

## 2003 Faculty Awards for Excellence in Graduate Teaching: W.J.T. Mitchell, the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in English Language & Literature, Art History

By **Seth Sanders**  
*News Office*

W.J.T. Mitchell, the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in English Language & Literature and Art History, has a penchant for collective work, which is reflected in the fruitfulness of his teaching.

Mitchell, who has been the editor of *Critical Inquiry* since 1978, when he joined the Chicago faculty, focuses his

research on the interplay of vision and language in art, literature and media, subjects that appear in his articles, books and the courses he teaches. The subjects can range from general problems in the theory of representation to specific issues in cultural politics and political culture.



W.J.T. Mitchell

In *Theories of Media*, Mitchell's cross-listed graduate-undergraduate lecture course, "part of the interest was in the interaction among its many constituencies (film, art history, literature, science, philosophy, etc.), which seems to have released a great deal of energy among the students who are longing to engage in general, systematic reflections on media."

One result of this is the online glossary of keywords in Media Theory that his class compiled over the past two years, available for public access at <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mitchell/keywords.htm>.

"This course also generated a working group called the Chicago School of Media Theory, which plans to continue collective work in the coming year." The group already has begun building a Web site for itself at <http://www.chicagoschoolmediatheory.net>.

His Totemism, Fetishism, Idolatry seminar, Mitchell explained, is "focused on a set of texts and issues surrounding sacred or special objects, images and 'things' that seem to have lives of their own. The range of projects developed by students is quite stunning, from the Elvis cult, to Argentinian devil festivals, to Yeats' Byzantium poems, to the sculpture of David Smith, to Erwin Panofsky's way of greeting art objects as 'acquaintances.'" The course shows how a common body of concepts that coalesced from a variety of disciplines can activate a conversation across fields.

"I've learned never to underestimate the Chicago student's ability to grasp difficult ideas and put them to work. My ideal as a teacher has always been to create a collective for the production of knowledge in (and out of) the

classroom.

“I have to say also that I believe this honor should, in my case, be called the ‘gradual’ teaching award, not the ‘graduate’ award. I hope to activate slow, life-long habits of inquiry and questioning, not instant knowledge,” said Mitchell.

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