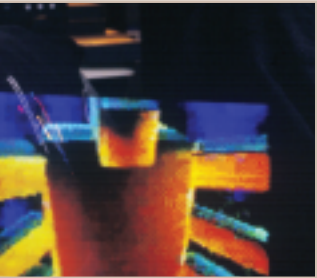


# V I D E O V I R T U O S O

BY CAROL A. SLIWA '80



If forced to choose a single word to describe herself, Glorianna Davenport '66 will say “filmmaker.” But she bristles at such a limiting characterization for good reason. Her life’s work has taken her well beyond the boundaries of any conventional notion of filmmaking.

Davenport is a principal research associate at the MIT Media Laboratory, where she heads the Interactive Cinema Group she founded. She also is cofounder and director of Media Lab Europe, a partnership between MIT and the Republic of Ireland. With her six doctoral students in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and four researchers in Dublin, Davenport explores new ways of telling and sharing stories using a wide range of digital media and computer science technology.

Interactive cinema clearly isn’t targeted at the couch potato who salivates over another episode of *Law & Order* neatly laid out from start to finish. Instead, it allows the viewer to play just

as great a role as the filmmaker does in weaving a story thread. A writer or director may set the initial circumstances, but through the assistance of computer technology, the story can unfold differently for every participant.

The story of Davenport’s life, for instance, could be told most richly through the photographic images and video footage she has been collecting for decades. Taking a traditional approach, Davenport would edit down the material into a sequence of *her* choosing. But through interactive cinema, viewers would get a chance to see footage she might have left on the cutting-room floor. Photographs and video clips could be cataloged and stored in a database accessible through a network, such as the Internet. Once viewers indicate their interests, algorithms programmed into software can search the database and automatically construct the story.

Some viewers navigating through an interactive documentary on Davenport

might focus on her home life, starting with her childhood in Manhattan and the summer and weekend visits with her grandparents in New Jersey. Today, they might catch Davenport at the expansive cranberry farm in southeastern Massachusetts where she and her husband, Evan Schulman, often welcome his three adult children and some of her six siblings, as well as their spouses and children.

More artistic-minded viewers might prefer to trace Davenport’s studies in sculpture with Leonard DeLonga at Mount Holyoke and Tony Smith and Robert Morris at Hunter College. She obtained a master of fine arts degree from Hunter in 1970.

Viewers interested in her film career could head straight for the three decades of footage in Davenport’s database. She discovered a new creative format—the Sony Portapak—in a Manhattan store window in 1970. Her father, an assistant managing editor at *Fortune*, used words

to tell stories. But when she laid eyes on the revolutionary camera that could capture motion pictures with synchronous sound, she thought, "Anyone can be Walter Cronkite."

Davenport moved from New York to Maine in 1973, and two years later, she changed the course of her life when she scraped together \$300 for a summer film workshop at Hampshire College run by Richard Leacock, an MIT pro-

Macintosh laptop so she can comfortably edit in her MIT office, Beacon Hill apartment, or the airy loft of the Plymouth-area home she helped to design.

Her research falls in sync with the highly creative and experimental projects of the PhD candidates she selected. One, Aisling Kelliher, is working with Nokia on mobile cinema. Another, Barbara Barry, is embedding artificial intelligence into consumer cameras to

been critical in helping interactive filmmakers pave new ways to tell stories.

Davenport says she still most enjoys breaking new ground in a story, and in recent years, she has done extensive work on how children learn. "When you give young kids a video camera and they're able to say something about their own lives that they couldn't say in words, that's a very profound thing," she says.

Particularly gratifying for Davenport



## GLORIANNA DAVENPORT '66 STRETCHES THE LIMITS OF FILMMAKING >>

fessor. She pitched a tent because she didn't have the extra \$300 for room and board. "It was definitely an act of passion," Davenport says.

Leacock would one day become her boss at MIT, where Davenport gradually advanced from projectionist to faculty member. Her life became a whirlwind of classes, workshops, speaking engagements, and writing commitments on an international scale. Her film projects also took her around the world—from the subterranean roadways of Boston's Big Dig to the World's Fair in New Orleans and from Copenhagen, for a remembrance of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr, to England and Thailand for a portrait of her husband's uncle, Harry Schulman, a British Army officer during World War II.

Davenport's clunky thirty-pound Portapak is long gone. She now uses a state-of-the-art digital video camera that fits into the palm of her hand, and she transfers the taped images to her

help their operators construct stories. Barry's master's project, also under Davenport's watch, involved the construction of a wearable computer for preteen girls. The computer took the form of a necklace with small beads, each of which could store images and wirelessly transmit them. The girls could create different versions of a story by stringing together different beads and trade images through a central video amulet.

"Glorianna gives people a lot of freedom to develop their own ideas," says Paul Nemirovsky, another of her doctoral candidates. "More than anything, she helps us to think more creatively—as well as puts us back on earth sometimes."

Davenport's most recognized scientific contribution came in the area of digital editing. She received a patent in 1992 with Hans Peter Brondmo for the "micon," a technology that gained wide usage in dynamic video composition and viewing. Innovation such as that has

were the journalism workshops she conducted in Thailand with teenage girls at risk for prostitution. The teens illustrated their stories using photographs published to a Web site. Davenport says she took the girls to places they normally wouldn't see, such as a village for families suffering from AIDS, to help them gain a deeper sense of self-awareness and understanding of the impact of life choices.

Cinematic images have the potential to create even more powerful impressions, and in keeping with her life's work, Davenport hopes to make video accessible to as many people as she can.

"There's a huge part of the world that has been left behind because we're overrun by text," she says. "Some of us need to communicate visually." □

• To view some of Davenport's work, start at <http://ic.media.mit.edu/people/gid/>.

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