

# Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS  
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



*May 2016*

The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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## P. ADAMS SITNEY



Widely regarded as the leading historian of avant-garde cinema, P. Adams Sitney is best known as the author of *Visionary Film: The American Avant Garde* (Oxford University Press; first edition 1974, subsequent editions 1979 and 2002), as cofounder of Anthology Film Archives in 1970, and as coselector of Anthology's controversial Essential Cinema series.

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.”

P. Adams’s other books include: *Modernist Montage: The Obscurity of Vision in Cinema and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1990), *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema: Iconography, Stylistics, Politics* (University of Texas Press, 1995), *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford University Press, 2008), and *The Cinema of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2015). With the full range of his work in mind Gunning declares him “one of the finest critics and theorists of the cinematic image and form working today.”

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.