

2023 P. A. CHRISTENSEN LECTURE:

MARC OLIVIER

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The P. A. Christensen Lectureship, established in 1977, honors College of Humanities faculty in literary and cultural studies.

Remember *Goodnight Moon*, the children's book that carefully catalogs every object in a room before saying goodnight to each of them? What happens if "instead of drifting off into a blissful slumber, we watch those things take on unfamiliar shapes?" asked Professor Marc Olivier (Film and Media, French), in his 2023 P. A. Christensen Lecture on March 8. Olivier's restless nights inspired his recent book *Household Horror: Cinematic Fear and the Secret Life of Everyday Objects*, which he describes as *Goodnight Moon* for insomniacs. It also informs his research in 18th-century French literature, European cinema, and photography. During Olivier's lecture, "Unrest in All Things: An Insomniac's Guide to the Humanities," he explored how a playful, childlike approach to learning allows the intellectually curious to create unexpected connections and ultimately revives the inherent wonder people feel as they engage in the humanities.

Quoting Parley A. Christensen (whom the lecture honors), Olivier said, "I like to feel an unrest in all things, a ferment at work everywhere by which all things are trying to transcend themselves." As an insomniac, Olivier is no stranger to unrest. He sees beyond what currently exists and imagines what *could* exist, which revitalizes his approach to his discipline, research, and teaching. However, testing the boundaries of study does not eliminate the need for rules. Olivier said, "Constraints enable growth. . . . Being playful is all about making up rules in order to see structures emerge."

Olivier shared three examples of his playful approach. In the first, students reimagined chapters of the French novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*) as tweets. This unique constraint allowed students to examine a classic book in a memorable, modern way.

The second project reversed standard essay writing processes. Rather than starting with a topic, students began with one of several bibliographies with randomly selected sources; for example, one bibliography only included sources that referenced Olivier's work. The exercise challenged the students to find cohesion in randomness as they wrote their essays.

In the third project, Olivier's students produced millions of sonnets by first composing poems in the style of French poet Louise Labé and then funneling them into a generative program that reorganized individual lines into new poems.

Olivier concluded, "Once we let the mind wander freely and allow ourselves to play unafraid, we can watch familiar objects take on new shapes, we can generate unexpected links between objects, and we can reclaim childhood wonder." H



Scan the QR code to watch the full lecture.



Photo courtesy of Marc Olivier