

**Andrew Horton brings both scholarly credentials and industry savvy to the study of film and video.**

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PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

# Life through the Camera's Lens

**What is life?**

(A) Life is a board game in which tiny figures ride around in plastic cars coping with mortgages, insurance, employment and birth. (B) Life is the force that infuses all of earth's breathing creatures and photosynthesizing vegetation. (C) Life is what colleagues and students agree Andrew S. Horton has brought in creative abundance to OU's Film and Video Studies Program since he became the first Jeanne Hoffman Smith Professor of Film Studies in 1998.

The answer is (C), at least in this quiz.

"Andy really has brought life to our program," says Joanna Rapf, professor of English and an integral part of the program's multidisciplinary teaching team. "I say it with a smile, but it's an accurate assessment in everything that life involves: energy and joy and enthusiasm.

"He has also brought the world of film to this campus, and I mean that literally. Many of the people he knows in the industry from all over the world come to Norman now. And he's made the University of Oklahoma a center for film studies, especially by making it the headquarters for an organization called the Society of Cinema Studies. We're on the map in a big way."

The star marking OU's position on the unpublished but very real map of important places to study film shines brightly because Horton, called Andy by friends, left the clearly marked interstate system of graduate

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■ Andrew Horton, at right, OU's Jeanne Hoffman Smith Professor of Film and Video Studies, has brought the world of film to the campus.



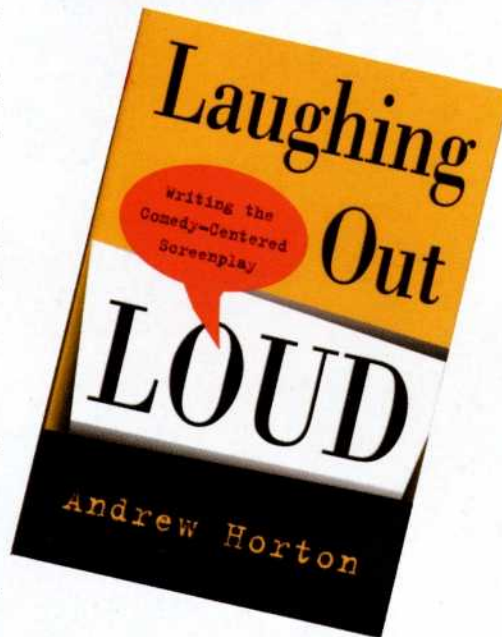
"Like the best things in life, my film career came to me by happenstance not by design," he says. "I loved movies always, and I was in grad school doing a Ph.D. in comparative lit. I had already started to write about film informally when I encountered this wonderfully crazy professor who was absolutely passionate about film. I took his course in which we were required to see 50 films in a semester. It was total madness, but it was a revelation. This was at the University of Illinois, and I think the course was simply called Cinema. It was all over the place; it covered everything. Because of that course, I made film studies part of my program and thesis.

"When I entered the job market in the mid '70s, everyone wanted someone who knew about film, and there were few film Ph.D.s then."

**T**hanks to his nutty professor, Horton was able to peddle his awareness of film in a seller's market. First he went to Deree College in Athens, Greece, as assistant professor of English and film. There, he also served as film editor for a magazine called *The Athenian*. After four years, he returned to the states as professor of film and literature at the University of New Orleans. He spent two years as chairman of Brooklyn College's film department before going to Loyola University in 1990 as professor of film and literature. From there, he came to Norman packing the whole wide world of film in his briefcase.

"We've already had New Zealand and Greek and Yugoslav filmmakers coming through in one year," he says with global-sized enthusiasm. "Push comes to shove, these people are influencing our students as much as the Hollywood people who have come to visit. Take the Greek who made a film called 'No Budget Story' about a young Greek who has no money to make a film. The real filmmaker made the film for little money and won awards all over the place.

"You know what it means if you're a 20-year-old sitting in an OU film class and you hear this guy tell that story? I see the international influence coming into OU. I want to nourish and build on that. I want not just to bring in Hollywood but to expose students to a variety of international influences. This is important because more and more films are co-produced, with four or five different countries on a film. Take a film like 'The Piano.' Everybody thinks it's a New Zealand film. Well, it was shot there, and the director is from there, but the money was half from Australia and half from France.



Andy Horton's most recent book, *Laughing Out Loud: Writing the Comedy-Centered Screenplay*, springs from his conviction that laughter is best way to cope with the horrors that life can bring.

That kind of thing is happening more and more."

Horton's knowledge of what's happening is one key reason his colleagues and students find him such an important addition to the program.

"You can get a little speech from me here," Rapf says. "Part of the problem with academic film study in this country is that it *is* academic. It tends to be overly theoretical, I think, and doesn't have much contact with what goes on in the industry. The terrific thing about Andy is that he has strength in both these areas. He's a thorough and respected scholar, but at the same time he knows the industry. He knows what students have to do if they want to become professionals or if they want to go on to graduate school and become academics. There aren't a whole lot of people who wear both hats with such comfort. He does it because of unbelievable energy."

Horton's energy has given him industry savvy because it allows him to have a parallel career as a screenwriter. In 1988, Brad Pitt took his first feature role in a film called "Dark Side of the Sun." Horton co-wrote the screenplay for this film set and shot in the former Yugoslavia. Because of political turmoil, Horton's film wasn't released on video in the United States until January 1999.

His 1991 film "Virginia," directed by Yugoslav Srdjan Karanovic, won the 1991 Felix, which Horton describes as a European Oscar. It won first prize at the Valencia Film Fest in 1992 and was the top box office film of 1991-92 in its home country. "Something in Between," co-written with director Karanovic, won five Yugoslav Oscar-equivalents, including one for best dialogue.

Horton's 40-page tome of a résumé lists five screenplays under contract for production and nine completed and looking for production contracts.

Those 40 pages also include an eye-tiring list of scholarly articles and books on film, including several on comedy genius Preston Sturges and, most recently, *Laughing Out Loud: Writing the Comedy-Centered Screenplay*. Comedy, from the archly clever to the wackily zany, moves Horton more than any other genre.

"That's part of his whole philosophy of life, which is to find joy and laughter in everything," Rapf says. "He knows, as we all do, that laughter is certainly the best way there is of coping with the horrors that life can bring. He's made a conscious effort to spread the dogma of 'Let's learn how to lighten up a



Teaching remains scriptwriter Horton's main focus. He takes pride in OU's very active film club and in the students willing to take a chance on internships that require initiative, creativity and hard work.

bit, to relax.' I think a lot of that comes from his Greek background.

"Laughter is a way of keeping up the energy level, too. I'm prejudiced toward Andy because one of the other problems with so much film study is that it's heavy, pedantic. We especially see this in feminist film theory, which can be humorless, when, in fact, laughter is the most serious subject in the world. It's what defines us as human beings, I've always thought. Animals cry; they don't laugh. Andy is connected with the very essence of what it is to be human."

Horton sees film as one of the most human forms of expression given its multiplicity and accessibility. Opera, fine art and theater find few outlets other than in major cultural centers, while multiscreen cinemas dot the American landscape. In those multiplexes, Americans of all races, creeds and socio-economic levels find commonality when the lights go down, the soundtrack swells, and the opening credits roll. Whether they have become a community to laugh with, delight at witty dialogue, shiver with fear at the latest commercial slasher flick, cry with true emotion at a

poignant moment or jump with surprise at cutting-edge special effects matters not a jot, Horton says.

"If a film can make you both laugh and cry, it's doing really well," he says. "Can you take something as serious as the Holocaust and make a beautiful, funny film about love of a woman, of a child, of a country? 'Life is Beautiful' shows you can.

"I'm talking more about comedy these days because I'm getting ready to teach a course in comedy and because my current book deals with writing the comedy-centered screenplay. I've been thinking about humor for a long time, and I realize how important it is. Let's jump to current events, all the shootings in schools. I would like to require a course in all American schools in comedy. You can't graduate until you've taken it and learned to laugh at yourself."

Horton's film philosophy is based upon the belief that this medium is one of the most important ways every culture talks to itself about itself. He points to New Zealand, in which the highest ticket-seller has not been "The Piano," an international favorite, but a shattering film called "Once Were Warriors." Written by a Maori, directed by a Maori and starring Maoris, the riveting film looks at the impact of New Zealand's dominant white culture on the indigenous Maori.

"Why is that film important?" Horton asks. "Because at the center of the New Zealand culture is how they deal with the Maori experience. The film hits hard emotionally; it doesn't stay on some purely intellectual level.

"I think that's true with each culture. In fact, filmmakers don't always know exactly what they're doing. We're celebrating 100 years of Hitchcock this year. Why have so many of his films lasted? They speak to us on deeper emotional levels that

*"Something in Between," co-written with director Karanovic, won five Yugoslav Oscar-equivalents, including one for best dialogue.*

we may not really understand. Great art from Homer on, you can't cage it. You can't nail it down.

"For all of the silly movies that get made and are forgotten the next day after you've seen them, the ones that stick with you have a real impact on your life. What a program like ours at OU can do is to increase the possibilities. We can say we know what a typical Hollywood film with car crashes is, but what if you take away the crashes? Give me another story. Let's talk about that.

"I think it was Homeric scholar William Arrowsmith who said: 'Film is the humanitarian art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's the way we speak to each other about ourselves.' I firmly believe that. Be it 'The Blair Witch Project' or 'Casablanca' or whatever, it's been the wonderful medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century."

As a scholar and a professional, Horton accepts all aspects of the ever-various medium of filmmaking. He recognizes that art and commerce may be in conflict at times but that they needn't be mutually exclusive. His hope for his students, he says, is that they absorb it all. That, says Rapf, is exactly what Horton has always done.

"I don't think anyone could do what he does if he didn't really love movies," she says. "When someone loves something like that he wants to gobble up every aspect of it. He wants to take it all in. It's his very being, his soul, and he tries to infect

the students with his passion. That's a wonderful thing."

Film omnivore Horton proselytizes shamelessly about the wonder of all aspects of the art and business of film.

"Film encompasses a whole range of goals and products," he says. "One approach doesn't necessarily exclude the other. 'Life is Beautiful' is a piece of art that has made a lot of money. You can have it both ways. 'Surf Nazis Must Die' comes from a different direction. The guy who made that is just having fun. Then he turns around to make a serious Nathaniel Hawthorne film. I call it 'the carnival of life and the carnival of work.' 'Carnival' means that you have freedom and fantasy and festivity.

"But I never forget that Shakespeare had to sell tickets. Commerce has always been there. I'm a strong believer in that. I taught in New Zealand last year and in my script class there, five students have either made a feature film based on the script they wrote for me in a year or are under contract for films. Their budgets range from \$100,000 to \$1 million. That's exciting. You don't need a 'Titanic' budget to make a meaningful film. You don't even need a university, but what we can do as a university program is to help film students get a broad spectrum and do a little thinking."

**H**orton is proud of OU's very active student film club and the ever-increasing number of students willing to take chances on internships. This summer one film and video studies major traveled to New Zealand to work on a film festival. Another went to the Harvard University Film Archive. One journeyed to New Orleans to work on a film magazine, and one jetted off to Hollywood to work with an agent. That these placements match up with Horton's interests and career trajectory is no coincidence. All his experiences have resulted in a professional network of which his students take full advantage. However, while his scriptwriting career infuses his teaching with up-to-the-minute information, the teaching itself remains his primary focus.

"Pull it all together, and it's an exciting time to be a young filmmaker," the older filmmaker says. "Start in truth and use the imagination, I tell my students. One exercise I do with scriptwriting students is to pair them up and send them out with a video camera for half an hour to interview someone they don't know, someone outside their bubble, given their age, sex, race, social class, whatever. I tell them to make this person as different from themselves as possible. We all live in our own little bubbles, and part of the idea of a university is to get students out of theirs.

"When two young women from Norman interview a black woman working in a tattoo parlor and write a feature script about a 50-year-old woman in a tattoo parlor whose old boyfriend is dying of AIDS, that matters. Never in a hundred years could they have come up with that if they hadn't gotten outside the bubble and found something real they could connect to emotionally."

By bursting his students' bubbles, Horton hopes to take them beyond mortgages and insurance and into a world full of creatures different and, at the same time, like themselves. If he can get them there, these Oklahoma students can join him in making a difference in the world by making movies that entertain, inform, surprise and delight. That's entertainment. Even more importantly, that's life.



In teaching prospective filmmakers, Horton emphasizes the compatibility of art and business. "I never forget that Shakespeare had to sell tickets," he says.