Imaginary Lives: On the Passion for Ignorance and the Benefits of Self-Misunderstanding

In the *Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924, author André Breton issues a warning about the imminent death of the imagination and calls for an artistic revolt against modern culture’s growing obsession with logical thinking and practical concerns. Four decades later, Guy Debord, social critic and leader of another revolutionary group, The Situationist International, declares the arrival of a new age dominated by mass media and leading to the replacement of real human relations with imaginary ones. The aim of this presentation is to consider these two seemingly disparate perspectives with the help of Jacques Lacan, an influential psychoanalyst whose concept of ‘the imaginary’ figures at the very heart of all human projects – and projections.

Imaginary Gardens and Real Toads

“Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere” (Albert Einstein). The imagination is most often viewed positively, whereas the imaginary is frequently associated with the unreal and the fictitious, even with madness. Both the imaginative and the imaginary seem to be connected, in turn, with painting, literature, and religion. Using literature and psychoanalysis, this talk will examine some of the implications, both positive and negative, of these terms and their relevance to our lives.

Drone Strikes as Self-Defense?

Preemptive use of force by the United States over the last decade, most notably the ongoing use of armed drones operating far from conventional battlefields, is having a significant impact on the international legal regime and particularly the Jus ad Bellum. Yet this impact need not, as many commentators and scholars have worried, be all bad. Indeed, Plaw argues that it may have some unintended positive effects on the law of self-defense and particularly on the interpretation of Article 51 of the UN Charter. This paper begins by briefly reviewing the famously contentious debates over the meaning of self-defense under Article 51 in the era before 2001, and then sketches an interpretation of how US uses of force, and increasingly those of other states like Israel, Turkey, Russia and Colombia, are reshaping those debates and creating a new practice permitting limited, episodic exercises of force in response to cross-border attacks by non-state actors. This practice has the potential to resolve some inconclusive and sterile debates over the meaning of Article 51 and might permit states the necessary flexibility to confront immediate terrorist threats while avoiding the slippery slope to full-scale preventive war.

A Snapshot of Canadian Indigenous Artists Creating Alternative Cartographies within the Urban Landscape

This talk focuses on the concealed geographies of Indigenous histories in the city of Toronto through selected artworks that, in visually demonstrating an alternative cartography, challenge myths of settlement situated in the colonial narratives of archaeology and geography. Nagam demonstrates that the artworks of Indigenous artists such as Rebecca Belmore, Robert Houle and Jeff Thomas narrate Indigenous stories of place by using the memories and wisdom of Indigenous people in the areas of art, archaeology and geography. Using her own scholarly interventions and artistic work, this talk expands on Nagam’s past and current research into concepts of Native space, the significance of the embodied knowledge of Indigenous people, and the importance of reading the land as a valuable archive of memory and history.

With thanks to the Faculty of Science and General Studies for its generous support.
The 2015 VANIER COLLEGE HUMANITIES SYMPOSIUM
February 2nd – February 6th

IMAGINARIES

This year’s Humanities Symposium will offer a space to reflect on the theme of Imaginaries. The ‘imaginary’ addresses the ways in which individuals come to imagine themselves, their relations with other people, and their communities. Similar to a worldview, an imaginary develops out of the interaction between an individual and a society’s particular way of seeing. In recent years, many have argued that imaginaries have important implications for how each of us self-identifies, acts toward others and navigates our social space.

What is the nature of these imaginaries? From what sources do they take shape? How active or passive are we in their making? To reflect on this theme is also to reflect on whether and how we may re-imagine our world, ourselves, as well as our place within it.

Open to the public, with a special invitation to the Vanier community of students, teachers and staff. All events will take place in the auditorium (A-103).

MONDAY, February 2nd

10:00 – 11:30 VERONIQUE FRASER (University of Toronto, Bioethics)

The Case of Michael S: Medical Decision-Making and the Ethical Imagination

Making medical decisions on behalf of patients who do not have the ability to provide consent to treatment is one of the most common ethical issues encountered in health care today. When a patient’s prior wishes for treatment are unknown, a decision maker must make a decision based on medical “best interest” and what they think the patient would have wanted if he or she were still able to make a choice. This process raises several notable questions: Can we predict with any accuracy which medical interventions a loved one would want? How should we deal with our own biases, values and preferences when making a decision on behalf of someone else? This talk will address some of the key questions and tensions that arise in substitute decision-making and explore how the concept of the ethical imagination might help inform this discussion.

2:30 – 4:00 KEYNOTE EVENT: JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN (CBC Host of WireTap)

An Evening in the Afternoon with Jonathan Goldstein (in conversation w/ Vanier College’s Burt Covit)

CBC Radio host, National Post columnist, author, This American Life frequent contributor, gadfly and Vanier College alumnus, Jonathan Goldstein will be on stage in conversation with his early mentor, photographer, boulevardier, gadfly and Vanier College employee, Burt Covit. Clips from Goldstein and Covit’s radio collaborations will be played and the creative process will be discussed. Discussed, too, will be Vanier College of the eighties, a time when students and teachers alike smoked in the building and wrote in paper notebooks. As well, there will be a slideshow. It will involve drawings on Post-it notes. There will also be sponge cake. If you bring sponge cake.

TUESDAY, February 3rd

8:30 – 10:00 ALANNA THAIN (McGill University, English & Program for World Cinema)

Cinema out of the Box: Collective Experiments with Mobile Movies in Montreal

Cinema Out of the Box is a research-creation project founded by Alanna Thain, in collaboration with her students at McGill, to develop practical tools for a mobile cinema. Today, our media is defined by mobility—devices that can go anywhere for bodies that are always on the move. For some, this means that a “cinematic specificity,” associated with the experience of going to a movie theatre (sometimes called the “cathedral of cinema”) has been lost. But on the contrary, the new mobility of cinema means that we can have “cinematic experiences” in new and unexpected ways. COTB is a completely bicycle powered cinema that relies on audience participation to run, and which can be set up in almost any environment. What remains of cinema when we take it on the road, and what happens to our experiences when we have new contexts, environments, and publics for cinema events?

10:00 – 11:30 HEATHER O’NEILL (Author of The Girl Who Was Saturday Night)

The Artist Before Twelve

Author Heather O’Neill will examine the way in which the influences of an artist’s childhood affect their work for the rest of their lives. She will show how an artist’s inspirations may range from a toy in a cereal box to a paperback book of philosophy, and how these inspirations are then synthesized into a coherent and idiosyncratic portrait of their life. She will reflect on her own personal influences and inspirations from childhood, as well as the way they have shaped her literary work, in order to illustrate this phenomenon.

WEDNESDAY, February 4th

10:30 – 12:00 DAVID MEREN (Université de Montréal, History)

Yaks to Ungava: Canadian Imaginings of ‘Development’ from the Global South to the Arctic, 1945-1960

This talk engages with the entangled histories of Canadian foreign aid and relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canada. Specifically, it traces a proposal in the early 1950s to use the Colombo Plan – the Commonwealth technical assistance program in which Canada was a participant – to transfer yaks from India for use in the “development” of the Inuit population in northern Quebec. While the transfer was ultimately never realized, the episode reveals how questions of race and empire, along with preoccupations to facilitate “modernization” according to a liberal capitalist worldview, informed the imaginary underpinning the Canadian state’s engagement with Aboriginal populations and the Global South. As such, this talk seeks to understand how the history of encounters between natives and newcomers informed Canadian attitudes regarding foreign aid, and vice versa.

3:30 – 5:00 MAGGIE KATHWOOON (Vanier College)

The Expendable Male: Masculinity for the 99%

Despite the progress made in redefining what it is to “be a man” in the 21st century, certain traditional gender notions linger that may contribute to some men accepting that their lives are secondary to other interests. An example of this is the professional athlete. There is mounting evidence that accepted styles of play in both American football and hockey, for example, contribute to brain damage, early death, depression, mood swings, and suicide. However, leagues, fans and the players themselves fail to consider that what is asked of professional athletes is to slowly sacrifice their lives for the sake of spectacle and profit. Given that professional male athletes serve as a powerful model for contemporary masculinity and are often lauded as examples for young boys and adult men, to what extent is their expendability a part of the contemporary masculine imaginary?

THURSDAY, February 5th

8:30 – 10:00 BRIAN ABOUD (Vanier College)

Risk Imaginaries and Imaginary Risks: Danger and Uncertainty in the Tempo of our Time

We, individuals of the contemporary West, are conscious of, focused on and concerned with threats, dangers and mishaps in ways and in degrees that are unprecedented. This attention, in thought and action, to potential future harms and losses flows from, while also giving form to, a particular way of imagining the world, the specific social setting of which we are part and our condition in it. At the heart of this particular imaginary is the notion of risk. This presentation will argue that, in the current time, risk has become a central and pivotal component of collective, personal and organizational imaginaries.