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DISTINGUISHED ACADEMIC AWARD

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# Natural Born Pillars: The Academic Importance of Cineliteracy

**BARRY KEITH GRANT**

PROFESSOR OF FILM STUDIES / BROCK UNIVERSITY

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AWARD ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS

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**Barry Keith Grant** received his doctorate in American Literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1975. An influential figure of film studies as an academic discipline, Grant has spent his entire academic career at Brock University, where he teaches in the Department of Communications, Popular Culture and Film.

At Brock, he was the first chair of the Department of Fine Arts and founding director of the interdisciplinary MA program in popular culture. He also founded the highly successful Brock University Film Society, which recently completed its 15th successful season, and has been involved in many local initiatives related to the arts. He was president of the Brock University Faculty Association from 2005 to 2007.

He has published 20 books, including *Shadows of Doubt: Negotiations of Masculinity in American Genre Films* (2010), *Film Genre: Film Iconography to Ideology* (2007), and *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman* (1992) and, as editor, *Covering Niagara: Studies in Local Popular Culture* (with Joan Nicks, 2010), *100 Documentary Films* (with Jim Hillier, 2009), *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* (2007), *Film Genre Reader* (2003), *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Film and Video* (with Jeannette Sloniowski, 1998), and *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (1996). His work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and has been translated into several languages, including German, Italian, Russian, and Japanese. He edits the Contemporary Approaches to Film and Television series for Wayne State University Press and the New Approaches to Film Genre series for Wiley Blackwell, and was the editor-in-chief of the comprehensive four-volume Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film (2006).

Barry Grant's work in each of the domains of academic life: teaching, research and service to the institution and to the community has been honoured with a CAUT Distinguished Academic Award. This is a copy of his acceptance speech delivered during CAUT Council events in Ottawa, April 24, 2010.



# Natural Born Pillars: The Academic Importance of Cineliteracy

**BARRY KEITH GRANT**

EVERY YEAR DURING the Academy Awards ceremonies, at least until they introduced the dreaded musical cue for the Oscar winners to stop talking and get off the stage, it seemed there was always one long-winded acceptance speech in which someone thanked everybody, from his or her parents to all the “little people” who helped along the way. Thus it was so refreshing when screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart, accepting his Best Screenplay Oscar in 1940, remarked simply, “There has been so much niceness here tonight that I’m happy to say that I’m entirely responsible for the success of *The Philadelphia Story*. Nobody turned a finger to help me.”

OF COURSE, I can make no such claim for my academic achievements. Indeed, I would not be here speaking to you today if it were not for the support and insights of my students, colleagues, and numerous people in the St. Catharines community over the years, many of whom were kind enough to write letters in support of my nomination for this Award. Obviously I cannot thank them all, but for nominating me I would like specifically to acknowledge Dr. Tom Dunk, dean of social sciences at Brock University; Dorothy Griffiths, associate dean; and Jo Stewart, administrative officer for the faculty of social sciences. And I would be remiss if I did not also thank my wife, Genevieve, and daughter, Gabrielle, for their gracious acceptance of the many hours I’ve spent sequestered in my study preparing classes, marking students’ work, and so on.

Given the nature of this award, it would not, I think, be hyperbole to regard it as the Oscar of Academia. I say this because it acknowledges significant achievement in all domains that comprise academic life — teaching, research, and service to the institution and service to the community. The first recipient of the CAUT Distinguished Academic Award, Bernard Robaire of McGill University, described these activities as “the three pillars of academia.” It thus rep-

resents in my view the ideal of what an academic should be, and hence the pun of my title. But I could not be more serious in saying that I am truly honoured as well as humbled to be this year's recipient of the award, for it represents the judgment of colleagues who share with me the same vision of the ideal academic life. I thank the members of the adjudication committee for deeming me worthy of it.

I also wish to thank CAUT executive director Jim Turk for inviting me to address Council today. When Jim invited me, he asked me to speak about any issue or issues of post-secondary education in Canada that were of concern to me. Certainly I, like no doubt all of you as well, would welcome the opportunity to give opinions on these matters free rein. I think of Groucho Marx as Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff in *Horse Feathers*, who suddenly finds himself thrust from the ranks of the faculty to assume the headship of Huxley College. His first act as new college president is to tell the chairman of the board, "I think you know what the trustees can do with their suggestions." However, I suspect Jim wants something from me for this occasion that is a little less succinct, if not also more circumspect as well.

This, I confess, has proven to be a more difficult task than I had anticipated. There is, to be sure, much to be concerned about in academia, both today as well as the prospects for the future. There are a number of issues that are of direct concern for me and my colleagues in film studies and related areas of cultural studies and popular culture. Perhaps the most pressing has to do with the question of copyright and fair use legislation that addresses both the rights of artistic creators and the needs of educators. But there are also other fundamental issues with wider implications, particularly the perennial issue of underfunding, and the difficulties in long-term, sustainable planning that results from the annual nature of transfer payments to the universities. For many of us, this yearly exercise, in which we must allow for multiple funding scenarios, also drains valuable time and energy that otherwise more productively might be spent teaching and doing research. As well, the rapid expansion of university administrations and the attendant bureaucratic infrastructure, which siphon resources from the academic programs where they are needed most, is a more recent but equally troubling development. And, too, there is the related situation of intensifying competition among institutions for students, with universities operating increasingly like corporations more focused on branding and marketing than on the quality of what they produce.

But these are issues about which CAUT is fully aware, and in any case I doubt I would have much to add to these discussions. As I was considering what to write for this occasion, it didn't initially occur to me to speak about the inherent value of film studies. To do so here, I was sure, would be to preach to the converted. Otherwise, I doubt I would be standing here now, having devoted time to researching such vital topics in the scheme of things as zombie

movies and Canadian rock and roll. But even as I was preparing this talk, the *Globe and Mail* published a column by Margaret Wenthe entitled “Universities are sitting ducks for reform,” in which she raises the recurring argument about making universities more fiscally “efficient” by creating a two-tier system of research-intensive and teaching-only institutions. There are many things wrong with her reasoning, most of which all of us know well. But I was particularly struck by one observation, that “taxpayers are not going to subsidize research in critical literary theory much longer.” For those taxpayers who think like Ms. Wenthe, I am sure there is even less patience for seemingly frivolous subjects like film. At least literature has an acknowledged artistic tradition to give it a sense of prestige. Shakespeare is about as highbrow as you can get. But, while cinema has always been regarded as art in Europe, this was not the case in Hollywood, the dominant source of our collective image bank as North Americans. As MGM studio head Sam Goldwyn had famously put it, “Pictures are for entertainment. If you’ve got a message, use Western Union.”

So the question of what a discipline like film studies can contribute to society and our common academic mission may not be so obvious after all. Indeed, if anything, it is more pressing than ever in today’s challenging economy, when the majority of students are enrolled in universities more for the acquisition of concrete job skills rather than for expanding their cultural consciousness. And also, when there is increasing pressure for quantifying outputs as a measure of departmental “success” and for the introduction of entrepreneurial “cost recovery” schemes into the academic curriculum. Popular culture, as cultural theorist John Fiske has asserted, is “a site of ideological struggle” masking as entertainment, and I have been fascinated enough to spend my career exploring how movies and other forms of popular culture have functioned in this way. I believed then, as I do now, that it has been worthwhile to research, teach, and be involved in the artistic and cultural traditions we embrace as part of everyday culture, for it is these things that define us as a people and as individuals. It was precisely for this reason that I decided to commit myself to studying cinema while still a graduate student in English and completing my doctoral dissertation on literary style and democratic theory in the work of Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain.

The powerful presence of movies in our cultural consciousness is something I can attest to personally. I spent my formative years in the 1950s growing up in New York City, in the Bronx to be exact. I lived just blocks from Yankee Stadium, and witnessed regularly the dominance of the Yankees and football Giants. It was also a time when what is known as the classic Hollywood studio era was nearing its end. But movies were still the dominant form of mass entertainment, television not yet present in every household. In New York City, movie theatres and the culture of movie-going were pervasive, as had been the case from the early years of cinema. In my neighbourhood, movie theaters

were ubiquitous, part of the street scene, mixing with the storefronts of butcher shops and bakeries, almost as common as the corner candy store; their neon marquees jostled with the electric mix of signs for the equally pervasive Chinese restaurants. Movie theaters were, in short, integrated into the daily rhythm of everyday life. And like so many people, I went to the movies regularly, at least once a week, usually on Saturdays but not always, regardless of what was showing. In a sense, it didn't matter what was showing: it was "going to the show" that counted. And every time we were treated to a classic program with newsreel, cartoon, short subject, sometimes a serial episode, coming attractions, and two features.

Part of this experience was the movie theatres themselves. Almost all the local theaters in my neighbourhood were built in the late 1920s, a few in the 1930s. If their exteriors were part of the bustling cityscape, inside they were more spacious and silent than anything to be found on the cramped, busy streets outside. The cavernous quality of these theaters was crucial, because they were able to swallow one whole; and certainly they enveloped me completely, giving me ample room to enter into the expansive fantasies offered on their screens.

The grandest theatre of them all was the Paradise, located in the borough's premier intersection of Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse, a broad avenue modeled after the Champs Elysee in Paris. The Paradise, also called the Loew's Paradise (or "Low-ees" to Bronxites), was one of the five Loew's "Wonder Theatres," so named because each was equipped with a special Robert Morton pipe organ. It was Loew's flagship theatre in the Bronx, built during the era of the great "atmospheric" movie palaces and designed by John Eberson, the style's prime practitioner. The Paradise opened on September 7, 1929, with *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929) starring Swedish actor Warner Oland, and it was still magnificent when I was making my regular pilgrimages there a couple of decades later. Like Eberson's other grandiose atmospheric theaters elsewhere in the US, the Paradise transported New Yorkers into a Baroque Italian garden decorated with marble pillars, Romanesque statues, tapestries, and bubbling fountains. Boasting almost 4,000 seats and surpassed in size in New York only by Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan, the Paradise had seemingly endless mezzanines, loges, and balconies. According to one historian, "In the center of the lobby's north wall, beneath a statue of Winged Victory, a great fountain of Carrara marble bubbled water above a carved figure of a child on a dolphin." There was also a pond with goldfish in its inner lobby, and outside, above the unique flat marquee with its striking sunburst pattern, a statue of St. George slaying a dragon would animate every hour on the hour. A magnificent "emporium to the God of movies," the Paradise's greatest and best-known feature was its spacious arched ceiling, on which was painted an elaborately detailed mural of a night sky. This was Eberson's speciality, and

apparently he designed the stars in the Paradise in the constellation of Marcus Loew's astrological birth sign, Taurus, but who knew that then? The stars were just there, looming high above, everyone's topic of discussion until the house lights went down for the first show of the day and the projector fired up. I believe that some of the stars actually twinkled, a mural in motion similar to the spectacle on the screen, although this may have been my youthful imagination.

Nevertheless, this celestial canopy made it the perfect venue for me to see Cecil B. DeMille's remake of *The Ten Commandments*, to which my grandmother took me when I was an impressionable nine-year-old in 1956. Although I had seen movies such as *Shane* at the Paradise before, and was awed as little Joey at *Shane's* mythic heroism, this time I was absolutely thunderstruck not only by the epic sweep of the movie but also by the magnificent opulence of the theater — for it was just like the monumental richness of Ramses' palace within the film. It was as if there was a seamless flow from the images on the screen to the real world. Somehow I understood this to be, for better or worse, what the experience of movies (at least Hollywood movies) was all about. *The Ten Commandments* was billed as “the greatest event in motion picture history,” a statement with which I, who knew almost nothing about film history then, nevertheless was in complete agreement. It was here that my passion for film was born, as consuming as DeMille's Jell-O sea for Yul Brynner and the infidel Egyptians who doubted the power of special effects and cinematic illusion.

Yet I was hardly alone in my youthful cinephilia. Baby-boomer students, me included, were the first television generation to attend university, and we were keen to explore cinema and the mass media as art forms and as social expression. We were equally excited about the newest films of European art directors like Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman, and Godard even as we rediscovered Keaton, Chaplin, Poverty Row B-Movies, and other classic Hollywood films. We were in synch with the wave of brash “movie brat” directors and the films of the “New Hollywood” that opened up the traditional genres in new, politically interesting ways. The distaste for the movies once expressed by established critics like Edmund Wilson and H.L. Mencken, who called them “entertainment for the moron majority,” seemed suddenly curmudgeonly compared to the rapt enthusiasm of such newer critical voices as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris. And the popularization of Marshall McLuhan's ideas helped further a new awareness of film and other forms of popular culture as media, each with its own distinctive properties. My film mentor in graduate school, Dr. Gerry O'Grady, was fond of saying that he was a medievalist who had dropped the “evil” but kept the “media.” No slight to all the Chaucer scholars here intended; his comment simply expressed the excitement with which many of us were exploring and defining a new discipline in the early 1970s.

During this time, courses in film history and appreciation were springing up in colleges and universities across North America. Until then, only the occasional college course in film was offered, and the very few universities in the US that had established film departments were for the most part production-oriented. Courses in film study required a different model than the traditional humanities course in which students simply brought in their copy of the book to a classroom for discussion. But 30 years ago, with stable enrolments, healthy budgets, and active student interest, many departments and institutions managed to establish courses in film, even though they entailed additional expense for film rentals and projection equipment, staffing costs for projectionist, and administrative issues in the form of timetabling, adequate screening facilities, and rights clearances.

By the early 1980s film studies programs emerged from the chrysalis of their various parent departments of English, theatre, art history, sociology, and communications studies. Thus film studies was created by scholars who broke from established academic boundaries to pursue a cognate interest. At the same time, however, because film incorporates aspects of so many other disciplines, including history, literature, psychology, art, architecture, music, sociology, philosophy, politics, drama, photography, and cultural studies, the question of where in the conventional departmental landscape film studies could or should be taught has been problematic. In the anthology of essays on the teaching of film which I edited for the Modern Language Association in 1983 — the first book on the subject of teaching film at the post-secondary level — at least five of the 17 contributors considered this issue of paramount importance in describing their efforts to mount a program of film study. While some institutions embraced the interdisciplinary model for the flexibility it offered, many film scholars adopted such a model simply to get the subject on the books and into the curriculum.

Of course, today movies no longer are as central to everyday culture, either in the Bronx or elsewhere in North America, as they were back in the day when showings were continuous and you entered anytime, picking up the story as you went. (For those interested in such details, it was the exhibition strategy for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960, which announced that no one would be seated after the start of the movie, that was largely responsible for institutionalizing the practice of individual showtimes.) Nor are movie theatres the same kind of enveloping experience they once were now that they are mostly merely functional concrete multiplexes at the local mall, each one showing the same few mainstream films as all the others.

Nevertheless, movies remain a significant part of popular culture, even if their delivery systems and viewing contexts have radically changed. More people than ever may be watching movies, but increasingly they do so at home, in their appositely named “home theatres,” and on a variety of portable digital



playback systems. Television, home video, digital technology, computers, and the internet have drastically altered how films are made, distributed, exhibited, and experienced. Today we can watch the movies we want when we want; the history of film — or more accurately, what remains of the history of film — is readily available to us, literally at our fingertips.

Cinema as a medium has both lost and gained something from these technological changes. More people may see more films, but at the same time cinema is diminished, as it becomes merely one option in a menu of visual entertainments. Movies are now an unremarkable part of the environment, like the old films continuously playing on the ubiquitous TV monitors in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* to which no one pays conscious attention. Movie audiences today must be admonished before every theatrical screening not to talk during the film and to turn off their cell phones, since the multiplex no longer seems a Paradise, just a larger and louder version of one's living room. When we no longer need to go to the cinema because the cinema comes to us, then cinema loses whatever phenomenological "aura" it once had. Theatres, like academic programs and universities, are looking to attract patrons in a dwindling entertainment market share. As a result, movie theatres now also offer other entertainment, such as live opera and wrestling matches via satellite along with arcade games, just as universities have added all kinds of co-ops, experiential learning, and accelerated learning options into their academic packages. Just as administrations are, for a number of reasons, pushing more delivery of online courses, so in the near future, movies will be beamed digitally via satellite to theatres, and eventually on demand directly to our homes, likely erasing the need for reels of celluloid as well as the theatres in which to show them.

By the mid-1980s, even as film studies was becoming secure within academia, the fortunes of the film industry were declining and almost every one of the movie theaters I went to as a youth was gone. Much of my neighbourhood in the Bronx had been reduced to rubble as a result of urban flight and rising drug and crime rates. The Luxor became a fast food mart, the Kent a dollar store, the Zenith the Latino Action Pastoral Center, and the Ascot, the area's only art cinema, a revivalist church. The Paradise had met a particularly sad fate, having been mercilessly bisected — twinned in industry jargon — as was happening at the time to most large downtown urban theaters that were still operating. But this fate seemed particularly blasphemous for the heavenly Paradise. The theater was further divided into three before finally closing in the mid-1990s. I always thought that, at the very least, they could have named those three theatres the *Paradisio*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Inferno*; and that, according to their location within this once-stately pleasure dome, movies could be programmed thematically: for example, horror films would play in the *Inferno*, while seemingly interminable art films like Alain Resnais' *Last*

Year at Marienbad would be screened in Purgatory. But it was merely the bland, undignified Paradise I, II, and III, an ignominious end to a myth-laden place.

Of course, it would be a fool's paradise to wallow in nostalgia for the past, and so my point has not been to mourn the golden age of Hollywood, but rather, to look forward to what cinema has become and how to work with it.

At the turn of the 20th century, shortly after the invention of cinema, Italian film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo argued in his "Reflections on the Seventh Art" that the medium of cinema had synthesized the traditional spatial or physical arts (architecture, sculpture and painting) with those that unfolded in time (music, dance, and theatre), making movies the "seventh art." Now, a century later, the new medium of video games in turn has absorbed cinema and added the new dimension of interactivity to become what I have called "the eighth art." With this new element of interactivity we have come one step closer to Star Trek's holodeck, or the myth of "total cinema" as prophesied by French film theorist and critic André Bazin. Videogames represent the inevitable future of the cinema, the next stage in its teleological progression, and it is worth noting that for several years now the gaming industry has generated greater profits than the film and music industries combined.

For the past decade I have been working with Silicon Knights, a cutting-edge Ontario videogame developer, helping to build synergies between the abstractions of film theory and the practicalities of the business world. It has been rewarding, for example, to discuss concepts of spectator identification in cinema with game designers and to see these ideas actualized in the camera strategies of a videogame. Also, in consultation with Silicon Knights, a group of Brock faculty members from several departments working in the area of digital gaming developed the interactive arts and sciences program at Brock in 2006. Although similar collaborative schemes between university academic programs and industry have turned up in a number of post-secondary institutions around the country, the Brock program is unique in its emphasis on the humanistic aspects of gaming — its relation to classic mythology, narrative theory, cultural theory, art and music history, and film language. I have been working with the company president, Denis Dyack, to design a proposed Institute of the Eighth Art, a combined industrial and academic cluster dedicated to the development and understanding of the new art form of interactive gaming and digital media, and which would involve the collaboration of several academic departments from Brock and nearby Niagara College, and local and regional governments. The institute would be located in the St. Catharines City core, and would be a major step in revitalizing the downtown economy through job creation. Brock and the city are already collaborating on a new facility in the downtown that will house the municipal arts centre and the university's school of fine and performing arts.

Again, I am not alone among film studies scholars in bringing film studies into the digital domain. Even as film has changed, so our interests have spilled over into other visual media such as television, the internet, and other forms of digital media and popular culture. Administratively, a number of film studies departments in Canada and the US have in the last few years changed their names to more inclusive designations such as “media studies,” “moving image studies,” “screen studies,” or “new media,” and revamped their curricula accordingly. My own program in film studies at Brock evolved out of the fine arts department into a department of communications, popular culture and film 10 years ago. In 2004, the Society for Cinema Studies, the primary international professional association devoted to the scholarly study of film, changed its name to Society for Cinema and Media Studies in acknowledgment of these changing realities, and the nature of the organization has changed substantially since then. Significantly, no film studies professor teaches with actual film anymore; 16mm projectors are a relic from another era, like typewriters and turntables. Now films are screened digitally in so-called smart classrooms.

Whether these changes have resulted in dilution or diversity for the discipline has been the subject of some debate. But for me, as someone who has always tried to connect academic work with real life, it is a welcome development. Contrary to what Ms. Wentz and those of like mind might think, film studies is if anything even more relevant to education in the 21st century because the language of film, how we think visually, has filtered into these other media as well. The skill that we might call “cineliteracy” is crucial to understanding and working in our increasingly media-saturated society. After all, by the time students reach high school, they have devoted more hours to watching television and surfing the internet than they have spent in the classroom.

Yet, astonishingly, in school we are all taught to read but much less frequently to look. As a result, our young people are socialized to a large extent through the visual media, unaware of the degree to which their values have been shaped by the images these media generate. By the time our students enter university or college, they are thoroughly plugged in, and think nothing of social networking or texting during lectures when they should be taking notes. To give students the tools and concepts of critical analysis, whatever the text to which it is applied, is to help them navigate the networked mediascape which structure our perceptions, values, beliefs, and fantasies. In other words, through film studies, students learn to think more independently and so to become more responsible members of society, opening up the media to alternative and multiple points of view and allowing for alternate and pluralistic ways of seeing and representing things. It is no coincidence that when we come to understand something we say that now we “see” it.

Film studies, then, is inextricably linked to broader, more urgent, and more political concerns. By making students aware of how images work, how they convey meaning, they become more resistant to media manipulation and to being the kind of consumers some theorists call cultural dupes. In Frederick Wiseman's 1968 documentary *High School*, a boy in a film discussion group says of his school that "it's cloistered, it's secluded, it's completely sheltered from everything that's going on in the world. And I think it's wrong and has to be changed and I think that's our purpose here. And not to talk about films." In fact, as I have suggested, this has been the mission of film studies from early on. The point was always more than only to teach the history of cinema or the skills of film analysis. Rather, it was more broadly to make students generally more aware and attentive to the media and its methods — an endeavor that is necessarily at once democratic and radical.

Because of its inherent interdisciplinarity, film studies has faced the problem of attaining a stable academic identity; but at the same time, this flexibility has allowed it to survive in the sometimes Darwinian, shark-infested environment fostered by disciplinary boundaries in times of budgetary cutbacks and program restructuring. Nevertheless, if I were to ask, along with John Milton, "Must I leave thee, Paradise?" my answer would be a resounding no, even though that magnificent movie theatre of my youth is physically gone. For the marble columns of *The Paradise* have been replaced for me by the pillars of academia, which are nothing less than the pillars of society.

I thank, once again, Jim Turk and CAUT Council for this opportunity to reflect upon the importance of film studies and my own involvement in it.



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