

Humanities Center Newsletter

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Trinity 126, 100, and hallway www.csuchico.edu/hfa/hc

Director's Corner

Welcome to the new Humanities Center Newsletter. Besides informing you of upcoming HC events, we hope to use this space as a forum for intellectual debate, discussion, and discovery. We will publish book reviews, interviews, position papers, and responses to the events we sponsor, whether they are art exhibitions or public lectures. There are only two limits to our ecumenical latitudinarianism: we will not address either pedagogical or workplace matters as they do not fall within the purview of the HC. Our format and content will likely change over time; our approach is experimental. Above all we want to serve you and so we are particularly interested in hearing from you about features you would like to see.

This Year's Themes and Speakers

Each year the Humanities Center Board chooses one or two broad themes it wishes to address by inviting prominent

scholars who have written on these topics, by organizing reading groups around them, and so forth. Last spring the Board chose two themes to explore during the current academic year. I will take this opportunity to outline briefly the importance of the theme and to mention the speakers whom we plan to invite in order to discuss these matters with us.

The Role of the Public Intellectual:

Since approximately the Enlightenment, writers, scholars, and artists in the West have claimed the right to speak out on pressing public matters, to act as the moral conscience of a society or a nation. This claim has always been fiercely contested, usually by conservatives, but even a moderate such as Max Weber drew a sharp distinction between the expert who addresses a matter of fact within his or her expertise and the citizen who wishes to make a political argument. Weber deeply despised those professors in his day that abused their academic position to pontificate on politics in the classroom. In America the controversy

over the role of the public intellectual was probably most intense during the Vietnam War. In recent decades the debate has subsided somewhat although it always remained an important undercurrent, periodically flaring up. Events since September 11 will probably once again raise the issue.

The Humanities Center has invited two prominent guests to give their own perspectives on the role of public intellectuals in America. **Richard Rorty**, in his public talk entitled "American Universities and the Hope for Social Justice" [Tuesday, November 6, PAC 144, 7pm] and in the follow up seminar [Wednesday, November 7, Trinity 126/100 10:00am to noon], will discuss the views he introduces in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th-Century America*. For a brief discussion of this work see Professor Troy Jollimore's review in this newsletter. Next spring the Humanities Center has invited the UCLA historian **Russell Jacoby** to speak on the same topic [date to be determined]. Jacoby's famous book *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (reissued by Basic Books in August 2000) argued that the disappearance of the independent, academically

unaffiliated intellectual (his models are Edmund Wilson and Dwight MacDonald) has resulted in the retreat of intellectuals into the university, the only economically viable way for them to make a living. Among the mostly baleful consequences of this "academization" has been the proliferation of scholarly jargon, a product of professors writing for other professors instead of for a wider audience. Both in *The Last Intellectuals* and in his most recent book, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy*, Jacoby has been an acerbic, witty, and devastating critic of pretentious professorial prose, much of it emanating from the so-called cultural left in the universities and informed by literary theory and cultural studies. Jacoby has, however, many more interesting things to say about the role of public intellectuals. In some ways his views parallel those of Rorty (I am thinking specifically of their defense of utopian idealism); in others they provide an interesting and provocative contrast. [The Question of Truth in the Humanities](#): With the advent and apparent triumph of postmodernism (in certain departments at least), we have become accustomed to the claim

that the notion of pursuing scholarship in search of an objective truth is passé, an impossible project that should be abandoned. In this view all so-called "truths"—even those located within the natural sciences—are culturally specific, meaningless outside of the various communities within which they were generated. This assertion too remains highly controversial. Many people, even within humanities departments, would question whether Newton's gravitational constant is culturally relative in the same way as, say, religious beliefs or culinary tastes (and if not, why not?), or whether all historical accounts of, for example, the Holocaust are epistemologically equivalent. This question is also related to the role of the public intellectual since intellectuals have frequently based their claim to speak out on their purported possession of the truth or at least a truer view of the world. If, however, one abandons the notion of an objective truth, how can one present one's political views as anything more than one's own subjective desires?

Richard Rorty, as the country's most well known advocate of the advantages of abandoning the quest for an objective truth, believes that this is a

pseudo problem. He will address these issues in his first public lecture, "From Religion through Philosophy to Literature: The Way the Western Intellectuals Went" [Monday, November 5, Pac 134, 7pm] and in the follow up symposium [Tuesday, November 6, Trinity 126/100, noon to 12:00pm]. Those interested in a preview should pick up a copy of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and read the first three chapters [copies on sale for a 10% discount, along with *Achieving Our Country*, at the A.S. Bookstore].

Susan Haack, a prominent British philosopher from the University of Miami and the author of six books on logic, epistemology, and a wide range of cultural issues [see especially her recent *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago, 1998) for a discussion of multiculturalism, feminism, pragmatism, science, affirmative action, and relativism], will present a substantially different take on the matter. Rather than paraphrasing her views, I will append this comment on *Manifesto* to give you a sense of her approach:

"Anyone who cares for truth and reason, and appreciates trenchancy in criticism, will value this book and applaud its author. Susan

Haack is an epistemologist who holds that philosophy, while not to be confused with natural science, resembles the latter in being a truth-seeking enquiry which aspires to as much rigor and precision as possible. She is consequently the uncompromising enemy equally of certain fashionable skepticisms about these aims and of some current perversions of academic life. She stages, *inter alia*, a dialogue between Pierce and Rorty; and might even, rather freely adapting Burke, have called her entire tract "An appeal (or reproach) from the old to the new pragmatists."—Sir Peter Strawson, University College, Oxford

Professor Haack is tentatively scheduled to give both a public lecture and a symposium on March 11.

Gratis Rorty Books Distributed

The Humanities Center has purchased and distributed free of charge 75 copies of Richard Rorty's books to more than 30 interested faculty of the HFA College. We hope to do the same for those faculty members interested in attending the talks and symposia of Russell Jacoby and Susan Haack in the

spring. Our budget for such things may not always be as generous so please take advantage of it while you can. We do expect those who accept gratis copies to attend both the public lecture and the symposium of the speaker in question.

The Humanities Center Library: A Call for Donations

The Humanities Center is beginning to establish a library in Trinity 126. This is an expensive project and although we have some money to begin purchasing books, we could use your help. Please consider donating one or several books to our library and we will put a label inside the book commemorating your gift. You may also donate books in the memory of a friend or family member. [I have taken the first step in this effort by donating a new copy each of *The Columbia Encyclopedia and Mathematics: From the Birth of Numbers* by Jan Gullberg in the memory of my father]. Naturally we are looking for new, or almost-new and perfectly clean, copies of volumes chosen from a list drawn up by our library subcommittee. Most of these will be reference works as these will be of use to the widest number of faculty across the disciplines. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the list or if you

would like to suggest a book for the library, please drop me a line. And to all you authors out there—the Humanities Center Library would dearly like a clean copy of all the books written, edited, or translated by the HFA faculty. It is our fond hope to have at least the kernel of a useful and attractive library set up by the end of the year.

Letters! We Want Your Letters!

For our next issue, we would love to hear from you, especially if you have any comments on the talks and symposiums of Professor Rorty. We will consider, however, any short letter or *mise en point* on any aspect of our themes or speakers this year.

Laird Easton
director, Humanities
Center

Review

***Achieving Our Country* by Richard Rorty (Harvard University Press, 1997)**

In 1994 the New York Times published an editorial by Richard Rorty that concluded with the following paragraph:

If in the interests of ideological purity, or out of the need to stay as angry as possible, the academic left insists on a 'politics of difference', it will become increasingly isolated and ineffective. An unpatriotic left has never achieved anything. A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country's politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt.ⁱ

The three lectures (and two appendixes) presented in Rorty's 1997 book, *Achieving Our Country*, constitute an extended expansion of and meditation on this remark. The book is a challenge from within to the American left, a once powerful movement that no longer moves much of anything. Having exchanged political engagement and potential economic reform for the paralysis of principled disdain and the meager consolations of philosophical and literary theory, the left, in Rorty's view, has not only admitted but embraced defeat. It has abandoned the idea of making the United States a better and more decent society, because it has decided that the United States is rotten to the core, and thus unsalvageable.

Whitman and Dewey knew better. In their works Rorty finds an expression of the open-eyed, patriotic idealism he would have the left rediscover. (It would be interesting to find out whether he thinks My Lai, Kent State, or Nicaragua might have shaken their faith.) Rorty's choice of heroes, as always, is eccentric, at

least in their combination: Whitman is the most and Dewey quite possibly the least romantic American imaginable. Personally, I am not yet sure whether I buy Rorty's allegation that a common spirit unites the two. But if nothing else, the claim is provocative and scores high on the *chutzpah* meter.

To the so-called "Old Left" that Rorty so admires—the Reformist left of the early to mid-twentieth century—Whitman bequeathed an interpretation of democracy as passionate love for humanity at large; Dewey's gift was a common-sense, tinkering approach to social change, and an obscure but inspiring philosophical view to underpin it. The New Left, on the other hand, traces its intellectual lineage back to the petulant, despairing, withdrawing figure of Henry Adams. Adams exemplified the intellectual stance Rorty calls "detached spectatorship"—an attitude which he claims has triumphantly invaded the academic world in various deconstructionist and otherwise postmodernist guises, transforming philosophy, sociology, and literature departments into ineffectual, seething masses of tenured resentment.

Rorty, of course, has spent much of his career tilting at the windmill of objective truth; he is famous for insisting that language does not represent the world, that the so-called 'true' sentences are simply the ones we like the best, and that neither humanity nor the world possesses any sort of intrinsic nature—good postmodernist theses all. Some people, then, will be surprised to find him here criticizing postmodernists and deconstructionists. They will perhaps be even more surprised to find him endorsing patriotism—an attitude which, up until the first week of September at least, was typically regarded as old-fashioned, square, and rather Jimmy Stewart-ish. Rorty, in fact, thinks his post-modernism *supports* his political stance, or at the very least dissolves the most serious obstacles to it. The idea, very roughly, is this: having rejected such quaint notions as reality and truth, we ought to consider ourselves free to avoid all troublesome questions concerning whether the U.S. is a country worth salvaging, or whether it is in fact (as the New Left holds it to be) deeply and irredeemably corrupt:

[I]s there *nothing* incompatible with American national pride? I think the Dewey-Whitman answer is that there are many things that should chasten and temper such pride, but that nothing a nation has done should make it impossible for a constitutional democracy to regain self-respect. To say that certain acts *do* make this impossible is to abandon the secular, antiauthoritarian vocabulary of shared social hope in favor of the vocabulary which Whitman and Dewey abhorred: a vocabulary built around the notion of sin.

The rejection of constraining metaphysics, then, leaves us free to adopt whatever attitude is most likely to lead to good results; for Rorty, this attitude is a species of patriotism. "You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one

to which you wake up every morning," he writes. "Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual."

This defense of patriotism is of course contingent on the success of the attacks on objective truth that Rorty has put forth in his other books; and there is certainly not adequate space here to evaluate that issue. Confining ourselves to *Achieving Our Country*, there are still many questions to be asked. Is 'patriotism' really the best word to describe what the deconstructionists and other academic leftists are lacking? And (though it rather pains me to say this) don't they have at least somewhat of a point, in holding that today's political environment is neither as honest nor as open to redirection (other than from well-moneyed interest groups) as that with which the Old Left was able to deal? Similarly, their rejection of reflexive patriotism—a patriotism that can persevere in the face not only of Vietnam, but of any revelation, any crime—seems rather sensible from a certain point of view. Even putting aside the question of whether moral realities permit such a flexible, not to say shallow, attitude, one wonders if it really would be advantageous to adopt this sort of groundless (perhaps Rorty would say grounds-free) patriotic sentiment. Aren't people who reject the notion of sin that much more likely to commit it? Germany's National Socialists used to wake up every day to their own dream country, a country that became more and more actual as the number of torture rooms and death camps increased. Rorty might protest that we can distinguish between that country and ours. But can we really continue to do so, once we have abandoned the antiquated notions of objective morality and objective truth?

This might seem like an old complaint, and perhaps a tired one. But the problem is central to Rorty's project, and some of us have been waiting a long time for him to make a serious attempt to resolve it. Moreover, particularly in the light of recent events, I find myself unable to wholeheartedly endorse patriotic fervor as a force for moral good. That said, I am sympathetic to many of the central claims of *Achieving Our Country*; my skepticism is directed more toward the philosophy that is thought to underlie those claims. The book is worth reading; many will find some points of agreement to warm their hearts, and everyone will find some points of disagreement to serve as provocations to further reflection. And besides, the book is not only short, but positively breezy. How often do you hear that said about a work by a major philosopher?

Troy Jollimore
Philosophy

¹ Richard Rorty, "The Unpatriotic Academy," *New York Times*, February 13, 1994, E15; reprinted in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books, 2000)

Interview

Filmmaker Daven Gee

Filmmaker Daven Gee visited the California State University Chico campus on October 10-11, 2001 to present a program of nine short films he curated, entitled *Not All Picket Fences are White*. These films, made by San Francisco-based filmmakers, explore families and relationships that flourish outside what might be described as the cultural norm. *Picket Fences* was a follow-up to *Plastic Fantastic*, a program of independent shorts Gee brought to Chico State in 2000.

Daven Gee was raised in the Chico-Durham area and attended Chico State, receiving a B.A. from the Department of Communications in 1984. He currently lives and works in San Francisco. As a filmmaker and gay artist, he has shown his work extensively in the Bay Area, nationally and internationally in places as diverse as Brazil, Hong Kong, and Texas. He teaches filmmaking at San Francisco State University and City College.

An arts activist, Gee has supported other filmmakers as a curator, juror and distribution director. Some of the recent projects he has worked with include the 1998 Academy Award nominee *Regret to Inform*; the Sundance winner, *Scout's Honor* and a new

project about Israeli and Palestinian young children, titled *Promises*.

You grew up in the Chico area. How has that experience impacted your work?

Growing up in the Chico-Durham area left me with something of a blank slate in terms of finding my way as an artist. I made art in high school and in college but I didn't really make the connection between the work I was doing then and the role of art on a broader level.

In terms of media—film and video—there wasn't a whole lot being done here but the Pageant Theater and the film series on campus were a big influence. A profound influence—otherwise I would have never ventured beyond the cineplex.

What was it like growing up gay in this area?

I never identified myself as a gay person while in Chico. I didn't have that kind of consciousness and wouldn't have been comfortable with that word. Believe me, it was dangerous. I had the benefit of knowing and working with some extraordinary gay and lesbian individuals in Chico and am so grateful I had them as early role models. It was only after I moved to San Francisco that I discovered how being 'different' is not only a necessity but is also

celebrated. I hope things are moving in that direction in Chico.

How did Chico State prepare you for your career? Did any faculty especially influence or inspire you?

There are two things I left [Chico State] with that I remember every day: two simple pieces of advice. One I heard in a Communications course. The professor said, "If you leave this program with nothing else you will at least leave with a shit filter." For that alone my undergraduate degree was worth it.

The other piece of advice—and I repeat this to my students every semester—was told to me by Richard Attipetty, a visiting professor who taught a video production class. He was from India and had studied film in Chicago, a real fluke that he was in Chico for a semester. His advice to me was, "You can train a monkey to operate a camera, but it takes more to do something interesting with it." He said, "I think you have something more—don't be afraid." He changed my life.

My creative writing and humanities teachers were also big influences. They exposed me to a world beyond communication theory that prepared me for graduate school and nurtured a desire to investigate life through art.

Are there any common themes or ideas in your work?

It's hard to say because I hope I'm changing. What comes to mind today is my interest in creating opportunities for reflection. For the most part, I find real life as interesting as art. I think of life as a place for action, so I often turn to art as a place for reflection. I do have a renewed interest in documentaries because I've finally seen projects that blend reflection and information in a way that not only inspires tremendous awe but also action. That's a direction I'm beginning to explore.

What drew you to filmmaking as an outlet for creativity?

Filmmaking—*film viewing*—is about immersion of the senses: to see, hear and travel in time and space. The relationship between those layers really interested me. Also, I left social service work in Chico for film because I felt that going to the movies is one of the ways we refresh ourselves. I think this aspect of art makes it as important as anything else we do.

Can you describe the aesthetic in your work?

It's changing. I've started to work in digital, whereas before I worked in 16mm. I am drawn to images that represent more than

what they are—this probably won't change. With film, I was doing a lot of re-photography, layering and exposing the film to organic elements like salt water and dirt. That isn't possible with digital media so I'm not sure what shape my new work will take, but I'm excited by it. I'm always looking for beauty and, fortunately, beauty takes many forms.

For many people, filmmaking represents entertainment. Why do you consider film a fine art? Can film be art for arts' sake?

I appreciate and want to make films that are both artful and entertaining—by that I mean engaging. I do think it's good to work even when you're 'at the movies.' With short films, it's hard to find audiences to begin with so I do hate to piss them off once I find them. In any case, I don't know if *art for arts' sake* is ever just that—it trickles down. In film, it shows up in Hollywood and commercial television and it does help teach other artists more about their craft.

What personal philosophies have shaped your work and values?

I'm fascinated by the ways in which our lives are unscripted and by what we do when we find ourselves in those situations. That's what I'm most interested in exploring. It has a lot to do with stepping outside of

proscribed roles, the ways we identify ourselves and how we explain our existence. In those gaps there is usually something to be learned.

You've lived in Chico, New York, and San Francisco. How have those environments and experiences shaped your work?

Chico makes me appreciate vast horizon lines and I really want to make a film that uses horizon lines. I find the aesthetic of flatness very captivating [laughs]. Really, I am writing a screenplay that is set in a town very much like Chico—I hope I make it.

Living in New York and San Francisco has helped me realize that a lot of what is interesting—and ultimately successful—in the arts comes out of very small, personal, quirky, obsessive visions. We're so used to experiencing art as a big finished product but, on the contrary, so much of it originates in little run-down rooms by under-funded, under-noticed, nervous artists. I suppose the same is true for artists in Chico.

You've curated two film programs for Chico State [2000 and 2001]. As an artist, what do you gain from curating other people's work? What are some of the considerations in curating a film show?

First, curating makes me more aware of my responsibility to an audience. As an artist I can get a little self-indulgent but as a curator, I care a lot about what an audience will experience. Bad curating is a curse—it pits audiences and artists against one another.

The second thing about curating is that it gives me an opportunity to engage with artists in a different way—to be generous with them and to engage critically with them. When I ask to see an artist's work and then not show it, I learn what it's like to be on the other side of the table. Both roles are equally humbling.

With the visual arts, artists look to tangible venues like galleries, museums and collectors to get their work out. Speaking of short independent films [under 40 minutes], after a film is completed, what venues are available to a filmmaker?

As an independent, short filmmaker, a lot of it is about hustling—you are basically self-distributing. Whether that be through film festivals, galleries,

museums, online viewing or even videotape sales, there are very few bona fide venues and there is very little money to be made. It is a labor of love.

What future trends do you see in filmmaking in terms of technology, viewing trends and content?

Who knows what the digital revolution is going to finally deliver to independent mediamakers—or rather, how mediamakers are going to shape that revolution? The cost of acquiring and upgrading digital technology is really prohibitive to a person doing something as risky as making art. Money becomes the big issue. I hope someday people will create and swap movies online as frequently as they watch TV. That would be great. But I think content, vision, and artistry will always be rare. For that reason, my hunch is that technology is not going to diminish the value of being an artist and the real work that making art demands.

Jason Tannen
curator, University Art
Gallery

Calendar

November 2001

- 1, 2 Day of the Dead, activities, Trinity 100+hallway
- 5 •Richard Rorty, public lecture, "From Religion through Philosophy to Literature: The Way the Western Intellectuals Went," 7pm, PAC 134

- Reception following, Trinity 126, 100
- thru-29** •*California North: An Homage to Ansel Adams at 100*; photography by Juri Brilts, Cris Guenter, and Michael Simmons; Trinity 100+hallway
- 6** •Richard Rorty, post-lecture symposium, noon-2pm, Trinity 126+100
 •*California North: An Homage to Ansel Adams at 100* reception, 5-7pm, Trinity 100+hallway
 •Richard Rorty, public lecture, "American Universities and the Hope for Social Justice," 7pm, PAC 144
 •*Faust* (Jan Vankmajer, Czech Republic/UK, 1994), University Film Series, 8pm, Ayres 106
- 7** •Richard Rorty, post-lecture symposium, noon-2pm, Trinity 126+100
- 13** •*Calendar* (Atom Egoyan, Canada/Armenia, 1993), University Film Series, 8pm, Ayres 106
- 27** •*Four Corners* (James Benning, U.S.A., 1997), University Film Series, 8pm, Ayres 106
- 28** •CAPE's "Walking the Talk: Being the Change You Wish to See in the World," workshop, 7pm, Trinity 100
- 30** •Christine Goulding, symposium, "The Journey from Wit to Genius in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics," 3-5pm, Trinity 126+100

December 2001

- 3-21** •*Reward Structure*, new works by Klutch Stanaway, Trinity 100
- 4** •University Film Series, 8pm, Ayres 106
- 5** •*Reward Structure* reception, 5-7pm, Trinity 100
- 11** •University Film Series, 8pm, Ayres 106

Humanities Center Board

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Laird Easton (History)

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