Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.
Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status 2016

Scott Gordon Burnham ....................... 3
Edward James Champlin .................... 6
Douglas Wells Clark ......................... 10
Ronald J. Comer ............................. 13
John Madison Cooper ....................... 15
Angus Stewart Deaton ...................... 18
Paul Joseph DiMaggio ...................... 22
Robert A. Freidin ......................... 25
John Richard Gott III ..................... 28
Abdellah Hammoudi ....................... 30
Nancy Weiss Malkiel ....................... 34
Kirk T. McDonald ......................... 36
Ignacio Rodríguez-Iturbe ............... 40
Jerome Silbergeld ......................... 43
P. Adams Sitney .............................. 46
Szymon Suckewer ......................... 49
Ronald Edward Surtz ..................... 52
Robert Daniel Willig .................... 55
P. Adams Sitney


P. Adams grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, briefly attended Trinity College, and spent a year in Europe, lecturing on American avant-garde cinema. He then studied Greek and Sanskrit at Yale University and earned a bachelor’s degree in classics there in 1967. One of his professors somehow persuaded P. Adams’s draft board to permit his return to Europe as a lecturer on American film so he could laud and analyze works that were sublime exemplars of American art.

P. Adams next entered the graduate program in comparative literature at Yale, while holding managerial and archival posts at Anthology and teaching film at various schools, including the Art Institute of Chicago, Bard College, New York University, and Cooper Union. In 1980, he received his doctorate from Yale and joined the Princeton faculty.

At Princeton, P. Adams received the President’s Award for Distinguished Teaching in 2010, after decades of erudite provocation in the classroom and the Stewart Theater. “Like the beautiful and challenging films he teaches, he has a cult following,” one undergraduate alumnus wrote in nominating him for the teaching award. His courses on film history, major filmmakers, the language of cinema, and avant-garde cinema were the core of Princeton’s curriculum in film studies throughout his tenure. He treasured his decades-long collaboration in the Program in Visual Arts with colleagues Emmet Gowin, a photographer, and James Seawright, a sculptor.

As a teacher of film, P. Adams prided himself in projecting celluloid prints of exceptional works from the entire history of the cinema. Late in his career, he lamented the decline of film as a medium in the era of digital video, and challenged students to prove their capacity to reckon with Robert Beavers, Stan Brakhage, Robert Bresson, Abigail Child,
Nathaniel Dorsky, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Federico Fellini, Su Friedrich, Ernie Gehr, Alfred Hitchcock, Gregory Markopoulos, and Andrei Tarkovsky.

P. Adams devoted much of his teaching to the great books curriculum in humanistic studies, often taking on extra teaching without compensation. He is one of the few professors to teach in both halves of the humanities sequence — from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, and from the Renaissance to 20th century. He scoffed at coteachers who shrank from lecturing on any writer covered in those courses, and abhorred what he took to be a vast decline in the seriousness of humanistic inquiry and instruction.

_Visionary Film_ was the first history of American avant-garde cinema since World War II. Film scholar Tom Gunning of the University of Chicago calls the book “the canonical account” of its topic. David James of the University of Southern California refers to P. Adams as “the dean of American film historiography.”


Already in his teens, as the editor of _Filmwise_, P. Adams had established himself as a champion and respected critic of filmmakers such as Willard Maas, Marie Menken, and Maya Deren. Later, his editing work included the journal _Film Culture, Metaphors on Vision_ by Stan Brakhage (1963), _Film Culture Reader_ (1970), _The Essential Cinema: Essays on the Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives_ (1975), _Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism_ (1978), and _The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays_ by Maurice Blanchot (1981).

In 2008, P. Adams received the Logos-Siegfried Kracauer Award for critical writing from Anthology Film Archives. In 2011, the American Academy in Berlin awarded P. Adams the Anna-Maria Kellen Berlin Prize, and he was admitted to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
P. Adams views cinema as a quintessentially modern art and “values it for its freedom from traditional fictional forms and for its intensity.” Whatever violates or debases the objects of his aesthetic admiration becomes the object of his ridicule. His devoted students and closest colleagues are grateful to have found the intensity of his loves contagious. From such appreciative sentiments he defends himself by pretending to have had no beneficial effects. P. Adams managed to slip out of Princeton into retirement with a sense of unburdened glee.