

## M i c h a e l R a b i g e r

*OK, it is Thursday the twenty-sixth of February of 1998, and this is the interview with Michael Rabiger. And he is the Acting Chair of the Film and Video Department at Columbia College.*

**OK, we'll start with, again, when did you come to Columbia College and what were the circumstances that brought you here?**

Labor Day of 1972; poverty (*laughs*). I came to Columbia because essentially, my career as a documentary filmmaker was coming under pressure in Great Britain. Those were the winters of discontent when the electricity guys were shutting the current off in London. There were strikes, all sorts of things were going on. And the BBC, that I worked for as a documentary director, they were beginning to run low on money and they were selectively eliminating freelancers, and I was a freelance. And there came a point when there were nine hundred union directors and six hundred of them were out of work. I became one of those who was out of work. I also think—I just recently had some confirmation of this—I felt at the time there was some political element involved because I made all history films, a lot of them about left-wing people, and the country was going to the right. And years later, I read in the paper, I was sent an article from England, saying that there had been an MI5 person in office at BBC headquarters whose only job was to vent people politically: directors and producers and editors. And I heard, just two years ago I was in Norway and met up with an old colleague and he said, “Oh yes, there’s a rumor that you belonged to an extremist political organization.”

**This is the English version of McCarthy, the blacklist...**

Yeah, maybe delusions of grandeur on my part. But I suddenly felt—in the way in which I was dismissed—I felt the man regretted it and there was some subtext to it. So, I was out of work and I was recently divorced and living in very difficult circumstances. And I very badly needed a job so I came here. I had a whole year’s work, incredible, I had been working on an eight weeks contract. There would be a gap of a month, two months, three months, and finally I hadn’t been able to find work for three months. And there was this year’s work in a little college and it turned out the college was right next to the place that I filmed at in 1969. So destiny is very strange, it sometimes brings you, you have experiences in places that will later get to be very important to you.

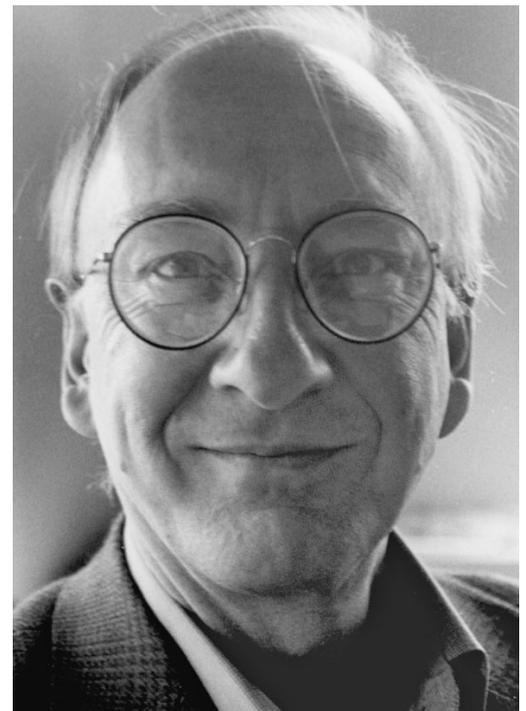
**How did you hear about Columbia, or how—through the grapevine, just professionally?**

No, I could see work was being fit underground in 1971, ‘72. And I looked at every place in America that had any kind of a Film Department. Columbia’s chairman, then chairman, was coming through London and met with me, saw the list of films I’d made—he’s an old socialist himself...

**What’s his name?**

This is Robert Edmonds. And our friendship began in a bar in London. And by the time I got here, there being sort of a palace revolution, Bob would be moved over to Liberal Education. And so I started here, there were no teachers left, it was Tony Loeb and myself in this department—and some resentful part-time people. And there

was, I think, two pieces of paper with these sort of very poorly duplicated instructions on them, and some very beaten up film equipment. And I was talented in the technical area. I got the entire technical instruction for the film school to deliver. I was working twenty-eight contact hours a week but I couldn’t understand why I was so tired. Then I looked at everybody else’s, all the other teachers, I did a bar graph and mine towered over the rest of the school. All I did was hand it over to Tony, and he took a look and said, “Oh, we’re going to have to do something about this.” Because I was carrying twice, more than twice what anybody else was teaching. So that was the beginning, and the students were a mixed bunch. Some were very keen and dedicated, some of them were ex-Vietnam vets who were in sort of a state of withdrawal, I think. They were shocked, they came through all sorts of things and they were trying to pick up on their life again. I was



shocked by the state of illiteracy among the students. I'd never seen people write poorer in my life. I liked the students, it was a very small school, I liked the work. I was attracted to the idea of unpacking everything that I'd learned because I'd been in the film industry for fifteen years. I worked in a big film studio, a big picture film studio first, and then I worked as an editor and a director of documentaries which were very improvisational, very, you'd make them up as you go along; two very different worlds. And I never thought really analytically about how I'd learned to work like that.

Of course, as soon as you start teaching you have to unpack your memory. It's like you unpack your mental suitcase to see what the hell you've got in there. Why do you believe what you believe? Why do you do things in the way that you do them? How do you convey—to someone who's never operated anything more technical than a hairdryer—how do you convey how to use a camera? What is a camera? A camera is a substitute for a pair of eyes, a pair of eyes is directed by an intelligence. So you discover that, I discovered, that film language is, in fact, it's an analogy for consciousness. It's the nearest thing we have to putting consciousness before an audience. Writing does that but film produces sights and sounds and the counterpoint between them. So, what you're teaching is not really teaching camera or sound recording, you're teaching people about how to reproduce their own consciousness: the times of stress, the times of dramatic moments. And so the whole business of teaching, for me, was a journey inwards and backwards. It was an opportu-

nity to stop blindly moving forward; trying to create product, trying to research and create product all at the same time, in order to keep my family fed. It became time to, if you like, see myself; see those young people, see the learning in a more deliberate way, a more instructed way, to give them the chance to learn what I'd learned in a more logical, kind of, deliberate, structured way. So it was, for me, it was the opportunity to create the education which I hadn't had.

**It sounds like looking back that you appreciated the experience, but was that tradition, from going to producing to teaching, was it difficult, I mean, at the time or...**

No, not really, no, because the school didn't have high expectations and it wasn't... The school was making up education. You know, the people that taught in the school were radicals in the sense that they came from radical political backgrounds; they came from the position that anyone can do anything, that our job is to help, is to empower people who are disadvantaged and our job is to share what we know with young people; our job is to figure out how best to do that. And I always, I always, I'm a self-educated person. I didn't go to college, I left school—there was no such thing as film school—so I went straight into a film studio. And you had to figure out what was going on, there was nobody who would teach it, teaching the immediate things that they wanted you to do; what nobody wanted to do to what was going on in the studio, who did what, what the politics were—you had to find all that out. And that's a very long-winded and inhibiting way to learn. So, here's the opportunity to take what I'd learned from fifteen years of professional work and to present it, analyze it, break it

down, and present it and to do hands-on work with the other people and to figure out how they learned. They were like me, they learned in certain ways, and so it was like a fascinating, never-ending experiment in conveying what you know, or what you feel, and why it's worthwhile to learn to do drudgery; there's a lot of drudgery in filmmaking, why the drudgery's worthwhile. So you're teaching that "why," you're not just teaching skills, you're teaching a way of seeing, a way of learning. And then I gradually moved over from fiction, which is all we taught in those days, and moved over towards my own specialty, which had become documentary, which is more-it's the sort of jazz of filmmaking, because it's improvisation.

**You've touched on that but what, if you could expand, how you would describe the mission of Columbia College, perhaps, maybe keeping special attention to when you first came and what drew you to it, or what you found. And then if you could also, maybe, address how you feel it's impacted the arts, the media.**

What I understood the mission of the College to be was they placed the misfits, people who were not winners by the traditional academic standard. And they were people who weren't average, didn't excel, uniformly across the board. They were often people who, people from the ghetto, people who—for one reason or another—were unequally developed. We had such a range of people. Within a year or two I had a nun in my class and I had a pimp—not in the same class. We had such a range of people of all ages and all backgrounds. And our job was to take people who wanted to learn something and to work with

them, work with their limitations, work to overcome those limitations where it was necessary. Essentially our job was to [embrace] people who wanted to learn, and to give them the confidence and give them the self-belief to understand. Once you want to learn something there are ways that you can, from just about any deficiency in your background. And our job was to take people from the ghetto, to take people with disabilities, to take people who were felons, people who came from blue-collar backgrounds, people who came from abusive backgrounds, people who didn't fit in. And our job was to find a spark and to develop that, blow that into a fire: take a spark and blow it into a fire. And in those days the school was very small. We had sixty students in the Film Department. The whole school only had four or five hundred when I joined. And now we have a good eight thousand and the Film Department has nearly a fifth of the College under its roof.

**Is that increase dramatic, I mean, looking at where it was in the early '70s? Has that impacted the mission, do you feel?**

Well, it's had an impact on the practicability of the central, really the central facet by which education works. Education works because somebody gives attention to somebody. And we need for the student to learn something about their life because when you write and talk, you discover where they are touched and where they are alive and where they are yearning to be useful in the world, to make and do something with other people. When, here was an old person, or here was someone with [a shade] about their background;

when you say to that person, "You can do this. I can see what you're interested in, I like this too. I'm interested; I find what you say interesting. Let's see what kind of object you can make, and I will help you," what you're delivering is student-based education. There are two kinds of education: one is student based, which says, which means that you take an interest in each individual and you help that person cross a series of bridges, the bridges really from childhood, from being one of many to being someone with skills and a sense of purpose. The other kind of education is the mountain top, the image is the mountain top, where the professor or the expert stands on the mountain top swinging a sword, says, "Come up! See if you can get up here, I'm gonna try and stop you, I'll make it difficult for you. If you can journey up here then you're one of us." So that's the challenge model, that's what I think of as a traditional model. I think it's immensely damaging to a lot of people. I think it's inhumane, I think it reinforces class separation. I'm an Englishman, therefore I'm intensely aware of class stratifications. And our job in this school was to bypass that and to present a model of friendship, of belief, and of nurturing and encouragement. That's what we did. It's become much more difficult. We suddenly have ninety-two part-time teachers in this department alone. So, communication's very difficult and we have to rely on people sharing our philosophy and we have to rely on helping—many have gone through the school; that's a double-edged sword, to use a mixed metaphor.

**Why is that?**

Well, it means that there's something incestuous about using your own people. On the other hand, the

values by which we operate aren't widely available. Mostly it's the competitive model. Students come into this school, come into this department, they have to turn around habits of a lifetime. Their habits are, were learned during competition with the people around you, there's only so many slices of the pizza, and you've got to scramble over the bodies [with a knife in your back] in order to get to the top of the heap. Well, this is a collaborative discipline; people have to work together. There's no limit to the appetite for good entertainment. And I count Ingmar Bergman as a good entertainer: that to me is really good entertainment, something that makes you think, dream, feel, imagine, wonder; there's no limit. So there's no limit to the amount of employment. But if people come in with the good old American capitalistic competitive model, they'll screw each other. And they do. Fifty percent of the first Film Production class dropped out because they made life uncomfortable for each other, because they can't collaborate. Or they think they can't collaborate. So our job is to teach them, is to reverse the flow of their lives and to get them to work together and to get them to discover the joys of working with other people towards a common end. So, yes, it's gotten much more difficult, and the difficulty for teachers of handling people who can barely read or write along with people who are pretty sophisticated in reading, thinking, and in film watching, and who have traveled. This is an almost impossible task because it drags down the faculty members, who are so heavily worked they don't have the time to give what we once had. There's so much busy work, there's so much

bureaucratic stuff in education in the States that the quality of teacher's lives has changed very much; it's become much more difficult. Most people work like sixty-hour weeks and they may only be teaching two classes. The amount of work to run a graduate program, for instance, the amount of work to run two classes yourself, and then supervise maybe twenty other classes, it's pretty hectic. So yes, things have changed; I think it's still known for the same thing. Actually, two of our alumni came a few nights ago and gave a presentation at the Getz; two young African-American men who both made films in Hollywood within six or eight years of their beginning in Columbia. And what they said I thought was very interesting. They said there are three major film schools in the United States: there's NYU, there's USC, and there's Columbia. And NYU and USC are in the shadow of their respective film industries and one of them said, I think George Tillman, said, "I gave a presentation at NYU, and nobody asked me about working with actors. All they're interested in is how do you break in, how do you get running." So both of them felt that on either coast, that students are seduced and corrupted—even in film school, they're already corrupted with film industry values, with capitalistic industry values. And they said, "The thing that we learned at Columbia," and they both said this, "We learned to value our own lives, value our own emotions and our own experience. And both of us came back to Chicago. We got the money in Hollywood but we came back to Chicago to make our films. This is where we belong, this is what we know, this is where we can make films. We can make our

films." So that's what we're about. And you know, it brought tears to my eyes because that's what I've been attached to for the last twenty-six years. Those are the values that I believe in and my colleagues believe in, that's what we stand for: valuing yourself, coming to respect what has happened to you and how it has affected you and what you have learned from it. And making art, whether it's novels or short stories, or poems, or paintings, or films, music—making art from your heart and your intelligence. You're not making art to imitate, trying to join in with a trend of some sort. They said it, we didn't ask them to say it, they said it spontaneously. So they've [NYU and USC] lost everything but we haven't lost anything. I don't know.

**Well, I think that addresses, in part, perhaps the uniqueness of Columbia to those trends. Does Columbia, then, have a larger impact or is it traveling on its own, you know, unique path that...**

Well, this is hard to say. It's very hard to see where your work, where your beliefs really go and how they travel, if they travel. I have taught at NYU, I taught for NYU for a year. And NYU has a very good program and their students are very well educated, in terms of the film-making side, you know, the lighting and all the technical stuff. They don't have a writing program; the writing program is in another department. So, when you go to their Film Festival at the end of the year, it's all calling-card films, it's all schmaltzy—who's the Neil Simon-type... the best ones, of course, are very good and are different. The great majority of the material doesn't have the thoughtfulness, doesn't have the self-searching sincerity to find it [in the

artwork]. It's shaky and it's beginner's work, but usually you can... The best of our work always has soul. It can be misshapen and can have all sorts of things wrong with it dramatically and the acting, but there is the soul of the person, people making it is usually visible, and you'll see it [through discussion of those things]. I know one way in which my personal work has traveled: I wrote two books and these books are used in film schools all throughout the English speaking world, which is why I get to travel around. So in that sense, what I learned here, I got tired of saying the same things in class after class, and so I thought I'd write a book. And then I wrote a second book, and those books get used a lot. So in that sense, what Columbia stands for, what Columbia is inventing, a hands-on, kind of, experiential method of learning, it's ideal for film and, for better or for worse, those methods are used everywhere. I mean, my books are widely used, so in that sense, yes. And I'm sure there are lots of other ways. There's a cell in Hollywood with—I think Charlie [Carnow] told me there are some forty Columbia alumni who meet regularly, they have picnics and stuff, and they help each other and they help—again, it's a question, it's a matter of values. The values that they learned were so important in school, are something they can keep going among themselves. There's a sort of support network in Hollywood. Some of our people got highly placed there, so that's nice. *(Laughs)*

**I want to back up a minute to something that you said earlier: when you came you talked about how, you know, sparse things were. How did you get the materi-**

**als and the equipment? And how did that come about, to build the department?**

We had very basic materials. And in fact, for instance, we didn't have a means, we only had one theater, we had a little theater that could show picture and sound in synchronization with each other. And I have a background in some self-taught engineering. I did my own car repairs since I was a kid, motor-cycle repairs and so on. So the first double-system projector that we had in the classrooms, I made two of them, and I made them out of—I linked a piece of a Moviola, which is an editing machine, to a projector using gear belts and things. So I made quite elaborate stuff that could be rolled in the classrooms. And our early, the footage counter on our mixing equipment, our second double-system studio, the footage counter was made of an adapted calculator. I figured out how the buttons worked and I rigged up some switches. So it was a little improvisation and...

**Did you have a budget?**

I never, I never saw money. The place was run like a family business and chairs were the favored and not so favored sons and daughters, and the faculty were really treated, somewhat, like children. We never got to see money and we never got to know how much things cost. And I suppose it was convenient for a long time not to have to bother with that stuff, but I certainly don't [mind it to] change all that. Because we're huge and we have a large budget, so [I'm making the faculty meet their budgets]. No, we didn't have anything. Things were given to us, or we—the department had a budget of some sort, and we acquired bits and pieces. And the education sort of—we made use of

what we had to work with. We had some crummy old Bolexes, we had a Steenbeck flatbed editing machine, and one or two other things. So we taught with what we had. I don't think, the tools aren't as important, you know, you don't need very much to make film, you really don't. You can make a film out of very few basic things. That wasn't really much of... The place itself, the building, the infrastructure of the building, was a warehouse that was built entirely of wood. And times when classes changed, there'd be this tremendous rumbling like cattle moving through the building, the rumble of boots. There was no carpets anywhere, the place was bare wooden floors. The students used to drop their—everybody smoked, and everybody dropped their butts on the floor or their pop cans and there'd be this—

**In the building?**

Yeah, in a wooden building. And when we lectured or taught, there'd be this... So I was saying we had bare wooden floors. And the first major improvement was Bert Gall, I think it was Bert at that time, had some carpeting installed. Immediately people stopped dropping shit on the floor and they stopped flicking their ash all over the place. And the acoustics improved dramatically. So that was the beginning of physical improvements. The washrooms, the men's washroom, were always blocking up so you'd often walk in with an inch of water on the floor, with overflowing urinals. And we had one elevator I think. And it was very hand to mouth, but it was jolly, you know? We were making things up as we went along and everyone pretty much understood that. We thought we were inventing education—of course we were, as far as we were concerned. We were

making up something that had never been done before, and that's a very exhilarating feeling. It was a good place, I was proud to be part of it. And I was proud that we were doing something that no one much else was doing with teaching people filmmaking. It was also, from a personal point of view, I had a pretty bad school experience. I didn't like school. And it was a chance to rethink what education might be and to—it was a privilege to be able to apply it to our unsuspecting students. *(Laughs)* They were all part of an experiment. I don't know whether they realized that or not; it was all an experiment.

I think we, by now, twenty-five years later, we've all internalized what works and are very busy doing it. It's come down to how the students learn, what they learn and so on. But, the President used to eat his lunch with the maintenance man, Jake Caref, in a little cafe called Ma Shermann's. And Ma Shermann, her son did the cooking and Ma Shermann took the money, and they had a succession of student waitresses. So that was right next to the school. It was right next to the lake. I remember arriving my first day and getting there early and standing on the side of the lake, because I had been here in 1969 and I was with a BBC film unit and I was jumped on by a bunch of marshals when I went into the Federal Building. And I was coming here to film Benjamin Spock and the Chicago 8, and the whole place was like bristling with FBI—I don't suppose they were CIA—FBI guys, secret police types, and there was a lot of fear and a lot of tension in the city. And this was in '69, and I thought "Boy, what a cold place." I was glad to get out of

there. Where do I get the job, but Chicago? I thought, “Jesus, what am I walking into?” I remember standing up, you could see through this window, out on Navy Pier, on the outside of that big black building—the Mies van der Rohe building—I remember standing up there looking northward at the coast. And it was a day like this, it was a pretty, sunny day, and thinking, “Wow, this isn’t so bad. Maybe I can handle this.” *(Laughs)* And I thought,<sup>3</sup> “Well, it’s only for a year and then I go home.” But at the end of the year, I didn’t have any freelance; if you’re away for a year, people forget you.

So a year stretched into two years, stretched into three years, and I’d go home and see my kids as often as possible, but they eventually started to come to visit here. So, that’s how I lived. But it was, it was a cheerful place and Chicago itself, it was beginning to change from being a working-class, tough, rough, meat and potatoes kind of place. And you had one alternative theater, Body Politic. And gradually, gradually over the years they brought, I don’t know, thirty theater companies, thirty orchestras, God knows how many galleries, I mean, the whole nature of the place has changed, as [its citizens] changed all over the United States. They’ve changed from being, sort of, machines for business. People have begun to-as people have gone through colleges like ours, people have begun to value movies and books and plays, as well as baseball and all those traditional things. So I’ve seen, in twenty-five years, this place has changed beyond all recognition. It’s become a much better city to live in. And I’m sure that Columbia has something to do with that. Columbia was always the—well, to

begin with, people would say, “Where do you work?” And we’d say, “Columbia College.” They’d say, “Where’s that?” Then after five or ten years, it changed from being, “Where do you work?” “Columbia College.” “Oh, what do you do there?” *(Laughs)* So it’s gradually become, it’s become a place that everyone in the city knows of, you know, [as a] special nature. And the Film Department, it has a national, an international reputation. We’re a member of the International Consortium of Film Schools and we’re represented—I just went to Denmark with Chap Freeman, we went to Denmark to the conference. Chap and I have run the European Documentary Workshop. This is for students from national film schools; so, I’ve just been to Jerusalem, I’ve been teaching in Jerusalem for the school and before that Mexico City, before that Norway; we were in Berlin, Amsterdam, Prague, New Zealand—taught in New Zealand—what else? I’ll be going to Cuba in a few weeks.

**Really?**

Yeah. So, I mean, from a little college that couldn’t pay its bills we’ve changed into a force to be reckoned with, the Film Department. And, you know, the rest of the school will tell you about itself. I can only really talk about the Film Department.

**Who are some of the people, whether it be students, you know, over the years that you remember for one reason or another or influenced you?**

I suppose we’ll always have students that we’ve kept in touch with. For instance, there was a class in about 1978 that was an extraordinary class. We got two directors, camera people, three directors out of that class, I think, production

managers, screenwriters. Every so often you get a class that’s just extraordinary. One in that class was a man called Iram Patinkin, he’s related to Sheldon, who runs the Theater Department. I’m still in touch with Iram. When my daughter went to visit Israel she split up with the person she was traveling with and I had given her his number. She went to visit him on the kibbutz that he lived in and she liked it so much she didn’t leave. And she met an Israeli there and four years later she’s living there. And I went to visit her, and I went to visit Iram in his own country for the first time, and we sat and watched some of his movie. He’s a very well-known Israeli director. But in that way, your life, you know, you can’t tell how your lives will be intertwined. There are people that just hit it off and they become good friends. There are so many people that have touched me, and that I’ve touched them. This has happened with the international teaching I’ve done. I had a script come through the e-mail from Robert [Sweenen], who was in the Visions Project class. So people keep contact; there is a conversation going on and that’s part of, I mean, all of that emanates, ultimately, from Mike Alexandroff’s conversation that he had in a bar with someone, “Why don’t we start a school? Why don’t we start a school where we encourage people who wouldn’t otherwise go to school?” And out of that philosophy, the idea that everyone has a spark, everyone has energy, has a spark in them, everyone learns in a different way and we have to adapt our teaching methods to the way that people actually learn. My daughter doing sound for Iram’s films, I mean, that’s all connected. A seed produces a forest over a period of

time. And the seed is a philosophical, humane one. It's a humane vision that Mike had and Bob Edmonds had and Bill Russo and Harry... I'm blocking his name, he used to lecture in the arts on WFMT [Bouras]. But those people started the school and they had a humane vision and they were people who identified with ordinary people, who weren't interested in—they didn't see themselves as part of an elite. They were Marxists, they were Socialists, they were 1930s idealists, visionaries. Sentimental vision, sure; humane, yes.

**Has the College been able, I guess, what are its challenges now, you know, what's on the horizon?**

What's on the horizon?

**Yeah.**

I think the challenge is really to retain and develop our belief system, our humane vision for education, and not to become an impersonal machine. We're already so large that I'm afraid a lot of students never stay long enough to find out what's here. We're using, we're recycling our own graduates as teachers because we can't find teachers, which is not good, it's not right. We're not paying people properly, we never have done, and that's created a union backlash. That never need have happened. I think our problem is a problem of quality of education. And the mission, because the mission sucks in people of all abilities and disabilities—and we're talking about educational, not physical, we're talking about educational disabilities—I think that we have a problem of quality and consistency. As we get larger, for instance, we have

over twenty sections of the first film class. It's a nightmare to try to keep some consistency of education across that range of teachers. We don't have the time to teach the teachers. They are people we know and they are people we give some instruction to and we test them, but basically they're on their own in a classroom. They're doing what they've seen done a year or two earlier, four or five years earlier. A lot of them have very little professional experience.

So that's—I think that's the biggest challenge. I'm sure the money thing will be sorted out, I'm sure that we'll have to put up tuition. We'll put up tuition, we'll lose some students, and I think the people that run the school, the financial, the people that do the finances, I'm thinking particularly of Bert Gall, Mike DeSalle, and his predecessors, they're very smart people. They're also good business people. And I think the challenge is to overcome the anxieties of the business market and have confidence that what we do is very good and we can do it even better if we don't have to work with people who, literally, cannot read or write. Some people come in here who really can't. Some of them come from the ghetto, but probably an equal number of them come from the white suburbs, because the school system is so dreadful, so little is expected, so little concentration, so little personal output is expected of kids in schools. So the education system prior to college is dreadful and we try to remedy it. And we've been less willing to discriminate against people who are damaged by that system, and maybe we shouldn't be. I suppose the financial imperatives are going to drive us towards being more of a mainstream place, which is sad. But the price you pay for being

successful is that you're driven into the arms of mainstream education. So we're certainly trying to preserve—we're teaching the arts. We're not teaching business, you know, we're not teaching MBAs, and we're not teaching organic chemistry or electrical engineering, we're teaching the arts. And there's always that thing, you're in the arts because you want to save the world, you know? And so some good in the world. And so we attract idealists, and so there's always something to work with, however difficult the finances may be. Students work their butts off, you know? They're doing twenty hours, thirty hours of work a week and they don't have time for any personal lives. They are often tired, exhausted, and they work very hard. So those are all the difficulties.

**Has that changed since you came here too, that students, like would you describe students today differently?**

I would say they're a bit more literate, they're better educated in the arts. They're certainly a lot better educated in film because of tape, the ability to own a film and examine it. I think they're more ambitious now. Our students were so meek years ago; they were the first kids in their family to ever go to college. So just getting into college was like a major thing. Our students are becoming more ambitious, which is good. They are more confident, I think. Yeah, I think they have to work harder than they used to. Probably because we know our business better and we work them harder that they have to work to support themselves, there's not much help from people's families, I suspect. So many of the students have gotten a lot better. They've

gotten better in their... there's always the students, in any school, who make teaching worthwhile, students who are always excellent. And the students who want to study film are better still, the students who want to study documentary are better still still *(laughs)*, you understand, because there's no money to be made in documentary. Anybody who wants to make documentary, they're very... what's the word, there's a word I can't get to, it means idealistic: you want to do good. So, yeah, the students have always been good.

**Is that one of the reasons, besides being able to work in your field, that you remain teaching at Columbia as opposed to—I don't know if you were going on to other schools...**

Yeah, I could have stayed at NYU if I had wanted to, but I think Columbia has the right emphasis. We emphasize understanding your own, understanding the value of what's happened to you and what's happened to the people that you love as the beginning of making art. And other major schools, they are corrupted by feeding the industry or thinking they feed the industry. Columbia's always been an interesting place; we've had a great deal of freedom, from being fettered by an administration that wanted to dictate what we taught and how we taught it, we had a great deal of trust placed in us. So I think that the faculty has been relatively happy in the Film Department. We've had our bad times, we've had people who were a negative presence, but by and large the same people have worked here, nobody much has left, which tells us something. The turnover in full-time faculty is minimum,

absolutely minimum. We have part-timers who have taught anywhere between five and thirty years, so—and I think people teach because they feel that they're giving something and they feel that they're part of something that's worthwhile. It sounds sort of Pollyanna-ish, but... I think that we, with some concerted work over a few years, we could have—I know this sounds kind of stupid—I think we can have the best film school: you know, a film school that's recognized as being head and shoulders above anyone else. We lack equipment and we lack consistency and we lack paid teachers, we have partially paid teachers, we lack faculty, but the administration's been very generous, as generous as it can be, I think, giving us more space, more equipment and some more teachers.

**It's interesting because some of what you say, you have said today, sounds like the Film Department is a bit of an entity unto itself at Columbia for its notoriety and its accomplishments; but then you've also hit on issues that, you know, every department, the ratio of part-time to full-time...**

We have the worst ratio. In some of our disciplines, when I came here it was thirty undergraduate students to one faculty member. In cinematography it's a hundred and sixty, I think, to one now. And some areas don't have any full-time faculty members teaching there at all, so things are much, much worse when you think of carrying on this tradition of, you know, person to person virtue. Our part-timers are mostly excellent, and they're hardworking, they're young and they're energetic and they're inventive and they're making new things up and contributing and so on. But we mostly don't get to

meet them; we hear about them, you know. It's not the way it should be. But yes, I think we are self-contained because we're making films and the whole class is going to films, there's so many of them that there isn't really room to interact with the outside world. You don't need anything; you have everything under—you're a city, almost, under one roof. Which is like in the big film studio when I was a kid, it's like a city, everything's there: scene, building, clothing...

**And you're creating worlds...**

You have a world in order to create worlds. So you do get, I mean, we're isolated within the College because kids are going out and they're filming here, there and everywhere, and they're bringing life back into the department and they're making films out of it. So we don't have the sense of being cut off; it's more or less a sense of the rest of the College being the irritation, we don't need it to do what we do, we don't need it. We just wish they came in reading and writing and able to multiply and add up.

**I know the tape's running low but if there's any particular events or moments that you felt, you know, were very defining in your experience here at Columbia, whether it's directly related to the department or the College...**

Yeah, I think there has been a major change in the College, which I alluded to the fact that the College was run like a family business to begin with for a long time. And at a certain point we became almost to be treated like—to be children, and the faculty created a faculty organization. And what this did was to create this force, a

democratic—the development of democracy in the running of the College. And that’s pretty much what you’ve got now. And in that way, what we did was to create a more traditional college; collegial, the word means working with other people. And it wasn’t like that to begin with; it was a benign dictatorship.

**And when did that...**

I would say it was probably the early ‘80s is my impression, the early ‘80s. A few of us got together and we very carefully constructed this thing.

**And what types of issues did that focus on originally? I mean, was it budgetary or...**

It wasn’t budgetary for a very long time. There were issues of power, control, control of the chairs. The chair in this department was not very benign, it was...

**You mean, not just the best person...**

Well, they’re chairs for life, you see. It was automatic...

**They were appointed?**

They were appointed and we lived with someone who was sometimes quite difficult, quite difficult. I guess I don’t want to get into all that. Life was not easy for a long time.

**But that was one of the issues...**

It was one of the issues, that it was top-down management. And we were all professional people and we all had lives and backgrounds. And certainly, coming from England where life is transformed in the nineteenth century by labor unions, by grassroots representation, it had to change and it did change. And I think the College doesn’t realize it

but it’s richer for all that. It means we all have to go to committee meetings and sit through hours of our colleagues explaining things at great length. But that’s the price you pay. I think it’s still a good organization. It’s got a very [skilled] administration. You can get things done quickly. If you can get along with people I think you can do well here. I think this is a place for everyone to grow who are interested in—people come in here, faculty members come in, I say, “What do you want to do with your life? What would you like to do? What would be your dream?” And try and arrange things so they’re doing something new, so that they can grow. And I don’t think that was the way [it all went]; I know it wasn’t. So it’s an interesting place, it’s a social experiment. It’s a sort of utopian-

**So you believe it continues to be that in the present?**

Oh yes, I think what we’ve done is to—it’s funny. When I went to visit my friend Iram, my ex-student, Iram lives on a kibbutz, he’s founded two kibbutzim now, and I went to a little kibbutz meeting which was the only part that I understood was—I understood body language pretty well, I knew what the issues were that they were discussing—the only part I understood was when somebody shouted out, “Fuck you asshole!” to Iram. I said, “I understood that, because that was English.” But the kibbutz, in the thirty years since it was there, in the thirty years that it’s been there they’ve changed from utopian villages to—very painfully, they’ve metamorphosed into more traditional industrial settlements, where people get paid. But they’re still working out how to keep some idea of collaboratively sharing their lives and sharing their incomes. So

I think we’re the same way. We started out as a kibbutz, and I think we’ve turned into a [town]. And we’ve had to reinvent governments; we’ve invented a lot of things, and we’ve had to discover how to work, how to create administrative lines, how to make people accountable, how to be responsible, how to interact, how to deal with complexity, how to deal with large sums of money, how to deal with public relations. In a sense, we’ve invented an institution and the institution has gone from village size to city size. Not that we’ve done badly at all, really.