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think

think critically, act creatively



Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature

College of Liberal Arts
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

interview with
Gary Thomas

profiles of postcolonial
theorist **Shaden Tageldin**
+ theorist and film scholar
Keya Ganguly

plus: essays from **CSCL**
students + alums

The University of Minnesota's Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature is one of the nation's premier cultural studies departments.

Expanding on the traditions of the humanities—CSCL's precursor department—our interdisciplinary research and teaching advance the critical study of literature, philosophy, and the visual and performing arts as expressions of human culture and understanding.

Our work ranges widely across history and geography and addresses culture broadly as a set of important and complex relationships between the humanities and everyday life, and between ideas and the material world in which people live.

Our undergraduate and graduate degree programs—among the U's top-enrolling academic programs—aim to produce critical and self-critical readers prepared to participate actively in the intellectual conversations and social struggles that shape global culture in our time.

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■ **Comparative literature:** engages questions of literary and cultural theory in a global context, as well as issues involving national or linguistic literary traditions.

■ **Comparative studies in discourse and society:** examines cultural production across varied discourses—including literature, the visual arts, and the built environment.

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on the cover: CSCL faculty member Shaden Tageldin, photographed in Minneapolis, fall 2005, by Richard G. Anderson.

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Colonialism's dance

Shaden Tageldin's work on intercultural issues has led her to understand empire-building and colonization as a complex process of seduction, a dance performed by both sides.



Shaden Tageldin in her favorite coffee hangout, Espresso Royale, downtown Minneapolis.

Born in Washington, D.C.—where her family settled when her father left Egypt to complete his graduate studies in the United States—Shaden Tageldin from the

start lived between two cultures. But she didn't find a language to describe the interaction of those cultures until she was an undergraduate at Harvard.

It was 1991 by then, and Tageldin was majoring in English—although she had

started college as a biochemistry major, one of several “back doors” that she says have led to her academic career. That year, she read Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the influential work that described what the author called “Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture.” Those words became truly meaningful for Tageldin when the United States launched the first Gulf War.

“My consciousness was galvanized,” says Tageldin, now an assistant professor of cultural studies and comparative literature. “Arab-Americans in Boston experienced harassment. And that specific harassment was the trigger for me to get more active and think about how Africans and Arabs are represented in the West.”

By the time she decided to pursue graduate study a few years later, Tageldin's thinking about intercultural issues—and particularly about the relationship of East and West—had only deepened. She had graduated from Harvard with high honors in her major, having written her senior thesis on images of the Near East in *Don Juan*, Byron's epic poetic satire of England's exaggerated sense of self in its age of empire. She had studied French language and literature in Paris, and she had worked as an editor for the respected Three Continents Press, which published the first U.S. translation of the Nobel Laureate Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz.

She also carried with her, she says, the inspiration of parents who “offered me a narrative of global relations different from what I was hearing. They were role models who taught me to ask questions and not to assume that surfaces were realities.”

Having learned Arabic in her early years, Tageldin believed that an understanding of East-West contact couldn't be found only in English texts. Wanting to work more formally with Arabic and fran-

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Napoleon was as much a seducer as an invader in 1798 when he issued a proclamation assuring the predominantly Muslim people of Egypt that the French were “sincere Muslims,” just like them.



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cophone literatures and to get inside other cultures, she opted for a graduate program in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

“It gave weight to non-Western literature alongside more canonical texts,” says Tageldin. “There was a place for Sanskrit, Arabic, and Chinese, along with the more traditional triad of French, English, and German. I had a foot in many worlds.”

Her work at Berkeley culminated with her 2004 dissertation on the psychodynamics of French and British cultural imperialism in Egypt. Titled “Disarming Words: Reading (Post)Colonial Egypt’s Double Bond to Europe,” it won the 2005 Charles Bernheimer Prize from the American Comparative Literature Association for the best dissertation in the field.

Empires in translation

Since joining the U of M faculty in the fall of 2004, Tageldin has been researching and teaching in the areas to which her many “back doors” have led: empire and postcolonial theory. Her book in progress, “Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt,” which expands on her dissertation, is a study of Egypt’s colonization by the French in 1798 and the British in 1882.

In these movements, she sees more than the story of forced subjugation. She has discovered a complex process of seduction, a dance performed by both the empire builders and those they colonized. “The French and British were most successful as colonizers when they presented themselves not as alien forces, but as equivalents or mirrors of those they invaded,” Tageldin says.

So, she argues, Napoleon was as much a seducer as an invader in 1798 when he issued a proclamation—written in Arabic and mimicking the style of the Koran—assuring the predominantly Muslim people of Egypt that the French were “sincere Muslims,” just like them. Tageldin says that his words were profoundly disarming

to Egyptian intellectuals, whether they believed Napoleon to be a friend or a duplicitous foe.

A similar process of seduction was at work decades later, when England advanced its own domination on Egypt, Tageldin says. She notes that the British consul-general Lord Cromer even wrote that to “woo and win Egypt, England had to shed its matronly respectability and become an ‘attractive damsel’ like France, able to manipulate—like Napoleon—the appearance of intimacy with Egypt.” The conquest-as-dance continued.

On the other side of the equation, though, and perhaps more surprising, was the complicity of the colonized Egyptians in peculiar and particular ways. Egyptian intellectuals began to translate their colonizers’ texts and in the process, “attached themselves to European empires even as they imagined themselves to be overcoming colonial domination,” Tageldin says. They overcame their colonizers, so to speak, by becoming “like” them: by making their language and those of their colonizers “equivalent.”

“Translation is a tango around the possibility of equivalence,” she says. “It attaches the colonized more deeply to the colonizer. As Egyptians began to translate the literatures of their colonizers, they negotiated a complex and often conflicted ‘surrender’ to the ideology of European supremacy and the imperatives of European colonialism.”

In this respect, Tageldin shares the view of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, who has argued that translation is an intimate act in which the translator in effect surrenders to the text that he or she translates.

Cultural imperialism, Tageldin notes, “is often thought of in impositional terms, such that the literary ‘canon’ becomes an extension of the military ‘cannon.’ But thinking of it as a seduction or a dance may be more helpful in really understanding it. Colonialism can infiltrate native tongues, and the philosophical and political assumptions of an imperial power can seep into the groundwater of a culture.”

Tellingly, Tageldin has illuminated similar dynamics at work in South Asian and Pan-African discourses under European colonization.

Global context

In one of those interesting quirks of fate, Tageldin began her study in late 2001, putting her research squarely in the center of the world’s geopolitical events.

“From the beginning, the events of 9/11 colored my work,” she says. “Even though I was not working on contemporary rhetoric, I was struck by our own question as Americans responding to the attacks, ‘Why do they hate us so?’ When I was in Egypt doing my research, I heard echoes on the other side: ‘Why does the U.S. hate us?’”

These questions, Tageldin felt, “ignored an equally important one I sought to answer in my work: Why, historically, have the West and the Arab-Islamic world also ‘loved’ each other so?”

As she charts her academic career, Tageldin hopes her research and teaching will reflect the influence of her teachers at Berkeley. One aim is to create as supportive an environment for students as did her adviser Lydia Liu, an effective mentor as well as a respected scholar of comparative literature and East Asian languages.

Another of Tageldin’s aim is to produce research that is as rigorous, useful, and passionately engaged as Liu’s work on translation as a process of unequal exchange. Tageldin also looks for inspiration to another Berkeley mentor, Arabic literature professor Muhammad Siddiq: “He’s someone who loves the Arabic language and always has insisted that Arabic be treated with the respect given to European languages. He’s also wonderfully receptive to new ideas.”

Tageldin says that these days she’s “more and more concerned that for all the globalization in the world, we’re gradually losing sight of our interdependence. I like to share how deeply intertwined the world’s people really are.” —Mary Shafer

Talking with GARY THOMAS

Whether you were a student in a 1970s course on the Enlightenment in the humanities program or in a contemporary cultural studies course called Music as Discourse, it's a safe bet that you know professor Gary Thomas. Thomas, who joined the U faculty in 1971, recently sat down to talk about CSCL history, Handel, the culture wars, and a wide range of other topics.

How would you define your interests?

I'm interested in marginal voices and in the relations between the center—that is, the dominant center—and the margins. Marginal social formations, communities of color, queer communities, dissident musics—any non-hegemonic cultural sites, where different notions of “the good, the true, the beautiful” come into view and might offer a challenge or an alternative to what passes for “the normal,” “the natural,” or whatever is uncritically accepted in the center. Much of my work as a cultural theorist has focused on music.

How did you develop these interests?

I think I come to a lot of this through my own experience of music. I was never in the mainstream as a kid—didn't do sports, was kind of an outsider. I found refuge in reading and especially in music. I started with the trumpet, and then moved on to the cello, piano, and flute—and then the pipe organ, which became a passion. Being a musician was a space “on the margins” in which I felt comfortable. And then, too, there was my experience of being marginalized as a gay kid. All these experiences shaped my intellectual path.

You came to the U in 1971.

I had a brand-new shiny Ph.D. from Harvard in Germanic languages and literatures, with a subfield in music and literature. A lot of doors opened. I had five offers. Fortunately, I chose this university.

That was fortunate in what way?

I was hired by the humanities program, which proved to be one of the main formative experiences of my life. The program had connections with multiple disciplines, including German, English, and art history, and it gave me—oh, man, it gave me a lot of the education that I have. I was forced into this wide spectrum of books and ideas and history. I will always be grateful for that.

It must have been a heady experience for a young scholar.

Yeah, although my first week I wasn't sure that they hadn't made a mistake. I was just 26, and I was up until 1 and 2 in the morning furiously reading all these new books. I remember pacing outside the classroom the first day I had to stand before 65 students in Humanities 1001. It turned out I knew a lot more than I thought I did, and the students seemed to like what I was doing, and I liked them.

Can you offer perspective on the history of the U's humanities program?

When I was hired in '71, the humanities program was kind of a “Great Books” program. It had been created in the mid-1940s and really was

part of the great “democratization” of higher education that followed World War II. Essentially it was a way of giving returning GIs a crash course in “Western Civ.” There was a fairly set curriculum—courses on the Greeks and Romans, on the Medieval and Renaissance periods, et cetera. By the time I arrived, the program was at a crossroads. Graduate students were doing almost all the teaching. The department had just come out of a sort of receivership under a University committee that had been convened to determine its future. Ultimately, a decision was made to strengthen the department, to hire core people. My hiring was part of that.



Gary Thomas in his St. Paul home, in front of his custom-made pipe organ.

The department subsequently began to grow?

Yes. We made several rather stunning hires—fine scholars such as Richard Leppert, Bruce Lincoln, Pauline Yu, John Archer, and John Mowitz. The program began to gain intellectual coherence and integrity. We developed courses addressing non-Western perspectives, critical literacy, and broader considerations of cultural issues. This, of course, leads us up to “the great curriculum wars” of the 1980s.

The department's work became controversial?

In some quarters. Lynne Cheney, the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Reagan-Bush years, singled us out as an example of what was wrong in American education. One course she didn't like was called Knowledge, Persuasion, and Power. She and other critics wanted us to simply do Great Books and lose the rest.

Cultural studies by its very nature threatened the status quo.

Yes, because we reconnected literature, the history of ideas, and the fine arts to the material analysis of culture—in other words, to politics. It's always to the benefit of political power to keep those things separate. We hadn't abandoned the old classics, but we also were look-

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“Thought is important. Arguments and language are important.”

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ing at media studies, at popular culture, at cultural theory. We were engaging new theories of knowledge. Our program became a truly vibrant and exciting place, and we began to get a lot more majors. Students like to learn this way, on a broad intellectual matrix.

That's certainly a hallmark of liberal arts education.

The best education is relentlessly critical and self-critical. You know, we live at a time when language is degraded. Where the discrepancy between image and reality is staggering. It really is important to look critically at all kinds of media, and to think about how we might approach Shakespeare and Bach on different ground.

This is the sort of thing that inspires a backlash from traditionalists?

One of the criticisms leveled is that we think graffiti is as important as Goethe, which of course is absolute and utter nonsense. That's part of what gets me—the dishonesty. When Lynne Cheney started attacking us, I sent her the syllabus from my new Music as Discourse class. It had Beethoven and Bach; it also had popular musics, with songs sung at a workers' strike as one example. The result was a new attack—“in the U of Minnesota's humanities program they deal with songs sung at a workers' strike!” She wasn't decent enough to say we deal with many other things, including Bach—or that the questions we ask might be interesting. It was all so phony. I do respect the honest intentions of some of our critics—they're passionate because they don't want the beautiful and wonderful things in Western civilization to go down the tubes. But none of us do—that's far from the point of cultural studies!

In 1992, humanities gave way to CSCL. What exactly happened?

In 1991, it was announced the department would be closed as a cost-cutting move, with its faculty and courses transferred to other units. I was chair at the time. It was flabbergasting, and deeply political. This was our *annus horribilis*—a contentious, fractious time. Ultimately, we got a new department, built on the humanities but much broader. We came out of the ruckus better than we went in. But for a time it was very divisive; it cost us a few of our best grad students, and one of our star professors, Bruce Lincoln [now at the U of Chicago]. We've moved on, though. We have a supportive dean, enrollments are running high, we're up to 15 faculty. I would say that the humanities and cultural studies at the U are flourishing as never before.

Would today's department be recognizable to earlier humanities grads?

They would see a lot of the same things, but in a much broader and richer and more theoretically sophisticated intellectual context. Interestingly, very few institutions had a separate humanities department as we did. All universities teach “the humanities,” of course—literature, philosophy, the arts, history. We had this sort of anomalous

Gary Thomas

Morse-Alumni Distinguished Teaching Professor of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature; director of undergraduate studies and honors

Education: Ph.D., Harvard U (Germanic languages and lit/subfield: music and lit).

Focus: Cultural theory, music, gender-sexuality, comic theory.

Home: A renovated carriage house in St. Paul's Victoria Crossing neighborhood.

Nonscholarly passions: Music (plays his custom-made 10-rank tracker-action pipe organ daily, mostly Bach and Handel); gardening (raises Cymbidium orchids and propagates roses); motorcycling (takes off whenever he can on his 1500C Honda Valkyrie); cooking (one signature dish is linguine with clam sauce).

When the stereo's on, it's ... “Just about anything. Mozart, Wagner, rock—you name it. I like some new bands such as The Decemberists, Magnetic Fields, and Sigur Ros—it's fascinating how they manipulate old codes and create new ones.”

Recent good reads: *The Truth about Dogs*, by Stephen Budiansky (“about why dogs aren't like people; it piqued my interest in evolutionary theory”); *The Botany of Desire*, by Michael Pollan (“it connects to cultural studies in many ways”).

“humanities department”—an interdisciplinary program that started out as “Great Books” and morphed into cultural studies. You can trace the intellectual trajectory—we're simply “the new humanities.” Those “old humanities” courses still exist, by the way; the basic sequences (Modern World, European Heritage, and the ancient world) have remained much the same over the years.

What's the intellectual argument for the new humanities?

Many of us since the late seventies have grasped that you can't continue to offer the courses the way they were constructed in 1945, ignoring sea changes in scholarship. Critical theory, feminist work, ethnic studies, gay and lesbian studies, all came with powerful models for reading history. And we also had new theoretical models—from new theories of language to knowledge-power analyses. Sometimes conservative historians talk disparagingly of “revisionism.” But what is history if not a continual revision of the past, a re-understanding of it?

Are there concrete links between the “old” humanities and the new?

Texts, really. We might discuss the same texts, but in very different ways. The humanities course on the Enlightenment that I taught for years included Voltaire, Rousseau, sometimes Diderot and Tom Paine; would look at visual art and Mozart; would end with *War and Peace* or *Faust*. We still look at the legacy of the Enlightenment, and some of the texts are the same. But we'll also consider, say, Adorno's dialectical critique of the Enlightenment. Dialectical thought is always more interesting than nondialectical thought.

Why do you say that?

Because it's more critical, more productive; it's open-ended and unsettled. It's more likely to get us to the truth of things. I'll leave it at that.

You produced a 1994 book in musicology that is still widely cited.

Yes, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, which I edited with two colleagues. It did break new ground. A 10th anniversary edition is coming, with a fine new article and new introductions.

Your long chapter on Handel was singled out for praise by critics.

And it was met with virtually total silence by the British “Handel establishment,” which made me very happy. I realized they didn't have any arguments. The piece attempted to theorize the ways the history of Handel had been written, with exclusions—and to write a real history. Why did Handel go to Rome? In a traditional history, you'll read, “Rome was a musical center.” Well, Rome was also a center for what today we would call gay culture. I wrote the piece in light of many innuendoes and hints in the literature on Handel and in light of a vast amount of new scholarship on the history of homophobia, the history of lesbians and gay men in the West, and analyses of the relation of the sex-gender system to the writing of history. That's what cultural studies does—it connects and articulates things. You connect material history with ideas with texts with people and biography—you try to get as full and complex a picture—of process, as relations—as you can.

Your article was an attempt to cut through the static—or the status quo?

To clear the air and say, “this is what I think is going on in the man and in the music, and these are the sometimes shameful responses of so-called scholars, who would rather suppress, or ignore, or denigrate what has to be read as evidence.” There's massive repression, displacement, and surpassing phoniness not only in the historical treatment of Handel, but with Walt Whitman, or Tchaikovsky, or Aaron Copland. That's unbecoming of a scholar. “Handel as a gay composer? Better keep music isolated from all that.” But how can you keep music, of all things, isolated from material history, from desire?

This is the sort of question posed in CSCL?

Yes. We teach not rote ideas from specific books, but questions to ask of any cultural text, methods to use. The Latin root of *method* means roughly “road” or “journey”—by what route can we get to what we



want to know? And do the questions we ask matter? Why?

What do you mean?

We ask students to think about why they are becoming educated—what education has to do with their lives, the real world, with citizenship. I've always felt it crucial to make students see that this is their moment in history. They can choose to help shape it or they can let it be shaped by others.

You grew up where?

Hayward, California—the Bay Area. In a lower middle-class family. My father quit the eighth grade to work for General Motors; later he

was a civil servant, a spray painter, for the Navy. He was proud of his trade. My mother taught school as a young woman, but worked as a clerk in a store like Dayton's most of her life. They were hard-working people. They were very proud that I went to college, and to graduate school. My work as a cultural studies scholar isn't their world. And yet it owes something to their experiences as much as to the particularities of my own journey.

What do you love most about what you do?

I know exactly what it is. It's getting to introduce students to new material and new ideas—interesting ideas, provocative ideas, powerful ideas, sometimes life-changing ones. And our students are so good. We have terrific students at the University of Minnesota.

What do you teach?

Sometimes I joke that I'm the "pleasure professor"—music, sex, and comedy. I put together our Introduction to Cultural Studies: Rhetoric, Power, and Desire. I teach Comedy, Text, and Theory and another course I designed called Music as Discourse. Sometimes an advanced course called Wagner's *Ring*: Music, Myth, and Politics. This spring I'll teach a freshman seminar, Words and Things—it deals with how words shape and construct, and assign value and hierarchy to, the things in the material world. I also occasionally teach Gay Men and Homophobia in American Culture, a course I designed that's one of our more popular courses. The material history of gay people is something I've studied a great deal. It's not, by the way, that I read everything through that lens. Rather, it's part of a larger project of cultural studies—the emancipation of the human subject.

Was the latter course the first of its kind at the U?

I think my course Gay Men and Homophobia in the Modern West was the first regular course on gay men when it debuted in the early 1980s. At a certain point in our curriculum, it just became an obvious thing to do. I directed a dissertation by a student in Spanish that I think was the first here to explore gay male issues. I remember the first gay studies course I ever taught—there were 10 of us, and we all felt very transgressive. Today the course Gay Men and Homophobia is taught every semester and gets at least 75 students, both men and women, about half gay-identified and half not.

All of this would seem rather brave—to be the first.

Maybe. OK, I admit it. The course drew some fire. But to be honest, I didn't think much about it at that time. I'd been out since I got here in '71. Someone once said to me, "I've always been in awe of your 'out-

ness.'" But I never thought about it as an audacious thing, which is testimony to the wonderful colleagues I had in the humanities program. It was—and CSCL still is—a very special place.

Students praise your unconventional teaching style. What do they mean?

Oh, I don't know. I think I bring a certain energy; I can be theatrical at times. But please don't say that I put on costumes to bring historical figures to life. I think that I did that twice, very ironically, and it has made its way into a sort of legend. I do try to get students excited about something—and to get them talking. We'll talk about anything.

Anything?

Anything that is a text is fair game. That could be Darwin, The Dixie Chicks, or The Daily Show. Wagner or Wim Wenders. But I certainly don't think that a bumpersticker is as interesting as a Bach fugue—I mean, that's ridiculous. But certainly anything that takes the form of a text might be something we would talk about. Mostly we look at rich, interesting texts—and ways of reading them, and reading them in relation to things that might actually matter in our lives.

“Anything that is a text is fair game. That could be Darwin, The Dixie Chicks, or The Daily Show. Wagner or Wim Wenders.”

What do you hope your students take away from their classes with you?

That education is power. And it's more than that. It's ... that life is short, and we ought to live passionate and considered lives. Not be conformists or automatons. I think we really do have a great deal of agency, especially collectively, to shape what we become. I guess that's the essence of what I want students to get. I would hope students become more engaged, in their own lives and in the world.

Critical thinking for better citizenship.

I think people should be active participants as citizens and as critical thinkers. I think they should cultivate dissent when it's warranted—to speak up, from whatever point on the political spectrum they enter into it, and to consider the stakes. This sounds so old-fashioned, but what enables bad government—or corruption, distortion, or repression—is amnesia and apathy, or phony patriotism.

Phony because ...

Because it's wrapped up as unequivocal support of the governing power's views and actions. Dissent isn't unpatriotic. You can't have a free society, a democratic society, without debate. Participation is important. Thought is important. Arguments, language are important. Yet today serious issues are translated into slogans and visual images. What dominates political and social life is not truth-telling, but spin. At the same time, people are so distracted by consumerism and spectacle—what I call “the distraction industry.” I think they fail to distinguish between the legitimate and the banal, between what's real and what isn't. The University has an increasingly crucial role to play in educating people for critical literacy. Just to be able to read government officials, to read what's going on in the news, or what passes for news these days. Critical literacy is the first step in citizenship.

Open debate is the issue.

Yes. You know, this issue of conservative pundits and ideologues going after higher ed for the alleged “liberal indoctrination” taking place in classrooms—it's a smokescreen. For one thing, I don't think students are that stupid. And—walk into my classroom, or any cultural studies classroom. Students can challenge anything anyone says, as long as they're willing to engage in honest debate. It's true that there's a power relationship involved in teaching—I always joke that “I have the Ph.D. and the chalk”—yet good teaching, especially when it involves provocative ideas, is never indoctrination. I bridle at that notion.

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Screening MEANING

For Keya Ganguly, films such as those of the great Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray have much to reveal about 20th-century social and cultural issues.

Keya Ganguly's father used to call his daughter "the leader of the opposition." No matter what the topic of dinner table conversation in their Calcutta home, Ganguly seemed to take an opposite view from that of her family members.

It's possible that Ganguly inherited this disposition from her grandmother, whom she calls "the most important influence in my life." Although her grandmother was given in an arranged marriage at the young age of 10, she was, nevertheless, a strong woman who encouraged her granddaughter to pursue a Ph.D.

"Such a marriage sounds alarming by our standards," Ganguly says, "but my grandmother was very forward-thinking. Ironically in many Third World countries—including India—women are leaders. In the U.S.—with its supposed superiority in women's rights—we're still talking about if and when we'll have a woman president. The contradiction in the Third World promotes outspoken women like me. I'm not unique; I'm a type."

Ganguly—now an associate professor in the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature—has engaged in all kinds of contradictions as she has crossed continents and academic communities as a scholar and teacher. In college, at Delhi University in India, she majored in English. She earned her degree despite the fact that she had, as she casually mentions, "often missed classes." She graduated with honors—then was troubled to find that her degree was not recognized in the U.S.

"There's this sense that non-Western universities are not equivalent to those in the United States," she says. "But by virtually any standard, many are tougher."

While still in her teens, Ganguly moved with her family to the United States, where she earned another undergraduate degree, in journalism and mass communication, at

Philadelphia's Temple University. Knowing early on she wanted to be an academic—"because I wanted to find other world views," she says—she went on to complete a Ph.D., in communications, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

When Ganguly came to the University of Minnesota, in 1997, she says, "few were studying postcolonial culture and literature—it was then a very new field. Today, everyone and their grandma is doing it, but I bring the unique perspective of coming from a country that is thousands of years old. The Silk Road [the 4,000-mile-long network between Europe and Asia] began in India. Transformational grammar was first written by an Indian scholar, Panini, who was a Sanskrit grammarian who lived sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries. Yet this is a country about which we still know very little."

Literature and film

With a foot in both the U.S. and India, Ganguly set out to study people who were, in many ways, like herself: Indian immigrants living with the heritage and traditions of an ancient world as they broke new ground in the United States. Her first book, *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity*, based on her dissertation, was a case study of a middle-class diasporic Indian community in the southern New Jersey suburbs.

It is the story of everyday life, of food and its attendant rituals, of media consumed, of the everyday contradictions inherent in the hybrid existences of 20 immigrant families caught between the lure of American ideals and nostalgia for their former lives.

Having established herself as an ethnographer, Ganguly found herself at an intellectual crossroads. With her training as a literary scholar, she'd always aimed to work in comparative literature, she says. "But I was something of a magpie in com-

parative literature's nest—magpies are interlopers and don't really belong in the nests they often inhabit. I wanted to find a way to link literature and media to ethnographic theory and practice."

In turning her attention to film studies, Ganguly found an ideal vehicle for her varied interests. She investigates how cinema creates and reflects intricate social, historical, and cultural values—revealing, in other words, "how people tell us about themselves."

Her film courses (she also teaches courses in comparative lit and in cultural studies) aim to help students "read" a production in its relationship to culture as well as to explore theoretical models that have shaped thinking about the cinema.

Teaching 21st-century students how to read film, she maintains, is an important way to engage them in thoughtful and productive discussion.

"We can't assume people will have read the canon [of works presumed to be great literature or philosophy]," she says. "We can assume they've seen movies. Film makes it easier to relate to the context of their own lives—we can use that connection to teach conceptual thinking. This is what film study brings to the table.

"This is not to say that Disney is the same as Proust," she emphasizes. "There is a hierarchy. But studying film can help us understand how societies understand themselves. And they can help us sort



“Disney is not the same as Proust. There is a hierarchy. But studying film can help us understand how societies understand themselves.”

through questions like, How do we live in a world of Rambo? How can we recognize the difference between *Top Gun* and the Gulf War? This leads to plenty of critical thought about social and cultural issues.”

Ganguly’s primary focus these days is on the avant garde and popular cinema of

Ganguly describes Ray as a master storyteller whose works are as literary as they are cinematic—films that are both deeply affecting and visually powerful, and that also succeed as social and political commentaries. She is writing a book specifically on his representations of femininity, cri-


postcolonial literature to the philosopher Theodor Adorno. All of her work is aimed at critiquing issues of identity and illuminating what she calls “the sociology of culture.” The ultimate goal, she says, is to “bring these ideas into conversation, as I do in my teaching. That’s the reason I became an academic. I want my students to ask questions, dig for information, discuss and write about ideas intelligently. I want them to relate texts to social situations. I want them to think.”

Little, in her view, matters more to the University and to society than teaching and learning in the humanities. “Why should we care what we are doing at the University?” she asks rhetorically.

“Some responses are framed in terms of whether the University is going to be ‘useful to business.’ Yet we’re here not only because we make possible patents or medical breakthroughs or technical innovations, but because knowledge is important in itself. The University’s business is, fundamentally, to teach young people how to think critically. People outside the university must be persuaded of that.

“I will say this for sure as a scholar of culture and history,” she adds: “No civilization has

ever been able to declare its greatness on the basis of science and technology alone. They’ve all had great philosophy and great art. Culture matters. Creativity and critical thinking matter. It’s a matter of survival. As a society, we must rethink our priorities, because we are at a crossroads politically and in every other way.”

That, of course, is where the work of Ganguly and other humanities scholars comes in. “There’s so much we need to know if we are to prepare a critically astute citizenry,” Ganguly says. “What are the effects of media on young people? That surely is a fundamental issue. We’ve barely begun to explore it.”—**Mary Shafer** 



Keya Ganguly teaching a cinema/media studies class in Folwell Hall.

South Asia, and especially the works of the Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray, whom she calls a “canonical director of postcolonial film.” Invariably ranked among the world’s greatest 20th-century filmmakers, Ray made films that expressed universal humanistic themes even as they focused, more immediately, on the rise of the Indian middle class, on consciousness and contradiction in the development of feminine identity, and on the sense of alienation felt by large sections of India’s educated urban middle-class of India.

(Among Ray’s most acclaimed films on these themes are *Pather Panchali* [1955], *Jalsaghar* [“The Music Room” 1958], and *Charulata* [1964].)

sis, and modernity in West Bengal, the northeastern Indian state whose villages and cities (including Calcutta) provide the settings for most of Ray’s films.

Ganguly’s work brings new strengths to a department well-known for its expertise in film criticism, history, and theory (as well as, more recently, in film production). The department also is home to the U’s relatively new film/media studies major, an interdisciplinary program that incorporates varied courses across the College of Liberal Arts.

The case for humanities

Besides Ray, Ganguly has published work on subjects from Harlequin romances to

Multiple layers

by Mark Fiddler

“Essentially, when I was learning to analyze the art of René Magritte, I was learning to analyze the law.”

I graduated from the U of M College of Liberal Arts in 1985 with a major in humanities, the “predecessor” department to cultural studies and comparative literature. Much of my work was centered around critical theory, semiotics, and post-modern theory, approaches that have flourished in CSCL. I loved my studies, even though I didn’t realize at the time how it would shape my way of thinking and my future career.

I recall being enraptured in a humanities class studying Roland Barthes, the guru of French semiotics. I learned to focus critically on a “text,” whether music, painting, or film, and see in it multiple layers of meaning—cultural, social, and political.

Such critical thinking has been derided in some circles as “political correctness,” usually when its outcomes (specific critiques of “great art,” for instance) challenge established views. That charge does an injustice to the rigorous methods of thought and analysis that are taught in humanities and cultural studies. What I learned from my courses with Gary Thomas and other humanities/CSCL professors was nothing less than how to think for myself, with intelligence and complexity—not just about a work of art, but about the complex world around me.

My humanities education laid the foundation for a rewarding career in law. After I graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1988, I served as

an assistant Hennepin County public defender and Minnesota assistant attorney general. In 1993, I founded a nonprofit law program to serve Native Americans involved in the child welfare system. The following year, I was awarded a Kellogg International Leadership Fellowship, aimed at encouraging leadership strategies to benefit dispossessed communities.

meaning. I learned to see multiple layers of meaning and compelling interpretations beyond the obvious or the assumed. I learned to think creatively and intuitively as well as rigorously and methodically; to see the larger context, to apply and synthesize useful perspectives and insights from philosophy, literature, history, and other disciplines. And I learned how to subject

all my insights, judgments, and interpretations to logical analysis.

Good lawyers likewise require this capacity to refuse surface meanings, to think, “no, I do not accept that interpretation—that’s wrong.” But then good lawyers must move beyond the intuition of incorrectness to examine an entire field of law and its history—to fully understand its context so as to form an argument. Finally, the argument must be subjected to the test of logic and to basic concepts of justice. So essentially, when I was learning to analyze the art of René Magritte, I was learning to analyze the law.

I once litigated a case to the Minnesota Supreme Court, which, adopting my argument, held that Minnesota’s State Constitution provides greater protections to the accused

than does the U.S. Constitution. My humanities training inspired me to fight this case, to not take “no” for an answer, and to refuse to accept the meaning of a certain text—here no less than the Constitution of the United States.

A humanities/CSCL education can be a very powerful thing. 



Mark Fiddler, in a Hennepin County courtroom.

I now am in solo practice representing court-appointed advocates for children in cases across Minnesota. Throughout my career, I have relied on the habits of thinking I first learned in humanities to work for justice on behalf of the powerless.

In humanities, I learned to examine a text and to refuse to accept the surface

Mark Fiddler earned his B.A. in humanities (now part of CSCL) in 1985 and his J.D. in law in 1988 from the University of Minnesota. His Minneapolis-based solo practice focuses on adoption law, family law, and issues involving juveniles and the Indian Child Welfare Act. Other areas include government and legislative issues and appellate practice. He is an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe, a member of the Minnesota American Indian Bar Association, and chair of the Children and the Law Section of the Minnesota State Bar Association. His spouse, Elizabeth Seaquist, is an endocrinologist in the U’s Medical School, and son George (the couple also have a daughter, Grace) is a U student who is, Fiddler says, “thinking about majoring in CSCL.”

STAGED READINGS

by Polly Carl

“I learned to translate plays from paper to a cultural experience involving lights, sound, costumes, and sets.”

This past March I was in Tokyo at the Tokyo International Festival of theatre. I found myself sitting in the dark trying to read an English translation of a Palestinian play—which was being performed in Arabic with Japanese subtitles.

The experience stands out as one of my most memorable moments in the theater—one of those moments when art and politics collide and language and performance both connect us and keep us divided.

I know that to be an audience member is a necessary part of the artistic experience, of the live moment when we come face to face with actors translating context, movement, sound, politics, and language. In Tokyo, I

was actively engaging dueling discursive realities in a highly overt way—but the experience captures the essence of what I do everyday as producing artistic director at The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

I came to the theatre through cultural studies. My Ph.D. work in comparative studies in discourse and society taught me to be a reader—a reader of texts, be they objects of art, political ads, or architectural structures. I learned to be the consummate audience member working to untangle competing meanings as well as the signs and symbols that make language and its translation so incredibly complicated.

Like many students in CSDS, I came to the program with the intention of living



Polly Carl, at the historic Pantages Theatre, downtown Minneapolis.

out my life in a liberal arts college somewhere as a tenured professor. But at the point where the academic job market became the inevitable next step, I began to wonder how one discursive reality—a dissertation about identity, performance, and academic disciplines—might translate in the “real” world.

I happened upon a grantwriting job at The Playwrights' Center, a national organization, based in Minneapolis, that fosters the development of new plays for the stage. Admittedly, the theater was not my area of expertise. I had focused my interdisciplinary graduate work on film theory, literary criticism, queer performance, and women's studies.

Of course, I had read various plays during that time. But I had not passed hours in the rehearsal hall translating a script into a theatrical event. I wasn't trained as a director, and I wasn't secretly writing plays on the side. I wasn't a theater insider.

Yet it became clear to me that I had not only translatable skills but skills essential to the development of new plays. I immediately began reading plays, talking with writers, learning the language of the theater insider. I applied my CSDS training in textual analysis to the reading of scripts, and I learned quickly to translate plays from paper to a cultural experience that includes lights, sound, costumes, and set design.

After four years learning all the various ins and outs of the theater world, I was hired three years ago as the center's producing artistic director. I now have the privilege of working with some of the most talented playwrights and theater artists in the country, developing scripts and advocating for the production of new plays.

My transition from cultural studies scholar to theater insider seems a natural one. Cultural studies is about “reading the world,” after all. In my work I am acutely aware that we live in a time and a world when reading across cultures and genres and boundaries is not part of the work, but the work itself. As Susan Sontag wrote of her own experience: “To have access to literature, world literature, was to escape the prison of national vanity, of philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of inane schooling, of imperfect destinies and bad luck. Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom.”

Polly Carl earned her Ph.D. in CSDS (in comparative studies in discourse and society) in 1999. Her dissertation was titled “Making a Good Story: Feeling Good About Queer Theory.” A native of Elkhart, Indiana, Carl holds an M.A. in peace studies and a B.A. in English from the University of Notre Dame.

In 1998, Carl became director of development at The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis. In 2000, she completed a \$1-million capital renovation. She was in 2002 named producing artistic director at the center, where she produces the renowned annual PlayLabs Festival.

“As cliched as this will sound, collective experience has vastly improved my own individual research.”

Collaborative learning

by J.D. Mininger

Reading the acknowledgment pages of academic-type books can be a tantalizing enterprise. The lists of people thanked tend to trace a shorthand version of the author’s intellectual development, while also not infrequently revealing personal tidbits, such as names of friends, lovers, partners, or children.

One such page I read even thanked complete strangers, which naturally drove me to imagine all sorts of wild motivations for such gratitude. What intensifies the voyeuristic appeal of these notices of appreciation are the (admittedly) puerile kicks one gets from discovering who did or did not make it into the author’s clique. In fact, the manner in which authors often establish a pecking order within their roll-call of thank you’s reminds me of a procedure from my youth that was anchored in similarly brutalizing decisions of preference, by which appointed captains alternately chose players for their respective kickball teams on the elementary school playground.

In thinking about what I might share of my graduate experience in CSCL, I found myself digressing into this subject of acknowledgments. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of my graduate career has been the collective intellectual labor shared among CSCL graduate student friends and colleagues, and for this I acknowledge my gratitude.

On top of frequently laboring for labor—as when we banded together to help during the clerical strike at the U of M in 2003 and worked for the possible unionization of graduate students last year—many colleagues frequently and enthusiastically share their intellectual toils, both in the classroom and especially



J.D. Mininger, at a fall 2005 German reunification celebration, Berlin.

outside of it. Though competition, particularly for funding, often separates our interests, I prize the work, intellectual and otherwise, that my classmates share with me.

Some of my favorite classes, although demanding great deal of individual work (the image of a scholar as a solitary figure seems impossible to avoid, doesn’t it?), fostered an intensely cooperative climate. Among the most memorable were Richard Leppert’s “Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory” and Thomas Pepper’s class on Proust’s tremendous tome, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Both were wonderfully focused seminars in which student exchange and collaboration figured prominently.

Often what united effort meant was active participation in discussion along with collective decision-making about class topics, readings, and assignments. One of the finest experiences I had in collaborative intellectual activity involved something more. It took place in a cultural studies graduate seminar in which the professor encouraged me and another colleague to develop a class presentation in tandem.

We ended up literally sitting in front of the keyboard side by side, composing together—on the topic of the politics of friendship, no less. In the end, we deemed our unusual collaboration so successful that we expanded our original 8-page presentation

into a 25-page final paper, written in much the same manner.

And as if this joint effort whose topic silently comments on its own collaborative genesis weren’t cheesy enough, I must add that—as cliched as this will sound—this cooperative scholarship has vastly improved my own individual research. Indeed, the dissertation on which I’m now working owes much to the intellectual labor I shared with fellow students.

So, I thank you, fellow CSCL comrades, past, present, and future. Do not assume, however, that this acknowledgment means I want you on my kickball team. 🐾

J.D. Mininger, a graduate of Goshen College, splits time between Berlin, where he currently resides, and Copenhagen, where he begins his second year as a research fellow at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center. He is working on his dissertation in comparative literature, tentatively titled “‘Nothing Too Much’: The Poetics of Anxiety.”

“I hope to be a part of new group of scholars who think about media in a much more nuanced fashion.”

VIEWING CULTURE

by Stephen Groening

My scholarly interests lie in the discourse of screens—the cinema, television, video games, e-books, and cellular phones. The study of discourse requires accounting for a range of practices and ideas in cultural, social, economic, technological spheres. In turn, this necessitates crossing disciplinary boundaries between the humanities and social sciences. The Ph.D. program in comparative studies in discourse and society (CSDS) encourages just this sort of transdisciplinary research.

I became interested in the intersection of media and society working in the exhibition and distribution arm of the film industry. The media professionals I worked with did not talk of art, texts, or people, but instead of product, marketing, and demographics. The underlying assumption was that marketing data offered windows into individuals' habits. Films were produced and distributed according to these logics.

None of my undergraduate film studies classes, however, treated film in this manner. The prevailing approach was to select worthy films and subject them to the kinds of analytic procedures used for Milton or Shakespeare, without regard for films' distinct history and standing in modern industrial society.

My master's work in cultural studies attempted to reconcile these approaches. In my thesis, I critiqued treatments of the audience as predictable automatons or as impoverished minds needing exposure to the best of the best. Using ethnographic research methods borrowed from anthropology (because of its attempts to stay honest to lived situations), I studied a group of young male fans of the television program “South Park.” This show has been a source of considerable anxiety for those concerned about the relationship of television to child development, civil discourse, national character, and moral values. Not surprisingly, those I spent time with did not fit a simple model of viewership, nor did they offer reassurance about the potentials of contemporary U.S. television.

Visual media are the preeminent com-

munication forms of the last 150 years. Analyzing these forms as an aggregation of individual messages limits our understanding of visual media's place in society and culture. If the mass media is a “marketplace of ideas,” to use the John Stuart Mill phrase, it is important to grasp not just what is traded in that market, but who controls it, what transaction procedures are followed, and the differentials in power among producer, distributor, and consumer.

The conflicts over control of technology, content, and distribution have become more acute in the past few decades as media networks have gone beyond the nation as the central organizing principle and have begun more transnational and global procedures and modes of address.


Global visual media

My interests in global visual culture and media proliferation intensified during a trip to Ethiopia. I knew that Ethiopia had its own national TV networks and a relatively vibrant film culture, and so was looking forward to examples of this on my Ethiopian Airlines flight. On board a plane filled with apparently very wealthy Ethiopians, I discovered that every film or television program shown was produced or distributed by a Hollywood company, even the documentary on Ethiopian Olympians. I started to wonder what role international travel and the rise of mass tourism had in the globalization of visual media. Subsequently, I began researching the history of in-flight entertainment, which dates back to the age of zeppelins.

A study of the discourse of screens opens up questions and pathways which I could not pursue in a traditional film department. I hope to be a part of new group of scholars who think about media



Stephen Groening, at the Hollywood Theatre, Northeast Minneapolis.

and viewing behavior in a much more nuanced fashion, considering the relationships among culture, technology, and the economy. The CSDS program, with its investment in transdisciplinary work, is able to support and encourage such crucial investigations of our contemporary culture and society. 

Stephen Groening is a Ph.D. student in CSDS. His dissertation is titled “Connected Isolation: Mobile Screens and Globalized Media Culture.” He earned a B.A. in literature and film from Hamilton College in 1994 and an M.A. in cultural studies from Claremont Graduate U in 2001. He spent five years working in Hollywood in television production, film distribution, and film exhibition.

Keep in touch. Let us know of your scholarly, professional, and creative achievements (see page 2 for how to contact us).

A new home for CSCL

During the winter break of this academic year, CSCL will move from Folwell Hall, where it has been for nearly 15 years, to the newly renovated Nicholson Hall. Our departmental office will be on the second floor next to that of our new neighbors, the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Studies.

Undergraduate advising enhanced

Stephanie Kuhn joined CSCL this fall as a full-time undergraduate adviser. With the director of undergraduate studies, Kuhn will redesign the department's advising, outreach, and promotional activities.

Department faculty grows

The department recently has added three new faculty members. One, professor **Shaden Tageldin**, is featured in this magazine. Both of the other recent hires are cinema specialists. **Leo Chen** hails from the University of California, Los Angeles, where his work focused on critical studies, film, television, and digital media. **Hisham Bizri** comes from the University of California, Davis, where he was an assistant professor of art and art history. As filmmakers, Chen and Bizri will help CSCL take modest steps in the direction of offering instruction in film and video production.

A faculty search now under way in the College of Liberal Arts will bring us additional new faces.

CSCL events

Salman Rushdie forum

CSCL professor **Tim Brennan**, a leading authority on the work of Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie, will introduce and moderate a November 10 lecture by Rushdie. This Westminster Town Hall Forum event will be 12 noon to 1 p.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church, on the Nicollet Mall at 12th Street in downtown Minneapolis. Forums are free and open to the public; they also are broadcast on Minnesota Public Radio (91.1 FM in the Twin Cities).

Arab Cinema and Society conference

Stay tuned for details of a March conference on "Arab Cinema and Society" that CSCL will host in conjunction with the Walker Art Center. The event is being organized by professor **Hisham Bizri** and grad students **Mahzer Al-Zoby**, and **Imed Labidi**.

Out of Time conference

In October, the department's graduate students hosted their second international conference, "Out of Time: Theorizations of Culture and the Political." The conference focused on changing notions of time and temporality (as reflected in the workplace, the global economy, and in communications); presentations and discussions addressed how these changes are represented in film, art, literature, critical thought, and other texts.

Grants, fellowships & awards

Faculty

John Archer received a McKnight Research Award for 2004–07.

Hisham Bizri received a Rockefeller Foundation award to attend the Bellagio Study and Conference Center, a Jerome Foundation grant for a film project, a grant to build a Web library for the undergrad program in studies in cinema and media culture, and a faculty residency in the U's new Institute for Advanced Study (IAS).

Leo Chen received a 2005–07 Graduate School grant. **Shaden Tageldin** received the 2005 Bernheimer Prize for the best dissertation in comparative literature, the McKnight Summer Fellowship and a faculty residency in the new IAS.

Graduate students

Cecilia Aldarondo received a MacArthur Fellowship; **Meredith Gill** landed an Edward Said Summer Language Fellowship and a Social Science Research Council

Predissertation Training Fellowship; **Cecily Marcus** was tapped for the U's Mellon Foundation-supported position of postdoctoral associate; and **J.D. Minger** and **Brynnar Swenson** each received a doctoral dissertation research fellowship or grant.

Four CSCL students received awards from CLA's Graduate Research Partnership Program, which provides research stipends for research collaborations with CLA faculty: **Marisol Alvarez** (collaborating with CSCL faculty member **Thomas Pepper**); **Graeme Stout** (with **Cesare Casarino**); **Julie Wilson** (with **Robin Brown**); and **Holley Wlodarczyk** (with **John Archer**).

Gauthi Sigthorsson was appointed lecturer at the U of Greenwich, London; and **Jonathan Thomas** was admitted to the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program.

New books by faculty

Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House by **John Archer** (U of Minnesota Press, 2005).



Traces the evolution of the modern American dream house from 17th-century England to today's American suburbs.

Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right by **Tim Brennan** (Columbia U Press, forthcoming 2006).

Explores key turning points in the recent history of American intellectual life, taking stock of contemporary social, cultural, and political currents.



Re-Takes: Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages by **John Mowitt** (U of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Explores the complications inherent in the study of the "other" and offers a theoretical reevaluation of "film languages," both visual and verbal.



Gary Thomas interview, continued from page 7

You have maintained faith in education?

Everything comes back to education. It's hard to shake loose a "true believer," no matter where on the political spectrum they're from. But most students come to the classroom in good faith—to inquire, to debate, to learn. That's why the "indoctrination" charge is so insulting. I see it as a concerted attempt by some to direct attention away from critique. Social movements since the sixties and theoretical advances in intellectual culture pose threats to the maintenance of power by those who've traditionally held it. Education has been a central front in this struggle. That's why universities are under attack.

Here as elsewhere.

Yes, attacks on this University, among others.

One result is shrinking governmental support for education. Another is the attempt to impose "standards," or to censor ideas. But what is most profound is the withdrawing of the status long accorded to a free university, and to higher learning itself. All of this plays into a larger movement. The more education people have, the less likely you are to have an obeisant citizenry. We think critical thought, critical thinkers, are important—that the central question of any education is, "What's really going on here?"

But that's threatening to some?

To some, yes. There's a Bible verse: "When salt has lost its savor, wherewith will it be salted?" When you've lost the desire to know, to ask the really "salient" questions, then

you've lost the game. When you move bag and baggage into a certain camp, a certain way of thinking, then you're not a true scholar or an honest critic—and you can't be a free citizen, either.

Do you see this more today?

Yes, and on all sides of the spectrum—not just conservatives, but liberals who censor work out of fear of a backlash. Reticence even among otherwise credible academics.

What are you working on now?

It's a look at cultural studies roughly 40 years since its start. Our work is now closely linked to work in many other fields, of course. But cultural studies continues to be a center of intellectual ferment, of transformation, both in the academy and in the public sphere. 🌊



“Critical thinking—in the deepest sense—is nothing less than a necessity.”

Collective passion

by John Mowitt

When I came to the University of Minnesota in 1985, the department I now chair did not exist. At that time cultural studies and comparative literature existed in virtual form as an undergraduate degree-granting program in humanities and a graduate degree-granting program in comparative literature.

These units had no official institutional links, but shared intellectual links as peer departments in the U's College of Liberal Arts. Both units had a commitment to the new trends—theoretical, historical, and social—that by the mid-eighties had shaken up and deeply transformed inquiry in both the humanities and the social sciences.

In 1992, with the closure of the humanities department (an administrative decision not without controversy), five of its professors joined with colleagues in comparative literature (itself endangered) to create the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature. Under the leadership of then chair Richard Leppert, the department began its steady Phoenix-like rise, preserving many of the curricular strengths of the past while building a remarkable new intellectual community.

The department today

Today, we are a department of 15 faculty members focused on expanding the critical and theoretical understanding of human communities and their cultural products. Our program has, in just over a decade, become a model for cultural studies at other universities nationwide. Our faculty includes experts on topics from the visual and performing arts to global literatures to all aspects of our built environment. We have 50 students pursuing Ph.Ds. (in comparative studies in discourse and society or in comparative literature), and 200 undergrad majors (in cultural studies and comparative literature or in studies in cinema and media culture).

And what distinguished our faculty in the mid-eighties—internationally recognized scholarship and acclaimed teaching—is as true now as it was then. Just this past year we have seen the publication of three new books by our faculty (see page 14). In addition, faculty this past year have published a total of 22 articles and reviews in distinguished venues—with more sure to come as many of us complete work made possible in part by prestigious research fellowships we have received, as well as research residencies at major institutes and museums.

John Mowitt, professor and chair of CSCL, joined the U's faculty in 1985. His research and teaching focus on the history and politics of critical theory; cinema and media studies; and music. He has been honored by the College of Liberal Arts as a Scholar of the College and by the U for outstanding contributions to graduate-level education. He is a senior editor of *Cultural Critique* (a leading journal housed in CSCL [<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cul/>]).

Mowitt, who grew up in the Caribbean and Latin America, earned his Ph.D. (in comparative lit) from the U of Wisconsin after abandoning a career as a drummer. Among his many publications is a 2002 book on percussion (*Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking*). He lives in Minneapolis with his spouse, Jeanine Ferguson (an administrator at the U), and daughter, Rosalind.

Our graduate students have been similarly active. In all, our Ph.D. students published 15 articles and reviews this past year, and gave many public lectures and presentations—clear indicators that we have an enormously talented group of future educators in our growing department. They contribute in many ways to the intellectual vitality of the University and the Twin Cities. In October, they hosted their second international conference here, which brought together many scholars for productive discussions of culture and politics.

Significant in its own right, this scholarly productivity also informs and stimulates the teaching mission of the department. Our faculty is well-known for its exemplary teaching. Indeed, six of us in CSCL have received major teaching awards (Gary Thomas has been honored twice). All this is ample testimony to the continuing dedication of our faculty to the work of—to invoke Socrates—examining life and involving our students in this adventure.


Our distinguished profile of productivity expresses a collectively held passion for research, teaching, and service—not simply in the abstract, but in relation to the particular vision and commitment of CSCL. If our historical moment teaches us anything, it is that learning how to examine life as it unfolds creates knowledge that is more than simply useful or marketable—it is profoundly necessary.

Our students learn to draw on many critical tools and intellectual perspectives to be informed and discerning “consumers” and “readers” of culture. They gain insight into how differences (ethnic, religious, sexual, geopolitical and many others) inflect cultural experience. They begin to understand how “our” heritage is situated within the full geopolitical and transcultural context of its emergence. Ultimately, they develop the habits of mind needed for engaged global citizenship—not least the ability to critically examine life as it unfolds (in all the words, sounds, and images that make up everyday life; and in the larger political and social actions that shape world cultures).

New opportunities

When I joined the humanities department, it was housed in Ford Hall. During the winter break this year, our burgeoning department will move from our current location in Folwell Hall into a newly renovated Nicholson Hall. We are thrilled about our new scholarly digs, especially because they will be designed to meet the distinctive pedagogical needs of our department.

Two auditoriums will feature state-of-the-art video/film projection facilities and top-notch sound systems. We'll also have a beautifully restored “fireplace room” for public lectures and receptions. And a patio in the rear of the building will offer new possibilities for bringing majors, faculty, graduate students, and alums together.

I invite you to connect/reconnect with the U's humanities/CSCL community, either by actively involving yourself in departmental life or by sustaining it from afar (for example, through gifts for scholarships and fellowships, which are crucial to our ongoing vitality). Collective passion is infectious and—as we all know—often highly productive. 

The meaning of legacy

by Colleen Donahue

In this issue, Minneapolis attorney Mark Fiddler attributes his success as an attorney to the critical thinking skills he learned in as a humanities major at the U. That got me thinking more about the meaning—and power—of *legacy*.

Mark is among the countless CSCL alumni I have met who credit their education for many of the satisfactions and rewards they have experienced in their personal and professional lives. Many, like Mark, were in the humanities program that, along with comparative literature, combined to create CSCL in 1992.

Many of the great texts and ideas, and artists and thinkers, that earlier graduates remember from their humanities courses remain at the heart of the department—and so, too, do the deep respect for learning and the penchant for bold and creative thinking that humanities and CSCL alumni alike have carried with them into their lives and careers.

These alumni are from all walks of life. They are professors and accountants; performing artists and arts administrators; business leaders, attorneys, public officials, and even physicians. Whatever their chosen vocation, what all humanities/CSCL graduates have in common is a firm belief in the power of an outstanding liberal arts education to enrich their lives and to make the world a better place. They credit their classes in Folwell Hall (or other buildings) with making them smart thinkers, engaged citizens, and lifelong learners—people who can see the full complexity of the world around them, who can appreciate beauty and find deep pleasure in books and art (among many aspects of cultural life), and who think deeply and imaginatively about their lives and the larger world.

As a development officer for the College of Liberal Arts, I am proud to help this remarkable department secure private funding to support breakthrough scholarship and to recruit the very best students, both graduate and undergraduate. It truly is about legacy: Just as today's research benefits future generations, today's students will be tomorrow's scholars and practitioners.

If you wish to help a student experience a life-transforming education like the one that you enjoyed, I hope you will consider making a contribution to the John Mowitt Fellowship Fund, or creating a new scholarship or fellowship fund to benefit CSCL students. These gifts have enormous impact. And your gift may qualify for a match through the University's 21st Century Graduate Fellowship Fund or the Promise of Tomorrow Scholarship program, doubling the impact of your investment.

“Humanities/CSCL grads credit their classes with making them smart thinkers, engaged citizens, and lifelong learners.”

There are many possible ways for alumni and friends of the University to help sustain the future excellence of CSCL and other liberal arts programs at the University. Private gifts are more crucial than ever at a time of declining state support. Please contact me to talk about how you can make a difference.

On behalf of chair John Mowitt and the CSCL faculty, staff, and students, I thank all of you who already have given generously to the College of Liberal Arts, to the CSCL department, and to support research and teaching in cultural studies and the humanities. The generosity of our alumni, friends, and community partners is helping to sustain the excellence and impact of the University's programs—ensuring a strong legacy for generations to come. 🌿



Terry Faust

Colleen Donahue works closely with CSCL as a development officer for the College of Liberal Arts. To discuss how you can make a difference for CSCL faculty and students, please contact Donahue directly at donah071@umn.edu or 612-626-7642.

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“In a society distracted by media spectacle and consumer culture, nothing is more crucial—to citizenship, to democracy—than critical literacy. This is the project of cultural studies.”—CSCL professor Gary Thomas