focus on the arts and humanities
Dear Reader,

This issue of UT Discovers focuses on the arts and humanities. With federal and economic development emphases on STEM disciplines and technology, the arts and humanities are sometimes neglected. Since the founding of the University of Paris in the mid twelfth century, the centerpiece of a university education has been the seven liberal arts—the trivium and quadrivium. The trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectics) were the foundation upon which students concentrated before advancing to the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. It is interesting to note that music is placed among the sciences, but all the sciences require thorough grounding in the arts.

This issue of UT Discovers brings that focus and emphasis back to the arts and humanities. This sampling highlights the interests of a small group of our faculty but demonstrates some of the breadth of scholarly and artistic endeavors of our University.

We hope you enjoy meeting some of our scholars as you read these articles. If you have questions about the work described or about the scholars themselves, I would be pleased to answer questions and obtain additional information for you.

Sincerely,

James P. Trempe, Ph.D.
Vice President for Research
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merriam-Webster defines theology as the study of faith, practice, and experience. Comparative theology is a way of approaching one’s own theological tradition in light of its juxtaposition to other religious traditions. Religions frame their concerns differently and thus offer new ways of reflecting on one’s own tradition. Of course, the presupposition is that other religions are both relevant and sources of wisdom.

“We study other religious traditions to appreciate their depth of wisdom,” says Peter Feldmeier, “and to see how their approaches and insights help us think about our own tradition more deeply.” There are two ways of approaching such inquiry: one is what Feldmeier calls crossing over and coming back; the other is holding two traditions next to each other and having them communicate in a back-and-forth fashion.

Feldmeier has demonstrated these techniques in his two most recently published books. In Encounters in Faith, a college textbook, he helps students cross over into other traditions to see the spiritual universe in new ways. “You set aside your own assumptions about truth or faith and allow yourself to enter a state of deep listening. In short, you try to immerse yourself in the ethos of another tradition,” he explains. “‘Coming back’ is taking that experience to your home tradition and seeing your faith differently because of the experience.”

“We look, for example, at expressions of Hindu gods, such as Shiva, Kali, and Krishna. The classic texts often show them as overwhelming, even terrifying, and always surprising. Deeply appreciating these lessons in the ‘otherness’ of God, we can return to our own tradition and see where we’ve unwittingly housebroken our image of God, speaking too casually about God’s will or watering down the demands of our faith. It might even help us consider the lost importance of different images of God in our tradition.”

In The Path of Wisdom, a more technical exploration for scholars, Feldmeier demonstrates the second method — that of allowing a kind of conversation between traditions or texts. Here Feldmeier engages “The Dhammapada,” Theravada Buddhism’s most important canonical text that acts as a compendium for the entire tradition.

“You never know how the dialogue will go, or what will come up,” he says. For example, one might start by comparing Christian prayer to Buddhist meditation. One might theologically consider them quite different. While prayer is a faith response to God’s grace, and ultimately led by God, Buddhist meditation is a mental strategy that one learns, either to free oneself from a reactive mind, called vipassana meditation, or to cultivate a mental absorption in something religiously useful, often called samadhi. So is one supernatural while the other natural? Buddhist experience suggests the Christian rethink these hard-line distinctions. At the same time, Buddhists who claim to be non-theists regularly describe the dharma (law or truth) as ‘carrying you,’ or ‘leading you.’
And this becomes more the case the deeper one goes. Could theistic assumptions be what they are drawing on implicitly?“Comparative theology is not an exercise in syncretism, which blurs the distinctions between religious traditions,” Feldmeier states. Rather it is developing an understanding of the deep structures that are unique in each religion. “Entering an encounter and assuming that whatever the religious other believes is acceptable or similar to one’s own faith is artificial and insulting to both traditions. In fact, sometimes it’s the differences that are particularly fruitful avenues of comparison.”

When doing comparative theology, Feldmeier spends about half of his research time considering a number of religions or pan-religious issues and half in his particular specialty of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. “There is always the danger that in being too focused on one thing that there is no breadth of knowledge and, on the other hand, of being such a generalist that you don’t appreciate the deep structures of any religion. It is possible to become an intellectual dilettante, and that is not good scholarship.”

In addition to academic investment, Feldmeier has pursued his explorations of Theravada Buddhism by immersing himself in Buddhist practices such as vipassana meditation and has participated in a number of intensive meditative retreats. His last one was a silent three-month retreat, meditating 12 to 16 hours a day. “After only a few days, I almost gave up on it,” he comments. He notes that these experiences have deeply affected his understanding of how the mind works and how it relates to experience. “Vipassana meditation involves an intense watchfulness,” remarks Feldmeier. “It requires being attuned to physical, emotional, and mental phenomena as well as to one’s own reaction to those experiences.” He also added, “It really conditions the possibilities of spiritual freedom.”

The ultimate goal of Feldmeier’s scholarship is to continue to advance both interreligious dialogue and comparative theology, showing the Western reader in particular the depth of possible insights that can be drawn from other religious traditions.

Peter Feldmeier is the Murray/Bacik Endowed Chair in Catholic Studies at The University of Toledo. He has published numerous articles on Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue. He has also published four books, two of which were award-winning.
When you think of Medieval poetry, what comes to mind? Chaucer? Mystery plays? Piers the Plowman?

Christina Fitzgerald thinks of these canonical texts, too, but she also thinks of conduct poetry and commonplace books. Such books, written down by individuals to collect and remember eclectic materials — both pleasurable and practical — often contained conduct literature, guides to managing self and wealth. Some of this literature, particularly the type Fitzgerald is interested in, was written in aphoristic, rhyming couplets and appears in commonplace books as well as in manuscripts of many types.

As an undergraduate student of Medieval literature during her junior year abroad at Cambridge University in England, Fitzgerald says she did mostly independent work and wrote weekly about her reading and research. She experienced the literature personally and found it fascinating. She had the opportunity to think about this literature at a greater depth, intensity and intimacy than her studies in the U.S. had allowed. “What is interesting about it is the way it is simultaneously part of a particular time and place yet converses across time,” she comments. “These voices from the past make one think about other ways of being.” She adds that different periods interpret the past in different ways. “We always read through the lens of our own culture,” she explains. “We can read the notes and the accumulation of commentaries and interpretations, and in some sense we are reading these texts as palimpsests.”
The idea for a particular research project can come about in a number of ways, Fitzgerald notes. Sometimes it is planned; sometimes an idea develops out of discussions with colleagues; sometimes it is just serendipity. A current project began with a 15th-century poem added to the last page of an early 14th-century manuscript that also contains an ownership inscription. Fitzgerald says she became interested in this Henry Perveys and then became obsessed with whom he was, what he wrote and why; then the short poems on the page grabbed her attention, especially the one underneath Perveys’ ownership inscription. “These are moralistic poems and certainly not great poetry,” she says. “But what is fascinating is that the poems are a collation of couplets. And these couplets appear in multiple other manuscripts in different sequences.” Fitzgerald calls them “fungible couplets” for their interchangeable nature.

There is a network of couplets that Fitzgerald is locating. Some appear to be more popular than others and appear more frequently at different times. She is asking how many of them show up in other manuscripts, in what kinds of manuscripts, and how they are linked. She is also wondering where the couplets originated, although their ultimate point of origin can probably never be determined. “It is very likely that Henry Perveys and other of his ilk borrowed books from friends and neighbors and simply copied down what they liked since they could not keep the book and would have to return it,” notes Fitzgerald. Interestingly, one commonplace book is written in an accounting ledger. “The author probably had a blank ledger in his store and simply appropriated it for a different purpose,” she says.

The 15th century saw an explosion in books and ownership, as materials became cheaper and more widely available. But still, books were labor-intensive (they were all handwritten until the end of the century) and relatively expensive, and lending libraries were nonexistent. Hence the commonplace book, where one might copy down something interesting or useful from another book. Studying commonplace books and the texts they contain yields information on the readers and consumers of Medieval literature. It yields insight into the daily lives of the compilers and what they thought important. They are a window into a culture of the past.

For Fitzgerald, the commonplace book is a 15th century manifestation of present-day phenomena — in particular, Tumblr blogs. These are Websites in which the authors collect something they like. Some are thematic and most point to other places on the Web. This is the 21st century commonplace book, Fitzgerald suggests. People are using the same things, collecting and collating what they think is the best of the best. “We tend to think this is something new,” notes Fitzgerald, “but it is not. Blogs are simply using a newer technology to do what the commonplace book did 600 years ago.”

Fitzgerald comments that knowledge of the past and research both provide a perspective on current events. Things are not changing as rapidly as people tend to think. There are distinct similarities and a continuity of earlier technologies. We would not panic over the Internet taking over everything if we had a better understanding of that continuity. For example, she remarks, the codex, or bound book, gradually replaced the scroll for written text, but the scroll persists still in some venues (including the way we view many electronic texts). The invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century did not replace the manuscript, as bound manuscript books continued in vogue for a good two centuries and are still produced as specialty items.

But studies of the past are also aided by modern technologies and techniques. Fitzgerald says she is now thinking of taking her study of these fungible couplets one step further and turning it into a digital humanities project that will allow her to map the locations and linkages of the couplets. Such a map will do more than just determine literary connections — it will help in deciphering social connections, the position of the book owners in different levels of society, social custom, the prevalence of certain books and other aspects of the era. In the end, it is a melding of literature, cultural history and geography.

“We will all be part of the past at some time. By studying and investigating other pasts, we are speaking for the dead, honoring them in hope that some future culture will honor us,” Fitzgerald concludes.

Christina Fitzgerald

Christina Fitzgerald is an associate professor of English literature, specializing in the medieval period. She teaches various courses on Old and Middle English literature and language at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She has written a scholarly book entitled The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture and published journal articles on medieval drama, historical linguistics, manuscript studies, and teaching medieval literature. Current projects include work on late medieval London merchants and manuscript culture and on anti-theatrical anxieties in the Croxton “Play of the Sacrament.” She has a PhD from the University of California at Los Angeles.
It was serendipity. As an undergraduate psychology major, Tim Geiger signed up for a class in typography, thinking it was about “typing” people. His first assignment was to print a book — and he was hooked.

“I consider myself a fine printer,” Geiger says, but he is also a poet and so far has published two collections. He comments, though, that whereas he has forced the two activities to meet, he also tries to keep them separate “Writing poetry satisfies the mental and intellectual needs and capabilities while letterpress printing satisfies the physical ones.”

Growing up in Reading, Pennsylvania, down the street from a cemetery, Geiger was fascinated by the engravings in stone. He tried stone carving but says he had no talent for it. “Letterpress yields that same sense of permanence and has an archival nature. It lets me make something beautiful without having any artistic talent whatsoever,” he adds. Yet when you see his little books, you instantly realize that here is an artist with a sharp, imaginative and critical eye.
Timothy Geiger, professor of English, came to The University of Toledo in 1997. He teaches printing and bookmaking, poetry and creative writing. He has published two collections of poems [Blue Light Factory and The Curse of Pheromones] and created numerous letterpress books that can be found in fine collections around the world.

His letterpress adventures really began the year Geiger filled in for a professor on sabbatical. Although teaching creative writing, he was asked about teaching a letterpress design course. He agreed and found a press, a Vandercook, for $250; the University spent $4,000 shipping it from Canada. "The biggest stumbling block was finding some place to put it," Geiger chuckles. Geiger notes that Vandercook presses are the "gold standard" for letterpress because a drum holds the paper, and the inking and impression are so consistent.

The process of producing a letterpress book begins with finding a poetry collection. Geiger says he only prints poetry — narrative text is too dense and takes too much time for the letterpress process. He scans journals, some popular periodicals, and published collections. When he finds poetry that he would like to print, he tracks down the author, sends a sample of what a printed page might look like and asks if the author has a small collection of connected poems. He offers to do a small press run of 100 to 120 copies. Rather than a cash payment, the author receives payment in the form of 10 percent of the press run. "Authors almost always agree to this deal," Geiger remarks.

"Then it is a matter of sitting down with the manuscript and figuring out what it is telling me," Geiger says. "How does it want to be printed?" Poetry can be sad, happy, scholarly, humorous. Line lengths differ; format can be anything from sonnet to prose poetry. These characteristics all factor into the design: typeface, orientation, paper, binding. It could be an oversized book or one that would fit in a pocket. Additionally, Geiger says he works closely with the poet so that the final printed book fits the message that the poet wants to convey.

The letterpress process itself has also changed. Although he uses classic typefaces, Geiger is phasing out the old lead type and using photopolymer plates. The design is completed using desktop publishing software and then transferred to the machine that actually makes the plates. Becoming even more modern, Geiger has experimented with paper made from limestone rocks harvested from construction sites. "It is cleaner to make and environmentally friendly, degrading completely in sunlight," he adds. "This is the paper of the future."

Where Geiger gets subjects for his letterpress books by browsing, he gets the subjects for his own poetry by a similar browsing. Listening to NPR or to what students are saying and delving into his past and his family life all provide ideas for his poems. He says he composes in a steno book, generally in 10-syllable lines. "But it never ends up that way. After 30 or 40 revisions, it is totally different. Function takes precedence over form," he says.

Both of Geiger’s published poetry collections are a combination of metaphysical sojourns through the various stages of life, commentary on human beliefs and activities, and humorous, light-hearted commentary and anecdotes. "Books have an order about them, that’s why I print them," he concludes, "poetry is free form and allows some chaos." Order and chaos, physicality and intellect reside at opposite ends of the spectrum, but in Tim Geiger, they have met and found a unique master.
From a young age she was interested in journalism. Nellie Bly, a pioneering reporter of the late 1800s, was her hero. She spent a summer working for the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, and one day a woman walked in wearing jeans and a T-shirt, put a videotape and a camera on the desk and walked out. “That’s what I want to do,” Charlene Gilbert said to herself at the time. And that is what she did.

Charlene Gilbert is an independent documentary filmmaker, drawn particularly to the “missing chapters” in American social and political history. “I believe strongly in the power of visual storytelling to both move and inspire,” Gilbert says. “I use film, video, and digital media to create nonfiction narratives that are multivocal and layered.” She is particularly interested in stories of people’s quotidian lives and telling history through their eyes.
Filmmaking is not the glamorous occupation that some students seem to think it is, Gilbert remarks. It takes years to put a documentary together — one or two to bury oneself in archives looking for documents, film footage, photographs, letters and another three or four to do the filming and editing. “I actually spend a lot of time in the early stages of a project writing about my ideas. Often, you have to be able to communicate your vision of a project to a wide range of audiences before you can find the resources to begin a large-scale film project,” warns Gilbert.

An independent filmmaker needs to be able to develop a project from conception through distribution, Gilbert comments, so having both creative skills and a solid liberal arts foundation gives you a great advantage. “Funding for independent films continues to decline, and the infrastructure for commercial distribution is limited for documentary productions. Nonetheless, during the past decade the Sundance Film Festival has continued to provide an important venue for independent films, and cable stations have opened up more opportunities for nonfiction works,” she notes. “Unfortunately, the nonfiction form was hijacked by reality TV, but that may be on the wane.” On a more positive note, she says that people do not watch television the way they once did, and technology and the Internet — especially venues such as YouTube — are rapidly changing ways of reaching audiences. Additionally, the development of less expensive and lightweight equipment allows greater access for individual, independent filmmakers.

Gilbert says her first documentary was about Ina Mae Best, a textile worker in North Carolina who, after 18 years, was fired when she struggled to unionize the shop. Two other short films are light-hearted shorts — one deals with women’s hair and beauty, the other explores women’s body imagery.

Her first feature-length documentary, Homecoming, aired on PBS in 2000 and chronicles a season in the life of a farmer in southern Georgia as it tells the story of the decline of the African-American farmer. The story starts in Montezuma, Georgia, where her family has lived and farmed for generations. She filmed her cousin and his family as they negotiated the seasons of planting, growing, and harvesting. Gilbert used her family’s experiences to tell the history of the small, African-American farmer in the South from the end of the Civil War, through Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, and into the 21st century. She used traditional documentary techniques of photographs, drawings, animations, interviews, and film, but she told the story from a unique perspective — her own and that of her family. We see Gilbert herself returning to her roots as a city girl who has to be taught how to “break the soil.” It is a heartwarming and also a heartrending film.

A companion book to the film was released in 2000. The book is able to delve deeper into some of the historic details, but it has the same personal touch that makes it seem more intimate and immediate to the reader than many similar documentaries.
In 2004, Gilbert produced another full-length documentary for PBS, this one with a very different focus. *Children Will Listen* follows a group of elementary school children from several public schools in D.C. as they read, interpret, design, produce and act in Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods*. Junior Elementary schools in D.C. are underfunded, Gilbert explains, and the Kennedy Center operates a program through which it works with schools to bring in artists. During the nine months that Gilbert filmed, children in seven schools worked with professional designers, directors, costumers, and actors to learn all aspects of the play. As they worked with the master artists, they created their own designs and interpretations and explained why. These children then produced the show to open the Sondheim Festival at the Kennedy Center. “Programs like this bring arts to D.C. kids,” Gilbert says, “but they also develop future audiences.”

Today Gilbert is currently toying with a number of ideas. “Toledo is a rich place for stories and history,” she remarks. “There is so much about women’s participation in social movements that is lost or never told.” She is also fascinated by the possibilities of some emerging technologies. “How can we exploit emerging technologies to tell a story?” she asks. Augmented reality would put a viewer in a particular place and allow him or her to ask questions about that place in any sequence. Virtual reality would put the viewer inside the action to experience history at a more personal level. Gilbert is researching how these and other technologies might change storytelling.

As she re-engages with her scholarship, she has promised to focus on a set of experimental films. The first will be more conceptual, she says, using traditional materials and methods. But the second and third, although connected thematically with the first, will use emerging technologies to tell stories that engage the viewer in unusual ways. Let’s hope she doesn’t make us wait too long.

Professor Charlene Gilbert is the Chair of the Department of Women’s and Gender Studies and also holds an appointment as a Prestige Professor of Theatre and Film. Her film Homecoming won several national awards. She is active in numerous professional associations, is a sought-after speaker, and has received several prestigious awards and fellowships including Harvard University’s Radcliffe Fellowship. She has also received funding support from national sponsors, including the National Endowment for the Arts and the Independent Television Service.
Holly Hey has some answers. She came to film through photography and remembers one class she took as an undergraduate photography major at Ohio University that required students to work in pairs. She teamed up with a classmate who had a Fisher-Price video camera. “These cameras were designed and marketed for children,” Hey explains. “Kids did not pick up on it, but artists did.” Video cameras of the time were all analog and produced a rather flat image with little richness or depth. “It was not aesthetically pleasing,” says Hey. The Fisher-Price toy, on the other hand, collected images on an audio cassette tape and looked more like Super 8mm film.

The two started using the camera — walking and talking about making art, pondering what made one person’s work more viable than another’s. Hey eventually edited the video into a short experimental project titled So Just Make Films? She presented this work along with a series of still images that she photographed at the same site. It was through this class assignment that her interests in both filmmaking and mixed media were born. She then took her first film production class and soon realized that working with moving images was the most effective way to creatively engage with time as subject matter. She says many of her skills in photography translated to film, but with film she had to consider another aspect to her storytelling. “Film brought in another dimension to my creative work, and it was really exciting,” she says animatedly. “Now I had new material, a new realm, another dimension to explore.”

Hey explains that her ideas derive from her life, her work, her personal and familial history. These basic building blocks lead to and open a larger, more expansive, more inclusive discussion of memory, time, culture, and gender. “Along with creating original material, I reinterpret family photos and home movies in ways a larger audience can understand,” she explains. “The personal is political. I believe I can draw from my personal history and create dialogues that speak to the cultural constructs that pervade our everyday lives. The constructs are so encompassing that we accept them as natural. I want my work to interrupt embedded belief systems. But I don’t want to directly tell the audience what the film is about. I want to engage the viewer intellectually by coding my work and providing enough signs so the viewer can decode the meaning as the movie plays out over time.”
Rat Stories has received NETA distribution. The National Education Television Association (NETA) provides content for all PBS affiliates in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. The unconventional documentary has already aired on WSBE, Rhode Island PBS, and will air on WGTE Public Media Toledo. Hey also has commitments from KCTS 9 Seattle, WA. and OBP, Oregon Public Broadcasting. Rat Stories received an honorable mention in the Documentary Shorts category at the Los Angeles Art House Film Festival last summer and was screened at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, Pittsburgh, PA. in October, 2011.

Hey’s latest movie Rat Stories is a documentary, but of a somewhat different stripe from those we are generally familiar with. In Rat Stories, she isolates within each story certain documentary techniques like director participant, pan and scan, and archival footage. The segments are then connected by an animation that combines illustrated rats moving across a conflicted landscape where nature collides with man-made objects. As the rats move from location to location, a biologist introduces each new story by explaining physical and social characteristics of rats.

Hey says she initially strung the stories together with only the expert scientist presenting the facts, but it did not “work.” “Structure is everything,” Hey opines, “it is like composing music or building a house. You need something to hang the story on.” So she reworked, edited, and rethought. She then created a successful arrangement where each individual rat story is connected by the common structuring devices: the animated rats, the scientist’s voice-over, and a very specific sound pattern. “These are the codes that let the viewer know the movie is about to shift into another story.”

Ultimately Rat Stories is a humanities study where rats are used as vehicles to tell stories about people. Hey counters stereotypes and dispels misconceptions about rats to make visible the connections between rat activity and humanity. Exposing these connections makes the viewer think about embedded systems like economic class, socialized behavior, and fringe cultures.

Another of Hey’s videos, The Bionic Dog of Ohio, uses original video material, still photographs, and home movies in a series of vignettes or short stories about her childhood. Each story, although personal in nature, explores themes associated with gender identity and its cultural construction. Hey reinterprets the material in ways a larger audience can appreciate by using color, pop-culture iconography, music, and even mathematics. Much like a painter explores different types of surfaces, Hey engages with different formats of moving images and examines how image texture creates meaning and mood. Currently, she is cutting together digital videotape with Regular 8mm and Super 8mm film that has been transcoded into high-definition data for her work-in-progress, The Dum Dum capital of the world. This technique yields a visual and conceptual depth not otherwise attainable. “It is fun,” she says, “to play with different media, different techniques, and figure out how to tell a story that engages an audience.”

Hey’s films may not be coming to a major commercial theater near you in the next couple of years, but watch for them at the local art cinema and on PBS. You will be surprised, amazed, and challenged.
A Few Good Women

French literature, film, feminism, women’s studies—connections. Ruth Hottell is constantly on the lookout for connections between French literature and other topics. But as a student of French culture, she has gravitated to film. “There is no better way of showing culture than by film. The images are there,” she remarks.

Because of her love for both French and classic movies, Hottell initially was interested in the “fantastic,” loosely defined as an occurrence that creates confusion about its reality—think Hitchcock’s Vertigo. As she delved deeper into these tales, she began to analyze the underlying structure and discovered that women were generally treated as objects and had largely stereotyped roles—the temptress, the perfect housewife, the poor visitor, the wicked or evil one, the saint.

Trained as a structuralist, Hottell took film courses to learn the intricacies of creating film so that she could then dissect it with the practitioner’s expertise, peeling the different layers apart from the varying perspectives of language, grammar, scenery, costume, storyline. Once she has taken the building blocks apart, she can ask, “Now what do I have?” This is what Hottell calls engaged criticism, which involves breaking the text apart and looking for something: How does the film look at people? Does it “foreground” minor characters?

Using her background, training and personal interests, Hottell began looking at film through the lens of feminism and French post-colonialism. How does film portray women and culture and how does that portrayal change over time?
Women filmmakers are outside the mainstream of the dominant male culture, Hottell explains. As the “other,” they push to change the status quo. She finds that these women tend to treat all characters more equally. “Minor characters are more complex than they often are in men’s work,” she says, “and without regard to whether the character is male or female.”

Women also articulate the subject differently, Hottell continues. She has examined the work of several female francophone filmmakers, paying particular attention to Agnes Varda, who herself said that she films like a woman because she is a woman. Hottell thus set out to explore more deeply what it means to “film like a woman.” Along the way, she is also looking to see the effects of French colonialism on the work of these women and whether or not colonialism has a continuing impact.

“Mainstream narrative works on all levels to present the white male perspective as the norm,” Hottell comments. Theorist, educator and scholar bell hooks (yes, her name is spelled in all lowercase) once said, “Any artist whose politics lead him or her to oppose imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, white supremacy, and the everyday racism that abounds in all our lives would endeavor to create images that do not perpetuate and sustain domination and exploitation.” Hottell notes, “To seek alternatives to repressive representation, one must first understand how mainstream cinema manipulates images.” She says that other feminist film theorists have noted the need to expose the “glossiness of the finished text, the attractive trappings of how things are presented, and the mask of what is being said along with its ideology.” Only then, Hottell says, can critics and filmmakers seek expression of the “other’s” discourse in film.
Several Francophone filmmakers have set out to answer their own critical voices, but in doing so have “reinvented narrative pleasure in such a way as to include what the mainstream would exclude.” Artists and scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Marguerite Duras and Chantal Akerman have taken different approaches, but all have given voice to the gendered, racial and ethnic “other.”

Hottell says that Agnes Varda “provides concrete examples and models that are strong practical applications of the concept of inclusive spectatorship.” In Le Bonheur, Varda “visually and narratively reformulates romantic paradigms to insert the gendered presence.” In fact, Hottell adds, “Le Bonheur is a subtle satire that exposes the hypocrisy of the system.” Ironically, Hottell comments that many critics did not understand the subtlety of the film and even denounced what they considered its acceptance of the patriarchal model. Despite these criticisms, Hottell says they did generally realize that the film was not a simple fiction film but intended instead to elicit audience reaction and draw them into the cinematic world.

As her art developed, Varda produced L’Une chante, l’autre pas a few years later. Hottell describes that film as “a fictional world in which women — and their friends, communities, problems and joys — become the central focus of the narrative.” Women’s stories permeate the entire film; Varda herself even enters it as the voice-over in the prologue. The film highlights two women, who remain very close despite their differences. Hottell says that the differences—indicated in the title of the film: one sings while the other does not—are a contradiction that is not one. “Varda’s cinécriture embraces difference and evinces an understanding of contradictions between self and other,” she says.

One critic has noted that Varda was more interested in questions than answers. Hottell remarks, “Applying Varda’s questions to films that pinpoint issues of race, ethnicity and class could be a way to meet the need for discussion of various kinds of marginalization. Thus can film unite issues of race, class and gender in cooperative, engaged practices.”

Ruth Hottell, professor of French and chair of the Department of Foreign Languages, holds a Ph.D. in expanded French studies from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The author of numerous articles on a variety of topics within French studies, she has taught and conducted research at The University of Toledo since 1988. Hottell has earned an international reputation, particularly within French film studies and Francophone women filmmakers; her scholarly standing has been enhanced further in the last few years by the publication of three highly-acclaimed books.
History is the interpretation of the past as much as it is the past “as it really happened.” In United States history, the meaning of the American Revolution has been hotly contested, because it is the story of our national origins. For her dissertation research, Cynthia Ingham decided to tackle that broad question by focusing on how Virginians in the period during and after the Revolutionary War understood the concept of liberty.

What she discovered was that, although today people perceive the meaning of liberty in terms of politics, in the 18th century many people understood liberty through the lens and experience of religion. This was especially true in Virginia, Ingham explains, where the established Church of England had restricted and even persecuted dissenters in the decade before the Revolution.

Consequently, in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, Virginians celebrated what to them was an amazing commitment to tolerance — people who were Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Methodists would be able to coexist in harmony while still pursuing their separate beliefs. For the first time the state was not dictating behavior — religious or otherwise — yet the result was not chaos but community. And, Ingham notes, for a brief time the hand of tolerance was even extended to African-Americans, whose “liberty” to receive the Gospel on equal terms was rarely disputed. While history textbooks usually focus on the political events of the decade, which culminated in the emergence of parties, Ingham’s research suggested that many in that generation may have grappled with the meaning of liberty in the new (and revolutionary) experience of religious freedom.

One of the philosophical issues of Ingham’s scholarship is how historians treat the limitations of human action. Good intentions are often dismissed if dramatic social change does not occur or if the good intentions are revealed in hindsight as seriously flawed. Yet, in a real sense, all that a moral person can do is act on “best intentions.”
Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) was profoundly convinced of the importance of individual freedom of religion and freedom from religion. He felt that this was the best guarantee that the religious intolerance and bloodshed seen in many European countries would not be exported to America.

A key part of the act, Section II reads: “Be it enacted by the General Assembly, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.”

Elsewhere, the act reads: “...our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions...”

Religious freedom is often called the “first freedom.”

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The Virginia Act For Establishing Religious Freedom
Thomas Jefferson, 1786

An Act to authorize the election of...
As her scholarship expanded, she began to pursue the study of religion in the West — which led her into the exploration of Native American religion. “Religion in the West,” she says, “is not the story of the frontier in a religious key; it is the meeting of two world views, native and nonnative, that are not merely different but, in many ways, opposites. The challenge is to try to understand those worlds on their own terms, not through the distorted perspective of the present.”

The Native American concept of time and place was a layered one, Ingham explains, that collapsed sacred past into present reality. Life was a series of cycles based on the rhythms of nature and sacred myths. European settlers brought a concept of linear time moving from birth to death (or the Christian idea of conquering death). Europeans also viewed “place” as boundaries and possession. In contrast, the native view of place was flexible but ultimately resided in how the sacred inhabited a particular site. Given these very different perspectives, conflict would seem inevitable. Yet such a judgment allows little room for understanding the contingency of the past.

Throughout the 19th century, Christian missionaries always envisioned themselves as the ones who truly cared about the welfare of the native peoples. In the early decades, perhaps when racial categories of “otherness” were still fairly flexible, it was indeed the missionaries and interdenominational boards that fought to prevent the removal of the southeastern Indian peoples. “They may not have done it for 21st century reasons,” Ingham comments, “but their advocacy is still a story that needs to be told.”
This is especially true, she says, given the change that occurred by the end of the century — when the religiously motivated “Friends of the Indians” enlisted the help of the federal government to “save” the Indians by destroying their culture. What happened to encourage such a dramatic turnabout? In the late nineteenth century, Americanism, or hypernationalism, became the mood of the age. The rather simplistic idea that our nation — and its culture — was the best contributed to the dehumanization of the “Other,” explains Ingham. What was tested on the Indians became foreign policy for other “dependent peoples” as the United States moved outward into imperial adventures at the turn of the century. The “good intentions” of reformers, when coupled with state power and a propensity to base one’s identity on the negation of another, turned into a tragedy of epic proportions.

“History has a perspective of layering,” Ingham says, “and also a unique capacity for allowing us to step out of the center and subject our views to critical analysis. When we do that, we become able to empathize with the differences we see in others and accept them.

One way of thinking about it is to view history as a kaleidoscope. Looking through the kaleidoscope is one way to view the world, but turn the kaleidoscope and you get a different pattern and greater understanding.”
When he was working on his dissertation, Lingan took a course in avant-garde theater. It struck him that many of these plays contained images of the occult — Kabbalah, pentagrams, tree of life, crystals. Then he found that several playwrights were involved in the new spiritual currents and various forms of occultism. "Were the leaders of the new spiritual movements interested in theater?" he asked. Lending support to his ideas was the explosion of avant garde theater that occurred concurrently with the Occult Revival that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Between 1880 and World War II, several groups formed that were hypercritical of traditional religion but at the same time horrified by the spiritual skepticism promoted by the rise of the scientific method that accepted only what could be seen and proven. They felt the need for a spiritual side of life and created new religions that drew largely from the occult tradition but included elements of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and other religious traditions. The basic assumption was that we are at once both a physical and a spiritual incarnation of the divine, and religion was the tool to measure the truth of reality, Lingan comments.

During this occult revival, Lingan explains, new dramatic forms developed. "This was important to adherents of several occult movements — they saw it as a way of achieving spiritual enlightenment," he notes. "Theater became the bridge between religious orthodoxy on one side and science on the other." Each group used theater to convey its own individualistic world view to followers and prospective followers. And because it was important to them to demonstrate an ancient heritage, they incorporated elements of Greek and Roman theater and mythology into stage productions, as well as into belief systems, and reinterpreted traditional theater in light of their particular religious views.

"We can't tell what the motivations were," Lingan notes. "Did they even really believe what they promoted? All we have to go on is how much of their lives they devoted to their ideas and how well they themselves followed their own teachings." Some groups did not want to be called religious, even though that was the function they served. "These are also groups whose art has been treated rather meanly," Lingan adds, "or even ignored."

One of the earliest of these occult revivalists was Katherine Tingley, who worked around the turn of the 20th century. She promoted a belief system called theosophy that believed divine knowledge came from a conscious realization of the divine principle of life. She used theater to portray an idealized vision of herself as a spiritual leader — in particular through The Wisdom of Hypatia. (Hypatia was a Roman mathematician and philosopher who was killed by early Christians.) Moving from New York to California, she created the Lomaland community and built a Greek theater for performances, often using interpretations of Shakespearean or Greek plays to promote her beliefs.

Perhaps the most famous of the modern occultists was Rudolf Steiner, who was active in the early 1900s. Because Steiner's organization was not welcomed by the civic and clerical authorities of Munich, he was compelled to move to Switzerland to build his first (wooden) theater, called the "Goetheanum," which was burned by an arsonist on December 31, 1922. The second Goetheanum, which was an Art Deco theatre made of fireproof concrete, staged Steiner's plays. Steiner borrowed from religions, science, and philosophy to synthesize a
San Diego, California amphitheatre, built in 1901
Aleister Crowley, an occultist and leader of several secret societies, established a religion called thelema (Greek for “will”). “His goal was to free people from restrictive forms of Christianity — and other modes of social restriction,” Lingan says, “and he wrote several plays with this theme.” He believed people must get in touch with the divine principle of life and learn to live in accordance with that principle by practicing ceremonial magic.

Lingan adds that Crowley’s reputation suffered because of his shocking image and behavior: he was a drug user, incorporated drugs (at that time legal) into some of his public rituals, and often referred to himself as the Beast 666. One of his most famous — or infamous — theatrical productions was the Rite of Artemis, during which he passed out a beverage containing opiates to the audience. (He did warn the audience in advance about the contents of the bowl.)

Lingan notes that commentators from ancient Greece and Egypt perceived theater and religion as inseparable, connected cultural institutions. “Theatre and religion are culturally related and have a dynamic relationship. By understanding religion, we learn more about both religion and theater. Theater itself has a quality that borders on religiousness: to this day it resembles the myth of Dionysus in which he is dismembered and then reconstructed, just as a show comes together from distinct parts and then is torn down, only to reappear somewhere else.”

Ed Lingan is an assistant professor of theater whose scholarship focuses on the intersection of theater and religion. He is the founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Performance and Spirituality and editor of the institute’s online journal. Before coming to The University of Toledo, Lingan acted, directed, and wrote plays that were produced in theatres in New York, NY, and Brooklyn, NY. Lingan served as the managing director of Brooklyn’s One Arm Red, as the production and literary dramaturg for the Looking Glass Theatre in New York City, and as the Assistant to the Director of Programs at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center. He has a PhD in theatre studies from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.
In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Adam and an angel try to describe to each other the landscape each is familiar with — for Adam, that landscape is Eden; for the angel, it is heaven. “Neither understands the other,” says Andrew Mattison, “because of the difficulty in describing to another person something that is completely unfamiliar. This is the same problem that exists between the Renaissance poets of the 16th and 17th centuries and the modern reader.”

“Each individual brings something different to a poem”

If a poet like Donne or Milton describes something, Mattison wants to understand the relationship between the image in the reader’s mind and the image in the poet’s mind. “We tend to assume that poets want to control what is going on in our heads,” he says, “but I think poets make use of the distance between readers and the thing being described to make a better case for their own poems.” These Renaissance poets had been reading poems written long ago. They were aware that the problem inherent in reading very ancient poetry was not just a matter of distance in time but a combination of factors that included familiarity.

“Each individual brings something different to a poem,” Mattison explains. He asks how a poet anticipates that individuality. Returning to the example of *Paradise Lost*, Mattison says that the characters spend a lot of time looking at landscape and making sense of it. Milton presents it as something that is
“... her poetry represents the rhythms of traditional African-American songs and even some that came out of the streets.”
And mend my rhyme.

They and my mind may chime,
That so thy favors granting my request,
Defer no time;
O cheer and tune my heartless breast,
That so thy favors granting my request,
And mend my rhyme.

So God hears his prayer and suddenly his poem rhymes. Herbert also makes use of the fiction of tuning a musical instrument, suggesting that harmony and rhyme are the same, even though we know they are not. The poet appears to say that poetry is like music, but it is not. “Here Herbert is taking a historical relationship and creating a rather beautiful fiction, exaggerating reality to make a point,” Mattison concludes.

In the late 16th century, Chaucer was beginning to be thought of as the great English poet. The Renaissance poets were interested in the process of how to become recognized as a great poet and follow in Chaucer’s footsteps. These poets were consciously writing work that they intended to be read far in the future, Mattison notes, and thought that if Chaucer could become great, why couldn’t they? At the same time, he says, they were very anxious, thinking that the era of great literature was past and they were too late. They still had ambition but were not sure it was possible.

Despite their fears of oblivion, the Renaissance English poets talked about each other. They considered the poem as a kind of monument that can function as a memorial and have power after death. Milton wrote a poem about Shakespeare expressing the belief that we create a monument to the poet by simply reading his work — we become the sepulchre. Only 10 years after Shakespeare’s death, Milton was already considering the long-term effect of his work. Mattison says the story gets somewhat complicated when we consider Shakespeare, who had expressed the fantasy of a poem lasting forever, using the metaphor of the poem preserving his beloved. “But I’m not sure he really believed that,” comments Mattison, “because Shakespeare did not publish any of his poems.”

Part of the problem in reading the Renaissance poets today is that the Romantics were so forceful in claiming what poetry was and should be like, Mattison says. Those ideas are still strong; we need to be able to see a poem on its own terms. “Additionally, how do we tell if a poem is good?” he asks. “The poets we like are ones that tend to speak to our sensibilities today. Do we mean good by our standards or good by the standards of the era in which a poem was written?” Poems were often circulated in manuscript form among friends and “good readers.” And critics were not always right.

Like all questing scholars, Mattison ends with a question: “If you are going to have a debate about how good a poet is, how do you have that debate?”

Andrew Mattison is an associate professor of English. He teaches Shakespeare, Milton, and other Renaissance writers. His scholarship focuses on Renaissance poetry and poetics, relationships between poetry and music, and the interpretation of visual images. He has written a major scholarly book, Milton’s Uncertain Eden: Understanding Place in Paradise Lost (Routledge, 2007), and his articles have appeared in Milton Quarterly, Criticism, Modern Philology, and Spenser Studies. He is also a pianist with particular interests in Liszt and Schoenberg. Mattison has a PhD from Brandeis University.
Who’s in YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

Where do members of different ethnic and racial groups choose to settle and where do they buy land and houses when they become mobile and middle class? Is upward mobility inevitably linked to ethnic and racial discord and conflict?
Although he started out looking at immigration and ethnic history, Todd Michney became interested in black neighborhoods on the urban periphery. Most historians have focused on large, segregated inner city neighborhoods where a majority of the black population lived before World War II, but Michney takes a different approach. He noticed that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe — mostly Italians and Jews — interacted with African-Americans, settling in many of the same neighborhoods in outlying areas. “There didn’t seem to be nearly as antagonistic a pattern of race relations that others had identified,” he said and wondered what was going on.

The turn of the 20th century and into the 40s saw a growing black middle class and the beginnings of the suburban dream. African-Americans who were upwardly mobile sought a higher quality of life and better living conditions. They steadily started moving out of inner city areas. “Even working class individuals went to the periphery to buy land cheaper and build homes — sometimes room by room,” Michney says. “I felt I started to uncover a whole world that didn’t fit.”

Upon examining residential patterns of the 50s and 60s, Michney says he found that all-white, middle-class ethnic neighborhoods of Cleveland, Ohio were “threatened” not so much by African-Americans moving in as by ethnic residents moving out. As Jewish and Italian residents achieved higher economic status and

Ironically, then, fears of losing one’s investment led white residents ultimately to move away, even in those instances when their encounters with incoming African American residents had been benign.

moved to outlying suburbs, their departure provided the opportunity for middle class African-Americans to improve their living conditions by moving into vacated properties. While there was some racial tension and isolated conflicts relating especially to swimming pool access, whites in these areas moved away much
more slowly than has been recognized and some developed friendly relations with their new black neighbors in the meantime. But as whites continued to move further and further out, African Americans, sharing the same aspirations, followed suit.

During this later period, Michney says that intraracial conflicts arose over maintaining a reasonable quality of life in those neighborhoods that were largely African-American. As whites moved out and less affluent blacks moved in, conflicts developed over housing upkeep, how available liquor should be, overcrowding, schools, and commerce. “One really interesting pattern I am not sure I can explain is the scapegoating of southern black migrants,” Michney adds. Even though most African-Americans suburbanites were only one or two generations removed from the South, they started to place blame, saying that rural southerners did not know how to live in an urban setting. “This occurred despite the fact that most of the new black residents came from urban areas and had jobs and stable families,” notes Michney.

“We have to rethink our assumptions about how residential patterns were shaped in the early 20th century,” says Michney. The claim was that African-Americans moving into an area would cause property values to decline; they would bring in crime; they would not keep up their property. But from the perspective of the African-Americans, they were seeking good housing and good living standards — all the same goals as the white residents. “Whites did not give the African-Americans a chance in the 50s to see how they would really fit in,” Michney comments. Ironically, then, fears of losing one’s investment led white residents ultimately to move away, even in those instances when their encounters with incoming African American residents had been benign.

In the early 20th century, African-American Clevelanders generally lived in compact areas but in close proximity to Czech, Italian and Jewish immigrants. Their children all went to the same schools. Michney says that most of the black and white former residents he interviewed talked about friendly neighborly exchange, even though historians have emphasized that immigrants, who were not initially viewed as white, basically had to adopt an anti-African-American attitude to be accepted by the larger white population.

What historians have often seen as the problem and how indigenous residents assessed the situation were not the same, Michney explains. A shrinking industrial base in cities like Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit created a competition for jobs and economic insecurity made it harder for people to maintain their housing stock. Banks were less likely to lend to blacks and shopping malls moved further out. That is an important part of the story but not how residents typically imagined their situation, he says. Local residents were concerned with maintaining the livability of the neighborhoods — by cutting off the easy source of liquor, starting their own local businesses, and keeping money in the community.

The Community Council movement, which tried to bring together people from different backgrounds starting in the 40s, has received little press, Michney notes. These councils were somewhat successful, noting that Jews were more open to the idea, Catholics less so. “Jews were more willing to participate in the dialogue, but since they tended to be more upwardly mobile they often moved away sooner,” he says. Catholics on the other hand were less open and typically sent their children to parochial schools, although Michney found some of these desegregated before the 60s. Several observers actually noted that desegregation tended to alleviate racial tensions, especially between Italians and blacks. “In fact,” Michney states, “there was often more tension between the various white ethnic groups than between blacks and whites.”

“Racial conflicts are less now,” Michney says, “but we still see some of the same sort of reasoning on when and where to move. Today the African-American community remains split with the middle class doing quite well up until this last recession. Working class and poor blacks are increasingly alienated with some as frustrated as in the 60s. Ancestry is not destiny, but there is still a glimmer of those patterns.”

Todd Michney is an assistant professor of history. He received his doctorate from the University of Minnesota. He specializes in African-American history, urban history, race, ethnicity and labor. His upcoming book, Changing Neighborhoods: Black Upward Mobility in 20th-Century Cleveland, is a citywide study of the city’s black middle class. He anticipates using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to represent statistical data and settlement patterns in strikingly new and innovative ways.

Todd Michney
Life Revealed

“Now Art, used collectively, for painting, sculpture, architecture and music, is the mediator between, and reconciler of, nature and man.”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
Barbara Miner started in ceramics, making useful, quotidian pots and ran her own small business for several years. She realized, however, that this exercise was limiting — she needed to be able to say something she felt was important with her art and could not in that format. Then she went to Sweden with her husband (who had a Fulbright Scholarship). “The landscape in Sweden was pristine,” Miner comments. “And Sweden’s moratorium on building nuclear power plants helped define the relationships between the environment, human activity and the long-term impact of that activity. It was incredibly appealing.”

Returning to the U.S., Miner determined to get out of gallery spaces and into the open air with her art. She had worked in environmental themes with clay, but mostly dealt with specific objects. Now she wanted to create something larger — something that spoke to our relationship with landscape — to “create an environment within an environment.”

Early in her experiments with environmental art, Miner did a fellowship at an artists’ colony in New York. The park itself was built on a brownfields site that had been capped with a thick clay barrier two feet under the surface. She created a school of brightly colored wooden squid on poles. “The artists brought life back to a spot that wasn’t alive. It was incongruous to think about, the dichotomy of dead earth and living art,” Miner says. The experience helped clarify what she wanted to do.

Other installations followed, including wax covered, red cloth “lily pads” released into a pond and allowed to float freely among the real lily pads. She once covered a piece of wood in gold leaf, thus elevating something discarded to something very costly and valuable. Her wall of ammonites represents the timeline of life, but to create the background she experimented by using her hands to spread a mixture of latex paint and graphite directly on the wall, like a cave painting. And for a time her work was a reflection on people who are precious to her — such as the organza bags holding locks of her daughter’s hair and tied with red thread that represent a series of discrete gifts to her daughter. Another piece uses stones and X-rays of her mother’s hand; the different layers of the piece are akin to the idea of life being layered. “I love the fact that I’m the tool that builds these things,” she exclaims.

The “ponds project,” what will undoubtedly be a long-term work, is Miner’s latest effort. Her plan is to have the artwork be visible in the most public way — along I-75 — but the idea had its birth in a very private way. When Miner and her husband purchased 10 acres of land with a pond, they decided not to treat the pond water to prevent algal growth. Rather they left it alone and even threw branches into one section to provide spawning ground for fish and habitat for toads and salamanders. One day she saw a green heron alight, and then more green herons. She also elected to allow most of the property to remain natural prairie, only mowing a small area near the house. “Now we have eastern kingbirds coming to dine,” she exclaims. Then she started noticing what was happening — or what was not happening — in the neighbor’s pond. She thought, “If people could see the difference, they might make different choices.” One neighborhood child commented that her parents’ pond was “so boring” — it was regularly treated with chemicals to keep the algae down. “If you cut down trees, or mow, or use chemicals, you don’t get to see these marvelous things,” Miner explains.

“When you follow what interests you, and if you are open to potential side roads, you may find something ultimately appealing.”

Thus came the idea of putting installations in, above or next to ponds along I-75 between Bowling Green and Toledo. The ponds are visible from the interstate, Miner notes, but she has had to spend hours poring over county land records to find the landowners and more hours trying to contact them to get permission for an installation on their property. She isn’t sure yet what the works will be, but I can see these things in my mind,” Miner states. Her sketchbooks also help. She says she keeps a sketchbook next to her bed. She draws and writes and carries on a conversation with herself via the comments in her sketchbooks, asking herself questions about materials, position, colors. She keeps them and can go back to resurrect bits and pieces of earlier ideas. Every idea doesn’t work, Miner explains, so failure and repetition, patience and perseverance are part of the process.

One thing that Miner says sustains her as an artist, teacher and parent is imparting not just pure knowledge, but the understanding of personal things that are important; it is giving voice to what she loves and enjoys. Miner sums it all up when she says, “It is the astonishing joy of being able to show someone something that is so dear to me, and have them really get it.”
For this pond installation, Miner collected discarded saplings, painted them red and gathered dry grasses and painted them gold. The red was inspired by the fields of red poppies, the yellow by the fields of rapeseed grown for its oil.

The tiny notebooks contain rules, such as don’t chew with your mouth open, cross your legs at the ankles, don’t lie, stand up straight, etc. Miner’s daughter Grace was about 15 at the time. Miner says she was prickly (the pins); she was sick of rules; she was fragile and beautiful, like pearls; she was hard as nails; she was (and is) a voracious reader. “Somehow all of those things came together in this piece. I didn’t set out to do any of that with the work — it just pulled itself together.”

These floating hydroponic gardens in the shallow pond at the Toledo Botanical Gardens were inspired by Aztec gardening, done on floating reed mats called chinampas. Miner says hers produced a considerable amount of vegetable produce and flowers.
“When I speak here of truth, assuredly I refer first to scientific truth; but I also mean moral truth...both attract us and flee from us; they are never fixed: when we think to have reached them, we find that we have still to advance, and he who pursues them is condemned never to know repose.”
— Henri Poincaré, *The Value of Science*

Made-up monsters, mathematical models, missing links — these things have something in common, says Madeline Muntersbjorn, who studies how deliberate fictions teach us true things we need to know about the real world. “My favorite Latin verb is ‘monstrare,’ which means to show or make evident, from which both ‘demonstrations’ and ‘monsters’ descend,” she says. “Deliberate fictions, from formal algorithms to flights of fancy, always have ancestors. Astronomy descended from astrology just as Buffy the Vampire Slayer is the great-great-granddaughter of Beowulf,” Muntersbjorn remarks.
“The sciences are just one part of the whole of reality,” Muntersbjorn remarks. “When we take a long philosophical view of the relation between science and reality, we see that science gives us unprecedented power but could never answer all the questions we could ask... ”
All science builds on what went before; no one ever starts from scratch. “What we know about the world resembles evolved species in that human knowledge is neither inert nor eternal but comes into being gradually over time.” One thing she would challenge is the belief that science is concerned with truth, whereas everything else is made up and subjective. “Science is a search for truth — but this search depends on deliberate fictions more than people realize,” she says.

“When we develop scientific models, we begin with our linguistic legacy,” Muntersbjorn says. “One way of learning to say new things is to postulate fantastic things: Suppose there was a frictionless surface — would the ball keep rolling? What if the ground beneath our feet actually travels around the sun? Suppose atoms were like tiny solar systems. Suppose the heart is like an air bellows or water pump.”

What can seem like an obvious fact to people today usually took a long time to grow and develop into received wisdom. William Harvey (1578-1657) was able to imagine the valves in the heart as a kind of pump in part because engineers of his day were creating systems to remove water from city streets. Harvey was also inspired by Aristotle’s idea of perfect circular motion. “Aristotle’s metaphysics might be dismissed as nonsense,” Muntersbjorn says, “but this abstract ideal helped Harvey see the connection between a mechanical artifact and the circulation of the blood in the body.” Muntersbjorn says she is interested in how material culture and metaphysics influence science: “The growth of science is both a top-down and a bottom-up process,” she says.

Much of her research is in the history of mathematics with an emphasis on how people communicate mathematical ideas. “We now think that humans are born with an intuitive but limited sense of number,” Muntersbjorn remarks. “How do we get from an instinctive recognition of one, two, few and many, the only cross-cultural universals, to the space shuttle?”

Writing things down gives us the power to cultivate our native mathematical skills. The development of algebraic notation in the 17th century allowed for unprecedented abstraction. “It doesn’t matter if we talk about balls rolling down an inclined plane or the movement of planets: the math is the same. Algebraic notation makes abstract relationships implicit in the world explicit.” Explicit representations of these relations made previously unimaginable artifacts and applications possible.

In addition to the history of science, Muntersbjorn also studies “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” Her interest in fantasy is akin to her interest in science, namely how deliberate fictions make implicit relations explicit. “Monsters are important metaphors for social evils that are hard to define in literal terms, like injustice or tyranny. Superhero stories dare us to imagine that these demons can be defeated. We can battle them and win!”

Currently, Muntersbjorn is studying the philosophical writings of Henri Poincaré (1854-1912). Poincaré understood each of the sciences as a particular point of view that seeks to articulate everything in its own terms. “From a scientific perspective there is nothing real that cannot be studied: ethics, consciousness, aesthetics — there is no aspect of experience that could not be the object of a scientific inquiry.” But she cautions against the naïve presumption that, for this reason, the sciences can collectively account for all of nature. “The sciences are just one part of the whole of reality,” she remarks. “When we take a long philosophical view of the relation between science and reality, we see that science gives us unprecedented power but could never answer all the questions we could ask — if only because answers to one question, if they are any good, raise more questions. Further, the question, ‘why should we value science?’ is not a simple scientific question.”

Some people distrust science on the grounds that scientists are biased, driven by selfish or short-sighted motives. Muntersbjorn counters that concept: “Just because individual scientists are fallible, it does not follow that the collaborative activity of science as a whole is unreliable. Science is multifaceted, variable, and complex. By studying the history of science, we learn to see science as an important part of our intellectual legacy as human beings, an epic search for truth, wherein our ignorance grows at an even faster rate than our knowledge.”

RESEARCHER

Madeline Muntersbjorn

**Madeline Muntersbjorn studies the history of science as well as “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” which she says has spawned more academic scholarship than any other television program. She is currently writing a book, Reality and Possibility: On the Philosophy of Henri Poincaré.**

WITH MADELINE MUNTERSBJORN
All cultures are informed by oral traditions that extend centuries into the past. How writers construct characters who extend and reinvent those traditions is what intrigues Carmen Phelps. Moreover, she notes that some West African ancestral traditions are still being played out in contemporary literature. In her work she asks how tradition informs concepts of self and community within the African diaspora.
In particular, the current work of many authors of African descent embodies religious and spiritual ideals that counter the narrative of European imperialism and are relevant to a history of resistance struggles in the New World, Phelps explains. “Literature is a form of cultural expression as well as resistance,” Phelps comments, “and is connected to and indeed parallels trends in other forms of expression and performance.”

The legacies and traditions of people of African descent inform their identities, Phelps notes. How African-Americans define themselves continues to reflect ancestral patterns. More immediately, she says, gender performance and sexual expression are ways of articulating broader cultural ideals. Gender and sex also inform contemporary literature while tradition informs discussion of gender, self and community. Phelps is interested in how writers invoke gender in constructing characters, experiences and communities — how these characters see themselves in relation to norms or anomalies.

“In feminist, gender, sexuality, and modern cultural studies, we tend to think of gender and sexuality as the characteristics that distinguish people from one another,” Phelps says. “Gender identity can defy certain norms. But I think individual gender performances are ultimately expressions of aspirations of belonging.”

Cultural patterns are enacted in various ways. Writers of African descent often engage gender as a way of reinforcing rather than disrupting the concepts of belonging and community, Phelps continues. For example, Jackie Kay, a black British poet and novelist, wrote about a biracial, transgender jazz musician named Joss Moody in Trumpet. When he dies, the other characters discover that biologically Moody was a female. The plot of the novel is then woven from the perspectives of those who had known him. Kay explored the ways in which the characters’ knowledge of Moody’s sexual and biological status impact their memories of him and how Moody’s choice to live as a transgender person reflects his desire to belong. “Even his music recalls the black American jazz aesthetic, which is a complex community-oriented paradigm that invokes and encourages further community and cultural ideals as related to the culture of the African diaspora,” Phelps says.

Another writer, poet June Jordan, a bisexual Jamaican woman of African descent, wrote in the interest of social justice. “She viewed freedom struggles as related to human social struggles and saw herself as a voice for marginalized communities,” Phelps adds. “Her hero was Phillis Wheatley, an 18th century indentured black servant who wrote poetry that today we consider as representative of personhood and nationhood.” Phelps explains that Jordan talked about how miraculous it was that Wheatley was capable of producing such poetry. In her efforts to forge a more inclusive approach to fighting oppression and creating community, Jordan challenged feminist and black nationalist ideals as culturally restrictive and exclusive. “As a bisexual black woman, Jordan felt alienated by lesbian feminist struggles as well as pathologically heterosexual black nationalist struggles,” Phelps notes.

“Phillis Wheatley launched an African-American tradition and an African-American women’s tradition,” reflects Phelps. “Her expression of the African diaspora through art is one reason Jordan felt Wheatley was so important.” Additionally, she remarks, Jordan recognized a cultural connection to Wheatley as a black woman poet. “These are two black women bound by ideas of belonging within the broader African diaspora; and you can read this connection in their work.”

The late 20th century artist Jean Michel Basquiat was well known in the 1980s as a protégé and possible lover of Andy Warhol, Phelps says. His work embodied clear references to Afrocentric — as well as Puerto Rican and American — ideals. “Basquiat is fascinating to me because he is not discussed as much as he could be in terms of black nationalism.” She explains that Basquiat was an ideologically elusive and enigmatic figure. Because he was sexually fluid, he did not fit the standard idea of black masculinity. “I read his work as supremely nationalistic within the African diaspora, even though he remains a sexually complicated figure. His work incorporates traditional ideals of belonging, nationhood and citizenship relative to the African diaspora, and gender fluidity enhances these ideas.”

Phelps says she is fascinated by how people of African descent continue to imagine themselves as part of a broader transnational community. “These writers and artists represent the ability that we as black people have to reinvent ourselves as we have continuously embody and engage the spiritual aspects of politics and a collective sense of belonging.” Phelps says. Writing, music, performance, art — all become expressions of our ability to improvise, be innovative and inspire inclusivity.”
In the late 20th century, there was an outpouring of art related to the AIDS epidemic. One of those artists was David Wojnarowicz, a New York-based artist who tested positive for HIV in late 1987 and died of AIDS-related illness in 1992.

During the process of cataloguing Wojnarowicz’s estate after his death, Mysoon Rizk became interested in the artist’s history and the many facets of his art. “He was particularly fascinated by animals in nature,” Rizk says, “but he also used animal images to talk about dehumanization and how the larger society isolates or sacrifices members of subcultures considered dirty, unhealthy, or undesirable.” She notes that Wojnarowicz was also a writer, photographer, and social activist.

Wojnarowicz grew up in a dysfunctional family (his father was a violent alcoholic) and would escape by going into the woods. He loved the denizens of the forest — frogs, snakes, turtles — and had many books about these animals. He started running away from home when he was only 9. In his late teens, he began traveling widely, even spending time in France where his sister lived. “Although he started off as a writer and photographer, he was drawn to painting and sculpture. The first of his images appeared between 1975 and 1978,” Rizk notes, “and expressively channeled the experience of marginalization. He is intimately familiar with being marginalized as both a homosexual and a street person.”
Wojnarowicz received coverage for his art through the early 80s but disappears by 1986. “In 1987 he is suddenly in the vanguard, receiving attention once again as an important artist.” But Rizk adds, “also undoubtedly because of his activism and involvement in the AIDS crisis.” His activism takes on a different hue when he becomes embroiled in controversies with the National Endowment for the Arts and then determines not to allow the American Family Association (AFA) to run roughshod over him and his art.

To understand the controversies in which he was a principal, we need to understand some of Wojnarowicz’s history, explains Rizk. He cared for the artist Peter Hujar for two years before Hujar died of AIDS, willing Wojnarowicz the lease on his apartment. When the landlord wanted to evict Wojnarowicz, he fought and won important rights for tenants, affirming the right of those who are HIV-positive to live somewhere and setting a precedent for legislative reform regarding AIDS, homophobia, public health, and tenants’ rights.

This was the beginning of Wojnarowicz’s AIDS activism, Rizk says. He explored how disease is a natural part of life, but he viewed it from a different perspective and used images of animals (such as the bison “massacre” diorama in the National Museum of Natural History) as a metaphor for what was happening to AIDS sufferers. He used animals to talk about dehumanization and the way people get isolated or sacrificed.

Humans have a tendency to draw artificial lines about what is dirty, healthy or appropriate, Rizk notes, “and Wojnarowicz was exploring aspects of life that people don’t want to touch — slaughterhouses, dung, beetles, ants.” Wojnarowicz carried collage into the contemporary idiom and created large, complicated art that incorporated hundreds of tiny vignettes. His work helped create a feeling of unity and common cause among the AIDS sufferers and the gay and lesbian community. The doctored photo of himself with lips sewn shut is a prime example of art as activism.

During this period in the late 1980s, Wojnarowicz wrote insightful articles about the AIDS crisis and pressed the Federal Drug Administration to change its policies. His art became increasingly strident, and then he became the object of the American Family Association (AFA), which was pivotal in censoring ads, television, and film. The AFA was part of the effort to defund the National Endowment for the Arts and targeted Wojnarowicz by publishing a slick brochure of images taken out of context of the larger work. Wojnarowicz refused to take this kind of slander lying down and sued the AFA. He won his case on the basis of artistic misrepresentation. “This was the first time anyone had stood up to attacks of this nature,” Rizk comments, “but Wojnarowicz wanted to create a more just world for himself and others.”

Even after his death, Wojnarowicz became embroiled in controversy. His video *A Fire in My Belly* was removed from the Smithsonian “Hide/Seek” exhibit on homosexual artists who have contributed to art in America in the 20th century. “Why?” asks Rizk. Although Wojnarowicz is primarily recognized as an AIDS artist, he was a producing artist in the early
70s, long before he became an AIDS activist. Much of the video segments for “A Fire in My Belly” were shot in Mexico on the Day of the Dead when shrines containing food offerings are installed on cemetery grounds. Ants would naturally swarm. Independently, he also took several objects with him to Teotihuacan, located fire ant colonies near which he would position the objects, and then documented the ants’ responses. Some claimed that having ants crawling over a crucifix was sacrilegious.

“Wojnarowicz had issues with organized religion,” remarks Rizk, “but he had enormous respect for spirituality.” Part of his spirituality derives from his relationship with nature. He even had a “magic box” that was full of beads and tchotchkes from different religions all over the world. Rizk sees Wojnarowicz’s animal imagery as central to his art and his activism. “The way humans engage animals is often heavy handed. We are often more interested in efficiency and profit than welfare,” she says.

Rizk comments that the more she focused on Wojnarowicz and the more she found out, the more she realized that she needed to examine other aspects of disease, place, art, and history and their relationships and associations. Thus the study of one man’s artistic output leads to the study of art and disease, art and activism, art and religion, art and politics.

Mysoon Rizk proudly displays a Wojnarowicz print that she purchased during the artist’s residency at Illinois State University, where he had his first retrospective exhibition (1990). The lithograph is titled “Fire and Water” and has a companion lithograph titled “Earth and Air.”
Rolls of toilet tissue, spaceships, cartoon characters, cars, boats. All these things have something in common — they all appear in the art of Arturo Rodriguez and they all have a specific meaning to the artist, one that may be quite different from the spectator’s interpretation. They are part of the language of his art. And to decode these subtle messages (well, perhaps not all so subtle), you need to know a bit about the artist.

Arriving in the U.S. at age 7 on the 1980 boat lift from Cuba, Rodriguez was imbued with the idea that being Cuban was something dirty. So he worked on hiding and denying his Hispanic heritage — to the point that today he speaks English with no discernible accent. “As an immigrant, I wanted to be seen as American rather than Cuban,” he admits. Now he is proud of being Cuban and also American. “But how Cuban am I?” he asks.
As a young child, Rodriguez was fascinated by the pictures his mother would draw for him — he felt it was amazing and somehow magical. He says he always liked to draw and was identified in grade school as a candidate for a magnet school in Miami. He attended an arts high school and went on to receive his MFA from Indiana University while continuing to search for himself.

Rodriguez comments that his early work was angry and dark. Then he had the opportunity to go back to Cuba and reconnect with his family there. He discovered the humor with which they approach daily life (which he says is “pretty miserable”) and adopted that philosophy. “Humor doesn’t put people off,” he says. “And part of the process is finding and creating humorous images that tell a story.”

One notable item you might notice in Rodriguez’s art is rolls of toilet paper. “Why?” you might ask. “There is little or no toilet paper available in Cuba,” he explains. Cubans there use newspapers or magazines — and fight over who gets to use the page with Castro’s face. On his visit there in 2003, he took a suitcase loaded with this commodity.

Cubans are inventive, Rodriguez says. There are lots of cars in Cuba, but no parts to repair them. So the people are ingenious in cannibalizing other equipment for parts that can be used to make the cars functional. Rodriguez talks about his father who made a hot water heater for the shower from a discarded, old-fashioned salon hair dryer (the kind with a hood). Praise for that ingenuity is evident in Rodriguez’s work, even when he makes fun of it as in the “Cuban Computer” that combines images of an aged TV, an antique typewriter and old iron as a mouse.
He says that a cousin who lives in Miami had e-mailed the original image to him as a gag.

Rodriguez often uses idyllic American landscapes as background and then overlays them with woodcuts, iconic images such as a Western cowboy, and altered cartoon characters. One cartoon character that he has “adopted” is the Smurf. The original Smurfs, living in mushroom villages and following a “leader” in mindless lockstep, represent Communism or socialism to him. In some of his work you can find them, changed in color and costume and carrying a hammer and a sickle. He calls them “Smubans.”

Other images you might see in Rodriguez’s art include Tylenol pills made to look like spaceships. Why pills? Because a cousin said to take a TTM pill — the prevailing attitude is “Don’t give a . . .” The spaceship represents aliens. Is he an alien in the U.S. or in Cuba? “A lot of my work is coded,” Rodriguez says. “Everything added has a reason that makes sense to me but also makes it accessible to others.” One thing can always have multiple meanings.

Viewers should see this work as a mixing of cultures and as part of Rodriguez’s Cuban heritage. His color palette tends to be bright and tropical. “There is no indigenous Cuban,” he explains. “The Spaniards came and killed off the native population and then imported slaves from Africa. Only 90 miles from the U.S., there is a strong American influence. So Cuba really is an immigrant nation with a blending of three cultures.” He says that there is also a large Chinese population as well as a small Jewish (Jewbans) one and even a mixing of religions as in Santeria, which combines elements of Catholicism and African beliefs. All of these elements are likely to show up in his art.

Photographs, painting, woodcuts, screen prints and sketches combine and meld in Rodriguez’s art like the culture he has come from and adopted. But always there is humor. He remarks that his family in Cuba makes fun of a depressing situation, and he has adopted their outlook, using humor to overcome daily stresses.

So how is a viewer to know how to read Rodriguez’s work? He explains that he gives workshops and has exhibitions. He hopes visitors to an exhibit will engage him in dialogue. Titles and the artist’s statement also offer explanations of how his vision of a work developed. But there is always enough room for a person to respond to the art on some visceral, personal level.

Now see what you think. 🌎

Arturo Rodriguez is an assistant professor of art, teaching printmaking, lithography, screen printing, and etching, all techniques he uses in his own work. His art is a philosophical blend of cultures and a humorous antidote to unpleasant or stressful situations. His art students took a page from his book of life when they designed woodcut murals that were wheat-pasted onto the exterior of several participating businesses across Toledo.
LITERATURE FOR OUR TIME

The New York Times
PUBLISHED: MARCH 8, 2012
MISSOURI SEX ABUSE CHARGES DROPPED AGAINST SIX RELATIVES

Chicago Tribune
PUBLISHED: TUESDAY, MARCH 08, 2011
PHILADELPHIA ARCHDIOCESE SUSPENDS 21 ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS NAMED AS CHILD MOLESTATION SUSPECTS IN A GRAND JURY REPORT

Daily Mail
TELEGRAPH.CO.UK PUBLISHED MARCH 20, 2012
MARGARET THATCHER WAS AN ALCOHOLIC’ SAYS VETERAN ARGENTINE POLITICIAN
In the 13th century Philippe de Rémi wrote a romance called La Manekine about Joie, the daughter of the king of Hungary who refused to marry her father, amputated her own hand in protest, was sentenced to death but rescued by the seneschal, survived the voyage to Scotland in a rudderless boat, married the Scottish king but was condemned to death by her mother-in-law, was saved by another seneschal and survived the next boat trip (ending up in Rome), was reunited with both her father and husband, and finally retrieved her hand from a fish and had it reattached by the pope.

“WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?” asks Linda Marie Rouillard. “Aside from the fact that it is a wonderful fantasy that is fun to read, it does say something about social institutions, conflict, and controversy.” Rémi was evidently engaged in some of the social issues that occupied people of the time and still occupy us in the 21st century — incest, marriage, women and power, public confession and forgiveness, priestly misdoings.

The issues of incest and female power are at the center of Rémi’s fable, as they set everything in motion. Having promised his dying wife that he would only marry someone who resembles her exactly, the king of Hungary has looked high and low, only to realize that his daughter is the only one who can satisfy the requirements. And his barons are breathing down his neck to provide a male heir, not wanting the kingdom to be inherited by a woman. While a woman may be ineligible to inherit the kingdom, her words can still greatly influence that same kingdom.

When we look at these issues today, we see the same horror of incest (Joie cut off her own hand, saying that God forbids this marriage). The recent case of the Austrian father who imprisoned his daughter and sired several children by her created an international outcry. The German brother and sister who were separated during childhood and then fell in love when reunited have understandably caused a media sensation. Rémi used a situation that was blatantly offensive to dramatize the issue of marriage, just as Rick Santorum did in arguing that states should regulate gay marriage, lest we go down the slippery slope towards incest and bestiality.

“We have to recognize that the definition of marriage was undergoing change in the 13th century just as it is in our century.”
Rouillard says. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had just altered the definition of incest, redefining who was eligible to marry whom. States today are also altering the definition of marriage, creating upheaval and controversy just as occurred 800 years ago. “Gay marriage is not just an issue of gay marriage,” Rouillard adds. “It is an issue of the basic human rights that are attached to marriage — inheritance, medical care, and insurance. We live technologically advanced lives, but sometimes our technological advances bring us right back to earlier dilemmas,” concludes Rouillard. “Rémi’s discussion of marriage reminds us that our current controversy over gay marriage is yet another moment in the evolution of a social institution.”

Priestly misdeeds is yet another topic...
The priests looked the other way when the king proposed to marry his own daughter. “This is not far removed from the current controversy of the Church hiding evidence of the abuse of young boys.”

The issue of incest appears again when the king of Scotland’s mother wants to get rid of Joie because Joie is of unknown parentage — could she be somehow related? In this era of artificial insemination, frozen embryos, surrogate pregnancies, and sperm bank scandals, who is going to know their biological relationships? “Is ‘Let’s go get a DNA test’ going to be the new form of dating?” Rouillard asks, only half in jest. Women in power is another subtext in La Manekine. The king’s barons did not want a woman to inherit the kingdom. This resonates today as we constantly hear and read about the glass ceiling, women in STEM, equal pay for equal work. Rosie the Riveter was not simply a 20th century phenomenon — the issue of women’s work and women at work has been a pressing one for many centuries. Rémi’s subtext shows us that even in 1200, women and their supporters were arguing for a change in the status quo. And in the 21st century, the first woman to hold a certain position or the first woman to complete certain accomplishments still rates page-one headlines. While women rulers were unimaginable, Rémi’s female protagonist pre-empts the pope in publicly forgiving her father and is a clear example of a form of power that women wielded through language.

The king of Hungary who goes before the pope to confess his misdeeds resonates with our own morality plays. “There seems to be a need for public figures to engage in public penance,” notes Rouillard. In the past decade, we have seen Clinton apologize on television for his amorous adventures with Monica Lewinsky, John Edwards confess to adultery, and Mark Sanford admit that he was visiting his paramour rather than hiking the Appalachian Trail. These individuals could have issued a press release; instead they went on television, an act equivalent to appearing before the pope in the 1200s. In addition to recognizing the need for forgiveness, Rémi’s depiction of a daughter who publicly pardons her father re-appropriates a certain amount of lay control regarding spiritual relationships. “The individual must ask for and give forgiveness rather than merely relying on a third party or some higher power,” Rouillard remarks.

Priestly misdeeds is yet another topic taken up in La Manekine. The priests looked the other way when the king proposed to marry his own daughter. “This is not far removed from the current controversy of the [Catholic] Church hiding evidence of the abuse of young boys,” she adds. La Manekine is not the only medieval romance that resonates through the ages, remarks Rouillard. In Percéval by Chrétien de Troyes, the hero’s major weakness is not knowing when to speak and when not to; he is incapable of asking the right questions at the right time. Written at the time of the first crusades, La Chanson de Roland speaks to East-West cultural and religious conflicts. Brutal passages in this epic poem can be compared to Tim O’Brien’s description of the Vietnam War and even the humiliation of prisoners as at Abu Ghraib.

Rouillard concludes, “To those who would say that literature of the Middle Ages is irrelevant and archaic, I would say ‘Oh, yes, well consider these stories.’ I find the similarities just fascinating. Not a lot has changed in 800 years.”
What am I doing here? What am I supposed to do? How do I know where to go? Have you ever asked yourself these questions? Did you find answers? John Sarnecki says there are answers — or at least an approach to understanding the answers. “There are all sorts of answers,” he adds. “Some come from faith, the media, society. But they all reflect biases. Philosophy is a method to get out from under our biases and develop a deeper understanding.”

Philosophy and science both ask difficult questions, he remarks, but they are different because the methods are different. The questions philosophy asks are primarily conceptual and examine the sources of answers and the nature of belief itself; they have no concrete, physical basis for experimentation. “Ethics is an example of this,” Sarnecki explains. “Many of the beliefs that we hold most deeply encompass our values, but these won’t be informed by our science. There is no experiment that tells us when a war can be justified, for example, but philosophy provides a framework for examining the circumstances in which such decisions are made. It moves us closer to answers or at least the best ones we can offer.”

Aristotle neatly divided philosophy into two arenas: questions concerning the best life for someone to live and those involving the ultimate structure of reality. “I have known too many philosophers to suppose that we can offer much towards answering the first sort of questions,” Sarnecki says. Instead, his work has been motivated by questions of the latter sort. However, it wasn’t long before he realized that any discussion of the ultimate nature of the universe cannot be offered independently of the mind that conceives it. He notes that as a child he was fascinated by first contact stories — Columbus and the Taíno, Cortes and the Aztecs, the Vikings and the Native Americans. Here are two alien cultures meeting face to face but with no way to communicate. What do they think of each other? How do they conceptualize each other’s motives, actions and intent? These questions led Sarnecki to inquire how we make these first moves ourselves — both as newborns and as a species that is relatively new to the world. These are fundamentally questions about how we acquire mental representations. How do we begin to represent the world (and others in it) to ourselves?
At one level, a thought is only a neuroelectrical impulse, Sarnecki says, but obviously thoughts are much more than that. So the question becomes figuring out how the brain attaches significance to thoughts. “We once thought that a child came into the world as a tabula rasa, a completely blank slate,” he explains. “We now know that we come well equipped with structures that help us carve up the world in a meaningful way. Mapping out these structures tells us how our mind’s pantry gets stocked with ideas and also tells us a lot about why we see the world we do.”

These biases can be seen even in the youngest babies. Not long after birth, babies appear attracted to faces — they look at faces, are comforted by faces and even seem to mimic expressions. As they get older, babies appear to divide the world into discrete individuals. Babies track things and appear to make strong assumptions about how these things should behave. In experiments, for example, babies show increased interest in displays that appear to violate their intuitive physics than in those that conform. Sarnecki argues that these innate principles guide a child’s first conceptual steps. “If we have the capacity to track an object, then we can attribute properties to it,” Sarnecki says. “Philosophers historically had predicted this but did not have the techniques to explore the idea.” He notes that the experimental data change the way we think about innateness — it is a new way of understanding the mind.

Knowing how we see things, Sarnecki continues, allows us to begin to understand how we learn. Understanding the mechanics of knowledge allows us to examine the nature of understanding itself. This research has blossomed in the past decade, and it now encompasses questions as basic as the nature of religious belief as well as the psychological basis of moral judgment. Research, for example, into the neurophysiological basis of emotion and disgust has shed light on how we make the kinds of moral decisions we do. “There are certain ways we are wired that guide the way we respond to ethical situations,” notes Sarnecki, “and knowing what are our limitations in moral decision making can lead to steps to address those limitations.”

Many of our biases, it turns out, come as standard equipment.

Sarnecki says that his explorations of how the mind works led to his most popular paper. He chuckles when he explains that the paper, done on a dare, is about contagious yawning, “and three of the Ignoble Prizes in the past five years went to research on yawning.” Sarnecki was struck by the fact that almost all animals (including fish and reptiles) yawn; even fetuses in the womb yawn. The yawn reflex itself is a function of the lower brain stem that governs involuntary responses and behaviors. “However, contagious yawning seems to involve higher level representational cognition” he says. “Even talking about yawning causes yawns, but understanding the word itself is a significant cognitive achievement. It’s a strange detour for a lower brain stem phenomenon.”

Sarnecki posits that only social animals with higher empathic tendencies are subject to contagious yawning. But that does not answer why contagious yawning developed. He suggests that yawning might play a role in increasing community alertness to danger, or as a prelinguistic method of coordinating activities. But why should simply reading about yawning elicit the reaction? Sarnecki comments that this cognitive contagion could be a carryover of the perceptual case. “The links between perception and cognition that lead to the production of both forms of contagious yawning offer an opportunity to better understand the mechanisms that underlie all representational states and so illuminate the origins, structure and development of human thought and rationality.”

WITH JOHN SARNECKI

RESEARCHER

John Sarnecki has a somewhat wicked sense of humor and says he was “born in a raging snowstorm in the relative comfort of a fully equipped hospital.” He received his PhD from Rutgers with an emphasis on the philosophy of mind and language. He is particularly interested in theories of concepts and concept acquisition and has recently become interested in how we might develop an account of the formation of early man’s conceptual capacities.
Teaching in inner city schools, Pamela Stover became curious about how people learn. She was trying to get through to students and realized that they learned differently from the way she did. So she went back to get her doctorate in music education and found she most enjoyed a research class on historical methods. Then she found her grandmother’s music book for teaching in a one-room school. The result? A music education historian, a music methods specialist, and an involved historian and music expert for the Country School Association of America.
As a music education historian, Stover is interested in one-room schools and the music taught there and in the history of the Orff-Schulwerk process. It might appear at first blush that there is no connection, but Stover found the link.

In the course of teaching, Stover discovered that many people she met had attended one-room schools, and some had taught in them. Many in her family had also attended and taught in these country schools. She interviewed them all — what games the children played at recess, what social events were held at the school, box social lunches, spelling bees and all the nostalgia that goes with the “little red schoolhouse.” Stover says that a major benefit of this research is that reenactors at historical sites are now using appropriate music materials when they bring today’s school children into the one-room school to visit the past.

In the traditional one-room school, a single teacher taught every subject, Stover explains. The number of subjects was somewhat limited, the teachers might have been only 14 years old, and all grades sat together in one small space. It was a difficult job, and music might have been left out if the teacher wasn’t very musical. Stover has found that the technology of the time helped solve that problem. Country schools in Wisconsin used radio programs to teach some subjects, including music; and one-room schools in Iowa pioneered the use of phonograph records to teach music when the schoolmarm had no knowledge of music or how to teach it. “Radio was the original distance education medium,” Stover says, “and teachers embraced new technologies to help in areas where their own knowledge was limited.”

Radio connected Stover to the Orff-Schulwerk, a process of teaching music and movement and one that she had begun using while teaching in the inner city. She had heard that programs using Orff instruments had aired on the radio after World War II and was determined to investigate the history of this technique founded by composer Carl Orff. The Orff process breaks music into its component sounds and then puts it back together in new ways, Stover explains. Using percussion, xylophones and recorders, students learn how to make two-, three- or five-note melodies or rhythms as the foundation for their compositions. The music is simple, with repeated rhythms and generous use of drums. Students put the notes together in combinations and then can write down what they did, creating a level of music literacy. A second component is movement, which can include folk dance, modern dance, or creative movement called elemental movement. “Training with the Orff-Schulwerk process really requires experiencing it,” comments Stover. “It is an aesthetic and emotional response; you need to watch somebody doing it and then do it yourself.”

Her natural enthusiasm and curiosity led Stover to explore the origins of the Orff-Schulwerk. In the 1920s, the Günther Schule — founded by dancer Dorothee Gunther and composer Carl Orff — used modern dance to teach movement and music in Munich, Germany. Carl Orff, whose most famous composition is Carmina Burana, was teaching music to college-aged women. They would attend exotic dance programs to experience tribal and indigenous dance from Africa and Asia. The dance troop from the school toured many countries using this tribal, modern, and elemental
dance accompanied by music improvised and composed in the Orff-Schulwerk style. “Orff became quite famous,” says Stover. Then the Nazis came along and shut down the school. “Interestingly enough, the Nazi sport commissioner was married to one of Orff’s students, and he asked Orff to compose music for the 1936 Olympics pageant. Six thousand girls danced on the field while Günther Schule students and teachers played the music. This was the first time a microphone had been used to broadcast music, and Orff thought it would be a way to get his music known. World War II squelched those dreams.

Stover’s research has taken her to archives in Canada and the U.S. But it was in Munich, where the Orff archives reside, that she hit what she calls the “archival jackpot.” She found one book in German about the Orff-Schulwerk process. Then she came across a packet of typed manuscripts written by Gertrude Orff (Carl’s second wife, who had been his secretary) for radio broadcasts. Stover thought at the time that she had the original transcript of the radio shows, but when she heard the actual broadcasts at the archives of the Bavarian Radio in Munich, she found that they were not the same as the scripts.

The Munich archives yielded a number of other finds of early Orff-Schulwerk music, although Orff’s autobiography declared the autograph scores from the Olympics as missing. Orff’s estate was huge, however, and his fourth wife, Liselotte, kept bringing boxes from her attic to the archives. The archivist e-mailed Stover and said that she had a surprise for her. On her next trip, Stover found that Olympic scores and instrumental parts and sketches filled a box. She was delighted to discover two unpublished pieces written by Orff for the Olympics. One was a drum and bugle piece that had been cut from the Olympics program because Orff did not like the way the male dancers looked and thought there was a military overtone to the tableaux. Other documents included pieces of music in Gunhild Keetman’s hand. Keetman had been a student and collaborator of Orff and wrote a book of recorder music that Stover found in another box.

“Who would have thought that the 1936 Olympics had anything to do with how we teach music today?” Stover comments. Furthermore, Gertrude Orff adapted the Orff-Schulwerk method in music therapy for people with disabilities. Today, the Orff approach and its offshoots find their way into grade schools, therapy sessions, advertising, and popular music, among others. “Sometimes I see a commercial and think ‘ah ha, this is from Orff-Schulwerk,’” remarks Stover.

Stover notes that her research and teaching are intimately intertwined. She uses the Orff-Schulwerk approach in teaching people to be creative music teachers. Her Orff-Schulwerk teaching and research have taken her around the world. And because almost all of the history and documentation of the Orff-Schulwerk method is currently in German, writing a history in English is her next project.
Theater represents and reinforces the intersection between literature and life, says Matthew Wikander. In his first book, he looked at historical drama from Shakespeare to Brecht to examine playwrights’ and historians’ differing definitions of what is real, what is true. As he became more and more immersed in these dramas, he became interested in monarchy as an institution. Further, he says, he was troubled by recent trends in criticism that collapsed monarchy into performance — the idea that kings are actors set on a stage, their power grounded in illusion.

This inquiry led to a second book on court theater — actors playing royalty and royalty wanting to act. Queen Elizabeth I used theatrical techniques in her public dealings. Her court and her progresses to visit various country houses were a kind of theater. King Gustav III of Sweden had his own theater and liked to play the best parts. Ironically, Wikander comments, his favorite stage role was as an assassin, and he was subsequently killed by an assassin.

The examination of court theater and what effect the presence of the monarch — either in the audience or on the stage — had on the production itself often resulted in a distortion of the meaning of the play. From this perspective, it was a logical move for Wikander to turn to examining antitheatrical elements of theater.

“There is a strand in Western culture that is mistrustful of theater,” notes Wikander. “As far back as the fifth century B.C. E.,” he explains, “Plato argued that theater perniciously deceives in its pretense of spontaneity and its ability to engage audiences’ emotions as though the rehearsed actions they witness are somehow spontaneous.” Theater has been seen as a falsehood and a threat to social stability. “We have to recognize that audiences are willing to suspend disbelief,”
The play's the thing...

William Shakespeare
Twelfth Night

Photo by Jack Wade, State University of New York
Tartuffe is the ultimate liar and hypocrite, and Moliere takes the character — an actor — and puts him back in his place as a criminal. “These moments of imposture are not merely funny,” Wikander comments, “there is an undertone of sin in the enterprise.”
Shakespeare’s own difficulty with disguise and cross dressing shows up in Viola’s character in *Twelfth Night*. Here is a boy playing a girl who is playing a boy. Wikander says that her discomfort with her disguise speaks to her character, but even more to the customary theatrical representation of gender on stage. These representations are, by their very presence, a lie.

The lie then leads to insincerity and hypocrisy. Wikander explains that playwrights internalized and dramatized their ambivalence about the theater. They recognized the moralistic attacks on the theater and agonized on how to represent authenticity and reality in a medium that is false.

So what is reality? Wikander asks. Attending a play requires suspension of disbelief. We don’t go to the theater not expecting to be drawn in. Is it moral or immoral? What effect does theater have on our lives? On society? Is theater a phenomenon that deceives and leads to social depravity or is it an educational tool that can promote understanding of self and others? He says, “You don’t go to a play not expecting to be drawn in.”

“But even playwrights, from Shakespeare to O’Neill, indicate an antipathy towards actors and theater,” Wikander comments. They recognized the moralistic attacks on theater and acting and internalized and dramatized their ambivalence — how does one represent authenticity and reality in a medium that is false?

In his third book, Wikander takes a close look at the standard slanders against actors: they dress up; they lie; they drink. Of course, men had to portray women on the English stage because there were no female actors until the late 17th century. He notes that traditional Puritan attacks on theater were based on actors dressing up in clothes not of their sex and playing people they were not. Puritans and others were of the opinion that the audience would be ensnared and participate in sinful acts. The portrayal of women’s roles by boys in Shakespeare’s time, he argues, reveals anxieties about gender roles that remain relevant today.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare used the play within a play to parody theater. The characters don’t want to see the internal play and when they do, they don’t recognize the Pyramus and Thisby story as their own. “Shakespeare’s genius was to have it done by bad actors,” remarks Wikander, “good actors playing bad actors in a bad play poorly produced.” At the end of the play, Puck invites the audience back, telling them that, if they were offended, they should remember it was just a dream. Shakespeare was not selling a product; he was selling an illusion — and one that could be addictive.

Matthew Wikander is a professor of English whose primary scholarship is on theater from the 16th century to the present. He is a member of the Modern Language Association, the Shakespeare Association of America, and the American Society for Theatre Research; his research has earned the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Newberry Library; and his essays have appeared in numerous scholarly publications and in the Cambridge University Press Companions to Eugene O’Neill, George Bernard Shaw, and August Strindberg. He has written three books that have received wide acclaim: The Play of Truth and State: Historical Drama from Shakespeare to Brecht, Princes to Act: Royal Audience and Royal Performance 1578-1796, and Fangs of Malice: Hypocrisy, Sincerity, and Acting.