

MICHAEL J. SHAPIRO

ROUTLEDGE



STUDIES IN TRANS-DISCIPLINARY METHOD

INTERVENTIONS

After the aesthetic turn

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Interventions

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Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method

After the aesthetic turn

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To Cleo Cherryholmes

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Preface

The title of this book is inspired by Harold Garfinkel's classic collection of investigations, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.¹ His *Studies ...*, aimed at "learning how members' actual, ordinary activities consist of methods to make practical actions, practical circumstances, common sense knowledge of social structures, and practical sociological reasoning analyzable," effect a methodological approach that contrasts radically with the traditional philosophy of inquiry and established procedures of social science investigations. Rather than beginning with concepts, translating them into measurement protocols, and treating them as variables to test causal explanations, Garfinkel conceives the meaning of a concept as an accomplishment that emerges at the *end* of an investigation – as an outcome of a group's deliberations when it is charged with the task of implementing the concept. Thus in his investigation of suicide, in which he observed the decision-making practices of the staff at the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center, charged with coding whether or not unattended deaths were suicides, he analyzed what he calls the "practical reasoning" and "artful practices" through which "suicide" as a coding is accomplished.

As Garfinkel summarizes it, "the term ethnomethodology [refers to] the investigation of the rational properties of indexical practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life."² As applied to his investigation of suicide, his ethnomethodological approach was focused on the interactive decision process – the collective artful practices – through which the staff accomplished the coding of deaths as suicides, given the equivocalness of "suicide" versus other kinds of death. Garfinkel's actors are thus epistemological subjects. Involved in knowledge production tasks, they achieve the meanings of concepts and phenomena through their collective decision-making in practical everyday life settings. Garfinkel therefore refigures the methodological approach of social science practitioners, substituting for social science investigators, social actors who pursue concepts as the ultimate achievement of their inquiries. Those achievements are politically framed inasmuch as those social actors operate within structures of accountability. While deciding how to classify episodes, they are always already in a future scene of justification. In Garfinkel's words, "Decisions [have] an unavoidable consequentiality."³

In contrast with Garfinkel, my investigations in the studies in this book focus on the protagonists of artistic texts rather than on decision-making groups. Instead of task-oriented subjects involved in practical reasoning, my subjects are what I call aesthetic subjects. They are characters in texts whose movements and actions (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains. To provide an initial sense of the difference, I turn briefly to one of Philip Roth's protagonists, Simon Axler, a theater actor in his novel *The Humbling* (2009). Despairing at having lost his ability to perform convincingly on stage, and having attempted suicide as a result, Axler commits himself to a psychiatric clinic, where he gets acquainted with the clinic's other would-be suicides. At one point, feeling discontent with the clinic staff's approach to treatment, he gathers his fellow patients to give them his view of suicide as an artistic performance:

The one thing everyone wants to do with suicide is explain it. Explain it and judge it ... Some people think of it as an act of cowardice. Some people think of it as criminal, as a crime against the survivors. Another school of thought finds it heroic and an act of courage ... [instead, he argues] Suicide is the role you write for yourself ... You inhabit it and you enact it. All carefully staged – where they will find you and how they will find you ... But one performance only.⁴

Through Axler's statements and actions, Roth generates a suicide *dispositif*, which consists of (among other things) a "heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions ... scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions ... the said as much as the unsaid ... the elements of the apparatus."⁵ And he subjects that *dispositif* to critique by having Axler oppose a self-fashioning aesthetic of suicide to the explanatory apparatuses of suicide. Like Garfinkel's approach to concepts, Roth renders suicide as an "artful practice." However in this case, the artful practice belongs both to the author who invents his subject and to the subject/protagonist who enacts the artfulness. And whereas the meaning of suicide is rendered as an accomplishment by Garfinkel's epistemological subjects – whose actions consummate the institutional tasks to which they are assigned – Roth's aesthetic subject paralyzes the institution in which he is situated. Like Herman Melville's character, Bartleby (in his story "Bartleby the Scrivener," whom I introduce in Chapter 5), whose formula, "I prefer not to," disrupts the work of an attorney's law office, "erod[ing] the attorney's reasonable organization of work and life,"⁶ Roth's character disrupts the clinic's therapeutic functioning.

Certainly there is a critical aspect of Garfinkel's approach in that he sees the outcomes of the "artful practices" of his epistemological subjects as "contingent accomplishments."⁷ For Garfinkel, "suicide," rather than being an already stabilized phenomenon to be explained, emerges as an artifact of the organization of the task aimed at accomplishing it. To the extent that there are stabilities associated with such accomplishments, they result from achievements of "common sense," which develop from the deliberations of the institutionalized groups

undertaking the tasks. Although I too depart from the traditional explanatory orientation of empiricist, explanation-seeking social science, my analyses mobilize “uncommon sense.” Following Gilles Deleuze’s suggestion that common sense involves merely recognizing the representational practices that already exist within the *doxa*,⁸ or, as I have put it elsewhere, from the “unreflected upon acceptance of the world of actualities that exist in everyday, banal discourses,”⁹ my studies seek to displace institutionalized forms of recognition with *thinking*. To *think* (rather than to seek to explain) in this sense is to invent and apply conceptual frames and create juxtapositions that disrupt and/or render historically contingent accepted knowledge practices. It is to compose the discourse of investigation with critical juxtapositions that unbind what are ordinarily presumed to belong together and thereby to challenge institutionalized ways of reproducing and understanding phenomena. My approach to inquiry therefore accords with Maurice Blanchot’s notion of the purpose of literature, which is “to interrupt the purposeful steps we are always taking toward a deeper understanding and a surer grasp on things.”¹⁰

However, my investigations are not aimed at disruption alone. To *think* rather than reproduce accepted knowledge frames is to create the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds (and thus to be able to recognize the political commitments sequestered in every political imaginary). It is not, as is the case for Garfinkel, to administer *the* world within which collective tasks can be made to make sense. Articulated in this way, my methodological approach is in accord with Jacques Rancière’s version of critical artistic practices, which he sees as “ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making.”¹¹ They are practices that function within what he calls the “aesthetic regime of the arts,” practices that “disturb” accepted relationships between “the sayable and the visible” and that effectively repartition the “distribution of the sensible.”¹²

The pursuit of thinking with artistic texts rather than generating and testing explanations is neither a retreat into abstractions that lack contact with the world nor an avoidance of ethical and political concerns. It is a practice of critique that should be understood both as a challenge to epistemological certainties and as a positive engagement with actual experiences and issues pertaining to them. That practice requires one to resist the institutionalized knowledge that contributes to coercive structures, to – in Foucault’s terms – make those knowledge practices “fragile, temporary [and thus to turn those practices into] events, nothing less than events.”¹³ As for the ethico-political force of critique: writing about critique-as-method in another place, I put it this way: “Critique ... is ethical as well as political. In my various explorations of domains of political exclusion, for example, modes of identity and security politics that reject various forms of movement, both substantive (for example, immigration flows of the 1990s) and symbolic (such as migrating sexualities), I seek to encourage a hospitality towards ambiguous, protean and unsettled modes of selfhood and community.”¹⁴

Critique in this sense is therefore empirically grounded. In contrast with the kind of “accomplishments” foregrounded in Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological investigations, where what is “empirical” emerges from the accomplishments of

collective, common sense-creating tasks, the empirical grounding of my approach resembles what Louis Althusser calls “the materialism of the encounter.”¹⁵ In contrast to what he calls “a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism,” Althusser’s “*materialism of the encounter*” draws on a philosophy of “the aleatory and of contingency.”¹⁶ His substitution of contingency for necessity is reminiscent of Garfinkel’s similar substitution, inasmuch as Althusser suggests that within his philosophical perspective, “one reasons ... not in terms of the necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished.”¹⁷ However, in rendering facticity as a contingent event of encounter rather than (like Garfinkel) seeing it as the outcome of institutionalized tasks, Althusser draws attention to the historical contentiousness of what gets constituted as facticity. As he adds, “History here is nothing but the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another indecipherable fact ... only a provisional encounter, and since every encounter is provisional even when it lasts, *there is no eternity in the ‘laws’ of any world or any state.*”¹⁸

In order to illustrate more elaborately the epistemological value of encounter and the artistic media genres that stage them, I turn to some insights offered by the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, which I have analyzed elsewhere.¹⁹ Fuentes reports a conversation that took place while he and friends were lost while on a driving trip in the Morelos region of Mexico. Assuming that the local map had a unitary set of addresses, he asked a local *campesino* the name of the village where they had stopped. The *campesino*’s reply astounded him: “That depends, we call the village Santa Maria in times of peace. We call it Zapata in times of war.”²⁰ In reaction to the surprising answer, Fuentes reflected upon the plurality of temporal presences in the contemporary world. As he reports, “the old *campesino*” possesses a knowledge that “most people in the West have assiduously ignored since the seventeenth century: that there is more than one time in the world, that there is another time existing alongside, above, underneath the linear calendars of the West.”²¹ Fuentes proceeds to reflect upon the significance of encounter for his vocation as a novelist and finds himself asserting that the novel is especially attuned to multiplicity, to the plurality of presences or spatio-temporal ways of being in the world. Literature, according to Fuentes, can bring to presence “our forgotten self [because] ... the West, through its literature, internally elaborated a plurality of times in stark contrast to its external, chosen adherence to one time, the future-oriented time of progress.”²²

In effect, Fuentes’ *campesino* precipitated an “event” in Foucault’s above noted sense, for it has rendered a dominant mode of temporality fragile and also in the sense in which Deleuze conceives it when he states that the event “‘hovers over’ the bodies that it expresses.”²³ Accordingly, rather than conceiving of Fuentes’ experience in the encounter with the *campesino* as one in which a subject accomplishes the meaning of a concept/object (multiple co-existing temporalities in this case), we should recognize that there was, in Deleuze’s terms, a “virtual field,” a “problematic presiding over the genesis of the object.”²⁴ What is to be discerned from Fuentes’ brief commentary is the way such encounters actualize subjects, who in this case belong to alternative temporalities. While it is the

case that “the fluid ways in which interpretations of time’s passage become the idiom and the accent of the nation’s trajectory,”²⁵ there are alternative subjects to the citizen-subject familiar in nation state-centric discourses. They emerge in encounters. So, unlike Garfinkel’s studies in which already formed subjects accomplish meanings, an event-oriented perspective sees subjects as the non-volitional accomplishments of historical moments. As a result, critical analysis must involve what Deleuze calls “the counter-actualization” of the event or “counter-effectuation” of accepted facticities.

To appreciate what a counter-actualization implies, one must recognize the Kant-inspired – but reinflected – approach to empiricism that is central to Deleuzian philosophy. In contrast with Kant’s transcendental idealism is Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, based on his concept of the virtual in which every actualization of experience brought into discourse is one actualization among other possible ones.²⁶ As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the state of affairs actualizes a chaotic virtuality.”²⁷ Crucially, to distinguish Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism from the familiar social science approaches in which ideas/concepts are accorded representational measurement protocols, a given actualization is not a *representation* of the virtual. Rather, it is one kind of “repetition of the virtual” – an order extracted from a chaos – so that the politically relevant question becomes not one of whether it is a faithful representation but is instead one of “how a particular actualization becomes sedimented ... fixed over a period of time.”²⁸ And to show how radically contingent a given actualization is, Deleuze suggests (in one of his early texts) that the discourses and/or texts that effectively counter-actualize such fixities do so by repeating or mimicking a given actualization in order to “double the actualization ... to give the truth of the event the only chance of not being confused with the only actualization ... to liberate it for other times.”²⁹ Subsequently, he and Guattari attribute such a critical effect to the way that the characters in texts – both “conceptual personae” (involved in generating the “powers of concepts”) and “aesthetic figures” (involved in generating “the powers of affects and percepts”) – produce “thought events”³⁰ that achieve that counter-actualization.

Although my approach to such figures and the “thought events” in which they are involved is elaborated in my introductory chapter, I want to elucidate Deleuze’s non-representational image of thought here by providing an illustration of a politically pregnant articulation of “other times” actualized in a current piece of literature. To do so, I follow briefly a character in a contemporary novel that functions as both a conceptual persona and an aesthetic figure. The character, Lenny Abramov, is an employee of a “life extension” enterprise in Gary Shteyngart’s novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010).³¹ Lenny, an unassertive, unsophisticated and unprepossessing young Russian Jewish émigré, begins the narration thus:

Today I’ve made a major decision: *I am never going to die*. Others will die all around me. They will be nullified. The light switch will be turned off. Their lives, their entirety, will be marked by glossy marble headstones bearing

false summations (“her star shone brightly,” “never to be forgotten,” “he liked jazz”), and then these too will be lost in a coastal flood or get hacked to pieces by some genetically modified future-turkey.³²

Lenny’s conceit that such a “decision” is available to him is based on his employment, “as the Life Lover’s Outreach Coordinator (Grade G) of the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation,” which purports to be on the verge of perfecting the technology to offer its clients immortality.³³ While posted in Italy, Lenny describes his work to an old family friend, “I work in the creative economy ... indefinite life extension. We’re going to help people live forever. I’m looking for European HNWI’s – that’s High Net Worth Individuals – and they’re going to be our clients. We call them ‘life lovers’.”³⁴

Implausible though the corporation’s service may be (it eventually gives up life extension and becomes a lifestyle boutique), it trades on two aspects of the human condition, one enduring and one contemporary. The former is the ontological depth of life/death, a virtuality that has always hovered over every human aspiration, great and small. The latter is an “event,” a historic shift in command structures. Corporate capitalism has attenuated the cultural authority of religion’s symbolic and practical control over life/death. If we go back historically and look at the dawn of the approach to life and death that salvation-oriented religions have conceived and propagated, we discover a search that contrasts markedly with Lenny’s. Instead of a corporate search for “high net worth” clients, there was an intense, wide-spread search for saints and sorcerers – both of which were alleged to be “intimate with the divine” – as people sought details on what they could expect from an afterlife.³⁵

Jumping to a text that reflects on a futuristic rather than an ancient concern with life extension, we can contrast a fictional reflection on an articulation between enterprise and religion, Philip Dick’s invention of a historical moment in which corporate control over life/death assimilates a religious motif. In his popular novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and especially in Ridley Scott’s film version of it, *Blade Runner*, corporate capitalism and religion are inter-articulated. A large private enterprise, the Tyrell Corporation, presides over life and death by making artificial people to help manage a dystopic world. They are “replicants” with built-in termination dates (a four-year life span). The film’s imagery renders the Tyrell Corporation as a giant temple, and toward the end of the film, one of its products, Roy Batty, comes to “meet his maker,” the corporation head, Eldon Tyrell, saying, “I want more life fucker!”³⁶

The corporate control of life/death in Shteyngart’s novel functions in a future in which religion has been wholly displaced by private enterprise. In contrast with the God-like Eldon Tyrell, whose products are the people he makes, the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation functions in a futuristic, neo-liberal world that, except for some advanced surveillance practices and technologies, looks a lot like the present. Death-avoiding life extension services are to be available to those who can afford them (subjects that neo-liberal economic practices have made – the HNWI’s that Lenny Abramov has been hired to solicit), those for whom immortality is allegedly an available but costly commodity.

My assemblage of a historical trajectory of textual renderings of control over life/death constitutes a rough genealogy, an approach familiar in the late investigations of Foucault. As his investigations have indicated, a politically oriented genealogy of control over life and death is marked by a shift from the sovereign's absolute power over life to the state's concern with the management of life, effectively a governmentalization of life/death. Within this latter historical phase, the "event" in question is the historical emergence of a problematic and thus a new subject, the "population." As Foucault puts it, "Governments perceived that they were no longer dealing simply with subjects [those whose lives were under the control of the sovereign], or even with a 'people,' but with a 'population,' with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation."³⁷ As Foucault notes elsewhere, that new collective subject reflects a different "governmentality," one in which governance is less concerned with making sure that the will of the sovereign remains unopposed than with the use-value of people, with the human resources available as the state seeks to manage its economy and war machine.³⁸

Shteyngart's novel effectively registers a new historical event, the neo-liberal privatization of the power over life and death, one in which a new kind of subject has emerged, "high net worth individuals" (HNWIs), who, when they like Ridley Scott's Roy Batty "want more life," can seek it in a private sector whose services are not available to LNWIs (low net worth individuals). The novel accomplishes its political analysis through the experiences of its "aesthetic subject," Lenny Abramov, who is both a "conceptual persona, generating concepts, and a literary figure, generating affects and percepts." And although the life extension corporation ultimately fails to deliver the services its high net worth clients seek (in the end "nature simply would not yield"),³⁹ the subjects its practices have created constitute part of a contemporary event; they reflect the emergence of a neo-liberal world that generates new forms of human capital. Moreover, it is not only a world that harbors an extreme level of social inequality but also a hyper-securitized world (revealed when Lenny has difficulty avoiding scrutiny on returning to the U.S. from Italy because the computerized interviewing icon – an onscreen animated otter – renders his statement that he befriended "some Italians" as "Somalians"). The world that Lenny's trajectory through the novel maps is in effect what Deleuze would refer to as an "actualization" of a contemporary problematic. Moreover, and crucially, Shteyngart's novel, whose characters and situations mimic that world, operates as critique, as a counter-actualization of the event it discloses and reflects.

In the chapters in this book, I canvass a variety of artistic texts that enact the kind of critical effect found in Shteyngart's novel, beginning with Chapter 1, which, influenced by neo-Kantian philosophies of aesthetics, treats a variety of artistic texts that offer critical forms of uncommon sense. I begin that chapter with a brief reprise of the significance of the Kantian revolution in philosophy for two reasons: first because traditional social science methodologies remain largely innocent of its implications, and second because it has shaped the

critical perspectives that inform my methodological conceptions and applications throughout the studies in this book. After treating the implications of the Kantian revolution, the chapter sets up the rest of the book's studies by introducing and illustrating (with treatments of a variety of artistic genres) my primary methodological actants, diverse aesthetic subjects.

1 Philosophy, method and the arts

Prelude: the Kantian revolution

Considered in terms of their main tendencies, political science and political studies remain in a pre-Kantian epistemological slumber. Presuming that the world is responsible for what is perceived, they have slept through Kant's (self-described) Copernican Revolution, a change in the way to raise questions about the experience of the object world. Within a pre-Kantian philosophical framing, experience is engendered by that which appears, as opposed to that which lies behind appearance ("the intelligible essence").¹ To simplify at the outset, "appearances" constitute the data for empirical/explanatory analysis and "the intelligible essence" references the object of some versions of hermeneutic/interpretive analysis. What Kant contributed is a shift that enfranchises post-empiricist and post-hermeneutic modes of inquiry: "phenomenon will no longer at all be appearance."² Kantian epistemological orientations privilege *the conditions of possibility* for something to appear, an innovation in the philosophy of experience that puts critical pressure on the way that political inquiries have construed issues of method. Heeding that innovation in the midst of the "behavioral revolution" in political science in the mid-twentieth century, the political theorist Sheldon Wolin addressed himself to the implications of Kant's philosophy. Seeking to redeem the "tradition" of political theory, Wolin indicted the behaviorist trend in political science for its "methodism," for exhausting the space of political education with a preoccupation with methodological techniques, to the neglect of a historically informed and politically engaged knowledge.³ Invoking the Kantian revolution in philosophy, Wolin asserted that "method" [in the sense in which empiricists construct it] "is not a thing for all worlds. It presupposes a certain answer to a Kantian type question, what must the world be like for the methodist's knowledge to be possible?"⁴

Although Wolin does not elaborate on this brief but pregnant Kantian aside, his provocation is well attuned to the Kantian contribution. Without going into elaborate detail on Kant's first critique: in overturning traditional philosophy's focus on the extent to which what appears can be reliably observed, Kant substitutes a productive mode of consciousness for mere passive perception and rejects a search for the essence or thing in itself behind the appearance. He introduces a subject who is no longer subjected to the object. Philosophically, it is a

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phenomenological rather than an empiricist subject, one which retains a receptive sensibility but also has an active understanding that legislates and reflects; a subject responsible for constituting the conditions under which things can appear as things. Consequently, within the Kantian philosophical frame, inquiry into how one has the world requires elucidation of the structures and dynamics of subjectivity. Moreover, rather than a concern with relationships among existing objects of knowledge (an explanatory syntax), Kant's philosophical revolution, as it has been elaborated in a variety of post-Kantian perspectives, encourages inquiry into the forces that have brought such objects and their interrelations to one's attention.⁵

Certainly Kant-inspired post-Kantian philosophy has yielded compelling alternatives to the consciousness-privileging Kantian subject. Among the most significant are the subject's involvement in the world and thus the "how" rather than the "what" of subjectivity (the perspective of Martin Heidegger); the subject's lack of unity – its conflicting multiplicities, rendered as the "which one" rather than the what or how of subjectivity (a philosophical trajectory running from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gilles Deleuze); and the subject who emerges as epiphenomenal to discursive practices, one located in the discursive formations within which alternative subjectivities are possible (the perspective of Michel Foucault). And while Kantian philosophy presumes the conditions of possibility for a common sense (*sensus communis*) and enframes that common sense within a juridical figuration, critical post-Kantian philosophy – especially as exemplified by Deleuze, Lyotard and Rancière – emphasizes dissensus and discord (drawing on Kant's reluctant discovery in his "analytic of the sublime" that the sublime evokes "pain, opposition, constraint, and discord," which makes it difficult to achieve the "subjective necessity" that legislates in favor of common sense).⁶ Nevertheless, the Kantian legacy, with its focus on the conditions of possibility for the emergence of what is perceived, encourages a recognition of multiplicity, of alternative worlds (containing differently implicated subjects) within which things can emerge as objects of knowledge.

The most perspicuous post-Kantian effects discernible in inquiry treat historically emerging modes of subjectivity rather than assume a timeless, universal subject, conceived as a structure of apprehension. For example, in an application of Kantian philosophy in an architectural treatise, Irwin Panofsky shows how the subject fashioned in the emerging scholastic thought world was materialized in the design of the Gothic cathedral (beginning in the twelfth century). In the former "mental habit," realized in the Romanesque cathedral, faith was insulated from reason in a design that enacted in stone an ontological divide between the reasoning/experiencing faculties and spirituality. In contrast, the Gothic cathedral constituted a realization of "aesthetic subjectivism," materialized as a series of homologous spaces within which a subject with vision could gain clarity about the interrelations of reflective thought and spirituality as that subject moved through the cathedral's spaces.⁷ Similarly, to consider a more recent historical subject, Michel Foucault suggests that Édouard Manet bears significant responsibility for the emergence of the "modern viewer."⁸ Manet's canvases, he observes, "played with the place of the viewer"⁹ in such