
Not in Print: Two Film Scholars on the Internet

By Kristin Thompson

Considering that David Bordwell and I were relatively late to acquire our first computers, we certainly did not expect to be regarded as pioneers in exploration of possibilities of taking academic film writing online.

Our early forays were tentative enough. In 2000, David put up a website on the ill-fated Geocities server. It contained his curriculum vitae and a statement about “Studying Cinema.” (The statement is still [on his website](#).) A modest attempt, but he was the first faculty member in the Department of Communication Arts here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to have a personal website. In 2005 he started adding essays, beginning with “[Film and the Historical Return](#).” The idea was to respond to issues in the field, as well as to add supplements to his published books. One such was “[Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging](#),” commenting on David’s book of the same title. The site was essentially a way of doing traditional academic essays and getting them to readers more quickly than journal publication could do. The site remained a small part of David’s publishing.

I had no desire to establish my own website, and yet I was very much online. In 2003 I launched a project to write about the *Lord of the Rings* franchise which eventually became [The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood](#) (University of California Press, 2007). Not only was I doing a great deal of my research online, but I was studying the relationship of the Peter Jackson’s film and the internet. I examined the official website, which was a pioneering one in a day when very few films had their own websites. I also studied the quasi-sanctioned unofficial sites and the range of fan sites that sprang up in response to the film. I got so much cooperation from webmasters and contributors to such sites that a planned single chapter on the Internet became two. I sent the manuscript to the press in early 2006.

The Textbook and the Blog

That year we happened to be revising our textbook *Film Art: An Introduction* for its eighth edition. As part of this process, McGraw-Hill always solicits sets of comments from a mix of professors who use *Film Art* and others who don’t. We can’t possibly take all the suggestions these reviewers offer, since most of them involve expansion of the text and we are strictly limited as to length. Inevitably, too, the suggestions one

reviewer proffers are often exactly the opposite of what another would like to see us do. Every set of reviews, though, brings some intriguing and practical suggestions that we adopt. One such was buried in the reviews we received in August, 2005, when we were planning the eighth edition. In an answer concerning the Online Learning Center on McGraw-Hill's website, an anonymous reviewer commented, "I think it would be quite innovative to offer an author's blog or podcast. This would allow users of the text to interact with the author about film or to hear discussions between the authors and with experts." (More on the second part of that suggestion below.) Our editors like the idea, and so did we.

That was during the era when huge numbers of blogs were coming online every day. Some were just ways of keeping in touch with friends and family—a function that Facebook subsequently took over, thinning out the blogosphere. Others were ways for young professionals to put themselves in the public eye in the hope of getting a job or even finding some way to monetize the blog and make a living with it. At that point the number of blogs created each day was rapidly rising, and it peaked in roughly April to August, 2006. By 2007, an average of a mere 120,000 new blogs was being created daily. (See the "New Blogs Per Day" chart [here](#).) Countering all this enthusiasm was the fact that many bloggers abandoned their sites within months. In May, 2007, only about 21% of blogs then online were active.

Not great odds for success. Still, we were intrigued by the idea of having this new way of getting ideas and information out to *Film Art* users and anyone else who cared to visit our blog. We didn't want to commit to a two-week schedule, since we had no idea of predicting how often we would be inspired to write something. We certainly had never aspired to be film reviewers, so that idea didn't appeal. Most of all, we didn't want the blog password-protected. If the blog was to promote *Film Art*, it had to be available to non-users as well as those who had already adopted it.

Finally, and I think we knew this intuitively from the moment all this was proposed, we could not allow comments on the blog. People have asked us about this or even complained, but we've read the comments sections of blogs. Some, like those on sites like Jim Emerson's [Scanners](#) or Girish Shambu's [Girish](#), are intelligent and original—but both are moderated. We didn't have the time or inclination to moderate comments. We also suspected we would get questions from students covertly looking for help on their term papers. (The more persistent ones can still email us occasionally, and we ignore them.) For these reasons and more, the comments feature on *Observations on Film Art* is not enabled. We have, however, posted some items that include "discussions between the authors and with experts." David and I have had dialogues on [Ratatouille](#) and [Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull](#). A group of

students and alumni of the film program here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison got together to discuss the [merits of sequels](#). These were crafted as entries, however, and not as a series of comments.

In fact when [our blog](#) went online a little over a year after it was suggested to us (September 26, 2006), it went by a more cumbersome name: [Observations on Film Art and film art](#). The idea was to suggest that, although the blog was tied to the textbook, it would range further afield in exploring the art form. Eventually we dropped the second “film art.”

Our Own Private Journal

One of the pleasures of the blog was that we could upload the entries and post them ourselves. Meg Hamel, our amiable and efficient web czarina, who had been taking care of David’s website, set us up on WordPress. It’s so simple that even we could use it, though occasionally it would do odd things like render half an entry in bold type. At such points we went running to Meg for help. But as we have gained experience and WordPress has improved, such panics rarely occur.

For our first few months we were exploring this new outlet for our work. We tended to post often, and some of the entries were relatively short. David happened to be going for the first time to the Vancouver International Film Festival, so he reported, in two brief entries. Odd though it seems in retrospect, there were no pictures in those first entries. We soon learned to put images in, sizing and placing them. On November 12, 2006, David posted [the first of many analytical pieces jammed with frame enlargements](#). We quickly discovered that one of the advantages of a blog is that there is essentially no limit on the number of illustrations we can use, and they can be in color, something that is seldom possible with print publications. Sometime later we established the policy of using illustrations in every post.

We use these frame enlargements on the same basis that we use the ones in our textbooks and scholarly books: as fair use reproduction for educational and analytical purposes. Twenty years ago I had the privilege of chairing an ad hoc committee of the Society for Cinema Studies (now the Society for Cinema and Media Studies) that examined the issue of fair use of film frames. The report, which called upon experts in copyright law, concluded that publishing even extended sets of frames was most likely fair use. The crucial and helpful provision of the fair-use law is that the copyright holder would have to prove that a specific set of illustrations damaged the commercial value of the original work—something that’s hard to do with a cluster of printed film frames versus a full-length film. The common-sense belief would be that the use

of frames in an analytical context can only increase interest in a film and make people want to see it.

The SCS report, “Fair Usage Publication of Film Stills,” is [available online](#). I know that the report has helped many authors get their work including film frames published without being required to seek unnecessary permission from copyright holders; some presses, both commercial and academic, have changed their policies as a result of the report and no longer require their authors to seek such permission. In the intervening decades, there has been no court case involving film frames that could set firm legal guidelines for use usage—probably because a copyright holder would foresee difficulties in winning such a case. Still, other court cases involving images and fair use have tended to favor the scholar or journalist’s right to use such images, as I discuss in [“Fair is still fair, and more so.”](#) This entry quotes a lawyer who deals in intellectual-property rights; he states unequivocally that the ways in which David and I use illustrations online should be considered fair use.

No doubt in part because of this ability to use images lavishly, our entries tended to be longer and more like academic articles than like typical blog posts. Some run up to around 5000 words, which is the size of a journal article. Still, they are not exactly like academic articles. They are more argumentative, analytical, and backed by evidence than typical blog poses, but we aim them toward a general public. A good student, while reading *Film Art*, should be able to go online and understand any entry.

One thing we quickly discovered was that we could not tie our entries closely to the textbook. It just wasn’t possible to, say, watch and film and write about the editing in it, hoping that classes using *Film Art* could use it as a supplemental example to the editing chapter. To keep up regular contributions to a blog, we needed to seize upon things that intrigued us, whether the results related to the textbook or not. Often the entries’ relevance to *Film Art*, if any, becomes apparent only after we’ve finished them. So we blog from film festivals; we try to refute debatable claims made by industry officials or journalistic pundits; we explore technology, from aspect ratios in Godard’s films to the ups and downs of 3D; and most of all we analyze films, old and new, formally and stylistically.

We’ve often said that the blog quickly became our own private film journal, with entries posted as soon as they’re finished and feedback given in the form of other bloggers and journalists linking to our new pieces. There’s no waiting a year for the result to appear, as is typical with print journals. Plus with a service called “StatCounter,” we can see how many hits we receive on which pages, how many visitors have been on the site before, how many pages they looked at, how long they stayed, and what country they “came” from. When you write for a print journal,

you send an essay out into the world and wonder if anyone is actually reading it.

The blog has had the unintended but welcome consequence of broadening our horizons beyond the academic film world. Although we do have students and professors among our readership, our blog is also visited by film buffs, journalists, film-festival staff members, archivists, and filmmakers. At times we receive press passes for festivals and other events. Such contacts often mean that doing research is a very different thing than it would be in a more strictly academic context. In researching his recent “Pandora’s Digital Box” series on the move into digital filmmaking, exhibition, and preservation, David came into contact with film distributors, projectionists, and theater owners who were buying (or resisting buying) digital equipment. When I visited Wellington, New Zealand, in 2007, an invitation to sit in on sound-mixing on *The Water Horse* led to an entry, “What Does a Water Horse Sound Like?” (Barrie Osborne, who had produced *The Lord of the Rings* and supported my work on *The Frodo Franchise*, also produced *The Water Horse*.) In short, occasionally the blog allows us to step outside the ivy-covered walls of academe and into a world of films and filmmaking that we had previously studied mostly from a distance.

A Second Blog

In the first ten months or so of *Observations’* existence, I posted a few entries related to what would turn out to be the long and convoluted progress toward the making of *The Hobbit*. David intimated that if I wanted to keep on in that direction, perhaps I should start a second blog. The result was the launch in August, 2007 of [The Frodo Franchise](#), named for the book that had been published the month before. At first it consisted mainly of links to reviews and interviews, but it soon became a news site as well.

The blog largely focused on the many months when legal difficulties, MGM’s financial woes (the studio owned the distribution rights to *The Hobbit* and is co-producing it), and labor threats and other problems were delaying the commencement of filming on *The Hobbit*. I tried to offer some analysis of news events involving the film industry. Fans tend to assume the worst. For example, many took the Tolkien Trust’s lawsuit against New Line Cinema to be a sign that the author’s heirs wanted to scuttle the *Hobbit* project. I pointed out that the lawsuit was over money that was due to the Trust and publisher HarperCollins, stemming from a condition in the original 1969 film-rights contract sold by Tolkien himself; the studio was to hand over 7.5% of gross revenues, minus certain expenses. I also blogged constantly (110 times!) through the 2010 threats by labor organizations and the subsequent threat by Warner Bros. to take

the production elsewhere if New Zealand didn't sweeten the deal with further government incentives. It was an interesting few years.

The larger Tolkien-related websites have "spies" all over the world, sending news and tips and photos. I couldn't match their coverage, but I did come to have a few spies myself, people in Portugal and Hong Kong and England who sent me all sorts of links. That's an interesting phenomenon of Internet publication. People you don't know and who aren't scholars themselves get in touch and voluntarily help you out, with links and suggestions and, yes, corrections. By the way, once something is in print, you can't do much more than ask for a correction in the next printing if it's a book and for an errata note in the next issue if it's a journal article. Now we can correct, add to, and otherwise tinker with old entries.

I kept the *Frodo Franchise* blog going in the hope that eventually I would be able to write a follow-up book on the making of *The Hobbit*. After years of delays, both in the film's production and my attempts to solicit permission to do such a book, it turned out that I almost certainly will not be allowed to do so. Keeping up a blog takes a lot of time, and I decided that I would give it up. I suspended it on August 25, 2011. It remains online, since I hope it provides a useful record of the important events that happened during the long gap between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.

To my pleasant surprise, TheOneRing.net, the largest Tolkien-related website, dealing with both books and films, immediately invited me to join their staff. Given that TORn occupied a major portion of Chapter 6, on fan-run websites, I was delighted to accept. I have contributed a few news items and plan to do a series of features about my experiences back in 2003-2005, when I was traveling to New Zealand and elsewhere to conduct the interviews that were the foundation of my book. Being on the staff of TORn allows me to become a part of what I studied and wrote about years ago. One section of the book covered the parties TORn ran for fans in Los Angeles after the three Oscar ceremonies where *The Lord of the Rings* won its total of seventeen awards. Recently the staff started preparations for post-Oscar ceremony parties for 2013, on the assumption that *The Hobbit* will at least pick up some nominations, if not wins. There will no doubt be another in 2014. I hope to make it for at least one of these. Participating in things that one has studied is a novel and so far pleasant experience.

Blog into Print, Book onto the Internet

In the summer of 2009, nearly three years after we launched *Observations on Film Art*, Rodney Powell of The University of Chicago

Press raised the possibility of our collecting some of our blog entries into a book. This seemed rather odd to us at the time, especially since there was no requirement for us to remove those entries from the blog—something we would have been reluctant to do, given that the blog was in part intended to serve as an online resource for teachers and students. We soon agreed that it was worth a try. The University of Chicago was one of the first to venture into the new genre of blog-based books. At the time we were considering our project, they were about to publish Gary S. Becker and Richard A. Posner’s *Uncommon Sense: Economic Insights, from Marriage to Terrorism*, based on their popular economics blog. (Another early example was classicist Mary Beard’s blog-based *It’s a Don’s Life*, published in early 2010 by Profile Books.) It seemed worth the experiment. Besides, by that point we had about 250 entries on the blog, and despite an excellent search engine and many category tags, it wasn’t that easy for the new reader to explore the whole thing. (As I write in early 2012, we are approaching 500 posts.)

Preparing the collection of entries was an odd experience. Once we had chosen a selection with a considerable range of subject matter and not too many illustrations, we set in to polish the prose and to write a short postscript to each entry. The idea was to update each post without rewriting it. We wanted to preserve the original entries and their contexts as much as possible. Compared to our previous academic books, the process was relatively quick. An academic writer in our neighborhood teased us about doing a “free” book. It almost felt that way. Most of the prose was already there, and the process felt more like revising for a final version than doing a first draft. The book, [*Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking*](#), appeared in the spring of 2011, and it has sold briskly—as well, at any rate, as most of our other academic books. Keeping the original entries online doesn’t seem to have hurt sales substantially. The book represents about a tenth of the total amount of prose that the blog contained when the manuscript went to the press.

I personally still prefer to publish on paper for anything I really want to remain available well into the future. Whatever provisions one may make for a blog or other publication to remain online after we no longer can maintain them, I fear that such things will eventually disappear. David, however, is more intrigued by the advantages of publishing on the internet in a more ambitious way.

His first experiment with putting work online in book form came after his book *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* went out of print. Noticing that the University of Michigan Press had launched an online series of out-of-print English-language books on Japanese cinema, David offered *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* to them. On the first pass, the book’s pages were

scanned and converted into pdfs. But the result was murky, and the black-and-white stills looked ugly. So Abe Markus Nornes, who was working as the sponsor of the series, persuaded the press to redo the project with newly-minted stills. Markus used DVDs to generate the color images, while David rescanned the black-and-white ones from his original negatives. The result was a very presentable version of the original. Many people have told him that they were happy to have the book in such useful and searchable form. (It's available for free download [here](#).)

This seems to me one of the most promising purposes for online books. Once a book is in print, it can be put into libraries and other collections where it is preserved in hard copy. But once it goes out of print, why not make it available online? These days that usually means a pdf, though no doubt more sophisticated file programs will soon make online books even more attractive. My own *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934* was published by the BFI in 1985 and went out of print in record time. The BFI was switching American distributors, and as far as I know, the book never got released in the USA at all. Now it's available as [a pdf on David's website](#). Other books will follow as time allows.

David has taken this notion a step further. When his *Planet Hong Kong* was taken out of print by Harvard University Press, he revised it extensively into a second edition and began selling it online. With three new chapters and updating of existing ones, it was significantly different, and the illustrations reproduced in black and white in the print edition are all now in glorious color. The book hasn't sold a huge number of copies, but the expenses of having it professionally laid out with a new design have been paid off. A few teachers are assigning it in classes, so it promises to have long if modest sales. David did want some print copies. He had several locally printed and bound, which proved handy when libraries preferred copies to pdfs.

To some extent the online sales of [Planet Hong Kong](#), second edition, in pdf form has been an experiment in how viable online academic self-publishing is. David is currently contemplating other online projects of various sorts, each of which will probably be slightly different in nature: further experiments along these same lines.

There are advantages and disadvantages to such publication. One does not have the professional editorial staff of a university press doing the work on the book, so it falls to the author to learn how to do it or to hire someone else (as David did). There is no outside peer review, so someone working with an eye to tenure or promotion or an impressive CV for grant applications should probably steer clear of this sort of publication until later in his or her career. But if such considerations are irrelevant, the

advantages are obviously complete control and a speedy dispatch of the work into the world once it is ready. Various services offer the possibility of tracing the number of online views and often the location of the visitors.

Conclusions

By now David and I have explored several options for online publication, though we have certainly not exhausted the possibilities. Whether the blog has really achieved the initial goal of having an impact on the sales of *Film Art* is difficult to judge. One of our reviewers who commented on the ninth edition said he or she discovered the book through the blog and adopted it, which of course is gratifying. Some teachers do use the blog in their classes, assigning individual entries or simply drawing upon material for their lectures. We have no way of gauging how widespread such usage is.

Whether or not the blog significantly promotes *Film Art* and our other books, we are committed to continuing it. Given that we launched *Observations on Film Art* shortly after David's retirement, for him it provides somewhat the same sort of professional satisfaction that teaching previously had. It has allowed us to write prose that is a blend of the academic and journalistic: substantive and yet accessible to non-specialist readers. We can be topical in ways impossible in the world of printed academic journals, where getting an article into print can take a year or more. With one or the other of us posting something every week on average, we seldom do the sort of intense research necessary for a refereed print article, and yet it has turned out to be remarkable how much substantive material one can bring together in a piece written in a day or two, or even an afternoon.

Retirement is the ideal time for blogging. To a student struggling with a dissertation or an assistant professor trying to finish that tenure book, a blog is an easy distraction and a heavy drag on one's time. Some professors teaching full-time manage to maintain excellent blogs: Henry Jenkins' [Confessions of an Aca-fan](#), for one, and Jason Mittell's [Just TV](#) and [j.j. murphy on independent cinema](#). So it is possible, but it's something to be undertaken with caution. One consideration is how large a readership will prove satisfying enough to motivate the author to keep on blogging. When we started out there were still quite a few aggregator blogs providing links to individual entries, but the number of those has dwindled considerably. Now a lot of hits come from twitter feeds and other somewhat ephemeral sources. Certainly one should not undertake a blog hoping to make money at it. We don't have any direct income from the blog, and we can but trust that our book sales are probably higher as a result of it. We blog because we enjoy it, we learn from it, and we trust

that it is of interest and use to the two thousand or more people who on average visit our site every day. Surely that is far more than read our printed articles and academic books on a given day.

Copyright:

This article © [Kristin Thompson](#)