An Interview with Barbara Roos

Joe Hogan
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine

Part of the Film Production Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Hogan, Joe (2015) "An Interview with Barbara Roos," Cinesthesia: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol5/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cinesthesia by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Interview: Barbara Roos

Barbara Roos started teaching when Grand Valley was just a few buildings erected on a slab of midwestern prairie. Nixon was in office then, and young draftees were still being sent to Vietnam. In those days, Grand Valley – not yet a university but a cluster of colleges – was alive with the spirit of the counter-culture. William James College, among the most pedagogically experimental of the colleges, was interdisciplinary and non-departmental – it emphasized harmony between theory and practice, thought and action. At James, Roos co-founded the film and video program. In the following interview, she talks with guest editor Joe Hogan about how the film and video major has changed since then, and how film culture has changed along with it.

Joe Hogan: When you first joined the faculty, how did professors attempt to merge theory and practice? Did students get it?

Barbara Roos: On arrival, I found that a quarter of the faculty came from careers in the professions rather than from a background in academia. Mean age of the students was 25. This was because many had been in the work force since graduating from high school. Professors at James worked together with students to implement the theme of merging theory and practice across the curriculum. Small classes helped to do this. And so did having students themselves decide to sit in a circle in order to better observe and respond to fellow students who were making active contributions to class discussions. Students “owned” their college experience: the college experience was individualized in every possible way. Thus, James didn’t give grades. Instead, repeated personal evaluations of their work together with faculty evaluations served as individualized records of students’ college careers. I should add, not one student was ever refused admission to a graduate school because of this individualized evaluation process!

JH: How have students tended to approach their work as film majors? Do they seem to see or acknowledge a link between learning how to make films and learning how to think critically about them?

BR: This question is worth a book. There’s a mix. When you get students to articulate what they think film is,
some come in with a sophisticated understanding; for others, they change while in school through contact with other students. Ideally, the education we provide is not just about learning how to employ certain techniques – it’s about how you think about film, about what you see and what you don’t see. I mean “see” through the lens, as one also “sees” the cultural and aesthetic meanings of shot selection and shot editing, plus “hearing” so as to fashion a soundtrack.

**JH:** In the 70s, what kinds of films did students want to make?

**BR:** They knew they didn’t want to make Hollywood films – and Hollywood is not a place, it’s a style. But they didn’t necessarily have a vision of what they did want. What students would do is, in a literal way, search for topics. The problem was they often thought they were married to an hour and twenty minute film, and music that people knew already. They needed to be freed from that.

**JH:** How do students seem to approach film today?

**BR:** Currently, some of our students maintain loyalty to what they’ve seen before in terms of standards of evaluation – that is, the Hollywood standards. Other students reflect the fact that media culture thrives in many forms today, and students are in the middle of such changes.

As professors, we’re here to help students define a vision on which they can build a life professionally and personally. As the field of communication changes under the influence of digitization, students’ visions will change as well. Multiple alternative forms of media are joining the Hollywood standard.

**JH:** Is one of the problems that we haven’t sufficiently merged the aims of teaching film production with the aims of liberal education?

**BR:** I think so. What I would like to see is a closer relationship between our major and other majors: how about we integrate media courses into other courses? You could, for instance, take a media and history course. We need people who produce media to have a deeper understanding of
historical backgrounds — not just names and dates, but the historical development of current phenomena, current ideas. All the majors within the School of Communications seek to help students examine the existing and evolving relationships, which are many, between so-called liberal and so-called professional education. This is a natural outgrowth of the subject matter of film and video — students and professionals alike deal with content research, and the actual forming of the content for the screen as it’s been set traditionally and as changes have evolved in past decades.

Courses in media theory and history are liberal education as well as professional education. Hands on production courses structure content with perspectives like those of liberal education courses. I notice how often communications in general or film and video specifically are included within course descriptions in other fields, just as media has increased in frequency and importance in general. Our task as faculty, as I see it, is to continue the already-started task of strengthening student consciousness of the integration of the “profession” of media production within the forms and functions of other majors and the perspectives of liberal studies in particular. A synoptic view of culture remains key to education in film and video as it is in other areas of education in the present and the future.

**JH:** So what, in your view, is the ideal relationship between the study of film production and liberal education?

**BR:** Well, film and video production is a discipline that has, for a long time, been categorized as “professional” rather than “liberal.” In actual practice, this categorization may be too simplistic.

Consciously or not, decisions made by a film production staff grow from same kind of shared awareness of the cultural capital at the receiving end of the film, held by viewers. Filmmakers learn their craft by learning how to share with their viewers the “meaning” of changes in such phenomena as depth of focus, the framing of medium shorts versus close-ups, the degree of emphasis conveyed by the speed in which images follow each other, etc. The apparent “realism” this produces on the screen hides rather than reveals the fact that choices have been made based on the historical development of a film language as well as upon
scientific studies of such film phenomena as the
differential speed of a zoom in to the face of a hero or
the role of music on a sound track.

Film images can look a lot like reality but if viewers, or
students, stop to think about this for just a second, it’s
easy to recognize that they are not remotely real. Images
cut down real time. They’re flat, for the most part. The
real world phenomena of space get cut entirely out of its
filmed representation. Film is a conventionalized
language.

Adopting – just for now – the approach suggested here that
film and video production are best studied from both of the
traditional academic categories, the point of view that
“film is a language” tempts one to consider the study of
screened images as part of liberal education. But it also
fit well into the category of professional education. So
perhaps it is an example of a category uniting rather than
separating categories of human behavior.