

Encompass

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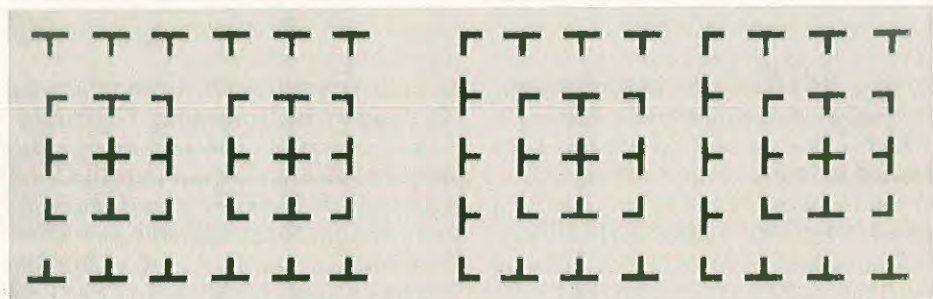
Spring 1990

Focus on: Literature and the other arts

Indiana University's Comparative Literature Program offered courses as early as 1954 and researched issues concerning interrelations among the arts. It has since emerged as a leading center of interarts studies, attracting students from as far away as Europe and the Far East, who join the program for MA and PhD work in literature and music or literature and the visual arts. During the 1960s, courses in interarts studies laid much of the groundwork for what would later develop into film studies, and in the 1970s the Comparative Literature Program created what may be this country's only course devoted entirely to concrete poetry.

Faculty members involved in teaching interarts studies agree the field is enjoying a noticeable resurgence of interest among undergraduates as well as graduate students. This may be in part because our program is unique in allowing undergraduate students to specialize in the study of literature and the other arts. But this alone cannot account for the growing popularity of interarts courses at IU and elsewhere. According to Giancarlo Maiorino, who frequently teaches comparative literature courses relating literature and Renaissance art, interarts studies is gaining ground because the recent cycle of overspecialization in the academic community has run its course. Consequently, both the academic institution and the student body itself have given the impetus to expand toward more interdisciplinary forms of study.

Although much of the resurgence of interest in interarts courses originates with the students themselves, Maiorino knows that not all students come to the field aware of the challenges and opportunities offered to them in an area so diverse. He believes that the inter-



Moonshot Sonnet, by Mary Ellen Solt

disciplinary character of interarts study "ought to lead toward a synthesis of cultural and intellectual history, as well as aesthetics, with the discipline of a specialist in the field." Such a goal, of course, requires the student of interarts relations to master basic academic training in more than one scholarly area. "There are no shortcuts to expertise," Maiorino cautions. But, as growing enrollments attest, the challenges for students lead to substantial rewards.

David Hertz, who often teaches courses in literature and music, concurs that to be successful, interarts students must develop a more broadly based competence than that typically expected of the student of literature alone. "You have to know more with this sort of approach, not less," says Hertz. "You must have strong training in one of the arts as well as a sense of what sort of literature you want to look into." Like Maiorino, Hertz warns against an amateurish approach to interarts studies, and stresses that because the field is so inherently interdisciplinary its students must devise a strategy for limiting it to a manageable size. Part of the fundamental allure of interarts studies grows out of a necessity to establish one's field of investi-

gation. "The students like the sense that if they are really good in combining the fields, they are never in an intellectually subservient position," he says. "There is more of an opening of opportunities with this approach, and more of a space for the student's own voice."

The sense of finding a method with which to clear a space where he can make original contributions was one of the early attractions Hertz felt for interarts studies. In the spring semester, when he teaches a course examining how studies necessitating a specialized knowledge of the arts are actually undertaken, he will investigate what is required of interarts students. "To really know an author's life, someone like, say, Zola," Hertz explains, "you have to know that he wrote about art. This in turn requires that you know something about art yourself. And soon we find that one of the founders of Comparative Literature at IU, Henry Remak, was right when he said that to really know literature requires you to get into all sorts of other spheres of human expression."

Claus Cluever, one of those chiefly responsible for the present format of Comparative Literature's introductory
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The description of graduate students

Anyone trying to discuss the graduate students in Indiana University's Comparative Literature Program quickly comes to appreciate the fabled dilemma of the three blind men trying to describe an elephant. Encountering the trunk, the first blind man describes the elephant as snake-like; feeling the circumference of the legs, the second says it is more like a great tree; standing before the broad flanks, the third says, no, the elephant is most like a wall. Graduate students are similarly marvelous creatures if one can judge from descriptions. To their students, they are instructors; to their instructors, they are students; and to the faculty members with whom they teach and serve on committees, they are like colleagues. Like the fabled blind men, I investigated this academic species to which I belong and which has occasioned so many various descriptions. I recently talked with four of Comparative Literature's graduate students to ask how they see themselves. I discovered that none has yet been able to feel like the integrated being they had hoped to become when entering graduate school, and that the question graduate students perhaps most frequently ask is, "What is a graduate student?"

John Berks, who is currently taking his qualifying exams, and who in spring 1989 won the American Translators Association's graduate student PEN award for his translation of Christine Faur's *Democracy without Women*, feels that a basic problem in graduate life is defining the character of graduate student existence. Each student must first realize that the problem of characterization in terms of action, or doing is personal: "What is it that I, as a graduate student, must do?" Then he or she must begin to come to some conclusions. For the sake of convenience, then, Berks divides graduate life into two stages. "The first phase," he explains, "is the MA, during which you discover that you didn't know what graduate life is like." Berks believes this phase of graduate existence is a period of intense adjustment, during which students discover that the loftier regions of college life are not the pristinely pure realms of learning they had thought them to be when they were undergraduates. Graduate students are introduced to the machinery behind the classes. For those more naive, it can be disillusioning to discover that the stimulating discussions, the unex-

pected insights, and the strategies for reading and writing well are made possible by budgets, committees, and a welter of bureaucratic deadlines.

Berks observes that there is no magic in the machinery behind even the most magical classes, and this is the first lesson graduate students learn whether they enter those classes as teachers or students. "But," he adds, "if you decide that you want to survive the disillusionment, and that you *can* survive it, you move on to the second phase of graduate school, the study for the PhD degree. There you begin to discover your real possibilities by gradually improving your ability to take advantage of the unexpected opportunities graduate life offers."

Fellow graduate student Leslie Ortquist, who is finishing her coursework for the PhD, concentrating in film studies, also sees graduate life as a curiously divided kind of existence. She pictures graduate students as mediators between faculty members and the undergraduate population. They help keep the faculty fresh because of the intellectual level at which they want to explore scholarly questions, and they can make undergraduate life more engaging by virtue of the energy and enthusiasm which, as teachers and, occasionally, as fellow students, they bring to the classroom.

Like Berks, however, she agrees that graduate studies initially involve an intense period of adjustment, beginning when graduate students first realize they must define themselves. Ortquist says, when first coming to IU, "I did not really know what I wanted to do. I had concentrated on French,

English, and art as an undergraduate, and I avoided having to choose between them." She thinks many students coming straight from undergraduate schools spend the early part of their graduate careers bumbling about in an attempt to discover what really interests them. Although this is a necessary part of the attempt at self-definition, both Ortquist and Berks stress that graduate life cannot become rewarding until students discover their own values. "When I found what I loved," Ortquist says, explaining her current work in film studies, "the field became mine. That was when graduate school really turned around." Concerning some of the incoming graduates with whom she is presently taking classes, Ortquist observes that they tend to adopt similar strategies when responding to the anxiety of trying to fill new and unfamiliar roles. "The younger students," she says, "want to look like they know what they are doing, but they need to work to find what fascinates them. That is what will sustain them and make them happy. If you aren't fascinated, graduate school won't be worth it."

Ortquist's fellow film student, Jeff Sumler, who is pursuing literary theory and literature as well as film, was initially attracted to comparative literature because of its diversity and the ease with which it allows students to cross departmental boundaries. These are the very qualities that can prove fatal to students who do not quickly and clearly learn to understand themselves and their roles in their own education. "To be a successful graduate student," Sumler explains, "you must be able to combine sustained intellectual exploration with a pragmatic grasp of bureaucracy. You must become a master of organization." He goes on to say that much of what makes graduate school worthwhile stems from what the student manages to acquire outside the classroom. "There are many kinds of knowledge," he says, "and this knowledge circulates through both official and unofficial bodies. I often learn the most from just talking with people." Like Berks, Sumler believes that even though it may be initially disorienting, it is essential for graduate students to serve apprenticeships with the machinery behind the classroom. He explains, "We all need some time in the belly of the beast."



Jeff Sumler

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Focus on interarts studies

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interarts course, Modern Literature and the Other Arts, argues that acquiring a familiarity with diverse genres of human expression is not merely an academic necessity, but is also a practical skill in today's media-dominated environment. "Someone who is not conversant with the languages of music and the visual arts," Cluever says, "is not in touch with what has happened in real life. We live in a time of multimedia; knowing how to encounter these diverse texts is, ultimately, more practical than knowing how to encounter strictly verbal texts."

Cluever says that most interarts students come to class not expecting to encounter texts that may have been around since the turn of the century without having been assimilated into the cultural mainstream. "They can find an early Dada text quite surprising," he says by way of example. Most students have come into contact with such texts indirectly, but in interarts courses they have the chance to directly engage these works with their intelligence. Cluever explains that most students find this a rewarding experience. They learn "to understand and be able to talk about things which on first encounter sound very strange, or things they have never looked at as art — for instance, that an advertising logo can be discussed as a minitext. For most students it is exciting to acquire this ability." Cluever speculates that enrollment is growing because interarts courses provide intellectual excitement while simultaneously encouraging students to acquire a practical skill.

Mary Ellen Solt, a pioneer in the

study of concrete poetry at IU, also feels that interest in the field has been rekindled in part because interarts students gain a kind of cultural competence through their classwork. She says students are often anxious at first, but quickly discover they can successfully deal with materials that initially seem difficult. Solt observes that students are "apt to enjoy representational art at first, but they are open to learning and feel that they should learn. They usually end up liking nonrepresentational art." Solt thinks one reason interarts courses are so successful is because students come to class possessing a great interest in media and an intuitive feel for much of the art they encounter both in and out of the classroom. Many of the raw materials for constructive participation in the arts are already in place before a class ever begins. She says, "We teach people how to enjoy participating in the world of the arts."

Like the others, Solt stresses the need for sustained institutional support if interarts studies are to continue to flourish. IU's art museum and its outstanding School of Music are two major reasons why interarts study has proven so fruitful. But as David Hertz says, "We need even more backing from the departments themselves to allow us to collaborate and to learn from each other." Narrow specialization may have run its course in academic life, but as everyone involved in studying interarts relations already knows, broadly based intellectual inquiry requires equally broadly based institutional support, financial as well as intellectual. Intellectual inquiry requires more than just the enthusiasm of students willing to ask questions and to investigate issues crossing traditional departmental and disciplinary lines.

In the news

Robert L. Duncan, BA'53, PhD'64, is co-author of a humanities text, *Arts, Ideas and Civilization*, published by Prentice-Hall, 1989. He is a professor at Illinois State University, Normal.

Mark Spilka, MA'53, PhD'56, won the 1988 Harry T. Moore Distinguished Scholar Award for lifelong service to and encouragement of D. H. Lawrence studies. A resident of Providence, R. I., he has three books being published: *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny*, *Why the Novel Matters: A Postmodern Perplex*, and *D. H. Lawrence in Changing Times: A Normative Progress*.

Linda Spence Wootton, BA'60, is a faculty member of the English and Linguistics Department at Indiana-Purdue at Fort Wayne. She is also a member of the board of directors for the Association of Professional Writing Consultants.

Robert K. McMahon, BA'74, teaches Chinese at the University of Kansas and has published *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* with E.J. Brill, 1988.

Michele M. Hilmes, BA'75, received her PhD in cinema from New York University in 1986. She is assistant professor of communication arts at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala. The University of Illinois Press will publish her book, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, in June 1990.

Geta James LeSeur, MAT'75, PhD'82, was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California-Berkeley from 1986 to 1988. She is currently a faculty member in women's studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

A collection of short stories by Vilas Sarang, PhD'78, entitled *The Musk Deer and Other Stories*, will be published by Penguin of India. Sarang, who is professor and head of the Department of English at the University of Bombay, has also founded a new journal entitled the *Bombay Literary Review*.

Jim Abrams, MA'73, has been the Associated Press bureau chief in Beijing throughout the recent crackdown by the Chinese government on the student-led prodemocracy movement.

Ibrahim Dawoud, MA'81, PhD'83, who teaches in Jordan, has returned to IU as a Fulbright exchange scholar in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures.

Carol E. Harding, PhD'85, living in Albany, Oreg., had *Merlin and Legendary Romance* published in Garland Publications in 1988.

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Graduate students

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Kathy McHugh, who also studies literary theory and film, and who is finishing her PhD dissertation, believes that even after graduate students have managed to discover what fascinates them and have learned to function as students, teachers, and faculty colleagues, a sense of camaraderie with fellow graduate students remains essential to their academic survival. McHugh argues that sustained contact with fellow students, as well as with faculty outside of the classroom, becomes increasingly vital to maintaining one's sense of humor and enthusiasm. Otherwise, as students finish their coursework and qualifying exams and finally begin researching and writing dissertations, the hard-won interests that made such progress possible can increasingly isolate them in a range of scholarship so narrow and solitary that the intellectual curiosity that brought them to comparative literature in the first place may begin to atrophy. "We can't afford to feel as if we are in an ivory tower," McHugh says. "We have to feel that what we do has practical effects, that it connects us to others."

All stress that one of the ways for graduate students to feel they are having practical effects is through teaching. Another way is by realizing that graduate students, by serving on committees, editing publications, and articulating their views as a group, help shape how they are perceived. This in turn helps to shape the conditions of their education. Graduate students are like the elephant of the blind men in

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that everyone who encounters them seems to encounter something different, but they are unlike that fabled creature in that not only can they sometimes reach out to help direct the ways in which they are perceived, but they can also talk about why they frequently seem a mystery even to themselves. When I asked Jeff Sumler if there were any concluding statement he would like to make summarizing life as a

graduate student, he paused for so long it seemed he might have forgotten the question. Finally, he looked up and laughed. "No," he said, "I can't think of any concluding statement, and that indicates what a fragmented existence graduate students tend to lead. I guess there is no concluding statement which can really summarize them." Each has unique experiences. Each is unique.

—Chris Kearns

Film studies update: So much to see

Sometimes it seems that the Comparative Literature film studies program may offer too much of a good thing. So many films are shown throughout the semester that no brief list of titles such as the following can adequately account for the scope and variety of films students are studying and that the rest of us might ourselves be interested in seeing.

Barbara Klinger's course on Film and Society includes *Scarface* (Howard Hawks), *The Searchers* (John Ford), and *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden). Klinger's Film History and Theory course is showing *Z* (Costa-Gavras), *Adieu Phillipine* (Jacques Rozier), and *The Spy Who Loved Me* (Lewis Gilbert).

In Harry Geduld's Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Western Tradition, students are watching *Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale), *Five Million Years to Earth* (Roy Baker), and *Slaughterhouse Five* (George Roy Hill).

Finally, Authorship in the Cinema, taught by James Naremore, examines the films of Vincente Minnelli and Martin Scorsese, including *Cabin in the Sky*, *Lust for Life*, and *King of Comedy*.

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