

**Editorial:  
Replaying Reuel Denney**

**By Randle W. Nelsen**

As a poet, man of letters, and social analyst, Reuel Denney was engaged in semiotic and cultural studies long before this became fashionable in North America. His readings from the 1950s of cultural spectacles such as football games and common cultural practices such as owning and driving automobiles remain valuable in illuminating life in the twenty-first century. The following Denney appetizer is written with the hope that it will help create a renewed interest in his work and what can be inspired by it, an interest worthy of his insightful scholarship.

William Walters' (2003) recent review of Peter Pericles Trifonas' essay concerning Umberto Eco's work on English football focused my own long-standing interest in American and Canadian football as cultural practices. More specifically, and beyond the Friday night hometown Americana spectacles I participated in as a high school player, my thoughts turned to the 1950's writings of the late Reuel Denney (1913-1995). For most academics, if they have heard of Denney at all, it is usually as the lesser-known collaborator with the late David Riesman and Nathan Glazer in writing the best-selling sociological classic, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). This book's well-known trio of tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed types serves to describe and analyze social change connecting historical eras and societies as well as to reflect upon the dominant character or ethos typically produced in different societies.

I first met Professor Denney as one of his graduate students in two American Studies seminars he offered at the University of Hawaii during the 1965-66 academic year. Denney came to Hawaii in 1961, and stayed for the rest of his career, after spending fourteen years with the English, Humanities, and Social Sciences staff at the University of Chicago. Riesman had encouraged and sponsored his move there in 1947.

Prior to this, since his graduation from Dartmouth in 1932 at the age of nineteen, he had worked on Wall Street, in a Buffalo, New York factory that manufactured automobile parts, and for five years (1936-1941) as a high school teacher in Buffalo. Denney became rather well-known as a poet and essayist, and by the time he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1941-42, had already published his first book of poems. During the war years of the early 1940s he wrote for both *Time* and *Fortune* magazines. He achieved some notoriety, and came into conflict with his conservative editors, with his stories on the 1944 world financial conference at Bretton Woods and on the California banker A.P. Giannini and his monopolizing Bank of America.

Denney's sports participation can be traced to his father's influence and tutelage, and his interests in the cultural and class aspects of sports were fostered by three generations of immigrant movement up the class ladder. After landing at Ellis Island Denney's maternal grandmother, who had earned her passage as a dairy maid, secured excellent employment as a parlor maid, while his grandfather complemented her good fortune by landing well-paid secure employment with the New York Fire Department. In brief, Denney's mother's parents lived (from Ireland to New York City and from the barn to the front parlor) both ethnicity and social class, and they knew and taught him the problems and potentials associated with each.

On the paternal side there was some money and success in business enabling Denney and his parents to live in close proximity to, if outside the official boundaries of, Buffalo's wealthiest district. He rubbed shoulders and became friends with the children of that city's upper class. This, combined with summers back among friends from the immigrant and first-generation German, Irish, Italian and Jewish families of the Brooklyn neighbourhood where he spent his first eight years, instilled in Denney a life-long interest in studying and writing on social class differences, sociability and leisure-time activities. In short, Denney's Buffalo high school experiences together with his participation on neighbourhood sandlot football and baseball teams and his tennis games, all taught a

young Denney that the relationship between the social and the intellectual - a kind of sociability, if you like - might be worthy of exploration. They also gave him an abiding interest and a kind of faith in social democracy that is reflected in his musings on football and popular culture.

Some of Denney's writing on football can be found in his groundbreaking tour of American popular culture, *The Astonished Muse* (1957; 1964; and republished in 1988). He explains the speedy development as well as the early and quick acceptance by Americans of their variant of English rugby as a consequence of the new game's close fit with "other aspects of their industrial folkways." He analyzes and describes football as a game becoming increasingly rationalized at the turn of the nineteenth century: "The mid-field dramatization of line against line, the recurrent starting and stopping of field action around the timed snapping of a ball, the trend to a formalized division of labor between the backfield and line, above all, perhaps, the increasingly precise synchronization of men in motion" (Denney 1964:111). Efficient synchronization of a formalized labour force combined with the introduction of new rules and manners governing play, helped take local proclivities, local colour, and inequities out of the game. The result was movement towards a professionalized standardization and a business-oriented centralization of the sport. As Denney put it, Knute Rockne was the game's Henry Ford.

In an article written earlier Riesman and Denney (1951) provided a history of Rockne's game as it developed into an American cultural staple. The authors outline how the tenth and eleventh century English game became formalized in the United States as both entertainment and big business. They show how "the ambiguities" of the English versions of soccer (the kicking game) and rugby (the running game) were melded into Rockne's version - how Ellis of Rugby's 1823 faux pas of picking up the ball and running with it became a "mistake turned into innovation" as Americans added the forward pass and downs with minimum yardage-gain and offside rules to create a more exciting, quicker-paced game. In brief, football's United States version revealed much

about the character of American culture - not only the Americans taste for the excitement of action-driven entertainment but also a desire for the no nonsense standardization and centralization of business favored by their rule-bound, legalistic approach.

American football's transformation into big and profitable entertainment also revealed "an element of class identification." The authors note that early football in Britain was played by an elite or upper stratum before lower strata audiences who were at least as much interested in carefully observing the players to be sure they demonstrated the "good form" of "gentlemen" as they were in keeping track of the score. The American experience and game was different; it was played by a collegiate elite, but watched by audiences with some experience in playing the game. As a result, the latter "were unwilling to subordinate themselves to a collegiate aristocracy" (Riesman and Denney 1951:318).

American football as a kind of democratization in the world of entertainment is part of, subsumed by, a larger theme central to Denney's sociology: The battle of capitalism and its attendant, standardized professionalism as it intersects with democracy and its emphasis upon a less-regulated, craft-based discipline grounded in amateurism. Denney was especially insightful on the matter of how differences between amateurism and professionalism are related to social class. He perceptively analyzed the often lower-class youth amateurism of hot-rod culture as threatening to the middle-class professionalism and respectability of the Detroit auto-makers who sought to normalize and standardize the amateurs. "Not a few people seemed to feel, without quite saying so, that the duty of young Americans was to buy cars, not to rebuild them. To rebuild a car, it appeared, was an attack on the American way" (Denney 1964:145). Put another way and to incorporate a 1990's advertising pitch, to mess around or tinker with the Chevy in the backyard was to mess with capitalism, "the heartbeat of America."

Buying and not tinkering with the Detroit model pits corporate restraint against the tendency towards individual freedom. That democracy as freedom for both

individual and community might be engendered by upward social mobility (i.e. the purchase of a new, factory-built car) was another concern and a theme familiar in Denney's writings and to his students. We soon learned to look beyond the automobile or the material good itself to share his awareness that cultural capital walked hand-in-hand with monetary capital and was often the advance guard for crossing class, gender and ethnic barriers. On the latter point he writes: "For the second-generation boy, with his father's muscles but not his father's motives, football soon became a means to career ascent. So was racketeering, but football gave acceptance too - acceptance into the democratic fraternity of the entertainment world where performance counts and ethnic origin is hardly a handicap" (Denney 1964:117). As for changing performance standards and the cultural requirements of today's game, suffice it to say that recruiting a good linguist, once a prized asset when in the 1890's arguments with the referee occurred as a matter of routine after most plays (see Riesman and Denney 1951:317), is no longer a top priority of today's big-time university programs.

What Denney's writings on football teach us is to look past the borders and the boundaries of the field of play and the game to see what lies beyond - to deconstruct football in order to see something else, to see more of what C. Wright Mills called "the big picture" as it changes. Walters (2003:12) in his criticism of Trifonas and his treatment of Eco notes that what is absent is "a sense that football is subject to social and cultural changes. It is not a static system of signs, but historically dynamic and changing." Witness the road we, in Canada and the United States, have traveled from the first game played, Harvard meeting McGill in Rugby football in 1874; to the early Americanization of the game and the different game developed in Canada in the late 1800s and early 1900s; to countless high school and college homecoming game spectacles (see Friedenbergs 1963, 1965:158-162 for a classic description of one such 1963 event) which solidify both individual and community identity and status; to the militarized business orientations of university football programs (see DeLillo 1972;

Shaw 1972); to today's high-stakes gambling wars where millions live all weekend (and Monday nights too) in a technological bubble of flat-screen digital television pictures reporting the progress of heavily-armoured and electrified warriors doing battle in domed stadiums that put a technologically-sophisticated end to such embarrassments as the 1962 Grey Cup known as "the Fog Bowl" played in the pre-Sky Dome days at Exhibition Stadium (see Gillmor 2003). Denney's work helps us read football as cultural narrative(s) (see Oriard 1993).

As I write we are entering the third month of the college and professional football seasons. Saturday's and Sunday's "Big Games" across the United States bring the car and football, gridlock and gridiron, together in the popular cultural practice known as "the tailgate party." Here the car becomes not only the warm-up for radio and television's play-by-play coverage but also kitchen, bar, music center and so on - literally the center of the party. In its transformation it is transformative, an extension of the stadium to the parking lot and in some ways a leveling, a sort of democratic counterpoint, to the difference between the box seats on the fifty yard line and the cheap seats in "the nosebleed section."

Denney taught his students to become attuned to such transformations, specifically the historical changes in cultural meanings attributed to material artifacts. His work is replete with models to be emulated in this regard. For example, in sketching the history of the car as both democratic possibility and media extension Denney (1964:142) writes: "sometime between 1920 and 1945, roughly, the auto had passed through a stage of its existence symbolized by the comic strip 'Gasoline Alley'. As auto it had lost much of its old novelty as transportation; in order to retain its glamour it had to become, in differentiated forms, a kind of daily apparel." As this beautifully constructed metaphor reminds us, we as a culture have been changed by the auto and as changed beings we do our best to make our own modifications, pushing the boundaries of the medium as both message and massage.

Football and the Sunday drive have merged in stadium parking lots across the United States. Canada is not yet known for its tailgate parties but Grey Cup, like Super Bowl, parties and the attendant corporate profits are plentiful enough. The point is that Denney's work recognizes the importance of football as a window, perhaps even a mirror, of cultural identity. Studying football tells us something about our Canadian identity and what may remain of our inferiority problem when we compare ourselves and our culture to the Americans and their notions of cultural superiority. Think of the denotative/connotative differences between Grey and Super. Football as it is financed, played (including differences in rules, size of field and ball, number of players and so on), watched and reported upon in the CFL vs. the NFL may even offer some insight into value and belief differences between the two countries regarding acceptance of the business-industrial system as exemplified in Eisenhower's famous warning concerning the increasing domination of the military-industrial complex; regarding deference and submission to legal and governmental authority; regarding the mix of populism and elitism in our increasingly entertainment-oriented systems of education and our Hollywoodized popular cultures.

The popular culture promoted and sustained by Hollywood could serve as a focal point for extending Denney's work on both football and automobiles. Certainly the violence and grandiose deeds of football fit well with the obligatory car chases and fiery car crashes of Hollywood movies. And as with half-time extravaganzas, whether we read these spectacular crashes as evidence of the apocalypse and cultural decay or of innocence and cultural renewal, or as evidence of something else, the point is the spectacle, the messages it conveys, the way it transforms us and we transform it through our understanding of its meaning. Denney's writings on football as cultural practice, as well as his musings on cars, deviance, social class and democracy, the connections between leisure and business, play and work, architecture and the mass media, continue to provide useful points of reference in our attempts to understand ourselves and our

surroundings.

Randle Nelsen teaches sociology at Lakehead University. His most recent book is *Schooling As Entertainment: Corporate Education Meets Popular Culture* (2002). His study of Denney's life and work, "Remembering Reuel Denney: Sociology as Cultural Studies," appeared in the *American Sociologist* 34/4 (2003).

## References

DeLillo, Don (1972) *End Zone*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Denney, Reuel (1957, 1964) *The Astonished Muse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Friedenberg, Edgar Z. (1963, 1965) *Coming of Age in America*. New York: Random House (Vintage).

Gillmor, Don (2003) "Yard Lines," *The Globe and Mail* (November 15).

Oriard, Michael (1993) *Reading Football*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Riesman, David, Reuel Denney, Nathan Glazer (1950) *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Riesman, David and Reuel Denney (1951) "Football in America: A Study in Culture Diffusion," *American Quarterly* 3: 309-325.

Shaw, Gary (1972) *Meat on the Hoof: The Hidden World of Texas Football*. New York: Dell.

Walters, William (2003) "Echo Chamber," *The Semiotic Review of Books* 13.2:11-12.

