

INTERVIEW

Exploring the Aesthetic Turn: An Interview with Michael J. Shapiro

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During the ASPECT Conference in April 2017, SPECTRA met with Michael J. Shapiro to discuss his work as a writer, the social sciences, and the inspiration he draws from aesthetic theory, cinema, and the everyday. Mike is a Professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Among his most recent books are *Cinematic Geopolitics* (2009), *The Time of the City: Politics, philosophy and genre* (2010), *Studies in Trans-disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (2012), *War Crimes: Atrocity, and Justice* (2015), *Politics and Time: Documenting the Event* (2016), and *The Political Sublime* (2018). The keynote address for the ASPECT conference included a piece from this latest work, and can be accessed on YouTube: "[When the Earth Moves: Towards a Political Sublime.](#)"

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Mario: Thanks for meeting with us, Mike. You are a very prolific writer with a broad set of interests from political science, methodology, aesthetic theory, and cultural texts. Can you give us an insight into your work's routine? What does your creative process look like?

Mike: I do all my writing in the morning after my morning Cappuccino, which makes my head explode with ideas. It's the only drug I still use. I work for a couple hours in the morning at home, then I go workout at an exercise club for an hour or so. Then I go home and eat lunch and then I go to the university and do my teaching in the afternoon and collect research materials when I have time in between teaching and advising duties.

Mario: Where do you draw your inspiration from?

Mike: Gosh, from tons of stuff. Sometimes reading the obituaries in the *New York Times*, sometimes strange encounters. But, you know, I read constantly. I cover thousands of pages every week. I look at a lot of video, films, and so on. In fact, I was thinking about that because right now we're talking about workload at my university and we're trying to justify ourselves to the regents. Alarming, one of the things they don't count is the amount of preparation you do by way

of canvassing materials. They don't pay much attention to that. But I feel as if to be a responsible mentor to PhD students, I've got to read thousands of pages all the time, week after week after week, to keep up with material. But I also read a lot of fiction and poetry, novels and stories, which frequently inspire me. Accordingly, one of the methodological orientations I have pursued is called *philopoesis*: the way in which you encounter literary and cinematic texts with a philosophical, conceptual mindset. So, the dynamic relationship between concepts on the one hand in percepts and effects on the other shapes a lot of the way I think and work.

Shelby: Cappuccino in the morning – Is that enough for you to get to that kind of flow?

Mike: It gives me a buzz. Sometimes I get an invitation to write something for a collection or something like that. Then there is not an idea in my head about how to start. However, after my cappuccino – wow.

Mario: Didn't [Max] Weber say something like, "The good ideas will come when you take a long walk, but only if you've done the groundwork at your desk before?"

Mike: Right. Well, as I was saying yesterday when we were talking, I'm constantly building an archive of materials. And I can then draw on it when I start to work on something.

Mario: So not everything that you read or consume has to have an immediate outlet, sometimes you just let it sit?

Mike: That's right. The thing is, I've learned when I talk to a lot of colleagues that the difference between me and a lot of people is that I have a good memory. I even often remember what page something is on. So, whatever I read, it's there, and I can access it.

Shelby: Is it the same when you watch something, when you watch, say, a show or a film, when you see something really interesting?

Mike: Yes, that tends to get stored as well. However, I don't usually write something down. For example, when I was dealing with the Deleuzian concept of the *conceptual persona* and the *attendant*, the person who is there but doesn't play a role in the narrative, but basically helps to indicate the facticity of what's going on, when I wanted to apply it, I recalled an episode or moment in *Pretty Baby* (1978), the Louis Malle film, where an African American pianist is presented in a sort of peripheral way. However, the camera does long takes of his face when the virgin is getting auctioned off, so that the facticity of the scene is seen through his eyes. When I wanted to illustrate that concept of the *attendant*, I fortunately remembered that moment in the film. Illustrations from artistic and cultural texts are kind of pervasive for me, and usually I'll use them in two different ways. One is at the beginning of an essay. I turn to a text in order to develop the concepts, and then I turn to additional texts in order to illustrate them. So, they play two different kinds of functions in my writing.

Shelby: The way you remember these things as you're writing is allusive to your writing style itself, the way that these moments just kind of emerge and flow together. Are you conscious of that particular kind of memory when you're writing?

Mike: It's hard to say. I mean, I frequently get questions from my students, such as, "Do I start with the artistic texts and then decide to write a paper?" Usually there is a certain concept that I'm dealing with at the time, like the problem of *the politics of attention*. So, then I remember, for example, that I read Zadie Smith's story, *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) in which an au pair in an Anglo-Indian household is walking by the embassy all the time and she pays attention to it. And then, fortunately, in the conversation she has with an interlocutor named Andrew with whom she has tea every week, the details tend to come out. Anyway, that story became one of two central texts for me to explicate the problem of attention. The other text is a story by Daniel Alarcón called *Collectors* (2013), which takes place in a prison in Peru. There is a fascinating pedagogy that goes on between cell mates in which one explains to the other how to pay attention to dangers when you're out in the prison

yard. How to look at the bodies of the other prisoners and see who is threatening and who is not, which people you have to ignore, which people are too dangerous to ignore, etc. Those texts turned out to be the bookends of my analysis in an essay on the politics of attention.

Shelby: Do you still feel like you have to justify how cultural texts, films, novels, and poems have something to say about micro politics or politics in general?

Mike: Some people think I do. If I submit something to a social science journal, they sometimes want justification, but I usually don't want to make meta-statements about what I'm doing. The chapter I did on the blues in my methods book, *Studies in Trans-disciplinary Method* (2013) is one example. I said to the editor (who solicited the essay), "Your social science readers aren't going to like it." Sure enough I sent it to him, and then he wanted explication of this and that and the next thing. He offered a revise and resubmit, but I said, "I'm not going to revise and resubmit, I don't do explication." My method is literary montage. I show rather than explain. And social scientists often don't like it. They don't tend to understand it even, that's the problem.

Shelby: It's interesting to me that there's still this break, that they still want justification. They still want explanations, although this type of work has been going on for a while now.

Mike: For some reason the average political scientist's imagination doesn't extend beyond her or his scope of methods class that they had at some point. That tends to absorb everything they know about how to do things.

Mario: So, is it mainly a futile endeavor to even try to situate your work respective to a broader political science? Should young academics stop doing that?

Mike: Well, I stopped doing it a while ago, but it's a dilemma for me with respect to my graduate students, because I warned them that if they work that way, someone's going to demand an explanation of their method. And so, I try to encourage them to think about a way to talk about their method, not necessarily in the paper, but to prepare their audiences, when for example they do job talks. That's a crucial moment in which people are going to harass them about their method, wanting to know where they fit in terms of the discipline's map of various familiar approaches to method.

Mario: You have a lot of theory as method in your work. If you were pressed to explain that, you would have a lot of arguments involving the works of Rancière, Deleuze, and others. Are those texts constants in the back of your head?

Mike: Of course. I teach a seminar on writing called “Writing Politics” and the emphasis is on writing as method rather than doing a method and then writing it up. The writing itself is the method, how you write, the grammatical narrative, rhetorical dimensions of the text – how the text thinks, basically, is what I try to encourage as an approach, which is about how your writing is “thinking?”

Shelby: At least in the context of *The Time of the City* (2010), it seems that there are some justifications in that text. I've used them to talk about how television can say something about larger political and cultural concerns. So, I think that there is something to say about theory as writing. Once someone else does it, it's easier to point to that.

Mike: When you're focusing on a media genre like television, for example, there is a nice essay by Stanley Cavell about the television text. According to Cavell, television series are basically about a format that gets repeated all the time. That is one of the ways to distinguish television from film. What's the format that you're going to observe in every episode? If it's a crime format, then it's got to start with a murder, right? And then thereafter it becomes a problem of investigation. So, there's a structure to it. There's always an investigation, which is step two, then the question is what is the structure of the investigation? And there are always two dimensions to that. One is forensics and the other is what I called *Metis*, i.e., practical reasoning. What distinguishes heroic detectives is their extraordinary ability at *Metis*: their practical reasoning. When writing about crime stories like my chapter on the micro politics of crime, I deal a lot with the way it works in a whole variety of different cultural settings, for example in the crime stories of Leonardo Padura situated in Havana.

Mario: Is the detective's character a special kind of narrative character?

Mike: The detective is an epistemological character. I think detectives are kind of exemplary in that way. It's an interesting knowledge problematic that has to take place in a complicated setting. But there's also an ontological dimension to detective stories. If you go back to Sherlock Holmes and those classic detective stories, you find that the assumption always seems to be that what the detective does is to restore normality. However, if you get to later detectives, e.g., Dashiell Hammett's, the presumption is that there is no such thing as normality. You don't restore something. You know the world is relatively chaotic and you operate within that. That's why in the *Maltese Falcon* (1930), he tells this parable, the “Flitcraft parable.” A man named Flitcraft is walking along the street, a beam falls from a building and hits the concrete. A piece of concrete hits him in the cheek, and he suddenly realizes that life is unsponsored. And so, what he does is change his life. He never goes home. He starts a new life in another place. And the question is, why in

the middle of this story does Sam Spade tell this parable to Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who turns out to be the perpetrator. I think it is Dashiell Hammett's way of telling us that life is random, unsponsored and chaotic – that the detective is not an agent of normality.

Mario: Is this notion of an unsponsored life something that you are getting at when you talk about the Eisenstein-Goebbels exchange in *Cinematic Geopolitics* (2008)? There is a point about documentaries where you argue with Rancière that a good documentary doesn't explain how the world is but rather confronts the viewer with ambiguity.

Mike: Rancière points out something interesting about Eisenstein. Some people tend to think that Eisenstein's work was pure propaganda and Rancière argues that it can't be propaganda because in an Eisenstein film you can never be exactly sure what you're seeing. What Eisenstein tries to do is to problematize what perception is about, among other things, and so it's not a question of trying to find out what's really happening in his films, but rather to understand the vagaries of perception. Rancière here has a nice remark about how to think about those things. He says what good cinema does is restore, in some ways, what perception tends to evacuate. Similarly, perception is one of the lessons of Kafka, in that for Kafka your consciousness is not an ally but an enemy, in many ways, and you have to deal with the way in which your consciousness frequently fools you. In this regard I also think of *High Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1990), a “Frontline” documentary by Bill Moyers. It deals with the Iran Contra Affair, and what seems to bother the documentary narrator, Moyer, who was frequently on the screen is the fact that in the Iran Contra Affair we violated the separation of powers, while the fact that many people died as a result, was only a minor part of the story. He treats it as a civics lesson. So, if you deal with the intentionality of the documentary it's quite uninteresting, but if you pay attention to the footage and all sorts of things that are going on, such as the way the camera is moving and working you find other things happening that are not part of his narrative.

Mario: Is that also a way in which you watch films, not even just documentary films, to not just look at what the characters are doing, but also at what the camera is doing?

Mike: I try to look for the ways in which certain things that are not people are actually main characters. Sometimes the architecture in a film replaces the main character. In the lesbian crime story, *Abound* (2013), the camera's work features very long takes of a wall and then there are those panning shots of the things that connect the apartments on either side of the wall, such as plumbing pipes, the telephone lines and so forth. The camera spends a lot of time dealing with the architectural setting and if you pay attention to that part of the narrative you really get a much stronger image of how

the relationships are being controlled, in part, by the nature of the setting in which they operate.

Shelby: The idea of architecture as a main character has also pervaded the 2016 election with all the talk about the Border Wall. I'm wondering if that has become its own aesthetic subject in some way within the rhetoric of the news. What do you think?

Mike: Yeah, definitely. In one of my books, I have a long section on walls and the different kinds of functions they play. Teresa Caldeira's book *City of Walls* (2000) is an analysis of the city of San Paulo in a similar vein. What architecture does, walls included, basically is constantly determine the conditions of possibility for experience. There's another interesting book, called *Sexuality & Space* (1992) edited by Beatriz Colomina, that does a lot of stuff on walls. It deals with the way in which the house is constructed, and how that shapes the experience in those spaces that people can see when they first enter the house and those places they can't see.

Shelby: This seems to echo particularly *The New Violent Cartography* (2014) that you did with Sam [Opondo] not that long ago. It features an essay by David Toohey that you preface in the introduction as "a cinematic 'demolition' of the US-Mexican boundary that is fixed within binaries that mark the former as a zone of safety and the latter as a dangerous place or the source of danger." Toohey uses Orson Welles' film *Touch of Evil* (1958) in that essay and I'm wondering if that methodology he uses is still relevant for what we're currently seeing? Is this a new kind of rhetoric or just a repetition of the same kind of binaries played out on a larger stage?

Mike: Well, let me go back to the *Touch of Evil*. One of the most interesting parts of the film is its opening scene in which a car crosses the border. It develops a dynamic of changing settings from one place to another and thus contrasts with earlier films on borders that take overhead shots, emphasizing the separation. And so what Welles does is to challenge that separation with his opening scene. I think it was one of the things that David [Toohey] – he was one of my PhD students, in Hawai'i – was sensitive to.

Shelby: I'm wondering more broadly about your approach to scholarship. Was there a time in your life as a scholar where you felt a turn towards looking at cultural texts and less at conventional methodology?

Mike: Yeah, definitely. I went to Northwestern University purposely to learn quantitative methods. It was disappointing in certain ways because the faculty there worshipped quantitative methods, but they themselves were not quantitatively competent. But at the same time, I had already spent a lot of time reading philosophy and was attuned to

philosophy of method issues all the while. And it was clear to me from the very start that the philosophy of method you get out of the social sciences was not adequate to the task. It has a very narrow view and I guess probably one of the first things that struck me about the narrowness was that it was focused very much on the relationship between a concept and a measurement. And it had only a technical notion of how you turn the concept into a measurement, but the more I thought about it, the more it became evident that there was an entire ontology and philosophy intervening in the word-object relationship. So, my first focus was on word-object relationships, and I began to see that if you read Wittgenstein and others, that there's a life world that shapes how a word can be related to its referents. I became less interested in moving from concept to measurement, than in the question of where the concepts come from, what kinds of histories and what forces shaped the problematics within which certain kinds of concepts emerge, and so on. I then did an edited volume on language and politics. I was very interested in an old essay by C. Wright Mills who understood the problem many years ago. He said, ironically, "We seem to have lost our desire to do evil," by which he meant that the discourse on good and evil no longer determines how we shape the problems that we deal with. And so, the history of problematics began to interest me a lot more than the problem of how you turn a concept into a measurement. The philosophical direction I went to first was English linguistics philosophy in the work of Austin and Wittgenstein, and then the French thinkers, like Foucault, and then ultimately Deleuze. They all changed the way in which I began to work and think. From the philosophy of language, I got interested in various genres. How does a novel think? How does the film think? How does poetry think?

Mario: Would you say there is an expiration date on these technical methods and methodologies in the social sciences, whereas knowing how to read, how to ask interesting questions, or even knowing how to watch a film, is almost timeless?

Mike: Very much so. It also means that you have to get into a whole variety of different kinds of disciplines. This is symptomatic I suppose: When I get my copies of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *Chronicle* magazine, which is inserted in that, I look at the page that features new books in print and spend most of my time in the literature section and almost no time in the political science and sociology section. There's nothing in those sections that interests me.

Shelby: I was thinking that your methods seem to be very organically interdisciplinary while "interdisciplinary" is kind of just a buzzword used nowadays. To what extent does that word describe your work?

Mike: I would say my work is transdisciplinary. People who think interdisciplinarily now, tend to sort of affirm the

boundaries of disciplines and then articulate them at a particular problem. Whereas if I look at sociology, I'm interested in a particular historical moment in sociology, how they make their world. Rather than using sociology.

Shelby: It's something that's hard because I feel the work that many of us do in this program [ASPECT] is transdisciplinary. We have conversations about how we market ourselves, because even though the methods that we apply may be transdisciplinary, at some point you still have to claim a stake in a department and justify how you fit in there.

Mike: Yeah. One key question is, how do you do comparative politics while at the same time involving yourself in a critique of the frames within which comparative politics does its business.

Shelby: Going back to talking about what compels us, if it is no longer in terms of good versus evil, what is the thing that now pushes our work forward?

Mike: One of the ways in which I've been trying to make sense of things is to look at the interaction between moral and political economy, that is, those forms of exchange that are thought of as inappropriate. There was a time in which it was inappropriate to sell one of your body parts because there are certain boundaries on what is a legitimate form of exchange, and what isn't. But now in India, for example, maybe a father will sell one of his kidneys to be able to create a dowry for his third daughter or something like that, and there's a market for it. I read an essay a long time ago that helped me with this in *The Social Life of Things* (1986), a volume edited by Arjun Appadurai. Someone named [Igor] Kopytoff talks about culture versus economy. From the point of view of culture (within which moral economy develops), certain things about people are singular and thus from the point of view of political economy cannot be exchanged. And so, how do economy and culture interact, and how is the boundary set? And within that dynamic the other thing you have to figure out is when there's a change, when someone's pushing to make something exchangeable that hasn't been before. Then the question becomes, who are the cultural authorities to warrant that change? Who's in a position to engage in warranting? A concept that I got from Allucquère Rosanne Stone's work in *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (1995).

Mario: In *Methods and Nations* (2004), you talk about John Ford's Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). Specifically, you talk about the frontier in that film not as a frontier of the open West, but as a frontier of ...

Mike: ... A space of negotiation, basically, because that's what the frontier is about. This is one thing I got from William Cronon's edited volume called *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (1992), which talks about the history

of the frontier, and the difference between a frontier and a region. The frontier moment is a moment when people are negotiating their relationships and their identities are in flux whereas when things become regionalized, that's when things get fixed, where people stand vis-a-vis each other. But I can't avoid this anecdote. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is an interesting title, because I had an undergraduate friend who went to work for the company, Liberty Mutual one summer, and he promised them that he was taking this internship, because he was thinking of a future with Liberty Mutual. But he only used it for a summer job and so thereafter we called him The Man Who Screwed Liberty Mutual, which is a nice riff on the title of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Peter X, The Man Who Screwed Liberty Mutual...It was actually the same summer that that film came out, so it was very apropos.

Mario: In the film, it's not immediately clear who actually shot Liberty Valance and the myth carries on, at least for the film's characters.

Mike: It's another example of the camera being wiser than the characters. Because they restore what perception tends to evacuate, to go back to that. It's an exemplary film in that way.

Mario: Do you think our culture is somehow uneasy with those blind spots?

Mike: I think we're uneasy with lots of things that suggest that subjectivity is not centered. The subject is not in control of what it understands. Just to give you an example, there are huge meetings of anti-Freudians. There are more anti-Freudians who have meetings than people who are actually Freudian because the Freudian position is very threatening to people who want to think that they're totally in control of their own consciousness. The idea that one is not in control of one's consciousness is very powerful. And the text that I think was most powerful for me historically was Thomas Mann's volumes on *Joseph and his Brothers* (1943). There's this moment in the biblical story when Joseph is pulled from the pit by the wandering merchants after his brothers have tried to murder him and throw him in this pit to die – but in Thomas Mann's version, the first thing that Joseph says to the people who pull him from the pit is, "Where are you taking me?" And they look at him and say, "You must think you're the navel of the universe. We're not taking you somewhere. We happened to be going somewhere and you happen to be with us." And throughout the novel, Joseph learns over time that there are many stories, not just his.

Mario: Given today's very science and economic-heavy curricula, saying that there are many stories in the world might be a problematic thing to do. If a liberal arts education were a cure for it, how would you design a respective curriculum?

Mike: Actually, there's something in the news right now about that, which is kind of interesting. Someone at some university has given his students an assignment to deal with 9/11 and write from the point of view of the mentality of the terrorists. Invent an imagination of what's going through their minds, as Don DeLillo did, I think, in *Falling Man* (2007) pretty well.

Mario: Did he lose his job?

Mike: No, he hasn't lost his job, but it's creating a lot of furor, because the question is, whose perspective is dominant here? I think one of the best texts to deal with that is one of Kafka's stories called *The Burrow* (1931). There is a creature trying to fortify the walls of his burrow all the time and he hears noises inside the wall, which he thinks are predators trying to get in. And it becomes quite clear that by the end that is what Kafka is trying to point out is that the noise you hear in the walls is the noise of your own imagination. Not necessarily something from the outside. It's radically undecidable whether what's going on is a function of what you're projecting versus what's actually happening and by the end the creature says, now I'm an old architect. I've been building this burrow for a long time, and I'm just incapable of distinguishing any longer, whether the danger was something I'm inventing. Kafka uses the architectural metaphor in that way, and it is very powerful. Sometimes I teach what's called the senior seminar in our curriculum. I do it with just good stories, and that's one I use.

Shelby: What are some other stories that you use in that context?

Mike: Daniel Alarcón's *Collectors* that I was talking about. A story by the Hungarian Tamas Dobozy called *The Beautician* (2012) – a really fascinating story. In an edited volume I worked on with a friend, Florentina Andreescu, from Romania. The volume was titled *Genre and the (Post-) Communist Woman* (2014) and includes an essay I wrote about the *The Beautician*. The essay is called "Hungarian masks," and focuses on that story among other things. What happens is this main character, this beautician, is a guy who's the manager of a club for Hungarian expatriates in Toronto. The story goes back into his background when he had to hide himself in a whole variety of ways and he still hides himself. He wears makeup and he is very androgynous in his appearance. At one point, one of the women who belongs to the club, which is very important to her, insults him in some way that he decides not to have the Saturday evening gatherings. As a result, she can't then display herself any longer. And so, she's got her masks, he's got his masks. Everyone's got masks all the time, and one of the things I point out to students is, about Ru Paul, who is a female impersonator, being interviewed by Brian Gumbel on television. Brian asks, "How does it feel to constantly be in costume?" He looks at Brian and says, "Brian, do you look like that when you

get out of the shower?" We're always in costume, one sort or another, it's just a question of how people choose their looks. Anyway, "Hungarian masks" was what I wrote. I use this story [*The Beautician*], and I use some of Carlos Fuentes' stories about border issues among other things.

Shelby: It seems to me that, in this case, costumes are also just walls of perception that we mask ourselves with. Can I go back just a little bit as well? I'm wondering about these narrative walls that we put up. It seems like in the last year we've seen a lot of awareness about people operating within their own news cycles and within our own perceptual walls, but perhaps we just don't care anymore, perhaps we want to continue.

Mike: Well, I guess one paradigm of that is that everyone who's got their ear buds in has their own playlist of what's going on. One of the things I talked about in the paper I just finished on urban punctuations and music is the sort of genealogy of music that begins in the street and enters the concert hall, then enters the airways. At one point when it entered the airways, everyone used to listen to the top 40 on the radio. That was the way in which popular music was being disseminated, but now people are selecting and creating their own kind of lists from popular music, and so it's no longer a very general community of sense with respect to music. There are different sensory partitions, which is true of other media as well. You know people select their own Netflix routines. In my case I see "recently viewed by Michael" every time I click on it – telling me where I belong as a viewer.

Shelby: We've read *The Time of the City* again for the upcoming seminar. I'm wondering how the paradigm you identify might also play into the rhythm of the city. In what ways might today's urban landscapes reflect on processes of individualization and collectivization?

Mike: Well, sometimes it's hard to see because you get into your car and you drive for coffee, then you get in your car and you drive to work. You choose a particular route and therefore you see the same things in the city all the time. I had a colleague who would purposely try to find alternatives. In fact, I guess maybe this particular experience gets at this problem. I had a house that burned down almost to the ground in 1980, and at first, I was lamenting my fate because I thought of it as a house, which I now have to restore. So, it's not like I'm doing something new, but I'm simply trying to restore something I already had. And as I was lamenting this, my son Kam was, I think, 11 or 12, and he said, "You know, dad, maybe you could think about this as really something new." As it turned out, because I was underinsured, I did a lot of the building myself. I built my own ceilings. I did all kinds of things. I had to lay my own sewer line because I had a cesspool that was no longer legal. I had to dig up 80 feet of concrete sewer line. But anyway, in the process of doing

that, I ended up in parts of Honolulu that I never paid any attention to. I saw the dynamic that took place in a plumbing store when a woman came in who simply wanted to buy a faucet and wasn't a licensed contractor; she was going to be charged 100 percent more than the contractor. The ways in which that conversation took place was kind of interesting because there were a bunch of contractors present wondering if the salesperson behind the desk was going to relent? Anyway, I saw parts of the city, and structures and interactions that I wouldn't have been privy to if that event hadn't taken place. And so, it turns out now, that event was very empowering for me – paying attention to how the city of Honolulu works. If you are able to understand events not in terms of what causes them, but rather how they change what comes after. It was an important event for me in the way I understood the city.

Shelby: I wanted to hear you talk a little bit about what we're going to be hearing on Friday for the keynote speech?

Mike: Well, it's a complicated chapter because it deals with a lot of different kinds of texts, one of which is simply based on a conversation I had with a niece who was three-years-old when the San Francisco earthquake took place. Because if you pay attention to Kant on the sublime, things like a storm or an earthquake are some of his major kinds of examples. And so, I begin with that conversation. I asked my niece how big it was, and she said very big and I said how big? And she said, too big for my daddy to hold, which meant really big as far as she was concerned, which is kind of interesting, because her daddy's a little guy. And then I use that as a way to launch into Kant's conversation on what a sublime moment is about, what's the sublime experience? Something that's a challenge to comprehension. Since I'm dissatisfied with Kant's solution to dealing with how we then cope with a sublime experience – he treats it simply as a cognitive mental issue – I talk about what intervenes in that dynamic between what he calls apprehension on the one hand and comprehension on the other, which is temporarily for him, a very short kind of moment, because one has the negative pleasure recognizing that one's mind is bigger than the event. I go on to deal with the way in which artistic texts get involved in a society-wide negotiation of the relationship between the apprehension and comprehension. For example, how do we come to terms with 9/11? There are all sorts of things that have intervened in that. It's not just a mental thing in which we say, "Okay, now I can understand it because my reason is so powerful." So, I deal with Don DeLillo's texts and others. That's a later chapter. But anyway, after I deal with the relationship with my niece, I begin to think about fathers and daughters and things like that. And that shapes the nature of the essay because at the end of the essay, I deal with Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake* (2000), a collection of short stories, one of which features a small girl trying to come to terms with an event.

Mario: Do you think that the notion of the sublime being replaced by something in our mediascapes, in that the sublime is either made beautiful or made bad, makes it so that we don't really explore the sublime further? I'm thinking of an author, China Miéville who in *Perdido Street Station* (2000) writes a lot about vast scapes of trash. So, there are vast spaces of trash that he describes in close detail and those descriptions constitute the narrative. Is this something that we maybe tend to reduce?

Mike: Well, I wouldn't generalize it and say "we" in any particular way with respect to that. There are people like China Miéville who tried to think outside of the frames in which people usually construct problematics and focus on different kinds of material. In the essay I have just been working on, which deals with urban punctuations, I spent a lot of time reading the way John Cage thinks, for example, what's most important to him is not just the noises, but the silences, the absence of noise. And for him the way in which the world provides a soundscape is the basis of which he then makes his music, as opposed to people who think that music is the sort of special moment when you sit down, and you compose it. And so, I guess I have trouble thinking of consolidating the "we" for anything that's going on.

Shelby: Going back to your conversation with your niece, I'm wondering if it is perhaps our lack of being able to respond to certain environmental factors, or even the environment itself with current climate change that has something to do with our inability to comprehend the vastness of such events?

Mike: I guess the political concept I've been using to try to consolidate those issues is what I call "communities of sense." How do communities of sense emerge? What are the boundaries between different communities of sense, what are the interactions among them? And when an event takes place, when something large takes place like that, what constitutes an event is really a function of how different communities of sense begin to work on it for example, one of the things that's fascinating is the kinds of books that are being sold right after the Trump presidency, when George Orwell's *1984* suddenly starts selling and his books become important again.

Shelby: Communities of sense, it seems to link back to our conversation about narratives and walls too, in order to understand something, we've got to build a sense around something, be able to narrate it.

Mike: One of the things that's popping into my head right now is how when I started looking at the history of African American crime stories going back to 1905, and then following them later on, almost invariably they involved characters who were trying to pass and the tragedy that ensued for those characters when they failed to pass at a particular

point. The dynamic of seeking to pass as a non-black person is so pervasive for that community of sense that it almost always shapes their stories. In a sense, everyone experiences a world as, among other things, an economy of excess and barriers. My new project is called “Punctuations,” that’s the main title, and what punctuations are, among other things, is a series of barriers.

Mario: That essay starts with a shot that you recreate for the reader from a famous city symphony film, Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin Symphony of a Great City* (1927). It’s a train approaching the city with minute detail to the modern achievement of technology. Earlier you said you like to start off an essay with one or two images like that. What does that image represent to you?

Mike: I guess partly I was influenced by the fact that I spent a lot of time with Jim Jarmusch’s film *Dead Man* (1995), which works the same way, right? It’s Johnny Depp on a train going West and a lot of the shots basically are under the train, showing the wheels and so forth. The camera spends a lot of time doing long takes of all the tracks because steel is one of the conditions of possibility for shaping modern life. And *Berlin Symphony of a Great City* features many shots of the clock to suggest the way in which clock time emerges as dominant as opposed

to seasonal time. It’s such a rich moment when you see a train entering a city. It’s a particular historical moment in which you’re moving working populations from the periphery into the city.

Mario: At the same time, we can’t quite imagine how it must have been for people back then to see a train versus how it appears to us now.

Mike: Or for someone to jump on a train and move from their ordinary home into the city, which was such a different kind of sensorium. The classic work by Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), where he talks about the vertigo that is the city and how the experience of the urban created this tremendous vertigo for people to process all of that movement, to process all the changes during the day and setting changes. Perhaps it’s not unlike when I first started getting into computers, when it seemed to me that my cursor was moving too fast. But then when I got really good at it, the cursor was moving too slow for me after a while, as I’d become attuned to the sensorium of sitting at a computer and working.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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