



# VilasVoice

Fall 2022 | For Alumni and Friends of the Department of Communication Arts

## Action!

Professor Aaron Greer  
(right) on the set of his  
new film, *The Coming*.

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# VilasVoice

is the alumni newsletter of the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 821 University Avenue, Madison, Wisconsin 53706.

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## Chair's Voice

### Journeying Home



COTTON MANSAGE

As I begin my term as chair, I have been reflecting on everything the Department of Communication Arts has given to me over the course of my career. I first arrived in Vilas Hall as a graduate student exactly two decades ago this fall, and as I worked to finish my PhD, I gained not just expertise in the field, but also a community. Securing my first faculty position at another institution meant leaving the intellectual home I shared with my peers and mentors. The rare opportunity to rejoin Communication Arts as faculty a couple of years later represented a dream come true—a chance to return and give back what had been given to me.

Such returns have to be more than nostalgia; we still have much to do to build a department in which everyone can feel so welcomed. My service as chair reflects deep affection, gratitude, and responsibility toward this home and my excitement to make it ever

more diverse, inclusive, and supportive.

You, too, can go home again—and help make that home anew for others—through your continuing relationship with Communication Arts. Please consider returning to UW–Madison sometime to reconnect with us. Send a note to former professors to learn about the cutting-edge research they are conducting and to share what you've from your own Communication Arts experiences. Provide the next generation of Communication Arts students with the same support that you needed when you were in their shoes: your generosity can lead to professional development experiences, scholarships, or opportunities for research collaboration with faculty. You might also share your time and perspective with those who follow in your footsteps. Our success in making the department home for the communication experts of tomorrow depends on your help to sustain and grow our community.

I welcome you to reach out to me at drjohnson3@wisc.edu if you, too, want to give back. If we do our job right, the Communication Arts of the future will look much different than what we might remember—but it will remain the shared home from which so many other successful journeys will begin.

Sincerely,  
Derek Johnson  
Professor and Department Chair



COTTON MANSAGE

Our 2021 cohort of graduate students

Left to right:  
Ryna Yeoh, Laura Broman, Clare O'Gara, Shannon Weidner, Pate Duncan, Nick Sansone

Not pictured: Clara Paloucek, Sabrina Finke-Klachko





### Professor films new feature with an assist from students

While Hollywood's ups and downs have garnered the most press, the COVID-19 pandemic arguably hit the world of independent film the hardest. Countless lower-budget productions halted in their tracks between 2020 and 2021, and the opportunities to resume work on these projects were few and far between. Aaron Greer, associate professor of film, is intimately aware of this. Early in lockdown, Greer was forced to cancel a feature he planned to direct, titled *Separate And Equal*, after months of developing it with his frequent creative collaborator Seth Panitch. Thankfully, Greer made up for lost time this past summer, completing principal photography on a new film, a psychological thriller called *The Coming* that was written and produced by Panitch. Like so many independent filmmakers, Greer was eager to return to set and make art with a talented cast and crew, which included a few fellow Badgers.

The horror genre roots of *The Coming* mark a departure for Greer, whose previous work has focused on drama and documentary. Billed as a "darkly comic thriller," *The Coming* tells the story of a disgraced psychiatrist, Dr.

Samuel Allyn (played by Panitch), hired by a backwater hospital that specializes in treatment of "the Jerusalem Syndrome." This controversial condition, much debated by medical professionals, arises in those who suddenly develop messianic complexes upon visiting Jerusalem. Allyn meets Patient X, whose delusions are so powerful that the doctor suspects some malevolent force at work.

To establish the proper tone and style, Greer drew influence from films such as *The Shining* (1980) and *Shutter Island* (2010), the paintings of El Greco and Leonardo Da Vinci, and definitive literature on schizophrenia, like Milton Rokeach's *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (1964). However, *The Coming* "plays with genre expectations," Greer said. "Thematically, I think the story has interesting things to say about how we often can't fully understand, or maybe even recognize, 'goodness' without the presence of evil."

Filmed in Chicago late last spring, *The Coming* is Greer's first feature since joining the Communication Arts faculty in 2020, though he is no stranger to balancing academic and creative commitments. Greer filmed his

previous feature, *Service to Man* (2016), near Tuscaloosa while a professor at the University of Alabama. He's a familiar face to Upper Midwest creatives since completing his first feature, *Gettin' Grown* (2004), in Milwaukee and teaching at Loyola University Chicago.

Three Communication Arts majors—Risha Cherukuri '23, Devin Mozee '22, and Kaitlyn Cardona '23—assisted in the production of *The Coming*. In addition to chipping in on day-to-day tasks, Cardona and Mozee each had moments to shine. When an extra could not make it, Mozee was drafted to act as a security guard, while Cardona stepped in as script supervisor and assistant camera multiple times. The on-set experience provided a model for inclusion, as well. "Our film's crew was not only a set of extremely talented people but also a very diverse crew," Cardona said. "As a Latina woman who is very passionate about representation, this was so inspiring to see."

Greer is eyeing a final cut of the film for spring 2023 and plans to submit it to festivals. His previous features screened at the Tribeca, Sidewalk, and American Black Film Festivals.



COLTON MANSVAGE

### Exploring information divides through climate change and Wisconsin football

Amid deep political polarization, how do we build consensus? Lyn Van Swol, professor of communication science, has dedicated years of research to the question. She's compiled countless data sets that shed light on how people bridge information divides and find common ground. Alongside her advisee, PhD candidate Chen-Ting (Tammy) Chang, Van Swol recently coauthored two innovative studies exploring these concerns—one focused on belief in climate change and the other on score predictions for Badgers football.

Across both experiments, superior outcomes emerged when opposing parties communicated with one another, compared to groups where this cross-party discourse did not take place. “Fostering Climate Change Consensus: The Role of Intimacy in Group Discussions” was published last year in the journal *Public Under-*

*standing of Science*. One group started by discussing the facts of the climate crisis, an approach termed “information condition,” while the other asked participants to begin by disclosing their feelings and values about climate change. This latter approach, termed “intimacy condition,” led to more favorable outcomes, with participants reporting higher social cohesion, lower levels of ostracism, and a final state of consensus, compared to the “information condition” group. Critically, several participants in the intimacy group changed their minds from initial skepticism to acceptance of climate change as fact, over the course of a brief, half-hour meeting. Van Swol also found the virtues of cross-party communication outside the gates of Camp Randall.

In “The Benefits of Advice from Outgroup Members on *Decision Accuracy and Bias Reduction*,” pub-

lished this past July in the journal *Decision*, Van Swol, Chang, and a team of undergraduate researchers polled college football fans on campus about their score predictions for upcoming Badgers games. One set of participants received advice from fellow Badgers fans (“ingroup advice”), while the other set guessed the Saturday game's score after talking with a fan from the opposing team (“outgroup advice”). “When people received advice from the opposing team fan,” Van Swol said, “they were more accurate in their forecast of the game, and their point spread was less biased in terms of thinking Wisconsin would win.”

Coauthor Chang adds that “some participants even asked us if they could stay in touch with their discussion partners to continue their newfound friendships,” she reported.

Van Swol's research makes the case for more communication, not less. When asked to summarize her recent findings, she replied, “I'm very interested in getting people with differing opinions to come together.”



### Recognizing the Hamel family's generosity

Few individuals can claim as positive or long-lasting an impact on the Department of Communication Arts as George F. Hamel, Jr. '80. Hamel is stepping down from the Communication Arts Partners (CAPS) alumni board after 13 years of service, during which he and his wife Pamela have led transformative initiatives that have shaped Communication Arts into the world-class center for education and research it is today.

In 2006, George and Pamela established an endowment to fund a cutting-edge multimedia laboratory. The Hamel Family Media Lab has served as our production sector's nerve center, allowing students to store 4K-resolution footage, edit digital video and audio projects, and fine-tune color and sound to industry-grade specifications.

In 2007, the Hamels inaugurated the Hamel Family Professorship, which supported Professors Sabine Gruffat



and Lori Lopez. Starting in 2016, this transformed into the Hamel Family Distinguished Chair, bestowed first to Professor J.J. Murphy and then Professor Jonathan Gray. The professorship provides crucial funding for research and salary. "Most professors can only be as ambitious as their funding allows them to be, and the Hamels have regularly pushed the department's horizons," Gray said. The Hamels have

also funded graduate student assistantships, faculty grants, and, since 2015, an annual Communication Arts delegation to the Telluride Film Festival.

In fact, George Hamel's contributions were the model around which the larger CAPS alumni engagement board was organized in 2008. Comm Arts salutes George Hamel for that leadership, unfailing generosity, and keen anticipation of the department's needs.

## WCFTR Update

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### A new collection highlights contributions of women in independent film boom

The staff and volunteers at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (WCFTR) work around the clock to acquire, preserve, and make publicly available essential historical documents related to the entertainment industry. While scholars regularly travel to Madison to access the WCFTR's film and manuscript collections, there is also a wealth of material that anyone—even you, right now—can access with an internet connection.

One exciting, newly digitized collection spotlights the influential quarterly journal *Angles: Women Working in Film and Video*. Milwaukee-based writer and editor Elfrieda M. Abbe founded the journal in 1991, during the peak years of the American independent film boom. *Angles* provided a public space to recognize, in the words of its inaugural mission statement, "the innovative and important contribution women have made and continue to make in the field of film and video."

You can read the full, newly digitized run of *Angles* through the Media History Digital Library, hosted on Archive.org. WCFTR Assistant Director Mary Huelsbeck thanks Abbe for preserving and donating the original 1991 to 2003 print run, as well as iSchool graduate student Jessica Green for meticulously scanning the issues this past year. "The WCFTR is pleased to add the journal to the collection as we work to broaden the voices and perspectives represented in the archive," Huelsbeck said. "Anyone interested in independent cinema of the 1990s, and especially the work done by women, will find something of value in *Angles*."

## Graduate Student Achievements

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Top:  
Kelly Jensen  
Matt St. John  
Lauren Wilks

Bottom:  
Maura Snyder  
Allyson Gross  
Kai Prins

The classrooms and corridors of Vilas Hall are busier than ever, powered by the prodigious brilliance and bustle of Communication Arts graduate students.

Nine scholars have earned their doctorates since May—a record number. These many successfully defended dissertation projects cannot be adequately described here, but you can read more about each of these achievements on the “Recent PhDs” pages on [commarts.wisc.edu](http://commarts.wisc.edu).

Students from all four areas have also published numerous works and been recognized with prestigious awards. Kelly Jensen placed an innovative study of Wisconsin State Representative Polly Williams’s rhetoric of justice in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Matt St. John contributed a study of director Agnès Varda’s use of social media to the feminist film studies journal *Camera Obscura*. Lauren Wilks published a study analyzing the media’s treatment of

Serena Williams in *Feminist Media Histories*. With Professor Marie-Louise Mares, Maura Snyder shared findings on how preschool students engage with animated and anthropomorphic characters on television, for *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*.

These graduate student accomplishments have not gone unrecognized. Allyson Gross won the Lloyd Bitzer Essay Award, named after the department’s professor emeritus, for her seminar paper, “Water, Weather, and the Myth of the Climate Crisis Safe Haven.”

The Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) bestowed the 2022 Outstanding Student Chapter Award to UW–Madison’s own. Rhetoric, politics, and culture PhD candidates Erin Gangstad and Kai Prins co-chair this organization alongside representatives from UW’s English department.

## Faculty Recognition

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### Two professors named ICA Fellows



COLTON MANSAVAGE  
It isn’t every day two of Vilas Hall’s own decamp to Paris to receive career-defining awards. That is why the Department of Communication Arts is proud to celebrate Marie-Louise Mares, professor of communication science, and Jonathan Gray, professor of media and cultural studies, for being named International Communication Association (ICA) Fellows. This honor recognizes scholars with exceptional records in the field of communication and follows a rigorous nomination process. Mares and Gray are the fourth

and fifth faculty members in Communication Arts history to be named ICA Fellows.

ICA celebrated the professors in Paris on May 28 at its annual conference. The award ceremony itself was a Badger-friendly affair, with several alumni in attendance and Mary Beth Oliver PhD ’91, professor of media studies at Pennsylvania State University, presiding as ICA’s outgoing president. Our honorees joined 21 other scholars from around the world as members of the ICA Fellows Class of 2022.

### Fall 2022 Dean's Message

ERIC SUIT



Fall semester is well underway, and there is much to celebrate this year! UW-Madison's freshman class is, once again, the largest in history, and it is also the most diverse. Here in L&S, we have a student body full of talent and we are providing a world-class experience for those students. Engagement at SuccessWorks, our innovative career advising center, is at record levels.

One of my top priorities is to make sure we have a welcoming and inclusive environment in which all of our students can thrive and feel at home. I am thrilled with the work happening in our Center for Academic Excellence. CAE continues to provide a strong community of support, guidance, mentoring and connection for students from underrepresented groups, from the time they set foot on campus until the day they graduate. Our new leader of CAE, Karen Stroud-Felton, is setting ambitious goals including a digital-first strategy to share students' stories in their own words.

Great people and strong teamwork are pushing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts forward in every department in L&S. As our Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion DeVon Wilson put it, "this is mission work." Visit [ls.wisc.edu/](https://ls.wisc.edu/)

about/diversity-and-inclusion to learn more about college-level initiatives and check in with your department about how to get involved.

We welcomed our largest cohort ever of new faculty this fall, and we celebrated 18 colleagues in an Investiture Ceremony that recognized both our great faculty and the wonderful donors who made those professorships and chairs possible.

We need world-class spaces in which to learn, teach, and carry out research. We look forward to seeing the new building for Computer, Data & Information Sciences begin to rise in 2023 and we are deep in the design phase for Irving & Dorothy Levy Hall.

As I reflect on our progress, I am constantly reminded that together, we can and will make a difference. Thank you for all you do for the College of Letters & Science!

On, Wisconsin!

**Eric Wilcots, Dean**

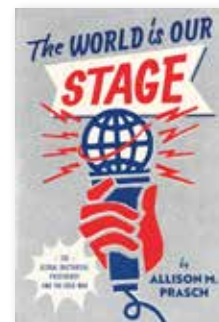
Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy  
UW-Madison College of Letters & Science



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*From Networks to Netflix*



**Eric Hoyt**  
*Ink-Stained Hollywood*



**Allison M. Prasch**  
*The World is our Stage*



**David Bordwell**  
*Perplexing Plots*



**Lori Kido Lopez**  
*Race and Digital Media*





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