Shapiro, M, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*: After the aesthetic turn (London: Routledge, 2013)

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Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method (STM) is a bold statement of the possibilities opened up by the so-called aesthetic turn and an important intervention in debates on 'method' in the social sciences. Michael J Shapiro's work has explored the critical potential of the cinematic, textual and visual since his writing on language, biography and photography in the 1980s. Since then, his readings of literary and cinematic texts have served as a way to think against grain of orthodox thought about politics and international relations and open up their various unacknowledged assumptions to critical scrutiny. STM gathers a number of readings of varied visual and textual artistic practices with an introductory essay that outlines the critical and political potential of such readings. In this introduction Shapiro makes explicit the manner in which artistic artefacts might constitute the material with and through which to question the 'pre-Kantian epistemological slumber' (STM, 1) of political science/studies. In so doing, he seeks to deprive 'the present of its necessity' through 'an aesthetic mode of apprehension' (STM, 8-9) that is critical and poitical insofar as it generates new concepts and questions the conditions of possibility of familiar ones.

Shapiro's philopoetic investigations of the critical, political potential of aesthetic subjects – 'characters in texts whose movements and actions…map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains' (STM, xiv) – is an important intervention into debates on method in political science/studies. As Shapiro notes, 'method' remains a narrowly interpreted concept that is largely focussed on technical enquiry into how data might be collected and analysed to reveal underlying causation. This, however, overlooks the onto-epistemological question of how understandings of what comprises 'data' are constituted and normalised. Orthodox political science/studies considers the parameters of the shared and objective world settled and the main question that of how to collect and classify samples of that world's matter. In contrast, following Foucault, a critical theory seeks to question those parameters and ask how they came to be – and continue to be – settled. To do so, Shapiro draws primarily on Rancière to propose that aesthetic subjects offer a political resource for critical thinking about issues as diverse as economic crisis, justice and war.

Artistic practices, Shapiro contends, embody Rancière's conception of the political as 'an event of dissensus…that reorder[s] spaces and reconstitutes identities' (STM, 140). Indeed, the cinematic, literary and visual arts are said to comprise an ideal site for the generation of aesthetic subjects that contest settled identities, spaces and topographies and thus think in a critical and political sense. This is, to my mind, the central claim of STM: that texts, images and artefacts *think critically*. In Rancière's terms aesthetic subjects re-partition the sensible and thus should be seen as both critical and political. Political analysis should be attuned to the various ways in which this critical thinking contests and reorders the seemingly settled spaces and identities of both historical and contemporary events. In this way, for example, Shapiro traces the way in which car culture in film and comics comprises a partitioning of the sensible that reveals a moralised economy which speaks to the reasons for which the automotive industry became a central plank of US government action to stem the tide of financial crisis in the early twenty-first century.

STM thus outlines the way in which aesthetic subjects might be engaged in thinking the political critically. Like all critical and thoughtful texts it is complex and multiple in ways that resist easy summary or interrogation. With that in mind, I want to trace out three ideas that are not so much question marks raised against individual propositions in the text, but rather thoughts provoked by Shapiro's arguments.

The first question is about the perceived relation between aesthetic subjects and critical, political thinking and the way this privileges a particular type of artistic practice. STM ranges widely across a variety of texts, images and artefacts: from cinema and comics to images, music and novels. That said, there is a predominance of works that might be said to be self-consciously 'artistic': literary novels, independent cinema and photomontage designed by its authors to deliberately contest what they perceive to be the settled perceptions of viewers/readers/society. It seems then that an important criteria for a source crossing the threshold to qualify as a critical, political resource is an intent by the author to contest what they see as the settled and normalised distribution of the sensible.

I would like to see a wider discussion about the nature and role of the aesthetic subject across the full range of popular culture. Here I am mindful of work by Slavoj Zizek on the subversive potential of popular cinema and Alexander Galloway or James Ash on the reworking of perceptual and affective topographies that occurs in mass market video games. Popular culture is, however, often written off as mere 'distraction' (in Benjamin's terms (STM, 144)). While STM touches on some cases that might be regarded as properly *popular* culture – the *Gasoline Alley* comic strip or Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* – many of the sources could be said to have narrower audiences and an artistic intent to transcend the merely popular, thus raising the question of the extent of critical interventions by their aesthetic subjects. And while there is an illuminating discussion of blues, the possibilities for a vernacular critical/political thinking through everyday popular culture is not explored at length. Here I am particularly interested in video games and the way in which the inhabiting of multiple subject positions as well as the deployment of digital imagery predicated on juxtaposition deprivilege 'centred commanding perception' in the same way that cinema did for Deleuze (STM, 24) giving rise to a vernacular critical/political resource.

This leads me to also wonder whether a focus on 'the critical' neglects the work of tracing the way in which popular culture partitions the sensible. While Zizek's work has had some attention in political science/studies, on the whole these questions have remained confined to media/cultural studies or sociology. Political science/studies has tended to assume that the mass of popular images and narratives are merely a corroboration (In Kracauer's sense (STM, 145)) of the extant order. This tends to underestimate the work that goes into producing and consuming popular culture. It also tends to fail to grasp the manner in which such culture is not simply endless repetition of the same. Indeed, popular culture is multiple and tracing the hegemonic partition of the sensible at any one time requires understanding this. Moreover, every interstice between iterations is pregnant with the possibility of a misfire, mutation or reworking of the aesthetic subjects that legitimate the current order. Overall, then, while the goal of critical political thinking is important, I'd like to see the aesthetic turn in political science/studies also deliver a sophisticated reading of the manner in which the aesthetic subjects of popular culture ceaselessly work and rework particular partitionings of the sensible. This is vital for the aesthetic turn to avoid the accusation of elitism that has haunted other attempts to critically interrogate aesthetic subjects (for example, the – possibly mistaken – perception that the Frankfurt School valorised minoritarian arts over popular culture).

Secondly, I was interested about the seeming lack of discussion of the affective registers which accompany engagements with aesthetic subjects. Recent work in cultural geography in particular (for example, by Pete Adey, Ben Anderson and James Ash) has drawn attention to the manner in which our entanglements with text and image are affective assemblages in which bodily and emotional states accompany the decoding of signs and symbols. For example, cinema is not simply representational (eye perceives images and transmits signals to brain for decoding into mental constructs) but also corporeal (disorientation as a consequence of the nature of vision, raised heart rate and so on). In this sense STM appears to focus on the decoding of meaning of images/words rather than the affective topographies associated with the images and narratives it discusses. To this

end I would be interested in moving beyond the aesthetic turn, to think about the manner in which political science/studies might benefit from non-representational readings of cultural artefacts.

Finally, the question of affect brings me to the materiality of the infrastructures of aesthetic subjects. Artistic products have material substrates that are necessary in order to operate in the way they do. Shapiro notes this in his reference to Deleuze's concept of the time-image. The time-image is a product of the technological underpinning of cinema as an art-form (the repetition of the still image and the peculiarities of the transition from one group of still images to another). However, the time-image is a concept developed in the context of a cinema based on celluloid film (which requires cuts – physical separation of segments of celluloid). A digital cinema may have other possibilities for critical thinking. Similarly, the book is an infrastructure of paper, binding and distribution at the very least. When it becomes digital, this infrastructure changes. To a certain extent if we are interested in what the artistic image/text does, rather than what it simply says (or as Benjamin put it – what it shows, not what it says (STM, 31)), then we should be interested in the material infrastructures that permit (though not determine) whatever it is that the text does/shows. To this end, political science/studies would benefit from not only reading the aesthetic subjects represented in the signs and symbols of cultural artefacts, but also the infrastructures or assemblages that form a condition of possibility of these subjects.

Overall then, STM is a fascinating text and important provocation to rethink the stale, slumbering epistemologies of orthodox political science/studies. It should be treated as an important call to arms for critical thinking after the aesthetic turn.

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