

CHRIS WORSNOP

DATE OF INTERVIEW: THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2011

INTERVIEWER: TESSA JOLLS

(Quote)

*Modern culture is no longer exclusively print-based. I insist on that word “exclusively”. It’s still very much print-based, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a lot of our educational institutions were formed, and our institutional assumptions were created, our culture was almost exclusively print-based and it made sense for our education to be print-based. But that doesn’t make sense anymore.*

*It hasn’t made sense for quite a long time. I reckon any culture that wants to thrive should really educate its children and its young people within the culture that they exist. They should be encouraged to swim in the water that actually forms their culture rather than look backwards; some would call it the rear view mirror, after McLuhan, looking back to the ancient Greek and Roman culture, plays from the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a footnote here, I am really enjoying reading all of these again now, but I rarely enjoyed or understood or appreciated them as much as I should have when I was young.*

## BIOGRAPHY OF CHRIS WORSNOP

Chris Worsnop is now running a weekly film program at the local Cobourg Ontario library, and chairing the committee for the Marie Dressler Foundation Vintage Film Festival. He is author of two books, *Screening Images: Ideas for Media Education* (2nd edition, 1999) and *Assessing Media Work: Authentic Assessment in Media Education* (1996). His background is in high school teaching and K-12 curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation in English language arts, drama, and media education.

## INTERVIEW TEXT

Selected Questions:

*Why did you become involved in media education?*

*How far do you think the field has come?*

*Do you feel like the field has moved in a direction you would hope to see?*

*Have there been surprises for you along the way when you think about the development of the field and looking back, what surprised you?*

*What would you like to see happen?*

***TJ: Why did you become involved in media education?***

**CW:** My father was a projectionist, and then I miss-spent three years getting an undergraduate degree in England, going to the movies every night instead of studying literature. When I was an undergraduate there were no film or media courses that I could have taken.

Afterwards, I just gravitated to something I loved. In 1965 I discovered 16mm projectors in the Ottawa high school where I taught, and the geography teachers thought that they belonged to them. I disabused the geography teachers of that idea and got in touch with the National Film Board of Canada <http://www.nfb.ca/> and the Canadian Film Institute, <http://www.cfi-icf.ca/> and made some good contacts there who gave me access to their entire libraries. I just kept driving downtown and picking up films that they recommended and bringing them back to my classroom and teaching them as if they were poems or short stories. I found that they were tremendously effective with all kinds of students. They seemed to understand better what I was trying to do with literature.

This branched off then into the formation of the film society at the school where we rented 16mm feature films and showed them in the auditorium. The next year I got an English headship at another school and immediately formed another film society. That year the Ontario Ministry of Education allowed the teaching of a unit on film as a part of the graduating year English course. I immediately put in a proposal to teach this course. All the films I wanted to put in the film curriculum I put in the film society program. Half of the members of the film society were parents, so their memberships helped to fund the materials we needed for this film course. We did an auteur study on Arthur Penn <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2008janfeb/penn.html>: *Miracle Worker*, *Left Handed Gun*, *Mickey One*, *The Chase*. *Bonnie and Clyde* was a hot film that year.

***TJ: How great! It really was a combination of the parents, you as the teacher and your students who made it happen!***

**CW:** Well I really had an enthusiastic staff. It was a brand new school and we'd hired very enthusiastic teachers who were, many of them, very strong in media. Of course we kept up with the connection with the National Film Board and the Canadian Film Institute.

Around that time, too, I got invited to join the board of the Film Federation of Eastern Ontario. That's a mouthful. That was an organization that bought 16mm films - there was no videotape then - and placed them in blocks that it rented to public libraries. These blocks circulated around eastern Ontario and people with a library card could borrow them with a projector, take them to their homes or church or whatever organization they represented and show them as a public screening. It was an ungainly way of having media at home, but it worked. It had actually been

set up earlier by the NFB, but when they gave up circulating their own blocks the federations in different parts of Ontario took it over.

Now from there I went on to the Ontario Film Association which existed to promote non-theatrical film to libraries, colleges, universities and school boards and museums and all the organizations with a collection of non-theatrical films. The Ontario Film Association organized an annual marketplace that lasted for four days. The OFA later set up the John Grierson <http://www.griersontrust.org/john-grierson.html> Documentary Seminar, using the model of the Flaherty Seminar <http://www.flahertyseminar.org/>. It ran at the same location for a few days before the marketplace. So this went on for several years, we invited people like Basil Wright <http://www.griersontrust.org/john-grierson.html> to come and be our guest speakers. The German animator, Lotte Reiniger, <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.3/articles/moritz1.3.html> who did the shadow animation *Prince Ahmed*, came one year. Well, eventually, the OFA disappeared because VHS came in and then of course DVD and it was unnecessary for people to come to a central place. The whole model for the marketplace became no longer viable.

While all this was going on, I was working in school to change the use of media in the classroom from audio-visual aids into a subject of its own. The argument I've always used is that a large and increasing part of our modern culture is visual.

Nowadays we'd call it screen-based but we didn't then. The British Film Institute <http://filmstore.bfi.org.uk/> at the time had a name for the subject - Screen Education. I'm talking about the mid-to-late 1960s now. Of course in Europe and the UK, media education had existed since the 1930s, in fact, F.R. Leavis [http://archive.waccglobal.org/wacc/publications/media\\_development/archive/2003\\_4/visions\\_of\\_media\\_education\\_the\\_road\\_from\\_dystopia](http://archive.waccglobal.org/wacc/publications/media_development/archive/2003_4/visions_of_media_education_the_road_from_dystopia) who was one my teachers at university, had written some seminal material about it promoting the use of films in the classroom, but he came from a kind of an elitist base wanting to talk about The Canon rather than about popular culture. But still it was something that got the BFI engaged in education and the BFI did a lot to support media education/media studies, whatever you want to call it, in the UK.

Sorry for the digression: I was trying to get media established in its own right because modern culture is no longer exclusively print-based. I insist on that word "exclusively". It's still very much print-based, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a lot of our educational institutions were formed, and our institutional assumptions were created, our culture *was* almost exclusively print-based and it made sense for our education to be print-based. But that doesn't make sense anymore. It hasn't made sense for quite a long time. I reckon any culture that wants to thrive should really educate its children and its young people within the culture that they exist. They should be encouraged to swim in the water that actually forms their culture rather than look backwards; some would call it the rear view mirror, after McLuhan, looking back to the ancient Greek and Roman culture, plays from the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a footnote here, I am really enjoying reading all of these again now, but I rarely enjoyed or understood or appreciated them as much as I should have when I was young.

So I was involved along with people like Barry Duncan <http://www.aml.ca/aboutus/speakerBios.php?speakerID=283> in the very early movement in

Ontario to establish screen education or media literacy - I think we still called it screen education then - in Ontario. I wasn't involved as much as Barry; he was very definitely more involved than me. There was a big media literacy conference at York University in Toronto with John Culkin <http://www.medialit.org/reading-room/john-culkin-sj-man-who-invented-media-literacy-1928-1993> as the keynote.

I ran some sessions in Ottawa too, little weekend or single day sessions. A man called Tony Hodgkinson <http://www.jstor.org/pss/30217409> who was then in Boston doing work in screen education, he came up from there to do the keynote in Ottawa for us. Tony was an ex-BFI leader who had been involved in selecting the materials that BFI made available to British teachers: extracts from feature films and such. Those still might be available. Tony was a great guy.

We had a little ruse that we used. We had one \$250 honorarium and we kept offering it to each other to go and speak for each other. But the idea was that nobody would ever spend it, but they would make it available to somebody else. So we only ever needed one \$250 but created the impression that there was a lot of activity going on and funds to support it. \$250 was quite a bit of money in those days, but there were no travel expenses, and Tony came very cheerfully on his own dime.

Around that time, 1969 - 1970, I moved and became a curriculum coordinator in a school board on the St. Lawrence in a town called Brockville. I was working for a director of education, Lloyd Dennis, <http://agora.lakeheadu.ca/agora.php?st=331> who was the best known progressivist in the province, which made him either a prince or a target; you know how it goes with progressivists. I was one of his fans. In 1968, this is just before I went there, I went to a NFB summer institute and spent 6 weeks immersed with filmmakers, editors, sound experts, animators and the whole nine yards of what was going on then at the national film board. There was a very memorable session with Norman McLaren <http://www3.nfb.ca/animation/objanim/en/filmmakers/Norman-McLaren/overview.php>. We were 20-25 people from across Canada who were very keen to be teachers of media, and I think that summer really gave me the bite to keep moving on because I knew that I wasn't alone.

***TJ: That sounds understandable because I think, when you are trying to advance some ideas, as you were, it's very important to have compatriots who also are working on some of the same issues and feeling like you can make some progress.***

**CW:** Thank you, you feel as if you're not isolated. Barry Duncan had been on this same course either the year previous or two years previous. 1967 had been a pivotal year - the year of Canada's centennial and the year the Montreal world's fair. A very, very exciting time in Canada, around that time. Of course, Marshall McLuhan was also quite prominent then. He was teaching at Toronto University. He was one of Barry's teachers.

When I became a curriculum coordinator, I was in charge of English, which meant I had a lot of teachers to relate to, secondary and elementary, but of course I was still very interested in media, but I had to ration the amount of time I allowed myself to spend on it. I kept up with my work with the OFA, all through those years in Brockville and started writing a bit then. I wrote

reviews of Canadian short films, non-theatrical in the OFA newsletter. I even produced a book of reviews once, in 1975, with the intention of doing one of every year, but of course those intentions fell upon stony ground. It was too much work because it was all done on a Selectric typewriter. My wife retyped every one of the reviews - there were about 400 - into camera ready copy. And that was the year our daughter was born, 1979. Yes, enough of that.

***TJ: Oh, nevertheless, your writings have been so terrific. I know we always thought of your book on media literacy, really the pocketbook that everybody should read. So I really do hope you do talk some about that.***

**CW:** O well, that's very kind of you. Okay, I had moved in 1975 to a new school board, an even bigger one and was able to be more influential with schools in promoting media studies because there was a very good collection of 16-mm films. I started writing classroom materials for publication we wrote for English teachers through my office. Some of the first things I wrote became chapters in *Screening Images*. The ones about different approaches . . . "four ways not to teach media, one way that might work", "the camera always lies" and so on. Film distributors had me writing study guides for teachers. There must have been a couple of hundred of them. I used the study guides to encourage teachers to use activities rather than just question and answer. I didn't write 20 questions, true or false; I wrote study guides that had students work in groups, make storyboards, try to reorganize or reedit the narrative. A lot of those activities are at the back of *Screening Images* both editions, in part 3. Where shall I go from there...?

***TJ: Well you were walking through how you were approaching media education as you were taking on more responsibilities in school....***

**CW:** Thank you for putting me back on track...in the late '80s, the Ontario Ministry of Education formed a writing team to produce a curriculum document on Media Literacy. Barry Duncan and the Association for Media Literacy, which had been working for 10 years promoting media literacy were given the job of writing what became *The Media Literacy Resource Book*, [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/recommended/books/media\\_lit\\_resource\\_guide.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/recommended/books/media_lit_resource_guide.cfm) 1989. It was really written in 1988 – but that's a political story. Ontario was one of the first jurisdictions to provide teachers with resources for media and Barry Duncan was right in the forefront; we can't give Barry enough credit for that.

Later in that time, just a year after the *Resource Guide* was published I was seconded to the Ministry of Education and I was able to do some stuff there for elementary schools in media, providing funds for others to do things. I went back to my own school board after that secondment, and got heavily involved in assessment.

Now, my first involvement in assessment was when I was doing my masters of education degree in the early '70s. I was involved in assessment in reading and actually did some pretty heavy research in reading. The procedure I developed became known as Retrospective Miscue Analysis. <http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/oct2750.htm>

In the '90s, we were involved very much in assessment because there was this evaluation fury going on all over North America. Locally we were determined not to use the standardized test route for assessing reading and writing. In the last two years I was working full time - I retired in 1995 - I concentrated on a project for writing assessment and happily worked with Dr. Judith Fine who taught me an awful lot about assessment while I taught her about language and writing. In those two years we supervised a million-dollar research project and came up with what we were convinced was an instrument for assessing writing in an authentic fashion, the Peel Writing Scales <http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/worsnop/three.html> As soon I retired, I took that model for assessment and I wrote *Assessing Media Work*.

It did well for a few years. I sometimes hope that there are still copies of it that are being found and used and kids are benefiting from authentic assessment in their media classes.

***TJ: How far do you think the field has come?***

**CW:** I think that everything that needs to be said about media education has already been said. If you go back to principles, you can't go wrong. And you know we can call the principles whatever we like, the key concepts, underpinning principles, what we believe about education, children, learning. These really are the things that need to be driving what we do in all of education. It isn't really about the newest telephone or the newest kind of screen or whether 3D will revolutionize television or produce a cure for housemaid's knee. We have to stick with principles and that's one of the reasons I stopped writing, because I've already said all I have to say and anything else would just be repetition with different examples and different contexts.

And of course I have a strong belief that media education ought to be education about media rather than using media as a tool in another subject area. I absolutely can see that media education can be useful to people in other subject areas, but when media education is used to try to get to kids to stop using drugs, that's a drug education curriculum not a media education curriculum. And when it fails, it's not a failure of media education.

***TJ: Do you feel like the field has moved in a direction you would hope to see?***

**CW:** I've always been attracted to enterprises in education which encouraged people to be progressive. And the one that's given me the most encouragement has been media. But I've also been very involved in drama and theater because that's another area where progressive ideas can find fertile soil and nutrition. So, I live in constant fear that progressive curriculum areas are going to be appropriated into the traditional; for when that happens people with progressive ideas seek for a new area where they can be progressive again. They don't want to toe the line of traditionalism. Traditionalism in education is not going to go away because there's too much profit for publishers and test makers for them to let go of it. And no government in its right mind wants to have a population of young people thinking for themselves, which is what progressive education is trying to create. I mean take a look at what's happening in the Middle East right now where people have all of a sudden started thinking for themselves and the government has no idea what do with them.

So, I would like to see media education maintain its progressive stance. More important than media education is progressive education: treating young people in schools as thinking,

reasoning, decision making, creative, autonomous individuals and acknowledging that and encouraging it, accepting it in ways that don't demand that they toe the line like we had to. So, that's one of the chief reasons I've been involved, apart from the passion I've got from my dad, the projectionist, and all the evenings I spent in the 1950s watching a lot of the trash Hollywood was churning out ...and enjoying it...and now I've come full circle.

In my retirement I'm doing a lot of film stuff again. I spent 10 years working with the International Baccalaureate developing a film course [http://www.ibo.org/diploma/assessment/subjectoutlines/documents/d\\_6\\_filmx\\_gui-out\\_0803\\_1\\_e.pdf](http://www.ibo.org/diploma/assessment/subjectoutlines/documents/d_6_filmx_gui-out_0803_1_e.pdf) for the International Baccalaureate Diploma. I volunteer at the local public library running a weekly program of feature films, mostly for seniors like myself, and I am the chair of the Marie Dressler Foundation Vintage Film Festival [www.vintagefilmfestival.com](http://www.vintagefilmfestival.com).

***TJ: Have there been surprises for you along the way when you think about the development of the field and looking back, what surprised you?***

**CW:** Oh nothing surprises me! I'm a cynic, a cynic is a person who always expects the worst and only gets good surprises. I've watched media education stand on the edge of the cliff for so many years and I've always been encouraged by the enthusiasm of those who are holding it from falling over the edge. Those people are always exciting to know and to mingle with and to bash minds against. I don't always agree with them but gosh it's fun.

There are awful and nasty, nasty powers in education that keep media literacy at bay. And I've fought with that. We had things like Channel 1, that's dead now isn't it? We had one here in Canada and soon after I retired, I put every ounce of energy I had into fighting the Youth News Network as an insidious and despicable plague that was getting ready to infect our public education. I quite enjoyed the fray.

It's starting up again because schools lack funds and they naturally turn to find funds anywhere they can get them. But in the end the principle to follow is that public goods belong in public hands.

I'll say it again: no government in its right mind wants a populace of young people who can think for themselves. Unfortunately there is a big divide between good sense and common sense. The problem with common sense is that it isn't very good and the problem with good sense is that it isn't very common.

***TJ: What would you like to see happen?***

**CW:** I'd like people to read A.S. Neil <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/pages/asneill.html> , I'd like people to read some educational philosophers and get away from worrying about test scores and start thinking about young people and what they can be, and how we can best help them become that. Get back to Dewey <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/> and Jean-Jacques Rousseau <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-rous.htm>, some of the people who write about the fundamentals of education. Think about how these ideas read in today's world...sure these guys came from the

print world, they came from the old society but they had a view of humanity and of learning that we can still treasure.

***TJ: It really comes back to the timeless principles that we were talking about, the fundamental human need to learn and to explore and to really kind of push the limits just what you said, what people can be.***

**CW:** Absolutely, you see in the end it isn't so much about media and education as it is about education. I'm passionate about media, I'm still spending money on all the toys that keep coming around but I'm not foolish enough to think that these toys and the use of them has changed the way people's brains work. I keep seeing people writing about that. Lord help us, the brain doesn't evolve that fast, we still have the same brain as before, homo sapiens-sapiens.

I think we have all got ways of understanding and interpreting the world. Some people do it through numbers, paintings, sports, I choose to do it through different forms of cultural and artistic expression. I'm still a huge consumer of literature, but I adore movies, I keep an eye on the pulse of developments of media. I don't like them all, but I keep an eye on it and try to understand it. I like to understand and interpret the world through culture and art but other people do it a different way. We have to acknowledge those differences.