In this inaugural review James Uden (Classical Studies) writes about recent books by Adela Pineda (Romance Studies), Jodi Cranston (History of Art & Architecture), and Abigail Gillman (World Languages & Literatures).

A variety of texts and objects shed light on unexpected worlds in three new books by scholars in the Humanities at Boston University. Spaghetti westerns critique the conventions of Hollywood cinema and the myths of colonial ideology. Portraits and statues of pastoral scenes allow the inhabitants of Renaissance Venice to float free from their marine city. The German translator of Mary Wollstonecraft’s landmark feminist text *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* composes a Yiddish version of Genesis, fashioning her own distinctive ‘new-old’ idiom to weave the history of Judaism into women’s everyday lives. Each of these wonderful books by scholars in CAS trains attention on the decisions made by writers and artists, and then traces their reverberation in political or cultural life. Reading all three works, I gained a heightened appreciation of the momentous importance of small choices.

Adela Pineda Franco’s *The Mexican Revolution on the World Stage: Intellectuals and Film in the Twentieth Century* (2019) (https://www.sunypress.edu/p-6820-the-mexican-revolution-on-the-w.aspx) examines a series of cinematic representations of the Mexican Revolution. In its armed phase (1910-1921), the Revolution was the first instance of war as modern media spectacle. Pineda Franco examines retrospective interpretations of these conflicts and their legacy in films from the 1940s to the 1970s by screenwriters and directors working in different genres, languages and nations. Collaboration is a key theme. John Steinbeck scripted *The Forgotten Village* (1941), a film that casts a flattering light on the social policies of revolutionary general (later President of Mexico) Lázaro Cárdenas. By depicting the spread of modern healthcare to underdeveloped areas, the film endorses the replacement of traditional modes of healing by technology and governmental control. Steinbeck would later write the screenplay for a film that focused more directly on the political events of the Revolution, the McCarthy-era biopic *Viva Zapata!*. The movie enshrined Marlon Brando as the populist hero Emiliano Zapata for American audiences, but received a frosty response within Mexico, and one of the most fascinating aspects of Pineda Franco’s book is the archival research that allows the reader to track the contemporary responses to each
film. In the third chapter, she draws a surprising but compelling connection between the spaghetti Westerns of Italian screenwriter Franco Solinas and the writings of the postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon. Just as Fanon’s writings expose the violence at the heart of colonial myths, so Solinas’ Westerns lay bare the brutal violence that was typically presented as benevolent or redemptive in American-made Westerns of the same era. Finally, Pineda Franco examines a more explicitly political work, México, la revolución congelada (1971), a documentary by the Argentinian filmmaker Raymundo Gleyzer and a key example of the ‘New Latin American Cinema’. As she demonstrates, the Mexican Revolution on screen was a global phenomenon.

Perhaps inevitably, The Mexican Revolution on the World Stage returns constantly to questions of narrative, the points at which cinematic stories and institutional stories converge and conflict. On one hand, Brando’s incarnation of Zapata as a brooding, melancholic hero – a character projected on to the ‘landscape of myth and tragedy’ – imposes a certain kind of narrative structure on the messier facts of history. By casting the revolutionary leader as a conventional tragic hero, the film guarantees that noble failure will be his movement’s eventual outcome. On the other hand, Gleyzer, like other directors of the New Latin American Cinema, juxtaposes oral testimony with the government’s approved footage of people and events, creating a positive space for suspicion and disbelief. In the epilogue to the book, Pineda Franco describes our contemporary skepticism towards both revolutions and their representation. She quotes Christopher Frayling’s aperçu that it is ‘naïve to believe that you can start a revolution with a movie, and even more naïve to theorize about doing so’. But The Mexican Revolution on the World Stage attests to a different sort of potential for cinema. This exhaustively researched book is testimony to the capacity of film to provoke political ideas, to enable collaboration between thinkers and artists, and to fashion new ways of viewing the present and the past.

The capacity of art to create new modes of experience is also the theme of Jodi Cranston’s Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice (2019) (https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-08202-8.html), although her research centers on a very different time and place. Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice sits alongside other recent books interested in subjective geography in Renaissance culture (I
thought also of Gareth D. Williams’ *Pietro Bembo on Etna: The Ascent of a Venetian Humanist*, Oxford, 2017). As Cranston argues, it was precisely the geographical setting of Venice, a city state bounded by the sea, that generated a desire to explore imagined vistas of green space. In the early decades of the sixteenth century, an extraordinary profusion of paintings and sculptures contributed to this pastoral moment. The phenomenon encompassed not only landscapes and statues of pastoral figures, but painting and sculpture in other genres, which, in Cranston’s analysis, reveal hitherto unnoticed or neglected natural detail: an open field glimpsed in the corner of Bellini’s devotional *Madonna and Child* (c. 1480s), the green island setting of Titian’s *Gozzi Altarpiece* (1520), the grassy shoreline that runs through Titian’s mythological *Rape of Europa* (1562). Rather than interpreting this imagery as directly corresponding to the literary tradition of pastoral poetry, Cranston argues that the artworks create their own ‘disjunctive world’, a second space that the viewer is invited to enter and explore. As she puts it, these works offer ‘parameters of manifold experiences rather than situations for exegesis’. She also resists fitting the flurry of pastoral art into any linear narrative of emulation or competition, preferring instead to emphasize the diverse motivations of a heterogeneous group of artists in a single, brief period of artistic activity.

As an example of the book’s many insights, I describe one argument that encouraged me to think differently about how visual art prompts a viewer’s involvement. Literary texts easily express the idea of a second world, the momentary disappearance of its characters into some imaginative space distant from reality. How can art express this idea? Isn’t any space depicted on a painting’s canvas necessarily a second world, different from the room in which it is hanging? Yet some depictions of green space, argues Cranston, invite an immersive experience more than others. The generally small size of many of the paintings and statues studied here is one factor in prompting greater attention from the viewer. When we lean in close, we establish a more intimate connection with the object; we examine all its details, view it from different angles, and give a looser rein to our imagination. Cranston also shows that many of these artists depicted figures with their backs turned. So, in *Pastoral Concert* (c.1510-1511, attributed variously to either Giorgione and Titian), one figure pours water from a jug, another holds a pipe, others talk to each other with their faces in shadows – no single figure looks
at the viewer. As Cranston writes, these characters ‘exist without us. We feel as though they prefer to be without us’. The landscape therefore appears as a fully independent environment, a ‘hidden pocket’ that can envelop the viewer in a second space. Cranston’s detailed, lavishly illustrated volume illuminates the ways in which Venetian artists create immersive locations that viewers are invited to explore. Like the artists she studies, her book opens up worlds.

If Pineda Franco and Cranston are both wary of fitting their material into a linear narrative, Abigail Gillman’s *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* (2018) ([https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/H/bo27314982.html](https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/H/bo27314982.html)) does just that. Gillman creates a compelling story from a varied set of texts, some familiar to scholars and others new to this level of analysis. Her book studies the large number of German Jewish translations of the Bible that appeared between 1780 and 1937, separating their evolution into four stages. Her first chapter studies the celebrated translation of Moses Mendelssohn. As the leading figure of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment), Mendelssohn brought the Scriptures into the mainstream of German intellectual culture, and Gillman notes the presence of Romantic conceptions of the fairytale and the sublime in his adventurous renderings of Biblical Hebrew. Next is the countercharge, a wave of extreme literalism exemplified by the Bibles of Joseph Johlson, Leopold Zunz, and Salomon Herxheimer. These works aimed to restore a sense of the text as something ancient, distant, and precious, preferring Hebrew word order over idiomatic German. The third wave charts a trend that belongs as much to the history of publishing as the history of translation: the fashion for the Bible as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (‘total work of art’), complete with elaborate design features and illustrations of plants and animals, all of which appealed to nineteenth-century encyclopedism as well as to aesthetic sensibilities. Finally, Gillman examines the impact of literary Modernism on Bible translation, studying the alienatingly new and innovative translation of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, as well as the Yiddish Genesis of Bertha Pappenheim. (Pappenheim, a curious nexus point for Modernist culture, is also Fräulein Anna O., the young woman suffering from hysteria in the first case study of Breuer and Freud’s *Studies in Hysteria*). Throughout the book, Gillman measures the distinctive tempo of the
Jewish tradition in Germany, its alternating urgency to keep time with the present and to preserve in stillness the treasures of the past.

*A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* is written in language that is always clear and accessible, sometimes lyrical and genuinely moving. More than once I underlined phrases that captured a truth beyond the confines of the discussion at hand. ‘The past had a vote, but not a veto’, Gillman writes, describing Moses Mendelssohn’s attitude towards earlier exegetes but also articulating a wider insight about the balance of priorities in any translation of a revered text. ‘The first handprints’ on the Jewish Bible were ‘left by God and Moses’, she says on the book’s final page, ‘but many others left their mark, not to alter its essence but to safeguard it for eternity’. As well as contributing to scholarship on the history of German Jewish culture and the history of the book – there is a particularly inspired comparison between Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (‘alienation effect’) and the white space around the page of the Buber-Rosenzweig Torah – Gillman’s book also has much to say to translation studies. Through close lexical analysis, she sheds light on the shifting expectations that alternately restricted and empowered translators to make the choices they did, and shows why different eras wanted Bibles that seemed either familiar or foreign. At one point, Gillman cites Franz Rosenzweig’s appeal to a rabbinic adage from the Mishnah: ‘Turn it and turn it, for all is contained within it’. To add my own parallel, in Latin the words for ‘turn’ and ‘translate’ are one and the same (*vertere*). To render a text in another language is to see it from a new angle: to turn it around, look at it again, view it afresh.

In other circumstances, it is hard to imagine a single research project that would lead to all three of these books, since they occupy ostensibly distant fields of study. That is a shame, because I found the experience of reading them back-to-back mutually enlightening. All three offer an eloquent reminder of the value of close attention to texts, tracing the widening circles of meaning that emanate from the individual decisions of writers and artists. All three works describe connections between environments, traditions, or cultures that seem to exist at some remove from one another. Reflecting on my own experience, I was excited by a new sense of intellectual proximity, a greater degree of dialogue between academic areas than I could initially have expected. Then again, what prompted me to read these books in the first place was the fact that all three
were written by colleagues in the same college in the same university, and so the dialogue between them need not exist only on the page. When we keep that more literal sort of proximity in mind, no field of study seems so distant after all.