In Memoriam: Henry Bacon

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His eyes were invariably full of curiosity and kindness.

This is an odd way to start a tribute, perhaps, but as those of us who knew and loved Henry Bacon can attest, it was true of him and a gift to us. This observation does no disservice to his sizable contributions to the academy, as all his good work for film studies flowed from magnanimity, friendship, and wonder. For Henry, the study of cinema—or anthropology, or opera, or religion, or philosophy, or the many different customs of varied cultures throughout the world, to name a few of his interests—expressed and enacted genuine love for the world before him.

Having studied engineering, musicology, and theatre in his early career, Henry found his academic home in film and television studies. A Finnish native, he taught at the Sibelius Academy, the University of Oulu, and served as a project manager for the Finnish Film Archive for the design of a radio and television archive. He also founded the film and television studies program at the University of Helsinki and spent most of his career there.

Henry's scholarly reputation stretched far beyond Finnish borders. His book on the films of Visconti (Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay [Cambridge UP, 1998]) is widely considered a foundational text on the director. Another English language monograph, The Fascination of Film Violence (Palgrave, 2015), added an important cognitivist voice to the discussion of that ever-important topic and explored it at the deep aesthetic, psychological, and moral levels such a matter requires. His Finnish Cinema: A Transnational Enterprise (Palgrave, 2016) vividly and incisively educated the world regarding the film industry of his home country and remains a definitive work on
the subject. Henry also wrote several monographs in Finnish reflecting his broader cultural interests: the history of opera, audiovisual narration, and the relation of film to the other arts.

It was that interdisciplinarity that sparked our initial friendship, having met at an SCSMI conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan (USA) in 2004. We talked late into that evening about his paper, presented that day, on “Synthesizing Approaches in Film Theory,” as well as classical music, opera, theater, and various aesthetic perspectives. Like me, he found in cognitivist film theory powerful explanations for how movies work, psychologically and philosophically, but he was always seeking to complement that paradigm with other approaches that could round out our understanding of why movies matter.

Each SCSMI conference was an opportunity to hear more of what Henry was studying, his most recent interests gravitating toward character construction and acting. We can only imagine what important contributions he might have made in that growing field. Each conference I also looked forward to an account of where he had traveled that year, as exploring new and interesting places and cultures remained his great passion throughout his life. Henry truly had friends all over the world, not simply because he was unfailingly respectful, kind, and well-traveled but also because nothing excited him more than discovering new cultural expressions of joy, beauty, and meaning. Many of us still recall, vividly, a trip to a true Appalachian music and dance gathering some miles outside Roanoke, Virginia, where the SCSMI conference was held in 2010. A little small-town general store housed the classic event, a country Friday night affair with food, festivities, and a lively string band. The whole town came out, as well as some visitors from a nearby international cinema conference. In the center of the floor: a mad flurry of jubilant dancers (of wildly ranging skill), Henry’s head bobbing among them. He would never deny himself a new and interesting cultural experience. I always admired and loved that about him.

After a few years of heroically battling cancer, Henry cannot dance with us any longer, but he enlightens us, through his memory and his increasingly important work.

But his greatest legacy might be the younger scholars he consistently befriended and encouraged. So many of us remain in his debt and struggle to imagine our work developing without his trustworthy feedback and reassuring support.

He will certainly be remembered as an incisive thinker who never hesitated to critique or search out better answers than those on offer, but he always did so with enormous charity. He was an example we should all emulate. I, and many others, remain so very grateful for the time we had with him.