VISIONS OF THE PAST:
THE CHALLENGE OF FILM TO OUR IDEA OF HISTORY
by Robert A. Rosenstone
Harvard University Press, 1995; 271 pages

When Professor of History Robert Rosenstone first introduced movies in his Caltech classes in the 1970s, and then in 1977 taught a course entitled "History on Film," class enrollments soared. But ultimately this innovation made an even more profound impact on his own studies, luring the self-acknowledged "Dragnet" historian (just the facts, ma'am) into the theoretical issues of how film works to create or "re-create" history. "History does not exist until it is created," writes Rosenstone. Film, he found, offers a new relationship to the past and a new concept of what we mean by "history." His latest book, comprising a collection of essays exploring what happens when words are translated into images, suggests that film is an even more appropriate medium for showing us the past than are words on a page. There are, however, different and more complex rules for history on film than for history on the page, and in his book Rosenstone discusses how these "rules" are observed in the various forms of historical film: for example, documentaries, films that mix fictional and historical characters, films from other cultures, and experimental films with deliberate anachronisms and inventions that "re-vision" history. He discusses five films in depth, including Reds and The Good Fight. Rosenstone, who served as historical consultant on the former and narration writer on the latter, also practices what he preaches.

THE CHEERFULNESS OF DUTCH ART:
A RESCUE OPERATION
by Oscar Mandel
Davaco Publishers (Netherlands), 1996; 128 pages

English novelists in the 19th century may have planted puzzles in their work, but 17th-century Dutch painters most assuredly did not, according to Professor of Literature Oscar Mandel. In this short book Mandel takes on the current intellectual fashion of imposing 20th-century interpretations of "semi-veiled meanings" on these paintings, interpretations that invariably see gloomy, moralistic lessons beneath the surface of the most riotous peasant feasts, merry companies, and even innocent still lifes and landscapes. Mandel chalks this up to our own century's "assault on euphoria" and sets out to liberate the "self-evidently happy works" of the 17th-century Dutch painters "from the excesses of academic earnestness." The Dutch painted their hedonistic displays of food and flowers and depictions of the human...
Most of the 16 essays in this book exploring the influence of ethnography on what has become popularly known as modernism were originally presented at a 1991 conference jointly sponsored by Caltech and the Claremont Graduate School Humanities Center. In the late 19th century various technologies (for example, railroads, telegraphy, photography) brought Western culture into closer encounter with primitive cultures, ushering in a profound alteration in how Westerners perceived others—and themselves. This new fascination with the primitive pervades much of the literature, art, and music of the early 20th century. The book's editors, who also organized the original conference, Elazar Barkan, associate professor of history at Claremont Graduate School (as well as director of its Humanities Center and previously instructor in history at Caltech), and Ronald Bush, professor of literature at Caltech, don't follow the easier, more heavily traveled routes through the familiar modernism terrain. Rather, they and the other contributors shift backward and dig deeper into the political, social, and racial antecedents and complexities of encounters with primitive societies. Some of the essays deal with academic anthropology, but topics also encompass vampires and violence, Gauguin in Tahiti, Josephine Baker in Paris, the influence of African American music on Irving Berlin, T. S. Eliot's fascination with primitive peoples, and the effect of ethnographic photography's erotic images on Victorian morality.

The Caltech-Occidental Concert Band, directed by Bill Bing, director of Caltech's instrumental music program, has recorded its first CD. It's loaded with such Caltechiana as the "Centennial Suite," written by alumnus Les Deutsch (BS '76, PhD '80) for Caltech's 100th birthday; "Throop March," written in 1900 and "unearthed" in 1987; and a medley of unforgettable songs from the 1920s including "Lead Us On, Our Fighting Beavers," "Fight, Men of California Tech," and the "Gnome Sweetheart Song" (all sans lyrics, unfortunately). There are pieces by two other local composers with a Caltech connection (but no beavers or Gnomes) and, oh yes, some Ives, Sousa, and Mozart too. The CD can be ordered from the Caltech Bookstore (818-395-6161) for $12.95 plus shipping and handling. —JD