

Astor Travel Fund Report - Professor Douglas Mao

Report on activities led by Astor Visiting Lecturer Douglas Mao (Russ Family Professor of Humanities, Johns Hopkins University), MT2025

Professor Douglas Mao delivered a series of unforgettable events on the timely subject of Utopia during the third week of Michaelmas Term. In late 2024, the MML Faculty secured a grant from the Astor Fund, which allows Oxford academics to host colleagues from the US for a concentrated period. Based in the English Department at Johns Hopkins University, Doug's work transcends disciplinary and language boundaries. His monographs – *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998), *Fateful Beauty: Aesthetic Environments, Juvenile Development, and Literature, 1860-1960* (2008), and the more recent *Inventions of Nemesis: Utopia, Indignation, and Justice* (2020) – are brilliant in their rigorous examination of ideological and aesthetic formations across diverse spaces and periods.



A dynamic and experienced teacher, Doug hosted two seminars exclusively for our students: in the “Disappointments of the Human” seminar, undergraduates explored examples of misanthropy across literature and theory, from *Timon of Athens* to *Gulliver’s Travels*. The postgraduate seminar, “The Place and Value of Human Beings”, meanwhile involved a discussion of

humanism and world-making across literary modes, with special attention paid to T.E. Hulme, Wallace Stevens, Gwendolyn Brooks, and the recent work of critics Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose (“Against Posthumanism”, 2024). Both of the seminars, held in Trinity College, were filled to capacity.



We gathered again on Wednesday evening for “Utopia across disciplines”, a brilliant conversation between Doug and the political philosopher Duncan Bell (Cambridge), with whom Doug has co-authored the book *Utopias*, forthcoming in the new *Literature & Politics* at OUP. The event was chaired by Prof Peter Boxall (English), one of the



researchers – along with Wes Williams – of the upcoming *Utopia Now!* season in Oxford’s Cultural Programme. This event exceeded our attendance expectations, and we had a packed house in the Garden Room at Trinity College.



The week of events drew to a close on Thursday, with Doug’s lecture “Utopia and the End of the World” held in the Levine Auditorium, Trinity College. Here, Doug explored utopia as a problem marked by a “radical openness”, in texts as varied as Adolfo Bioy Casares’s *Invención de Morel* (1940), John Wyndham’s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* (1953), and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963). Over 70 people attended.



The high attendance at all these events, made up in large part by students, signals not only the timeliness of utopia as a critical category but also the desire felt by members of our Humanities community – especially our younger members – to cross disciplinary spaces and come together. Doug's combination of intelligence, warmth, and wit was exactly what we needed; having him here as Astor Visiting Lecturer made our community all the richer.