



Take

Two for

Brandeis

Filmmakers

By Theresa Pease

Once a graduate pursuit at Brandeis, a popular field of study now moves from minor to major.

As a teenager, Harry Ostrow (b. 1922/3) was a bit of a gambler. First, the Long Island native decided he was willing to gamble on the highly competitive profession of movie making. Second, he took a chance on a university that offered no film major.

“Even though I knew I wanted to make movies, I was interested in getting a good liberal-arts education, not just going to film school. So I gambled on the possibility that Brandeis, known to be so cutting-edge in the arts, would soon start a film program,” he says.

The gamble paid off for Ostrow, now a Massachusetts-based documentary filmmaker whose *Renewal*, a ninety-minute piece about an emerging religious-based environmental movement in the United States, will begin airing on public TV in April.

In Ostrow’s second year at Brandeis, a flamboyant Scottish filmmaker named David Hardy joined the Brandeis administration with the mission of making promotional films about the school.

But Hardy had an inspirational vision of film as a tool for social change, a large interest in working with young people, and an even larger budget, which he used to purchase state-of-the-art moviemaking gear that far outpaced the equipment supplied to students in conventional film schools in the Northeast. What’s more, he had a piper-like charisma that soon had students flocking to learn his craft.

At first, the budding auteurs labored under Hardy’s guidance in a film-production workshop that was a sort of cinematic baptism by fire.

“He persuaded the university to put up more and more money, and he started training students in shooting, editing, and other basic techniques of filmmaking,” Ostrow recalls. “After that, we were pretty much on our own to go out and make movies.”

Hardy also used his contacts to help students obtain valuable internships; when Otto Preminger shot *Tell Me that You Love Me*,

John Ford (1970) around Boston, two of Hardy’s proteges were recruited to help out.

Within three years, Hardy (who often wore a kilt) found himself at the helm of a graduate film school peopled by colorful folks he had met in the industry. Working in collaboration with the Brandeis theater department, the program admitted about twenty students each year. Ostrow, who stayed on for the MFA, recalls that although the curriculum was not very structured, the experience was energetic and challenging.

“What made Brandeis a great place to be,” he says, “was this completely open attitude. If you were creative and wanted to make movies, they really supported you. They didn’t argue theory with you, and they let you do what you wanted to do. They put good equipment in your hands and provided money for film stock, which was expensive back then. There was exciting work being done, even if it was uneven.”

While many of Ostrow’s contemporaries went on to becoming working filmmakers, the program was short-lived. In May 1970, en route home from a fundraising trip to Albany, Hardy, age forty-five, died in an accident when his vehicle hit a deer on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Within a few years, the program was abandoned.

After Hardy’s death, film at Brandeis was taught only in bits and pieces—a course here, a workshop there. Then, in 1994, the university began to connect those dots in an interdisciplinary minor headed by American studies professor Thomas Doherty, an eminent film historian who holds the Sam Spiegel Chair in Film Studies. Interested students inundated his Introduction to the Moving Image course while also choosing from a range of offerings that focused on cinema related to the American West, Russian modernism, Jewish life, and the cultures of India, Israel, Germany, and China, among other geographic areas. As the program grew, budding filmmakers populated classes related to film noir, screenwriting, directing, and acting for the camera. Today, course offer-

ings in the minor total more than three dozen, with titles ranging from Hitchcock's Movies to Bollywood: Popular Film, Genre, and Excitement.

Outside the classroom, Hollywood hopefuls have gathered to hone their cinematic skills through a student film club. In addition, the annual SunDeis Film Festival draws audiences to the Wasserman Cinematheque, built and endowed through gifts from Lew Wasserman, a historically important studio mogul who was dubbed "Mr. Hollywood," and his wife, Edie. The festival showcases student films from throughout New England and includes the presentation of prestigious awards to celebrities from the world of moving images.

Still, those who had their sites set on a director's chair and megaphone have clamored for more. Adam Barish '09, who serves as an undergraduate department representative for the film-studies minor, said he has been agitating for a film-studies major since he first arrived on campus.

Why? Barish believes film is the new literature. Which is to say, film is to the modern world as Shakespeare was to Elizabethan England.

"To not study Shakespeare would be a tremendous mistake," the Virginia-born history major says, "but not to study Frank Capra would also be a tremendous mistake. In many respects, they are equally influential. We live in a visual society. We live in YouTube, we live in TV, and we live in movies. When they began making movies, communica-

tion changed forever. If you want to understand how people communicate, you have to study film."

Barish says he highly values the "theoretical" nature of Brandeis's film studies program, but he would like to see a broader spectrum of genres and directors studied. What's more, he wants to see the theoretical balanced out with more courses devoted to the practical, hands-on skills involved in film production.

Besides enabling the university to attract more film-minded undergraduates, Barish believes having a film school at Brandeis would lead to the creation of an alumni network that could help a fledgling filmmaker get a toe in the door.

"The film industry," he says, "is not one you enter by sending a resumé. You enter the industry, yes, by having applied skills, but also by knowing the right people. Being associated with a university that has a name in filmmaking will help any Brandeis graduate get a job. Any way we can give each other a leg up is important."

Barish could not have found a more willing accomplice on the faculty side than Alice Kelikian, associate professor of history.

Kelikian has been described as assertive, determined, inspirational, energetic, entrepreneurial, indefatigable, and undeniable in her advocacy of students' needs and interests.

Movie Mountaineering

If we learn by exposure, Brandeis film students and cultural observers must be getting a nonpareil education from one of Alice Kelikian's pet projects: the welcoming to campus of an array of Hollywood and independent film giants from both sides of the camera lens.

Drawing on personal connections from the motion-picture industry, as well as working in collaboration with Scott Feinberg, a Brandeis alumnus whose career has been built upon blogging about and interviewing Academy Award nominees and winners, Kelikian has paraded an array of notables across campus.

"I have many friends," she explains, "and I use my contacts to enlighten Brandeis students interested in film."

In the recent past, Brandeis has played host to screen legends Margaret O'Brien, Celeste Holm, Roy Scheider, Eli Wallach, and Patricia Neal. European filmmaker Barbet Schroeder, who directed Mickey Rourke in *Barfly* and Jeremy Irons in *Reversal of Fortune*, came in September 2008 to hold the only U.S. forum on *Terror's Advocate*, his provocative documentary about defense attorney Jacques Vergès, who defends some of the world's most hated terrorists. From closer in, Jason Kohn '01, whose *Manda Bala (Send a Bullet)*, a documentary set in the streets of Sao Paulo, Brazil, took top honors in the 2007 Sundance Film Festi-

val; Tony Goldwyn '82, director of *The Last Kiss*; and Sam Wesiman, MFA'73, director of *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, also came to share their visions with the Brandeis community.

Want more? Two stars of TV's *Law and Order*, Jesse L. Martin and S. Epatha Merkerson, were on hand for last year's SunDeis Film Festival, and an event featuring performers Kate Beckinsale and Alan Alda gathered a crowd of three hundred last fall when they came to screen their new feature film, *Nothing but the Truth*.

Among this year's Oscar nominees, actors Richard Jenkins (*The Visitor*) and Melissa Leo (*Frozen River*) visited Waltham last semester to screen their movies and answer student questions, while Werner Herzog's *Encounters at the End of the World*, a documentary on life in Antarctica, had its first showing on the Brandeis campus.

Celebrated documentarian Errol Morris, a friend of Kelikian, chose Brandeis to premier his last four films, including *Fog of War*, a 2003 Academy Award-winning documentary about Robert McNamara, and *Standard Operating Procedure*, a 2008 cinematic inquiry into the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

Another remarkable Brandeis event was a rare public dialogue between Herzog and Morris that was moderated by Kelikian and streamed live around the world. The conversa-

tion was so compelling that it was printed by the edgy magazine *The Believer* in its 2008 special film issue.

"When it comes to film, Alice Kelikian once told me, 'I am a social climber,' but then she corrected herself and said, 'no, let's make that a social mountaineer,'" says Feinberg, whose passion for the film arts was born when, at age fifteen, he came upon the American Film Institute's list of the 100 Greatest Movies of All Time. He watched the top three—*Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*, and *Casablanca*—in a single weekend, then vowed to see the other ninety-seven over the course of his lifetime. But when he completed the task within a year, he realized he had found his calling and began to educate himself as an authority on Academy Awards history.

Today, Feinberg not only helps make arrangements for the distinguished guests, but also conducts a question-and-answer session with each visiting luminary that provides fodder for his *Los Angeles Times* blog, bringing growing recognition to Brandeis within the film world.

"Brandeis students," he says, "are very fortunate to get to talk to these people up-close and in person. There are very few colleges, even on the West Coast, that manage to bring in such interesting people from the world of filmmaking."

—Theresa Pease



Alice Kelikian (center) brought film stars Kate Beckinsale and Alan Alda to campus to screen their new movie and speak with cinema students.

“She has a way of engendering people to her cause,” notes aspiring screenwriter Jonathan Zimmerman ’07, now a graduate student in film at the University of Southern California, while Steven Burg, a professor of international politics, calls Kelikian “a ball of fire.”

The daughter of Armenian immigrants—a world-famous Chicago orthopedic surgeon and his wife—Kelikian first encountered cinema when she saw Disney’s *Bambi* as a child. But it was Mario Monicelli’s *The Organizer*, a 1963 film about a labor strike in the Italian city of Torino, that helped knock her off the self-described “science geek” track. After seeing it on public television as a high-school student, she became riveted not only by Italian cinema, but by the political culture that it shed light on.

A subsequent trip to Italy with her father heightened that interest. And, though she entered the University of Champaign-Urbana on a full scholarship for science students, she decided before the first semester was over to transfer to Princeton, which was just beginning to enroll women. Selected as a Woodrow Wilson Scholar, Kelikian was able to put together her own course of study. She chose to explore Italian Marxist thought as well as other aspects of history, politics, architecture, and anthropology.

By the time she joined the Brandeis faculty in 1981, Kelikian had earned a doctor of philosophy in political history at Oxford University. She had taught at the University of California at Riverside and at Smith College. In addition, she had lived on and off for decades in Milan. There she learned Italian by frequenting the local film clubs, paying eighty cents per evening to watch movie after movie.

“I never thought about becoming a filmmaker. I am drawn to film because I am interested in the cinematic representation of the past,” says Kelikian, whose fascination with directors like Monicelli, Fellini, Pasolini, and Visconti, among others, led her to develop her Brandeis course Italian Films, Italian Histories. What’s more, her passion for cinema drew student film aficionados to seek her out as a mentor, and it made her a fit replacement for Doherty after he stepped down as head of the film minor in 2006.

From the start, Kelikian has energized the Brandeis community around film by promoting the program to anyone who will listen, expanding the

number of world-cinema courses available, and beefing up the film production offerings. What’s more, she has brought to campus a dazzling array of artists to share their creative insights with eager audiences.

Noting that students often arrive on the Brandeis campus with digital media skills, but with little of what she calls “film literacy,” she says, “My hope has been to encourage a vibrant film culture on our

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campus and support an interesting dialogue about the moving image, its importance, and how it has changed over time.”

With Kelikian fanning its flames, interest in the program has grown so intense that the number of minors increased from eleven to forty-eight over a two-year period, making the establishment of filmmaking as a major all but inevitable. On November 6, 2008, by acclamation of the faculty, film and visual media studies was added to the list of concentrations following a presentation by Kelikian.

Burg, who seconded Kelikian’s motion to establish the new major, says the faculty’s overwhelming endorsement was the product of assiduous advance work. “Alice is very energetic and very connected,” he says, “and much legwork had been done to assure that the faculty came into this meeting with a clear understanding of the relationship between film and the social studies and humanities. They were also keenly aware of film study’s utility in attracting new students to Brandeis. Many senior faculty members from around the university had been engaged in discussions about the crossover between film studies and other parts of the curriculum. So when the issue came up for a vote, we heard a lot of enthusiasm and no real opposition.”

The interdisciplinary program, which will welcome its first majors next fall, will allow students to take film-related courses from across a range of departments. Emphasizing that the program is a liberal-arts concentration, rather than a preprofessional one, the requirements only allow up to three courses in production-related areas to count toward the nine-course requirement.

In her proposal to the faculty, Kelikian wrote, “The curriculum is designed to provide a broad overview of the history of the moving image, to promote expertise in cinematic style and cultural meaning, to lend theoretical sophistication to an understanding of the moving image, and to ensure some appreciation of the practical and technical side of motion-picture production. We want students to develop an awareness of cinema as a complex narrative form and as an art.”

How exciting is that? So exciting that some faculty members who have not taught in the film-studies minor are considering hopping on board. Among them is Burg, who notes, “One of the things I teach is Balkan history, and there is a huge film industry in the Balkans. I would love to put together a course called The Balkan Wars on Film, because then students would be able to see and hear the emotions involved. It would be a great course to teach.”