An Interview with Annette Insdorf

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Introduction

In March 2014, Annette Insdorf, renowned film scholar and Professor of Film Studies at Columbia University, visited Grand Valley State University to give a lecture in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Sidney Lumet's ground breaking Holocaust drama, *The Pawnbroker* (1964). In addition, Insdorf discussed acclaimed Argentinian film *Debajo del mundo* (*Under the Earth*, Feijoo-Stagnaro, 1987) with film students. Insdorf, whose book *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* is the foundational text in the study of Holocaust cinema, agreed to discuss her work and career with Joe Hogan, editor-in-chief of *Cinesthesias*.

What led you to the study of film? Why study film as opposed to other arts?

First, ever since childhood, I loved movies, and my parents took me to see them every weekend. Later, I did my Ph.D. in English at Yale University, which had many great film societies. I went to the movies almost every night, and that was the real basis of my film education. I had the sense in my classes that everything of value had already been written about literature. But with film, I had something new and meaningful to say. I was very lucky because my advisor was Harold Bloom, and he convinced me not to leave Yale in order to try a Ph.D. in Film at NYU. Instead, he encouraged me to finish my doctorate in three years, and then teach in any area I want. That's exactly what I did. After two years of course work, I spent the third year writing my dissertation, and teaching a class on The French New Wave.

Though you attended American universities, you were born in Paris and, in 1999, were named “Officer” in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of
Culture. Has your closeness with both the U.S. and France given you insight into the way European film has shaped American, and vice versa?

Yes, I was fortunate enough to grow up speaking French, Polish and English by the time I was 5 years old. Decades later, this enabled me to appreciate the nuances of foreign films. It was my immersion in the French New Wave—the films of Truffaut, Godard, Resnais, etc.—that led me to an appreciation of the Hollywood cinema, as these critics-turned-directors acknowledged their immense debt to American movies.

Your book *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* is considered one of the best in your field. What led you to study Holocaust film? Why is it important?

My reasons were both personal and professional. My parents were Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivors, which led me to feel a particular responsibility towards this subject matter. And I began writing the book around 1979 after realizing how many films were being made on the subject.

In *Indelible Shadows*, you discuss how filmmakers who make films about the Holocaust attempt to represent that which is un-representable. In general, how effectively would you say filmmakers have addressed this issue in their work? Are there notable successes and failures?

I prefer to ignore the failures and focus on films that merit our attention. In each era and country, filmmakers try to tackle this difficult material, and many succeed in sensitizing audiences and/or finding the appropriate cinematic language. Among the best are the films that were shown on campus this week, namely *The Pawnbroker* and *Under the World*, an Argentine drama from 1986. A superb new Polish drama, *Ida*, will be released in the US in May. It opened in France last month to enthusiastic reviews.
Related to the above question, to what extent do you think Holocaust film has influenced broad cultural understanding of the Holocaust? Has it had a good or bad effect?

It has had an inestimable effect in sensitizing people around the world to the Holocaust. A movie like *Schindler's List* provided—especially for younger audiences—the first inkling of what transpired between Nazis and Jews during World War II. While some critics have justifiably questioned the trivialization that commercial movies can unleash, I find that for many viewers, a movie is the first step towards awareness rather than the final one.

As a film scholar, you seem to have a very close relationship with the actual production of film, having interviewed a variety of major directors and actually produced a short film, *Shoeshine*, which was nominated for an Academy Award. Have such hands-on experiences had an effect on the way you study film as an academic?

It made me more humble. When you work on a film, you realize that everyone starts out with the best of intentions. Huge amounts of time, money and energy are spent, even when a movie fails. I don't want to be the one to attack it. Rather, I call attention only to the films that I believe deserve our respect.

You are a very engaged scholar, having paneled many film festivals and provided commentary for a wide variety of major films. How do you strike a balance between your work as an academic and your work as, for lack of a better term, a major “cultural voice” on cinema? Is there a difference between the two?
Personally, I see no conflict between the two, as my "academic" and "populist" identities inform one another. I believe in accessibility as well as sophistication, in a historical awareness as well as originality. I do not write only for other academics, as there are millions of cinephiles who appreciate a deeper understanding of movies. Whether I am in a classroom, at a film festival, or with friends, I introduce a movie in the same way, asking the viewer to look closely at how the film is telling its story, and to later discuss what it means.

More generally, where do you see film studies going in the future?

I believe Columbia University provides the best model, namely an integrated program of scholarship and production, with no separation between the study of film history and of film practice. Cinema education is increasingly including Television studies (both history and production) and new media.

Do you have any advice for future film scholars?

It's the same advice I have always given to future scholars, namely to master movie history first: theory is important, but only after one has a solid grounding in the best that has been made by filmmakers around the world. And try to appreciate each film within its own terms. I think it's too easy to dismiss either commercial or experimental movies; rather, we should allow every motion picture to create its world; then we can evaluate whether the film has coherence and resonance (my two standards of value).

Do you have any advice for future filmmakers?

The easiest thing to learn is the technical (camera, editing, etc.). The hardest thing is to have a story worth telling. For that, one has to live and think deeply.