

Professor David Bordwell

Doctor of Humanities *honoris causa*

Citation

Professor David Bordwell is without a doubt the leading name in film scholarship today. He is Jacques Ledoux Professor of Film Studies Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has published over 20 groundbreaking books and more than 100 articles and book chapters on film history, film theory, and criticism. He also lends his time to lectures, interviews and an online blog, “Observations on Film Art”. He is writing still, having published his latest, *Perplexing Plots: Popular Storytelling and the Poetics of Murder* for Columbia University Press, in 2023.

I am proud to read this citation, having studied with Professor Bordwell for seven years at Wisconsin in the late 1980s. As his PhD student and TA during this time, I learned a lot about doing research from one of the sharpest minds in the field.

Here is a taste of some of his most important books. Given the scope of Professor Bordwell’s work and its impact, this requires some time, and focus.

Let us start with Hong Kong. Professor Bordwell is an authority on Hong Kong cinema. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* was published in 2000 by Harvard University Press. This scholarly, yet lively, work celebrates the art and appeal of Hong Kong movies. Professor Bordwell made a series of trips to Hong Kong between 1995 and 2010, and wrote a dazzling account of the strategies taken by filmmakers, action directors and cinematographers to make “our” cinema the envy of the world. The second edition was published in 2010. This book was translated into traditional Chinese for readers here in 2001, and simplified Chinese in 2003. Professor Bordwell made many good friends on his trips here and considers Hong Kong as a second home. In 2001 he received the Sir Edward Youde Memorial Fund Visiting Professorship at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts; in 2007 he was given the Asian Film Award for Excellence in Scholarship in Asian Cinema.

Professor Bordwell is also an authority on Japanese cinema. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* was published in 1988 (Princeton UP) and was a finalist in the Jay Leyda Prize competition held by the Anthology Film Archives. This book raised Yasujiro Ozu’s reputation to the highest in Japanese and even world cinema, and this is a case of ‘poetics’, that is, the principles through which a representational medium takes form. A series of books were then published following this subject by Professor Bordwell. They include *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989), edited book *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), and *Poetics of Cinema* (2007). In these works, Professor Bordwell explained and defended historical poetics, an approach that analyses the structure of motion picture texts, rather than interpretive flights of theory. Besides Ozu, Professor Bordwell has given us books about Carl Theodor Dreyer, Sergei Eisenstein, and Christopher Nolan.

Professor Bordwell co-wrote *Film Art* (first edition in 1979, now in its twelfth edition) and *Film History* (1994, now fourth edition). These were authored with his writing partner Kristin Thompson. Generations of students have absorbed film elements and film history from these books. These and many others have been translated into multiple languages, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Turkish, Czech,

Slovenian, Greek, Polish and Hungarian. These textbooks (in English) are regularly assigned to students here at Lingnan.

Professor Bordwell's work on American cinema best exemplifies his approach to film art. It stretches across the whole span of motion pictures, from precinema to silent pictures and classic studio movies to contemporary Hollywood films. Professor Bordwell does not just cover films, directors, and production companies but the conditions needed to make, circulate, and understand movies.

Consider *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (Columbia UP, 1985). Co-written with Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, this is a masterful account of how and why Hollywood rose to become the world's preeminent source of motion picture craft. Their method is democratic, drawing on hundreds of anonymous, forgotten pictures to test their propositions about how the industry worked as a whole. It is a striking book about the film industry, American capitalism, and the selling of talent in a global marketplace.

Just as impactful was *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Wisconsin UP, 1988), which combines narrative theory, philosophy, and psychology and offers a corrective to then orthodox assumptions about how the comprehension of film works. Here we find bracing thoughts on European filmmakers like Jean Luc Godard and Robert Bresson, the conventions of art cinema, and explanations of how these differ from classical Hollywood norms. Professor Bordwell conceives of narration as an event, or process and thus works as a distinct human activity, or exchange between filmmakers and their audiences.

There is no area of historical or contemporary film studies that Professor Bordwell has not addressed. Note such recent titles as *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling* (Chicago UP, 2017); *Pandora's Digital Box: Films, Files, and the Future of Movies* (Irvington Way Press, 2012); *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft and Business of Filmmaking* (Chicago, 2011). And there are many, many more.

Professor David Bordwell's research is world leading; as teacher he has won a University Distinguished Teaching Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1991, and an Anthology Film Archive Award for Film Preservation in 2006. He was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Copenhagen in 1997. He has supervised 33 PhD dissertations and 17 of those were later published by university presses. Today he joins Lingnan University, Hong Kong with an honorary degree.

Mr Chairman, in recognition of Professor David Bordwell's outstanding achievements in scholarship and higher education, may I present him for conferment of the degree of Doctor of Humanities *honoris causa*.

Citation written and delivered by Professor Darrell William Davis