Good evening, and welcome to the continuing program of “Haiti 2012: Dreams and Reality / Pay rêvé, pays réel.” We are looking forward to a very special opportunity tonight, a conversation with Arnold Antonin, who is at once his country’s most prolific cinematic artist and a powerful influence in the emerging Haitian cinema. Following the discussion, there will be a screening of his 2009 film, *Les Amours d’un Zombi, candidat à la présidence*.

In a 1936 essay called the Storyteller, critic Walter Benjamin drew a distinction between two very familiar terms: experience and information. He quotes Villemessant, the founder of Le Figaro: “To my readers, an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.” For information, says Benjamin, lets us lay hold of things nearest to hand, it lays claim to quick verifiability. And it must be “understandable in itself.”

He goes on to assert that the rise of information (in newspapers, for instance) has helped hasten the end of storytelling. But for a good many Americans, what we know of Haiti has come to us as information–bits of media that describe natural disasters, political turmoil, and deep, deep poverty.

This week’s program is meant to carry us beyond the flood of information. For Walter Benjamin, the opposite of information is not speculation, but experience. Experience passed from mouth to mouth; experience often beset with contradictions, sometimes beyond common sense. And believable because it begins with the urgent desire to say truthfully, “I have seen this.” “We lived through this.” All of us have known the moment when the voice of the poet, the genius of the film maker, painter, or dancer–acquires depth, purpose, and a reality unique to each of us. In such moments, we sense that the work of art responds–directly, generously–to the question, How ought we to live?

Tonight’s distinguished guest has for years given Haitian cinema not only prize-winning films, but also the challenge to create film true to the lived experiences of Haitians. “Our cinema is embryonic, but full of potential,” he told a reporter some
years ago. “Haitians don’t want to be invisible.”

Arnold Antonin is a university professor, who holds a PhD in economics and marketing from the University of Rome, and is engaged socially and politically in a wide range of issues. An early film, *Haiti, the Way to Freedom* resulted in his persecution by the Duvalier government, and led to more than ten years in exile. His film making credits include several full-length films,–among them *Piwouli* and *Does the President have AIDS?* as well as more than twenty documentaries. His work as a cinematic artist has been recognized internationally many times, including a 2002 award at the Cannes film festival for his film *Women of Courage*, and most recently with the Paul Robeson prize for *Jacques Roumain: The Passion for a Country* (2009), and again in 2011 for *The Loves of a Zombi, or Can a Zombie be President?* A past president of the Association of Haitian Movie Directors, he is the founder and director of Petion Bolivar, a community center dedicated to fostering political and cultural debate.

In short, tonight’s program brings us into conversation with an individual recognized for his cinematic artistry, his civic and cultural leadership, and his commitment to seeing Haitians find their voice in film. He has well deserved the title “first person of Haitian cinema.”