think it's part of the mission of the college too, which is that people are encouraged to express their personal vision. And it is an approach again that I value, and I think all of my work I can trace to some aspect of my life. But I mean it just isn't my biography, it's my interest too. And so the downside of that personal thing was when Tony was promoting it, it had this real Freudian psychological aspect, which had a kind of a continuous both sexual underpinnings, and a kind of you know, do you hate your parents kind of approach, which would be in some classes, which I didn't teach with him very often, but occasionally I would. And you know, sometimes they would turn into psychodramas and people would be breaking down in class. And I'm not totally against evoking emotion in some way, but it just seems oftentimes somewhat embarrassing or people would seem to feel humiliated, and that's not good.

So there was this weird psychosexual kind of current that I attribute to Mr. Loeb who I believe had a background in psychology. And I do sort of, my brother was head of DePaul Mental Health Clinic for 20 years, so I have an interest in it

myself, but not particularly a Freudian approach, which I thought his was. At any rate, this personal vision notion seemed to somehow turn into more like an autobiographical, like a literal autobiography which dealt with again people dealing with say the death of their parents oftentimes. And you know, again the student population was I would say on the average a bit older then it is now. But nevertheless, even at 20, 22 is not really much of an autobiography to really build on. And so I don't know, it seemed like more of a confessional type of mode that was encouraged that I didn't really—you know, I really was kind of bored.

But on the other hand, you know there was—and Michael had his kind of documentary. And he was always kind of like in conflict with Loeb. Even though I know they went way back, he always seemed to be in conflict with Loeb. And then he got—and I don't think anybody would really admit it, but the department has like a documentary center. And you know everyone sort of thinks that the origins of it were really idealistic. But really they were Loeb's way of kind of pushing Raebiger into having like something that was his, that he had his own little budget for. He probably would not like me saying this too much, but anyway, I know that's what the origins. It was—and a lot of things at the school were like a political motivation. They may be positive, and I think the Doc Center is a positive sort of thing, and I like documentaries, but the origins of it was almost like that Jim Martin got

pushed into some little thing that was of interest to him, and he got his little budget, and all his energy was devoted to that. And it was removed from you know, say attacking the chair. So that was a kind of way of deflecting the situation somewhat, and yet it still had a positive outcome more or less because it's done good things and I think the Film Department has become slightly known for it. I mean obviously it's an aspect that is you know, a part of the department now.

But there was I guess I'd say too there was a kind of supportive atmosphere just because well, you're all engaged in the same sort of effort. So there was a good deal of sharing, of kind of you know, when there wasn't political in fighting and other stuff. But there was a good deal of sharing of you know, educational problems in terms of how do you teach film. So I guess I would say although the department had a certain focus when I arrived, I still consider myself one of the architects of the department. Loeb appointed me like I think I was the first coordinator of a class, and I helped sort of define the syllabi. And so I guess I felt like I had a lot of input in how the curriculum developed, and that was another I thought—I mean there was a time when I thought I could not survive in any other place but Columbia. I'd be like tossed out on my ass, you know, and that.

**Can you explain that though?**

Well, I guess just because it didn't have the—because it had this kind of family, even then, although I've read a few or gazed through a few accounts that I think it was more of a family atmosphere in the Lake Shore Building when it started.

Nevertheless, Alexandroff was still president, and so like I always thought of Tony Loeb as being almost like his son, which I didn't care for a while until we came into conflict, and then I recognized he would be my boss of my life forever if I stayed there, and that was horrifying.

And partly because of his relationship with Alexandroff which I perceived as son-like, I felt you know there's nothing that he could do that would ever you know, get him out of there. You know, the chairs were, there was an impression like I say, there was this sort of—I mean it was described to me you know, a little Italian city, states ruled by autocrats. And if they were democratically oriented, that could be a good thing, but our department was run in a somewhat autocratic non-democratic manner. I came to learn later, yet in terms of curriculum there was a good deal of exchange and input, and kind of sharing and development. And I felt free to and to encouraged partly because you know, whenever you initiate something new it's like you're the one that does all the work, you know you could just sit around and go through the motions and take the syllabi that are handed to you and survive here. I don't know maybe less so now if you're tenure track, but in those days even making outside films, you know it was encouraged but if you were a good teacher, your evaluations were good, basically if people weren't going into Tony's office and complaining about you, by inference you were doing a good job.

So, and he never, I mean he wouldn't come to class and evaluate your teaching, and I thought that was

great. I always felt like I was doing a really good job because my evaluations were really good, and basically you know did your classes enroll or didn't they, and mine always enrolled. And I felt good feedback from my students, but I rarely was evaluated as far as—I taught with people occasionally, but at any rate I think the—I did feel free to develop and utilize my interests to both create new classes to bring new things to the classes that existed, to further my film making interest, which is a crucially important thing to me throughout my life at the college. And so that was why, and I didn't know if another college would seem to have a lot of—which now is becoming the case here, tons of meetings and sort of a lot of paperwork, and a lot of the sort of bureaucracy of academia, and sort of the you know, UW and U of I are so mammothly huge that it just seemed like I don't know you were sort of, I mean not as a student you're obviously feeling lost, but even as a faculty, part of this big—we working?

**This is working, we're fine.**

**Excuse me.**

So because of the, you know at that time, smallness of the place too there seemed like a lot of interaction. But definitely there was the encouragement to be innovative, to bring outside ideas in, and to incorporate them. I was completely *liaise-fair*, but I mean I felt really free to kind of pursue things I was interested and incorporate them into classes. And that kept me really stimulated, because certainly I wasn't here for the pay. I think I started here at like \$8,500 a year or something. And I don't really remember, I mean really there's a whole other issue about how my salary was repressed after my relationship with Tony went sour.

**Could I ask you just because you talked about that? You came into conflict with the Chair, and you realized he wasn't going anywhere. You obviously stayed. How did you resolve that or can you speak more to what the conflict was and how that worked out?**

Well, the conflict had to do with basically his autocratic running of the department where again, at the curriculum level wasn't all that controlling, but at other levels was. For example, around that time, you know our graduate program started which I was a part of. It's got to be somewhere in the eighties. But I mean my issues with him started around the early eighties, which partly had to do with this kind of single-minded attitude to what was a good film, and his kind of repression, his attempt to kind of control throughout. You know, we had a production fund, but no one ever knew how much was in it. He kind of ran it, and would dole out money to the favorites and to the people who were doing the kind of psycho-sexual kind of thing he approved of, and more experimental work was not funded. I mean I'm really speaking broadly here, but that was the kind of issues that were problematic. Graduate students working on films, and he seemed to want to control all of the films. Where people could work for months, even years on a project, and then he's see it and reject it, and they've got to go back and rewrite and re-shoot. He would like—people would be working for years, five, six, seven years you know on the same film, and obviously, people would give up. And so there was this real kind of control over the sorts of the films that were being made.

And then I can only say that this combined with something that happened between us personally that I can't discuss, but that it was just a really bad situation, and it actually involved another faculty member at the school. But let's just say there was a really weird kind of a relationships we didn't know about, and then it got revealed, and then him being in power over me led to what I thought were sort of prejudicial treatment in terms of my schedule, in terms of my workload. And then after he was gotten rid of, so to speak. I found out from Bert Gall who examined my salary vis-a-vie others who had been there, and it was clear that he had repressed my salary for three or four years. And I have to say towards Burt who I've also had some conflicts with, but who I still admire and have a lot of positive, I mean overall positive thoughts about. He actually reversed that. And in fact, he said I no longer had to deal with my chair, whoever that would be as far as my salary, that I dealt directly with him. So he sort of made me feel like I was, you know like I was valued and that this was a thing that the college took seriously. He gave me increases that brought me back up to where I should be with other people in terms of seniority and such. And he also valued my outside work, which was really considerable.

**That's what I want to talk about. I mean I just want to make sure that we're keeping track of the time. If we could start by talking about when you were able to move from teaching more and focusing on the tech side of film production into your main interest or in teaching and film**

**production, and looking at more of the creative side? How did you bring that to your teaching and how did your own personal work continue?**

Well, I guess I mean I could summarize some things related to Columbia, which was that for one thing it was a film department, and I corrected you, and you said it's Film and Video. But in fact, I was the one that provoked that name change and was responsible for bringing video production into the film department. And this was a whole conflict in the school between us and the television department. In fact, there was even a mild movement in the early eighties for Loeb and the Film Department, with me as the sort of newbie unconscious point man where it seemed like he was trying to take over the Television Department. This was during a time I think when Thaine Lyman was leaving and Morris was coming in, and Morris was, was like really whacked out. No this can't happen!

Anyway, you know, so that—I think that really soured my relationship with the Television Department, and that sourness blossomed again when I was running the multi-media department. But there'd always been a kind of conflict between the Film Department and Television Department. And then I brought video in. Video production was fairly new. Traditionalist film people considered it dirty, you know soiled by television and cheap and it didn't look as good as film, and all of that true. And I felt, and a few others felt like that nevertheless it was the future in some sense, and that we were being you know, cutting our throats if we didn't engage it in some way. And then in television who used video-

tape to record on felt that they—like Mafia Dons, there was always this turf thing which has been slightly reduced now I think partly because of this organization in the schools maybe. I don't know. But there was always this turf thing, so who's entitled to that? It wasn't like well, there's enough students and we can somehow share it, it was like well there's only that can have. And film you know, and now they're glomming on to our technology. But on the other hand, video is done with portable equipment. It's done with film style, it's not done like television production. So there's ambiguities, but to me it was clear, I know you not being in the Television Department, that video belonged in the Film Department.

So at any rate, that was part of what I brought sort of, and that was a kind of technology, but it also led to the notion of music videos where sometimes they were shot on film, but finished on video. And this was the early eighties, pre-MTV, and I was obsessed with music. That was like even more, I mean I'm obsessed with a lot of things, but writing, music and film are among them. And so all my films, or most of my films derive from music in some way or other. And so I was making sort of music videos before that was—before there was MTV. And so I kind of brought that into the department and taught the first music video production class.

So I created what is called the alternative forms concentration. That happened more in the nineties, and that now focuses on experimental film, and so the department is divided up into these different

concentrations which in some ways simply organize the curriculum and make it more clear, you know, this class belongs, it's part of this, but you know you can still dabble in it. It's not like they're restrictive in any way. But when you look at our schedule, it isn't like a thousand classes. It is a thousand classes, but at least they have little headings and you can see how they fit into a larger structure, you know, hopefully.

But at any rate, so I created, and when I say I created, obviously there was a committee, you know, I would say I did the writing. I shepherded it through the curriculum committee, etc., etc. But now I coordinate it and hire the teachers and help collaborate on the syllabi for the classes. And so in that way, although it took you know from the late seventies into the nineties to actually create this concentration where you know, more experimental, political work was done. Even genre films like horror and science fiction, I also brought it into the department because of this personal vision aspect genre, which is like horror, science fiction, thrillers, westerns were kind of like deprecated as being kind of more mainstream, and we don't want our students to copy this type of film making cause it was thought to be less personal than the sort of autobiographical confessional stuff. But I taught the first class in horror movies, which was a critical studies class and then later evolved, and often times I would teach like a critical studies class and then evolve it into a production class.

So I taught you know, a class in horror movies, well I still teach it as a critical studies, but then I also teach something called advanced production seminar horror surrealism and comedy for example.

**So you're talking on an expanded definition of that personal vision from the confessional autobiographical into—move into genres?**

Right, just because you're doing something that has a kind of formulaic base, you still can imprint your personality on it. You know, and I consider horror films and science fiction actually to derive from surrealist art, which is political and critical of the main stream. You know it also has to do with the self-conscious and dreams and all that kind of interesting subjective stuff. So it's still personal in that regard, but it's also political and it's also a good way for students who say who might be interested in horror films to teach them something about western culture and the origins of these things. And to me it's so fascinating to look at some of the early surrealist films which I do in class and compare them to current horror movies, which you know sometimes there's graphic violence that you might say is negative. Sometimes there's you know, the oppression of women in surrealist films, and that's the case in some horror movies too. So you know, you can see negative relationships between some of these things. And I think to me that's the way I like to teach in the sense that I like to access what students are interested in on the surface, and then show them not only what's below the surface, but like sort of historical underpinnings.

And I'm not saying I'm not the only one that does this of course, everybody, not everybody but a lot of people. You know I know a lot of people in liberal I'd say take that approach. You know looking at more popular art and then tracing it back to its underpinning. So I think I brought that to the film department. So my own work, well, I don't know how much I want to get into that. But I mean I would say that well, like in the early eighties I got obsessed with an African musician by the name of Falla Kute who was kind of the king of African music, sort of the Bob Marley, Bob Dylan of Africa. I had a friend that was in the Peace Corps that told me about him. And then there was a group, like they were mainly students and staff, and we would have these meetings and try to develop a project about it.

At the time like Talking Heads and Peter Gabriel were also doing world music then, Paul McCartney recorded an album in Nigeria. This guy was from Lagos, Nigeria. Anyway, I mean it's a huge long story, but I ran into at that time there was a lot of Nigerians here. And I don't think there's as many now as there were. But this guy worked in the cage, and my friend was playing some Falla music, and this guy goes hey, I know him. And one thing led to another, and I ended up going to Lagos with this guy to make a film about Falla. And so I lived in Africa for three weeks. I got a faculty development grant, that's another great thing. I'd say that the college has supported my work. I would say that I wish

there was a lot more money. Nevertheless, I've gotten a lot of faculty development grants, and you know through the Film Department, you know I've tested certain kinds of equipment and gotten free film. And so I want to mention that. They've been really supportive of my work.

So at any rate, this project it led to me doing a music video about Falla. He was put in jail. He was a political person and he got put in jail in Africa at one point. And my video was used by Amnesty International to publicize him. It led to me writing a cover story for the Reader about my experience as a, you know, white naive—it was the first time I mean I come from a poor neighborhood in Chicago. I'd never been on a plane. I don't think we ever took a vacation outside of Illinois. Like I think I went to like you know, Crystal Lake one time. I can't even remember, and then suddenly I'm going to Africa, and then I did this music video and that helped me, you know I brought that back. I could identify with African Americans more. It gave me real connection to the culture of Africa obviously, and it brought me into a more, you know, and I could talk about making films in a foreign country where actually I got arrested as well. So, I was in jail for two days there for taking a photograph of a policeman.

But anyway, it launched my freelance writing career cause I'd always written a lot and I kept journals. And this was the first time I actually had like an edited journal published cause it was like this first person, and that led me to God, I could actually—

**Was that the Reader piece?**

Right. So I could actually publish stuff that, like my journal stuff, and so that led to getting published. I mean now I write regularly for the Tribune. I write for Salon.com. I generally write about pop culture. So, but that kind of led me out in the way. And then that, I mean a lot of the work I do it sort of evolves in different directions. But I mean Falla died of AIDS several years ago, but now I'm writing about his son who also tours and has come to Chicago. That the piece I did for the Reader. Then I did a multi-media presentation at the, what is Culture Community and the Arts, which was a Lilly Grant. It was sort of this diversity project. Then students made a multi-media project based on that. So anyway, it just sort of evolved over a number of years. But originally stimulated by this small group of students and staff that were interested, and then led by this you know, who I actually broke off with when I got to Nigeria because he turned out to be a general in the military, and Falla actually hated him.

Falla had this album called *Zombie*. He used to refer to the military guys as *Zombie*. And when we walked into Falla's compound, which by the way he was married to 25 women because polygamy is legal in Nigeria. But at any rate we walk into this sort of community smoking this big huge marijuana splif, and he turns and looks at this guy and goes hello zombie. And I like oh, my God. So that was pretty amusing.

**Well, tell me how the students have changed while you're here, while you've been at Columbia.**

Sure. Well, obviously they've gotten younger. They've gotten more suburban, and again I'm speaking just to the Film Department. They seem to have gotten less diverse, although there's a lot of—we still have a lot of Asian people, but they don't seem as many African Americans. Um, it just seems more reflective of the kind of a more mainstream monoculture then in the past maybe. Um, and you know, I think the college also is heading in that sort of direction too. I mean maybe the price of success or growth, whatever and made it seem much more mainstream, you know, I would say in the last few years I almost view it as a new, you know, the new Columbia. I mean being an old fart I'm nostalgic somewhat for the past.

**And does that make it harder for you to be an outsider?**

What, the mainstream?

**Yeah, as a filmmaker that you saw yourself and seen as an outsider?**

I would say Columbia mainstreamed me a bit because I have ended up, although I would say—I mean I directed television for like Comedy Central, and I would say the television program I directed, which by the way my nephew I collaborated with, he's a comedian and actually I used to work with Second City people cause he was on the main stage. Anyway, he had this television show called *Strangers With Candy* on Comedy Central, which I directed a couple episodes. And it was probably the most outsider TV show on the air on

Cable. And yet, it was on a television station. So in that sense it was mainstream. But in the sense, I say relative to other programs. So I think I sort of maintained it a little. But I became more interested in, you know my work I think got more entertaining partly stimulated by the atmosphere here, partly just the people I was collaborating with, and our interest in comedy. And you know, if something is funny it can be really subversive too, and something can be—like that's partly why I like horror movies, science fiction or you know satirical black comedy. Those things can be really entertaining on the surface, and yet be really harshly critical underneath. And so that's what appeals to me. So I think, and I think it's partly stimulated by the Columbia environment maybe. You know in the film department itself has a kind of somewhat of a mainstream approach I guess overall with—well, I think if you come from suburbia you might look at Columbia as sort of an art college. If you come from the Art Institute direction, it looks mainstream. So it really depends on where you're coming from. But I think myself overall I've moved towards a slightly more commercial bend in my work reflected by—you know I've had you know, my films have played at Sundance Film Festival and you know, film festivals all over the country. So there's a certain amount of acceptance at the film festival level. I mean, so you know, I guess I've changed a bit that way or my work has been impacted that way.

**Okay. Before our time is up, I want to make sure to ask you to reflect a bit on not only your**

**experience at Columbia, but where you think the college is going, you know, what your hopes for the future are?**

I mean, I don't know, you know. I guess like I say the last few years I've been pretty put off by the direction of the college, which I guess I'd have to say is a kind of corporatizing of education. But I mean it's not just Columbia, I see you know, to some extent or another institutions. And again to me it undercuts the sort of humanistic values, and what I mean by that is a lot of people that I loved have gotten fired. And some of them have gotten fired in a way like I, to be honest with you, well why should I? No, I don't have to say that. I was at DePaul recently and I walked in across the street to get a coffee, and there a woman that I'd worked with who was part of the development said that, you know the whole department had gotten fired without severance pay.

So I'm basically pissed off at the kind of firing of people of which may or may not be positive, but you know they may or may not been doing their jobs, I'm not sure. But there's no sort of communication. It's just kind of like well, we're in charge and we're doing this and, you know, shut up and we're not going to explain anything. So I don't like that. The whole pension debacle is really to me a real betrayal, not necessarily that I think if it was economically unfeasible, okay, but there should have been a different way to handle that. Some of us, you know again at my age getting—well I could be close to retirement. I'm looking into that. I'm looking into myself personally, I'm not all that happy with the current situation. I'm looking for different options that I

might have, and I see other people both in my department and outside the department being—I don't think I mean teachers are always complaining. I mean there's a history of just you know, people carping and complaining and not doing anything. But I guess I find the atmosphere amongst staff and teachers problematic in that regard where people are talking more about leaving. People are applying for other jobs whether they find that the staff is moving towards unionization. I don't like the pension thing. I don't like the talk about the healthcare stuff.

It just seems like the atmosphere is moving in what I'm sort of generalizing as a more corporate kind of anti-human almost direction, which I thought Columbia was somehow immune from. But I mean my ex-wife got you know, who worked at Loyola University for 15-20 years, you know got summarily fired again for what seemed like trumped up whatever. So I mean I see that sort of happening. And you know in a school new people move in and they want their own people and their own sort of hirelings in charge and to support them. And to some extent that's inevitable, but I feel like the culture of the college has been somehow undermined, that the people that you know, and I'm talking say even like using Bert Gall as an example. And I still feel upset, you know I know he was in conflict with the president. I know that politically speaking he wasn't like going along with the plan, whatever that might be. But there was something really positive about what he brought to the college.

And so his elimination to me was a real, I don't know, a real strike. And it made me feel like I need to be more, you know and partly being older, but partly that. Like I need to focus on like are they paying me enough. What's my workload, you know.

Before that, and I think you look at faculty surveys and salaries like the last thing that people, and that just—you know maybe that's academia, but it seemed to me that's partly Columbia. People tended to be idealistic and not really look at the bottom-line all that much. And it's not that I don't, I life efficiency and I require it you know in my support for the classes I teach. But on the other hand, there doesn't seem to be a balance between a kind of efficiency and humanistic concern for people and the sort of history and value that they brought to the college. So I'm disturbed. I think that is some of the challenges the college faces in terms of like alienating both its older people, cutting off the culture in some way. But everybody still gives lip service to the sort of mission, and I think that's inculcated in the faculty because there is a good deal of continuity there. So I don't necessarily seeing that immediately undermined, but I do find a lot of things problematic at the moment. And it's sort of you know, success has brought negatives as well as positives I guess.

**Well, that is the end of our time.  
I want to thank you very much for  
this.**

