

Nick Davis
Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony
June 10, 2010

I started this year teaching my first freshman seminar and am ending it with the graduating seniors—seniors whom, given today’s occasion, it seems fair to flatter as the very best among a stellar cohort at Northwestern. This arc from the newest arrivals to the most accomplished of our imminent departures satisfies me, as a scholar of narrative, in a simple, elegant way—and not least because I arrived at Northwestern in the Fall of 2006 when most of you did, and even if some of you think I didn’t notice you or don’t remember you from a huge lecture course in the now-gutted Harris Hall: I did, and I do. Katharine Kosin, inducted today as a History and Spanish major, was a fearless respondent to questions from the podium, among a sea of 160 people, and unlike a lot of fearless commenters, she always had something substantial and original to say. Anna Gutina, inducted today as a Psychology major, was such a congenial and impressive visitor to my office hours, presenting paper ideas even fresher and more compelling than the ones I had speculated when I drew up the assignments. Alex Twinem approached me at the end of one lecture for information about how to major in English, and having now wowed her professors at every level of the curriculum and written an honors thesis that her advisor raves about, she’s showing everyone else how to major in English.

These are just a few, not all, of today’s inductees whom I already know. Many of you I don’t know, but I’m sure I’m not alone among the Phi Beta Kappa members on the faculty in wishing that I did. I’m not sure how Benedict Lim would have had time to meet me, and I hope he even has time to be here today, having completed an Economics major, an honors-track major in Mathematical Methods in the Social Sciences, the

Kellogg Certificate Program, and a Master's Degree in Economics, all at the same time. Jessica Kunke had to drop one of my classes because of intensive commitments to her senior research in Integrated Science, Mathematics, and Earth and Planetary Science, but in just three lecture sessions and one delightful office hours visit, she got me thinking about Faulkner in some new ways, which is much more than I offered to her thinking about multilinear algebra, vector fields, differential forms, integration on chains, manifolds, and Stokes's Theorem. But I would like to hear more about this, even about Stokes's Theorem—and more, too, about the psychology of body-image from Rachel Salk, about anti-mullerian hormone and the stages of ovarian aging from Monisha Banerjee, about German literature and philosophy from Brian Bodensteiner, about racial and gender bias in U.S. jury selection from Daniel Osher. You are all the sorts of students who afford your faculty the greatest pleasures of our jobs: the moments when we know *we* are the students.

But I also want to say something about those first-year students I worked with in the fall. As I recall, graduation was a time to take stock of how far I had come from my first semester, and yet I had also never felt more like a freshman since the days when I actually was one. I cannot figure out how unusual this is or isn't. The day I started college, the dean informed an entire yard full of my classmates and our parents about a recent study that had revealed 75% of entering Harvard first-years think they are less intelligent than their peers, and 75% of graduating Harvard seniors think they are more intelligent than their peers. I prefer, somewhat willfully, to believe that this is not a story about the reverse-alchemization of humility into arrogance but a story about the healthy satisfaction that arises from absorbing specialized knowledges that you know you've had

to work for, and that you realize not everyone possesses, even at a plane of advantage comparable to yours. Ever the contrarian, apparently, I don't think I belonged to either 75% majority: I had worked hard enough and had enough success in high school that I felt I had earned my shot at a grade-A college education as much as anyone had. At the same time, I valued college in part because even as I labored to develop aptitudes and good sense in arenas in which I thought I could thrive, it also served as a kind of four-year portrait gallery of so many aptitudes I don't have and modes of thought that don't come naturally, if at all.

I like to think of Phi Beta Kappa members, selected after all for your maturity and character as well as for your intellects and grades, as students who may well show up to university knowing that they at least have a leg up, in acuity as well as opportunity, and who leave university with a balanced sense of how you do and don't excel, where and how you can most directly contribute to the world, and where you will train yourself to make informed, principled, humbling judgments about whose help you need, whose expertise you desire and trust, whose experiences and articulations might regularly and justifiably call yours into question. It's not just the 25% vs. the 75% we're talking about. Attend to the key clause "than their peers." My hope is that four years of whom you've met, of what you've learned, and of what has transpired at various concentric scales around you has ignited both a narrower and a wider sense of who in the college, in the country, in the world, in its cycles and structures, in your beliefs, in your resources, and in your conundrums, are your peers. Think about all the skills and the smarts you have accumulated that would dazzle them, and could, much more importantly, benefit them.

Think about all the insights, abilities, and convictions about life with which they might stagger, enable, embarrass, excite, impinge upon, protect, redeem, or benefit you.

My first-years and I had one long discussion and several short ones that were contoured along these lofty lines of moral and pedagogical injunction. More than that, though, we talked about movies. My seminar was called Writing About Film, and my idea for getting them thinking, talking, and writing like university students was to furnish them some crucial terms for breaking down various facets of filmmaking and analysis and then to coach them through nuanced responses to a rangy menu of movies: the horror classic and Oscar juggernaut *The Silence of the Lambs*; the action-filled apocalypics of *Terminator 2*; the headline-grabbing Chinese melodrama *Raise the Red Lantern*; *The Double Life of Véronique*, a Polish-French metaphysical mystery; *Boyz N the Hood*, a kind of brooding Western set in South Central Los Angeles; the Congressionally-denounced experimental AIDS drama *Poison*; *JFK*, a notoriously paranoid fantasmagoria; the guns-blazing reversals of gender and genre in *Thelma & Louise*; and Jennie Livingston's drag-queen documentary *Paris Is Burning*.

All of these prize-winning milestones debuted in the U.S. in 1991—by design, the same year in which most of my seminar participants “debuted” from the womb. So, though these films would not feel immediately at hand to the world they now inhabit, neither did they hail from so distant an era that these viewers faced intimidating hurdles of accessibility. I wanted the world as these students had entered it *and* as they now occupy it to feel, in cross-section, intellectually complex, artistically adventurous, politically provocative, and requiring of serious engagements on multiple fronts. For a film scholar, this was easy to accomplish on behalf of students born in 1991, a rare year

when the stable of popularly endorsed and industrially championed titles still holds up remarkably well to contemporary eyes and by the metrics of ongoing cultural cachet.

A comparable time capsule and zodiac of cinematic guiding lights could be orchestrated for you, but only at the cost of making the tastemakers of 1988 seem cowed and inattentive, both snobby and buffoonish. The Best Picture winner in 1988 was *Rain Man*, a strangely glossy and grammatically lax tale about how it is, indeed, better to love your autistic brother than to kidnap him, contest his inheritance, or employ him conveniently as a card-counting savant in Vegas; fellow nominees included *Mississippi Burning*, a fact-fudged tale of civil rights and anti-lynching activism in the Jim Crow South, refracted through the vantages of white characters and discounting black agency; and *Working Girl*, an office comedy that unwittingly made white-collar female professionals seem exotic and exaggeratedly plumed, like cockatoos, alternately defined by perky naïveté and mutual sabotage. This is not just a tale of Oscar's frequent misbegottenness. The Cannes Film Festival winner in 1988 was, by consensus, one of its weakest, the Berlin jury somehow also fell for *Rain Man*, and the Venice and Sundance champs have gone unremarked and stayed out of print for years.

In my youth, winning an Oscar or a Palme d'or at Cannes seemed equal to earning an A+, a 4.0, a top-drawer diploma; it never occurred to me that these could be errantly bestowed. The first quarter of college isn't precisely when I aspire to explode the dream of stable ideals or of just meritocracies, dreams for which, frankly, I preserve my own nostalgic yearning. Part of what I loved about my freshman seminar was the ability to route attention toward formidable cultural artifacts that still bear out the promise and value of the laurels they attracted. But over time you acquire critical laser-lights, don't

you? – healthy skepticisms, your own sets of rigorous and idiosyncratic standards. Being a serious thinker and evaluator is to recognize that success has no single recipe, that communal criteria can be wobbly; stamps of endorsement can sometimes gravitate toward hollow templates or convenient, short-lived sentiments instead of properly shipwrighted thoughts, built to last. All five Best Picture nominees in 1988 opened in the last two weeks of December—which puts me in mind of essays that we sometimes write mere hours before they are due, though surely no one here has ever done that. All five bear the surface holograms of thought and prestige more than the marrow, the muscle, the blood flow of real contemplation and work—which puts me in mind of cosmetically deft five-paragraph essays, verse-chorus-verse songs, slickly economical mathematical proofs, or tidy lab reports with fully symmetrical hypotheses and conclusions... all of which can work beautifully, but all of which sometimes have exactly the *wrong* shape for the ideas being expressed, or may not risk anything *like* a real idea, relying on recyclable canards in place of tunneling thought, hydra-headed possibilities, uncomfortable concessions, or unresolved, forward-looking endings.

Having read about all of you, I'm tempted to beg that you re-matriculate upon graduation so that we can work together, but I would clearly have to engineer a course on different grounds. A 1988 course would necessarily insist that the criteria and the exemplars of excellence hand-picked for you by jurists of the culture, though alleged to know best, cannot always be trusted—prompting us to poke around nervier peripheries for our role models of success, and to interrogate our own definitions of “excellence,” which sometimes ought to encompass what we take for granted in front of us, even in ourselves. The point here is not to make any of you worry, “Oh my God – that guy just

suggested I might be the *Rain Man* or the *Working Girl* of this year's Phi Beta Kappa class." Trust your recommenders and your referees at least that much. But none of you were picked just because you crossed a certain line of latitude on the globe of GPA, or because you had three majors instead of one, or because of any other criterion that my first-year advisees still sometimes project as the indispensable, phylogenetic traits of a top student. If anything, what I prize most in reading all of your profiles are their diversity, both among the 74 of you and within your individual endeavors. If you were all movies, and I were enlisting you for the 1988 course I wish I could have taught you, some of you might be the *Unbearable Lightness of Beings* and the *Dead Ringers*, tracing wholly unexpected visions with consummate force; some of you are the *Salaam Bombays*, the *Last Temptation of Christs*, and the *Thin Blue Lines*, making severe, flamboyant, even life-saving statements on deeply troubling subjects, which need to be aired and debated; and some of you are the *Die Hards*, the *Bull Durhams*, the *Hairsprays*, the *Fish Called Wandas*, embarking on deceptively familiar, invigoratingly accessible projects and making them rich, fresh, and productive, in ways we don't always respect or reward as effusively as we should. Probably all of you are all of these things at different times—and I hope, as you are all inducted today into Phi Beta Kappa, you realize that as much as anything, you were selected from among an imposingly stellar senior class not just for those feats and stats that make your résumés glow, and not only for the ways you outdid yourselves in your primary arenas of endeavor, but because of how you impressed people in ways you may not realize anyone noticed, watched by people you didn't realize were taking an interest.

Teaching and debating and writing about film – such a hybrid art – reminds me always that subplots and side-projects are as crucial as centerpieces and tentpoles; that a tremendous film can be tremendous in any number of ways; that freshness, fire, versatility, and sublimity are eventually what lodge in the mind and advance the culture, despite the lurking temptations of quicker, safer routes to a hit, an Academy Award, an A+. How lovely that you all appear already to know this, and may even have reached this epiphany without needing *Rain Man* or *Driving Miss Daisy* to crack the code (which, by the way, means that any of you born in 1989 are still a little... screwed). I am thrilled to read that Bill Lotter is a power-thinker and a power-lifter, that Jesse Bastiaens hit home runs in his Econ degree, but I hope he knows that his mentors in the Psychology minor think he's as strong as all their majors, and that I would never have guessed from his work in English and Film that he wasn't one of ours. My last four bookmarks in my Firefox browser link to entries on TheSpinningPlate.com, a food blog written by today's inductee Angela Mears, whom I've never met, though every time I attend an event, she wins something. She may imagine that her gift for verbalizing the right ways to unbind the captive flavors in a marbled cut of meat, and of musing on how that private, culinary act might imply certain truths about how residents of different continents relate to their food, or about what food they do or don't have the privilege of eating—she might imagine this has nothing to do with her being here today, but I want to say, unequivocally, that it does, and that we marvel at how all of you spin so *many* plates. When we have met, taught, heard about, or read about all of you, we have all worked hard to perceive the “whole person,” excelling in ways that no one might predict but that anyone would applaud, and which we believe will preserve their power, their stamina,

and their potential for *good* for years to come, even as you inevitably grow, move, and change. Of course, you made the task very easy for us. Clearly, all 74 of you are remarkably “whole” people, even as, in some ways, you’re just getting warmed up—I can’t imagine my colleagues not having noticed, or having failed to appreciate you at your manifest, multiple bests. So congratulations, very best wishes, and – really and truly – thanks.