

Cambridge 02138

Ayn Rand, Ph.D. problems, images of Africa

MULTIMEDIA MATTERS

“PROFESSOR VIDEO,” by Craig Lambert (November-December 2009, page 34) left me mildly depressed. Not because I teach here, but because my college-bound daughter is considering applying here. When she was in public school, her parents fought the history teacher who relied on Hollywood movies. Now she would get to watch Keira Knightley in a course on the eighteenth-century novel?

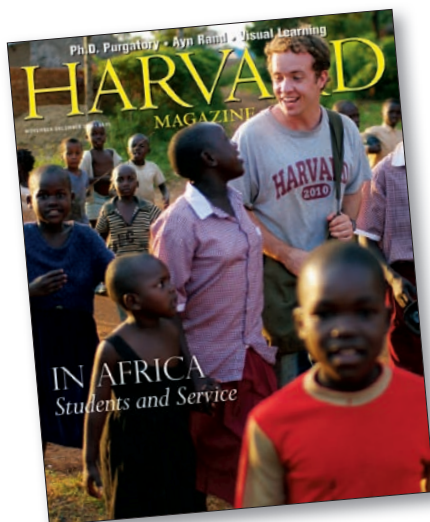
As regards the “most downloaded science animation in history,” which lies closer to my field of expertise: There is a lively debate about whether such movies are helpful in teaching cell biology. In producing these full-color 3-D animations, many creative liberties are taken. For example, the motions of all the molecular players are portrayed as they might appear on the macroscopic scale. They bounce, fall, jiggle, and travel on straight paths toward their reaction partners. The laws of physics forbid any such behavior inside a cell. So the seductive familiarity of these animations makes them at once compelling and potentially misleading. This conflict does not arise when we draw the fundamental principles on the board with chalk.

More generally, what is the urgency to adopt the style of YouTube, just because our students spend their free time with it? I don't recall professors in the '60s adopting the comic book form because their students grew up with Marvel superheroes. What happened to the notion of stretching a student's mind by taking him out of the comfort zone?

MARKUS MEISTER

*Tarr professor of molecular and cellular biology
Cambridge*

Robert Lue, professor of the practice of molecular and cellular biology, responds: No animation



can show everything, in the same way that no textbook or chalkboard diagram can ever do justice to the full complexity of a biological process. The decision not to show random molecular motion in a subset of our animations is based on the particular goals of those animations. The primary focus of *The Inner Life of the Cell* is not simply molecular motion; to include it would have obscured the cellular processes. We have found it more effective to portray molecular motion in other animations. Three years of student assessments indicate that unintended misconceptions on molecular motion arise less frequently from an animation like this one than they do from textbook diagrams.

VISUAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA are not just vehicles to teach with, not just window-dressing to gussy up one's teaching performance. They're texts that need to be questioned and analyzed like any other.

Reading about the latest efforts to use film, videos, images, audio, and interactive media took me back to 1993 and 1994, when I offered a summer professional development program, the Harvard Insti-

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Tel. 617-495-5746; fax: 617-495-0324
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Harvard Magazine (ISSN 0095-2427) is published bimonthly by Harvard Magazine Inc., a nonprofit corporation, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-4037, phone 617-495-5746; fax 617-495-0324. The magazine is supported by reader contributions and subscriptions, advertising revenue, and a subvention from Harvard University. Its editorial content is the responsibility of the editors. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, Mass., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Circulation Department, Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-4037. Subscription rate \$30 a year in U.S. and possessions, \$55 Canada and Mexico, \$75 other foreign. (Allow up to 10 weeks for first delivery.) SUBSCRIPTION ORDERS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE INQUIRIES should be sent to the Circulation Department, *Harvard Magazine*, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-4037, or call 617-495-5746 or 800-648-4499, or e-mail addresschanges@harvard.edu. Single copies \$4.95, plus \$2.50 for postage and handling. MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS are welcome, but we cannot assume responsibility for safekeeping. Include stamped, self-addressed envelope for manuscript return. Persons wishing to reprint any portion of *Harvard Magazine's* contents are required to write in advance for permission. Address inquiries to Catherine A. Chute, publisher, at the address given above. Copyright © 2010 Harvard Magazine Inc.



tute in Media Education. K-12 and college teachers spent a week exploring instructional practices to help learners critically analyze images from mass media and popular culture. Then, the practice of media literacy education was in its infancy. The rich conversations generated by the event led to the formation of the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

Today, there is a growing body of scholarship and professional practice in the field. But just 15 years ago, the idea of using visual media, mass media, and popular culture to expand awareness and knowledge was a great novelty at Harvard. Hurrah for the digital revolution!

RENEE HOBBS, Ed.D. '85
Co-editor

Journal of Media Literacy Education
Professor, Temple University School of
Communications and Theater
Philadelphia

AYN RAND

JENNIFER BURNS WAS CORRECT that Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism has become "part of the warp and woof of American political culture," but in more ways than most people know (Vita, November-December 2009, page 32). There are now at least 60 academic programs that involve reading Ayn Rand's works. There are at least 155 professors who teach and study Rand's works. The American Philosophical Association includes an Ayn Rand Society which will soon have its own journal. Both Cambridge University Press and Blackwell have published or have in press books or collections of essays on Rand's ideas. *Atlas Shrugged* has sold over seven million copies and has shown dramatic increases in sales in the last few years. Rand was a cultural pariah in the 1960s, but her ideas are now on the verge of changing the culture itself.

EDWIN A. LOCKE '60
Westlake Village, Calif.

A PUFF-PIECE about Ayn Rand, a "philosopher" who deserves ever more ignoring? Absurd, especially with the full-scale economic and social experiment we're still enduring thanks to only an approximation of her glorification of selfishness. And touting Alan Greenspan as an example of the success of her principles? Spare me.

BARRY GOLDSTEIN '64, A.M. '69
Newtonville, Mass.

I ATTENDED Ayn Rand's presentation at Harvard in October 1962. It was publicized in a quiet, almost embarrassed fashion and took place in an auditorium away from the center of things. One definitely got the sense that Harvard was not honoring Rand the philosopher so much as exhibiting her as a curious cultural phenomenon.

The hall was crowded. She gave her speech and then answered questions from the audience, which had been written down and passed in. She did not answer any question that directly challenged her assertions; her answers were mostly repetitions of what she had already said. Her exit, through the hall, was dramatic—a small, tender-eyed woman surrounded by a phalanx of young men in suits.

I had a hard time explaining Rand to a Harvard friend of the time, since putting her ideas into plain words, without the emotional drama of the novels, makes them sound idiotic, undeveloped, and cruel. Which they are, of course. Her talk, as I recall it, was little more than embroidery around her main theme, which is the justification of selfishness and the poisonous effects of societal obligations. That theme was not up for discussion.

She seemed to be there to get a little glow from the connection with Harvard. Most of us in the audience were there to see a star turn and, as in my case, to have her explain the difficulties with her theory. The star turn we definitely got; the explanation we definitely did not get. Whatever that night meant to her, I doubt that she considered it a success and certainly not, as Jennifer Burns called it, "a pinnacle in her career."

MICHEL CHOBAN '66
Altadena, Calif.

PH.D. PROBLEMS APLENTY

I WRITE TO DISAGREE, respectfully, with my colleague Louis Menand ("The Ph.D. Problem," November-December 2009, page 27), who writes: "that it takes longer to get a Ph.D. in the humanities than it does in the social or natural sciences...seems anomalous, since normally a dissertation in the humanities does not require extensive archival, field, or laboratory work." What might be "normal" in his branch of the humanities is certainly not true in mine, the history of art, which, on account of the need to examine works of art in situ as well as to conduct related digging in



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often chaotic or uncatalogued collections, requires extensive archival and field work, often in widely scattered collections, and, if issues of conservation and restoration are involved, laboratory work as well. To this I would add the need to master many languages, often in premodern as well as their modern variants. The same is true of many other fields of humanistic inquiry as well. Other laborious skills that have to be mastered often include paleography (no longer taught as systematically as used to be the case, meaning that students must often go elsewhere seeking instruction).

If it is currently taking Ph.D. candidates longer to reach their degree, it is at least in part because, due to deficiencies in our educational system, they now often begin graduate study with less foreign-language proficiency than previously. This is another respect in which graduate study reflects the culture at large, and it is, unfortunately, yet another way in which, to paraphrase Menand, it would be a catastrophe were the university to become just an echo of the public culture.

In an age of speed and easy gratification, the university provides a place to slow down—and think. Graduate school is not simply a place to acquire another qualification on the road to success, it is a place to acquire the tools needed to become a competent scholar and, still more important, to acquire the intellectual capital that can sustain a career of teaching and scholarship. That, like many good things, takes time, and if we in the humanities are not willing to sustain such study, then the future of our fields really is in much worse shape than Menand suggests.

JEFFREY HAMBURGER
*Francke professor of German art and culture
Cambridge*

MENAND IGNORES the institutional disincentives for reducing the numbers of Ph.D.s. He rightly observes that we are

SPEAK UP, PLEASE

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cranking out too many these days. But if you are in the typical “publish or perish” institutions, you need postdocs and grad students to help with your research in many disciplines. If you opt to cut back on accepting Ph.D. candidates, then in your annual review, if you are tenured, you are informed there will be no salary increase. And other penalties are exacted unless you keep up with the current production rate.

DAVID BROWMAN, Ph.D. '70
St. Louis

MENAND IS CORRECT when he states that the universities are overproducing Ph.D.s in relation to the availability of academic positions, but he fails to mention an important factor that led to this imbalance. In 1986 the mandatory retirement age for most professions was lifted, but not for professors. At the time, it was widely heralded that by the year 2000 thousands of positions would open up due to the retirement of an aging professoriate. But that did not happen because the requirement was soon lifted for professors. Many of them continued in their tenured positions, often with lowered enrollment in classes, but at the top salary ranges, a condition that limited the available spots for newly minted Ph.D.s.

CAROL DELANEY, M.T.S. '76
Providence, R.I.

WHILE IT IS advisable to diminish time-to-degree whenever possible, eight years in graduate school does not necessarily leave one “seriously overtrained” for a tenure-track job, and being a professor is not merely teaching at the college/university level, as Menand implies. Those of us in the profession know that, as dedicated as we are to our teaching, our efforts are also devoted to research and publishing, which demand time, focus, and funding that began during those important years we developed in graduate school. Many of us also mentor doctoral students, an intense commitment of time and energy that necessitates being well-entrenched in our disciplines—which would be impossible with only three years of graduate training.

My chosen specialization in contemporary Chinese theatre practice required me to become fluent in written and spoken Chinese; know the history and literature of western as well as non-western theatre; study Chinese history, literature, and politics; and im-

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HARVARD

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LETTERS*(continued from page 6)*

merse myself in discourses of literary theory, dramatic theory, performance studies theory, and theories of race, ethnicity, and gender...not to mention long periods of field work in China. My decade of graduate school from entering my master's program at Harvard to exiting my doctoral program at Cornell prepared me for the interdisciplinary teaching and scholarly career I have established since. In my subsequent decade of mentoring graduate students, I have found it untrue that "a dissertation in the humanities does not require extensive archival, field, or laboratory work." Menand's findings may reflect the reality of some students in some English programs at some universities, but they do not reflect the complexity of disciplines in the humanities more broadly.

CLAIRE CONCEISON, A.M. 1992, PH.D.

*Duke University
Durham, N.C.*

A COROLLARY TO Louis Menand's observation that the academic world tends to favor specialization and conformity is that, for all the talk about interdisciplinary studies, it shuns the scholar who is also a professional. Neither academia nor the outside world provides a job category for such hybrids as the physician-philosopher, the architect-sociologist, or (as in my case) the lawyer-historian. Professionals seem to look askance at the colleague with a Ph.D., academics with distrust upon the scholar with professional credentials. Consequently, much potential for creative interdisciplinary work is wasted. In fact, in terms of employment opportunities, the sum of a professional degree and a Ph.D. may prove to be less than either of its parts.

ANDREW SOROKOWSKI, A.M. '75
Rockville, Md.

AFRICA IMAGE

GLAD TO LEARN ABOUT undergraduates "Immersed in Africa" (November-December

2009, page 43), but surely the cover image is a gaffe: the adoring African woman looking up at the white guy a head taller than the surrounding blacks—and there were several other White Man's Burden condescending touches.

TOM BLANDY '54, M.Arch. '60
Troy, N.Y.

PRE-MED POSSIBILITIES

IN RESPONSE to Melanie Long's "Post Pre-Med" (November-December 2009, page 63), I object to her characterization that "being pre-med is more than a set of course requirements: it's a lifestyle."

As an almost-graduate bound for medical school next fall, I think Long caricatures a pre-med student. Her generalization that a pre-med "should take a leadership position in organizations such as the Harvard Cancer Society or the Community Health Initiative, you should volunteer at a hospital or a nursing home, and you should work in a research lab" reinforces the stereotype of the pre-meds who do things because they have to: getting an A in class, starting their own community-service project, or working in a lab. It ignores the fact that many pre-med students at Harvard have a lot of freedom in their academic and extracurricular activities. I have pre-med friends whose main passions are economics, health policy, and music. I concentrated in social studies and took a semester off to live and work in another country. I definitely did not feel constrained, and can still say that I did just fine (I hope!). Have hope, future pre-meds: life is not so bad.

LYDIA LO '10
Cambridge

I WONDER IF Menand has heard this?

Roy Bailey, a British professor emeritus of sociology and a folksinger, sang this at his own retirement party. I sang it at a party a friend of mine threw to celebrate the completion of her Ph.D. If she had it to do again, I wonder if she would bother.

ELIZABETH BLOCK '65
Toronto

Their Way

(Words © 1970 by Bob Blue; "My Way" music © 1969 by Paul Anka)

I came, bought all my books, lived in the dorms, followed directions.
I worked, I studied hard, met lots of folks who had connections.
I crammed. They gave me grades, and may I say, not in a fair way.
But more, much more than this, I did it their way.

I learned all sorts of things, although I know I'll never use them.
The courses that I took were all required. I didn't choose them.
You'll find that to survive, it's best to act the doctrinaire way,
And so I buckled down and did it their way.

Yes, there were times I wondered why I had to crawl when I could fly.
I had my doubts, but after all, I clipped my wings, and learned to crawl.
I learned to bend, and in the end, I did it their way.

And so, my fine young friends, now that I am a full professor,
Where once I was oppressed, I've now become the cruel oppressor.
With me, you'll learn to cope. You'll learn to climb life's golden stairway.
Like me, you'll see the light, and do it their way.

For what can I do? What can I do? Take out your books. Read chapter two.
And if to you it seems routine, don't speak to me: Go see the dean.
As long as they give me my pay, I'll do it their way.

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

WITHOUT COMMENTING on the ultimate merits of the issue, the assertion in the letter from Ted Gideonse '96 that the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy is written into the Uniform Code of Military Justice is incorrect (November-December 2009, page 6). The statute setting out the policy, 10 U.S.C. 654, is contained in Chapter 37 of Title 10 of the United States Code, entitled "General Service Requirements," and carries no criminal penalties. The Uniform Code is Chapter 47. The sodomy statute, 10 U.S.C. 925, which is Article 125 of the Uniform Code, is sexually neutral on its face, applying to both heterosexual and homosexual conduct. In 2005, the Bush admin-