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A NEW STUDY PROVES THAT FEAR DISTORTS OUR PERCEIVED DISTANCE TO DANGER
by Sally Lauckner / GSAS ’10

Impressions of the “enemy” are just what Jay Van Bavel, assistant professor of psychology in the Graduate School of Arts and Science, and doctoral candidate Jenny Xiao (GSAS ’13) set out to explore. Their research, published in June in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, focused specifically on how far away people imagine their opponents to be compared to their true distance. Van Bavel believes that a better understanding of our biological adaptation to what scares us might play a role in curtailing discrimination and other negative fear responses. The analysis considered the competition between two local universities, as well as the debate over immigration. But there may have been no better place to begin a study on perceptions of danger than in the Bronx, looking at one of the fiercest realties in sports.

Van Bavel and Xiao headed north on the subway in June 2010 to speak with New York Yankees fans as they poured out of the stadium after a game. At the time, the Bombers sat atop the American League East, while archrivals the Boston Red Sox were one game behind in second, and the Baltimore Orioles wallowed in dead last, 23 games out. That night, a majority of Yankees fans incorrectly guessed that Boston’s Fenway Park is closer to Yankee Stadium than Baltimore’s Camden Yards. Because the Red Sox were on the Yankees’ heels in the pennant race, most fans imagined them to be geographically nearer—even though Fenway is 20 miles farther than River Avenue. “We found that a group that you don’t like can seem a lot closer when they’re threatening,” Van Bavel says.

This flawed perception, Van Bavel adds, may simply be a method of addressing fear. He cites Joseph LeDoux, a professor at NYU’s Center for Neural Science, who draws the analogy of walking in the woods and seeing what may be an animal or a twig. “The advantageous thing to do is to jump,” Van Bavel says. “If you’re wrong and it was just a twig, it only cost you a few calories. But if you didn’t jump and it was a poisonous snake, then you could die.”

Continuing the study, the co-authors turned from baseball to a more serious policy debate. They asked more than 300 NYU undergraduates how threatening they believed Mexican immigration was to American identity. Participants who strongly identified with American pride and who felt that Mexican immigrants were detrimental to the country were more likely to propose that Mexico City is closer to New York City than it actually is. Another study measured the perceived distance between NYU and Columbia University, located in northern Manhattan’s Morningside Heights. For this survey, researchers aimed to manipulate the response. They offered some NYU participants articles that focused on positive comparisons of the two schools; in turn, these participants estimated that the distance between the universities was greater than it is. But other NYU participants who read material that presented Columbia as superior—as an older or more selective institution—presumed that the two schools were physically closer than in reality. “These issues have come up over and over throughout human history,” Van Bavel says. “There have been forms of discrimination that manifest themselves in putting up barriers and segregating groups to certain water fountains. By understanding how perception plays a role in this, we may understand more about the ways to deal with it.”

Van Bavel plans to do more research using this manipulative approach, which foretells that it may be possible to change how people feel about each other by changing people’s perceptions of threat.
Whether You’ve Got a Green Thumb or Just Want to See the Leaves Change, There Are Plenty of Ways to Enjoy Fall in the Big Apple

NYU Faculty, Staff, and Alumni Offer Up Their Favorites
by Renée Alfuso / CAS ’06

HORSEING AROUND
Brooklyn’s last native forest lies in Prospect Park, where perhaps the best way to experience autumn’s vibrant hues is on horseback along the 3.5-mile bridle path. Riders of all levels can trot to KENSINGTON STABLES for classes, pony rides, and guided tours of the 150-year-old park. The riding trail begins at the Park Circle entrance and travels along the edge of a lake, past the iconic Nethermead Arches, and through the peaceful Midwood, filled with myriads of trees. For the tallest being a 127-foot pine oak, “There are a few things better than a meandering ride through the woods,” says Young (CAS ’12), who’s been saddling up since age 8. As captain of the NYU Equestrian Club, which competes in Intercolligate Horse Show Association competitions, she led her team to victory in regionals last year. “Biding is a thrill like nothing else, so you immediately feel an extreme gratitude for your horse, even if it’s your first ride together,” she says. Before heading to the park, Young suggests wearing long pants, boots with a sturdy heel, and a certified riding helmet for safety. And she advises city-dwelling riders: “If your first [time] isn’t as great as you’d hoped, find another barn, another horse, and give it another try!”

12TH PLACE IN BROOKLYN, 718-792-6588. KENSGINGTONSTABLES.COM

MULTIMEDIA MECCA
In a city filled with exhibits and galleries, the MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE manages to be one of a kind, with the nation’s largest collection of artifacts—130,000 in all—showcasing the history, technology, and story behind the moving image. “It’s not a stuffy old museum—it’s much more fun,” promises Ben Moskwitz (TSM ’08), the preservation media unit lab supervisor for NYU Libraries. “The museum has been a pioneer in collecting video arcade and console games, and visitors can play classics like Space Invaders and Donkey Kong. Interactive computer stations allow guests to create their own stop-motion animations, view themselves dressed in famous movie costumes, or record their own movements to print out as a flipbook. The core exhibition in the recently expanded museum is “Behind the Screen,” which spans the evolution of the moving image, from 19th-century optical toys and Thomas Edison’s Kinetoscope through film cameras, television sets, and digital editing tools. The educational side is balanced with pure entertainment: movie posters, vintage lunch boxes, Star Wars figurines, and a TV lounge that re-creates a 1960s living room. Moskwitz especially enjoyed the collection of Coca-Cola Sweater and shoes, the exhibit on Jim Henson’s Muppets. “The museum brings back that sense of wondrousness from your childhood,” he says.

50-52 37TH AVENUE IN ASTORIA, QUEENS, 718-777-1881. WWW.MOVINGIMAGE.US

STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES
“The great landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx said that plants bring dignity to an urban space,” explains landscape supervisor George Rein (CAS ’19), who’s been adding life to spaces since age 12. “There’s a huge difference in attitude—we’re not just there to take your ticket,” says Nitehawk server April Nova (CAS ’13) of the theater’s passion for celluloid. “We’re all really into making this an experience, not just a movie.” Scattered vieware on order specialty cocktails inspired by the screenings, such as the Girl on Fire with house-infused jalapeño tequila, which pays homage to The Hunger Games. The Faccheghetti, named for the extraterritorial baddie in the sci-fi blockbuster Prometheus, is a mix of Bailey’s Irish Cream with green strokes of crème de menthe and looks both alien and irresistible at once. There’s a full menu of snacks, desserts, and elevated movie concessions, such as mushroom croquettes, fried pickles, and pop corn with lime, cotija cheese, and cilantro. They even serve brunch on weekends. The $14 Boulevard Club prix fixe menu comes with either a marmite or a Caogi—Nietzsche’s wicked version of a Bloody Mary. Anyone who gives that reference is sure to feel right at home.

REVIEWS: PICK
DINNER AND A MOVIE
Food and film are two of our favorite things here at NYU Alumni Magazine, and Luckily the like-minded staff at NITEHAWK CINEMA serves them up side by side with drinks. The independent theater opened last summer in Williamsburg and screens both digital and 35mm films with table service during the show. While the VHS Vault in the lobby bar offers free “guilty pleasure” movies, new releases play up front, alongside curated classics with monthly themes such as “The Late Night Lynx” and “Monsters of Summer” series, featuring 1980s throwbacks Predator and Pet Sematary. “There’s a huge difference in attitude—we’re not just there to take your ticket,” says Nitehawk server Ariel Arau (CAS ’19) of the theater’s passion for celluloid. “We’re all really into making this an experience, not just a movie.” Scattered vieware on order specialty cocktails inspired by the screenings, such as the Girl on Fire with house-infused jalapeño tequila, which pays homage to The Hunger Games. The Faccheghetti, named for the extraterritorial baddie in the sci-fi blockbuster Prometheus, is a mix of Bailey’s Irish Cream with green strokes of crème de menthe and looks both alien and irresistible at once. There’s a full menu of snacks, desserts, and elevated movie concessions, such as mushroom croquettes, fried pickles, and pop corn with lime, cotija cheese, and cilantro. They even serve brunch on weekends. The $14 Boulevard Club prix fixe menu comes with either a marmite or a Caogi—Nietzsche’s wicked version of a Bloody Mary. Anyone who gives that reference is sure to feel right at home.

136 METROPOLITAN AVENUE IN BROOKLYN, 718-384-3980; WWW.MOVINGIMAGE.US