

## **We Think In Public**

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In 1999, Silicon Alley entrepreneur Josh Harris rented an underground warehouse in lower Manhattan and subjugated a hundred friends to a home-made police state he named “QUIET.” Its residents slept in open bunk pods stacked atop one another, each with a bus depot television with a closed-circuit feed from every other pod. Quieters partook of bacchanal feasts and abusive interrogation. They showered and defecated and copulated together in glass enclosures in the middle of the warehouse floor. It was an Orwellian clubhouse where libertarians tried their hands at fascism.

On New Year’s morning 2000, New York City police closed down QUIET.<sup>1</sup> The official rationale was fire violations, but one wonders if authorities suspected the group was really a millennium cult intent on its own dramatic self-destruction.

It was hardly the project one would have expected from a man who had founded the successful market research and analytics firm Jupiter Communications a decade and a half earlier. But in 1993, Harris had also started Pseudo.com, an early internet television venture. Television had clearly fascinated Harris for many years before his penchant for fanatical parties evolved into sheer psychosis. So had spectacle and decadence; in the New York Internet scene of the late 1990s, Harris was probably better known as a sybarite than as a CEO.

Along with countless others, he lost most of his fortune in the 2000 dot com crash. But rather than rebuild his businesses, Harris decided to rebuild his bunker instead. That year, Harris spent \$1.7 million—a third of his remaining wealth—wiring up his Soho loft with microphones, cameras, servers, and broadband uplinks. Harris and his girlfriend, a former Pseudo producer named Tanya Corrin, would broadcast every detail of their lives to the world for 100 days, with video, audio, and chat services hosted on a public website. He started a company called Panopticon to house the project, which he named “We Live In Public.”

Despite being called “the Warhol of the Internet,” Harris was driven more by pragmatism than performance: “I am trying to figure out whether it’s better to live in public or to live in private.” On day 85, after weeks of psychological abuse had destroyed their relationship, Corrin moved out.<sup>2</sup> Harris was so terrorized in his loft that he swapped SoHo for an apple farm upstate.

Unlike most archives, the video proceedings of “We Live in Public” were recorded by default rather than by intention or by accident. QUIET been captured more deliberately. Long before opening its doors, Harris had the idea to make a film about QUIET, a plan that etched the covenant he struck with his Quieters: “Everything is free except the video we capture of you. That, we own.”

In 2009, filmmaker and former QUIET resident Ondi Timoner took up where Harris had left off, producing the documentary *We Live in Public*, a cautionary tale about Harris's exploits. Near the end of the film, Timoner suggests that Harris's extremism anticipated what has become standard practice online—thanks to blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and related services, everyone lives in public. Facebook Boy-CEO Mark Zuckerberg has taken up the reigns of involuntary public life's dark chariot from Josh Harris, but the fascism and exhibitionism remain the same. The scale has changed too: instead of a hundred residents, Zuckerberg rules over 400 million. Harris's tiny tragedy, Timoner argues, has become everyone's. The only difference is, most of us don't even notice.

*We Live In Public* falls in with a long line of cautionary techno-tragedies, the neoliberal dystopias that Richard Rorty criticizes in the opening pages of *Achieving Our Country*. There he writes, "novels like Stephenson's [*Snowcrash*], Congdon's [*Three Days of the Condor*] and Pynchon's [*Vineland*] are not novels of social protest, but rather of rueful acquiescence in the end of American hopes."<sup>3</sup> For Rorty, they characterize "a world pervaded by hypocrisy and self-deception." He contrasts these works of despair with the socialist novels of the early twentieth century. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* show "the difference between agents and spectators." Science fiction's "detached spectatorship," as he calls it, opposes the active engagement of Whitman and Dewey, who form the basis for Rorty's idea of a revival of liberalism in the United States.

But unlike *Snowcrash*, *We Live in Public* is documentary, drawing it further away from science fiction. Today, Harris's multi-million dollar home studio comes installed on every laptop. Like the manure catcher on a draft horse, online services collect and disseminate the exhaust of our lives without us even noticing. Any idiot can live in public. But this new public life is hardly an active one either. Living in public may be a prerequisite, but it is hardly an end. Rorty challenges us to do something more: *to think in public*. Thinking in public, it turns out, is far harder than just living in it.

Those of us scholars who are fortunate enough to stumble into the limelight sometimes call ourselves "public intellectuals." It's a name we wear as an armband more than as a badge. But when we talk about public intellectualism, we usually mean something very particular: plucking ideas out of the arcane corners of academic obscurantism and nourishing the poor, interpellated spirits of the deranged masses, our sweet, ripe berries quelling the public's preservative-plied palate. We tend to assume such a practice would meet Rorty's call for a greater engagement with social justice over abstract theoretical dithering.

But a closer look at the proportions of the public intellectual's public raises an eyebrow. When we talk about speaking in public, we have to factor in a handicap. Like egomaniacal screenwriters penning films about the burdens of Hollywood life, we academics mostly talk about ourselves, yet without the postmodern irony of a Charlie Kaufman. At best, public intellectualism is a name for authoring articles moderately less obtuse than journal papers for

venues moderately less obscure than journals: *The American Prospect*, *The Nation*, *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic*.

Are we just kissing babies? The cynic might argue that, at best, writing leftist jive in *The Atlantic* amounts to a futures market hedge on intellectual commodities. Eventually one cashes in on a collection of pithy, outraged essays for University of Whatever Press, and a smooth, salty gravy to pour over a steamy promotion statement. Public intellectualism is only *public* when set in relief against the sordid, indulgent privatism of the liberal arts, which spends most of its collective time denigrating the general public for their false consciousness in the coffeeshop attached to the indie bookstore. Let's face it: thinking in public is orthogonal to scholarly life. The "public intellectual" is a contradiction in terms.

One problem is in our approach. While Harris was dressing up as his clown alter ego, plotting his escape into a bunker, Richard Rorty was filling his own hard drives with lectures and notes about the future of civic life in America. As I perused the many documents and drafts in the digital archives which lead to the book *Achieving Our Country*, I couldn't help but wonder: What good is it to trouble ourselves with the draft versions of this document as it was "born digital?" Why do we want to peer into Rorty's hard disks like so many perverts once peered into Josh and Tanya's bedroom?

The expectation, I suppose, is one of intellectual *rigor*, a word most people reserve for references to the dead, but which we scholars use as an honorific. I suppose we're intended to troll through these archives as an exercise in inner pedantry, that practice of philosophy and critical theory we celebrate more than any other. Or as Rorty himself puts it in his 1996 American Philosophical Association response to Marjorie Greene's *A Philosophical Testament*.

For [many members of the philosophy profession] "doing philosophy" is primarily a matter of spotting weaknesses in arguments, as opposed to hoping that the next book you read will contain an imaginative, illuminating, redescription of how things hang together. Many of our colleagues think that one counts as doing philosophy if one finds a flaw in an argument put forward in a philosophical book or article, and that one is a good philosopher if one is quick to find such flaws and skillful at exhibiting them.<sup>4</sup>

There's a fictional character in *The Simpsons* known as Comic Book Guy. Offering sarcastic quips about his favorite comics and television shows, he epitomizes the nerd-pedant who splits every last hair in his pop cultural fare. Besides serving as a send-up of the quintessential comic book/D&D geek, Comic Book Guy also lampoons the nitpickery of the Internet, where living in public also requires critiquing every detail of everything all the time.

But beyond those obvious references, I think Comic Book Guy also serves as a critique-by-proxy of most academics. We are insufferable pettifogs who listen or read first to find fault

and only later to seek insight, if ever. “Discourse” is not a term for ironist conversation, but the brand name for a device used to manufacture petty snipes—about the etymology of a word, or the truth value of a proposition, or the unexpected exclusion of a favorite French theorist. Lectures like this one are understood not as highways between ideas, but as asphalt slaughterhouses where armadillos, having been crushed under the tires of tractor-trailers, leave residue for circling buzzards.

As a paraphilosopher, I’d suggest that philosophers are especially guilty of becoming comic book guys in their professional dealings. Indeed, perhaps philosophy is the prototype for Internet trolling, a hypothesis a quick evaluation of blog comments about Rorty’s death will support.

“I wish his nearest and dearest all the best at this difficult time, but that shouldn’t detract from the fact that calling such ideas those of a crackpot or a crank is almost a kindness.”

“And was Rorty abused and ignored because he indicated that ‘conventional’ philosophy has backed itself into a corner or is it, (as some have argued in this thread) because he’s just a fraud and conventional/analytic philosophy has essentially ‘got it right’?”

“If we reject the correspondence theory of truth, then Rorty is not truly dead. I am sure he will recreate himself.”

(The original post on CrookedTimber.com reads just, “Richard Rorty has died.” The comments that follow it total 22,000 words, among them the gems above).<sup>5</sup>

Rorty’s focus on conversation makes him a natural detractor of the Philosophy Book Guy attitude. Perhaps what he’s after is not a post-analytic nor a post-continental philosophy, but a *post-autistic philosophy*, to steal a term from one of the blog comments just mentioned.

We could debate just how public was Richard Rorty’s public intellectualism. But no matter, he did leave us breadcrumbs out of the woods. I’d like to talk briefly about three.

### **First, Irony.**

Rorty’s ironist is a good conversationalist. She listens. Not ordinary listening, but earnest listening that results in the active and regular incorporation new ideas into her logic of the world. In this respect, the act of *writing*, which is all we assume public intellectuals do, is no longer

terribly important, perhaps not even required. Given this attitude, most philosophers fail the litmus test simply because they are trying so hard to be philosophers.

The true ironist is always thinking in public, skeptical of private enclaves and comfort zones. For him, philosophy recedes into the background, reorienting the thinker away from the institution and toward the world. The ironist is no more a scholar than the plumber might be a Cincinnati Bengals fan; it is an incidental feature, one that exhausts the entirety of his being no more than the occasionalist's fire exhausts the features of the cotton.

Rorty found no gilded streets on either side of the border between the Analytic Autocracy and the Continental Commune. Despite his hopes, he never succeeded in becoming what Iain Thomson has called a *coyote*, a figure who steals across borders illicitly in the night.<sup>6</sup> When you hear people talk about his legacy, it is not uncommon to hear them say, "Rorty tried to change philosophy and failed" or to note that "he ended his life outside philosophy." These sentiments carry an air of tragedy: like Josh Harris, Richard Rorty was hoist on the petard of his own pragmatism.

But perhaps Rorty had us all fooled. Perhaps where he ended up ought precisely to be our goal. Perhaps the purpose of philosophy is to escape itself. In this respect, I'd argue that the ironist is not a pragmatist but a *realist*: she leaves the fascist prison of QUIET for the ordinary city streets above, streets filled with parking meters, Greek coffee cups, sidewalk gum stains, diesel exhaust, Manolo Blahniks, and People magazine. She enters what Quentin Meillassoux calls "the great outdoors," where Richard Rorty admired birds instead of propositions. We might just call it, without irony nor naiveté nor science fictionalism: "the real world."

## **Second, Liberalism.**

Rorty's political philosophy issues from Dewey. If realized, this very different kind of neoliberalism would oppose the impotent truculence of academic isolationism. "The academic left," Rorty argues, "has no projects to propose to America, no vision of a country to be achieved by gathering a consensus on the need for reform." The pragmatist, by contrast, offers political initiative, "vigorous participation" in electoral politics, and unabashed patriotism. Rorty was against the sweeping proposals of radicalism, supportive of incremental reform, and concerned with the reduction of cruelty through the continual expansion of the group of humans worthy of being spared it, a goal he names solidarity.

Some have argued that this position rests on a contradictory foundationalism. As David Auerbach puts it: "I have seen many continentals discourse on the indefinite postponement and deferral of truth and meaning, only then to proclaim the moral evil of the Enlightenment, capitalism, the United States, Europe, etc."<sup>7</sup> Some reject Rorty's entire project after *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* on these grounds: after all, doesn't contingency stand at odds with a

philosophical position bonded to fundamental political assumptions? How is anti-foundationalism compatible with American exceptionalism?

For me, the problem rests neither in some logical confidence trick, nor in the earnestness of Rorty's civic hopes. Rather, my issue is one of specificity: philosophy is not the handmaid of politics. I say this not from some deep-seated concern about the health of epistemology, but because liberal pragmatism adds blinders to the draft horse's weird garb. The "broader concerns" that public intellectualism ought to concern itself with are so much larger than politics. Ontology, not ethics, must offer us first principles. The true ironist would be just as concerned with rutabagas and ferris wheels and basalt as with gay marriage and the working poor and the spotted owl. "The public" is a big place. It's not just a place for states and voters and ballot propositions. It's also a place for legwarmers and silicone breast implants and hot vinegar pickled green beans.

### **Third, the Linguistic Turn.**

Rorty's contingency is rooted in vocabularies, in the way people talk about worldly issues. Descriptions of the world, not the world itself, are true or false, and therefore all language is contingent, usefully discussed only in relation to other existing or possible languages.

As a lapsed Derridean, I still find this line of thinking appealing. In fact, I might find it more appealing than Derrida's own account of differance, even if just because it can be explained without a nickelodeon full of mimes and praxinoscopes. Rorty is *right* that philosophy has been chasing trends more than it has cultured inspiration. But the firmament of language, alas, is one of those trends too.

If ideas are conversations, then all conversations are fair game, and it makes sense to preserve them. When we construct something like a digital archive, we do so thanks to an idealism underwritten by the linguistic turn. Archives house documents, and documents hold language, and language bears meaning. The rest we don't even think to think about, but toss away like citrus rinds.

But the actor-network theorist and the object-oriented ontologist see things differently: for example, the many documents that comprise the process of writing *Achieving Our Nation* are not terribly interesting as individual documents, but they might be as the network that is "the writing process." In fact, the archives are filled with things that are idealized into documents even though they really are not documents at all: faxes destined to be ground through the low-res scanner and sampled as telephony; correspondence that can only be understood as temporally distributed exchanges, and ledgers, like the empty appointment sign-in sheet that becomes an entirely different object when inscribed as a door-posting. When archives archive documents, they idealize them into language, failing to acknowledge their simultaneous status as things.

Furthermore, I wonder if it might be irrelevant to say that this archive was “born digital.” To do so is also to ignore the fact that these works were really born as stuff multitudinous: invitations, tax documentation, faxes, letters, drafts, and other things which happen to have given off digital textual exhaust, like QUIET exuded video. For those who would object that such aggregates are still “really” just bits on disk, texts meant to be used as evidence for social practices, and therefore worth acknowledging for their digital birth, I respond that digitalism is just as wrongly reductionist as language. Instead, stuff comes in real, material form, at many scales, none more fundamental than any other.

Consider, for example, the future archives being built today “in the cloud” on services like Gmail and Twitter. These are not documents, but entanglements of database records, air conditioners, end-user license agreements, electricity grids, backup tape automators, venture capital, password reminder security questions, browser standards, and much more. When we call things digital, just as when we call things linguistic, we are always only partly right. Instead of file systems, we ought seek other metaphors. Perhaps future archives will be more like bestiaries or like Wal-Marts than they are like libraries.

In one of his final essays, Rorty wrote in *Poetry Magazine*: “I now wish that I had spent somewhat more of my life with verse.”<sup>8</sup> Poetry had long been a metaphor for Rorty, one format among many for producing language games. But for another clue to his purpose, we must return to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and Rorty’s discussion of edifying philosophy:

Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause—wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.<sup>9</sup>

One way of thinking of “loving wisdom,” Rorty continues, is to think of it as the practical effort necessary to participate in a conversation. This is a reminder worth heeding again, lest philosophy become to scholars what vats of comic books are to pop culture fans, simultaneous bearers of tiny secret truths and temptations to withdraw back into the basement of dorkship.

But “conversation” is just one tiny step in a broader return to the real world. I choose to understand poetry not merely as a use of language, but as a form that points to the many stones unturned—not the least of which are the stones themselves. It’s not possible to get through the day without crossing hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of ignored subjects of philosophy ready to be thought in earnest. The *public* of the public intellectual must cease to mean just the polity and also embrace the great outdoors. There perhaps we’ll find a new ironist, a bird watcher as much as a philosopher out among the whippoorwills, the linen petticoats, the combine harvesters, the paper shredders, the salt water taffy, the magnolia blossoms, the waves that crash

to shore, the bits that race from hard disks, the stippling on unseen bookplates — threading his toes through the rain that smears the ink of *The Nation* forever.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Siklos, "Pseudo's Josh Harris: The Warhol of Webcasting," *Business Week*, January 26, 2000, <http://www.businessweek.com/ebiz/0001/em0126.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> David Osborne, "Josh Harris: a turn for the weird," *The Independent*, March 16, 2001, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/josh-harris-a-turn-for-the-weird-687505.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1998). This quote was taken from an earlier draft version of the book from the UC Irvine archives.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, "Comments on Marjorie Grene's *A Philosophical Testament*," paper presented at the Western Division APA meetings, Seattle Washington, April 5, 1996, <http://ucispace.lib.uci.edu/bitstream/handle/10575/748/GRENE.pdf?sequence=1>, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://crookedtimber.org/2007/06/09/richard-rorty/>.

<sup>6</sup> Iain Thomson, "Review of *The New Heidegger*," *Notre Dame Philosophy Reviews*, September 9, 2009, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=7603>.

<sup>7</sup> David Auerbach, "Richard Rorty, 1931-2007," *Waggish*, June 9, 2007, <http://www.waggish.org/2007/06/09/richard-rorty-1931-2007>.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Fire of Life," *Poetry* (November 2007), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/article.html?id=180185>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 370.