

A Tribute to Erik Barnouw, 1908-2001

Patricia R. Zimmermann, Ph.D.

Professor

Department of Cinema and Photography

Ithaca College

607-274-3431 fax: 607-274-7078

patty@ithaca.edu

On July 19, Erik Barnouw died at his home in Vermont. His wife Betty was at his side. Erik had an inoperable cancer and had been in hospice. Betty says he was ready for life's next adventure. He was 93.

Erik was a legendary, foundational presence in our field. He was the preeminent media historian of the twentieth century. His scores of books include *THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF COMMUNICATION*, *CONGLOMERATES AND THE MEDIA*, *TUBE OF PLENTY: THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN TELEVISION*, *THE MAGICIAN AND THE CINEMA*, *DOCUMENTARY*, *THE SPONSOR: NOTES ON A MODERN POTENTATE*, and *HISTORY OF BROADCASTING*. His memoir, a compelling and eye-opening journey through his amazingly rich and full life, entitled *MEDIA MARATHON*, was published in 1996 by Duke University Press.

Just a few months ago, Erik published *MEDIA LOST AND FOUND* with Fordham University Press, a collection of his essays. Erik's life and writing spanned nearly the entire twentieth century. He published his last book only months before his death. Erik Barnouw was a co-editor of the Temple

University Press book series, WIDE ANGLE BOOKS, with Ruth Bradley, Scott MacDonald and Patricia R. Zimmermann. The series is dedicated to retrieving the unseen and unknown histories of the non-profit media arts sector.

Erik is considered by many to be one of the founding figures in the field of university level communications programs and a person who carved out the field of media history. His books are classics; they constitute the bricks and mortars of our field.

Erik's life, however, was not confined to the academy. His film, *HIROSHIMA NAGASAKI 1945* is probably the most widely taught documentary in documentary studies thirty years after it was produced. It is considered by many international scholars to be the most significant and far reaching anti-war film ever made. In fact, it influenced scores of filmmakers around the world.

Erik's professional life was as variegated and diverse as the scholarship, films and videos he championed. He worked as a ad writer, an actor, a radio writer, a director, a producer, television writer, a journalist, a songwriter, a curator, a filmmaker, an archivist, a union official, a board member of many media organizations, a consultant on many film projects, a film preservationist. Erik served as the unofficial ambassador of the independent media world since the 1950s, way before the term "indie" meant anything. Up until his death, he was a constant advocate for independent media work, in all genres: he was generous in his spirit and always engaged and delighted by new work and new makers from all across the globe. His selections as a curator changed how we think about media history and media art. He was open to anything, and everything, as long as it moved the soul.

Erik served as the first President of International Film Seminars as well as the first chief of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress. He curated more Flaherty Film seminars over the course of forty years than anyone can remember. He carved out space for documentary filmmakers from all over the globe to engage in dialogue and debate. He thrived on their polemics.

As many scholars, media arts professionals, archivists, preservationists and makers know, Erik had a special and unique relationship to emerging scholars and to expanding the field of film and media history. He constantly shuttled between writing about the past, present and future, of media, presenting new work, and archiving old work. He was a scholar who loved makers and a maker who loved scholars.

He edited the monograph, *THE FLAHERTY: FORTY YEARS IN THE CAUSE OF INDEPENDENT CINEMA*, with Patricia R. Zimmermann, the first institutional history published by the journal *WIDE ANGLE*. Two Ithaca College interns worked side by side with him on that project, three generations of media scholars typifying Erik's insistence that the torch for independent, non-corporate media be passed on to the next generation.

Beyond these accomplishments that exceed what one can imagine doing in a lifetime, Erik was a compassionate, ethical, and clear-headed presence in the media arts and archival worlds. He was an academic who spanned the archival, festival, production, and art worlds. He was a writer whose work knew no boundaries between professional and amateur, between the commercial world and the art world, between fiction and non-fiction, between the experienced and the emerging. Erik's humor and wit still ring in many of our ears. His editorial vision was flawless, spontaneous, and always, always laser-sharp.

But above all, Erik's legacy resonates to insist that optimism, generosity, and unbridled enthusiasm and inquiry for all human effort--whether in media or life--are the only media that really matters.

All of us in the fields of film, television, video, communications and new media will miss him. But I suspect his inspiring spirit wafts through all of our classrooms, our archives, our productions, our writing. Like a clear, cool wind, it clears out the pollen, pushes us to engage a clearer vision, and reminds us that communication is truly about connecting with people across any divide.

Memorial services in Vermont and New York will be arranged and will be posted soon.



- [Home](#)
- [Join & Engage](#)
- [Moving Images](#)
- [Study Center](#)
- [Overview](#)
- [Video Loan Catalog](#)
- [Moving Image Review](#)

- [Symposia and Roundtables](#)

- [Essays](#)

- [Services](#)

- [Shop](#)

- [Alamo Theatre](#)

- [About Us](#)

- [2015 Symposium](#)

- [2014 Symposium](#)

- [2013 Symposium](#)

- [2012 Symposium](#)

- [2011 Symposium](#)

- [2010 Symposium](#)

- [2009 Symposium](#)

- [2008 Symposium](#)

- [2007 Symposium](#)

- [2006 Symposium](#)

- [2005 Symposium](#)

- [2004 Symposium](#)

- [2003 Symposium](#)

- [2002 Symposium](#)

- [2001 Symposium](#)

- [2000 Symposium](#)

- [Roundtable 3: In the Classroom](#)

- [Roundtable 2: Internet Guide to Maine Content](#)

- [Roundtable 2: Wabanaki Studies](#)

- [Roundtable 1: iMovie and Archival Footage](#)

-

-