

Review - Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method

Written by Rhys Crilley

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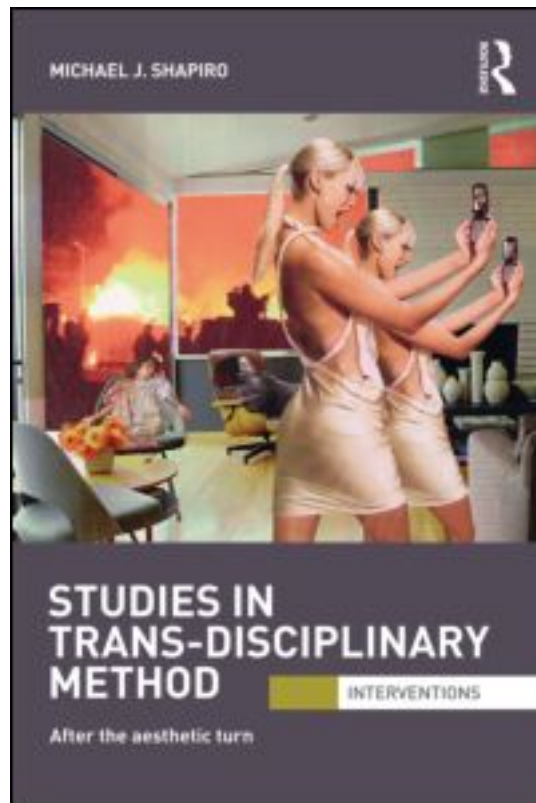
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RHYS CRILLEY, DEC 3 2012

Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn

By: Michael J. Shapiro

Abingdon, Routledge: 2012



Very few scholars publish work on such a diverse set of issues as Michael J Shapiro. From his early work on ethical and political theory, to more recent insights on cinematic geopolitics and military culture, Shapiro has explored a broad range of subjects by drawing upon a methodology as far-reaching as the issues he researches. It is no surprise then that his latest book *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* touches upon a vast assortment of issues in an original and insightful way.

When reading a book about methodology, one expects to be presented with specific points and guidelines on what one can know and how one can gain this knowing through various forms of research methodology. It is surprising and refreshing to note that this could not be further from the truth with Shapiro's latest work. At the outset, Shapiro states that the point of this book is to encourage thinking through the displacement of institutionalised forms of recognition[1] rather than providing a simplistic and straightforward methodology for understanding the world.

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Shapiro explores the encounters of aesthetic subjects, defined as “those who through artistic genres, articulate and mobilize thinking”[2], in order to challenge and displace ways of reproducing accepted knowledge frames whilst also highlighting the potential for imagining alternative possibilities when looking at political issues[3]. For example, by exploring aesthetic subjects in relation to the bail out of the U.S. automobile industry, the experience of African Americans and U.S. Warfare, Shapiro provides an insight into these issues that is impossible to gain through other approaches that focus on the state, institutions and policy.

This focus on aesthetic, artistic experiences may be hard for some to grasp, and questions such as ‘what does this have to do with IR?’ may be asked by those from a more orthodox tradition. Indeed, one does not often find the characters of *Mad Men*, Public Enemy lyrics or Phillip K Dick novels used in books about methods. Perhaps this highlights a flaw with Shapiro’s work – simply that it is too different, too removed from the discipline to be of interest to students and scholars of International Relations. However, it is worth noting that Shapiro’s work is not simply IR focused, nor is it inter-disciplinary, it is trans-disciplinary; meaning that for Shapiro there are no disciplinary boundaries.

This isn’t to suggest that *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* isn’t worth reading for those who consider themselves within the boundaries of IR though. On the contrary, by drawing upon a diverse set of artistic sources and blurring the boundaries between subjects such as political science, cultural theory and film studies, Shapiro highlights several issues that are undoubtedly relevant to the study of IR.

In the opening chapter, Shapiro lays the basis for his philosophical underpinnings and technique of writing-as-method. He argues for a rethinking of the relationship between philosophy and inquiry where philosophy is used as an “innovative, idea- and concept-creating practice”[4] rather than using philosophy as a logical tool for turning concepts into measurements in order to derive propositions. This post-hermeneutic approach underpins the rest of *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* and draws upon the tool of juxtaposition to carry the burden of analysis rather than explicitly making a statement[5]. At times this method of juxtaposing one artistic source with another can seem circumlocutory as one struggles to pin down exactly what Shapiro is getting at. However, if the intention of this book is to make the reader think, this method of montage is thought provoking and serves its intended rationale.

The second chapter of *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* is perhaps the weakest as at times the narrative seems to wander off at tangents. However, it is worth sticking with in order to gain an insight into the ways in which car consumption has impacted on America’s moral economy and culture. Shapiro explores the ontological depth of automobiles in U.S. culture, making several points about the U.S. bailouts of the automobile industry using his method of juxtaposing aesthetic subjects. For instance being a force that helped draw African-American’s into civic life, whilst simultaneously being at the heart of its political and real economy[6].

One key thing that makes Shapiro’s points easier to understand and follow is having access to the aesthetic subjects he’s using. I would strongly recommend reading, viewing and/or listening to the artistic texts Shapiro draws upon whilst simultaneously reading *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method*, in order to gain a good grasp of his points.

Once you settle into the way Shapiro uses writing-as-method, juxtapositions and montages of aesthetic subjects to make points, reading *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* becomes easier to follow and understand. The following chapters on the Blues subject and zones of justice provide insights into the often overlooked dynamics of the micropolitics of race and dispositifs of justice respectively. Here Shapiro’s approach to the issues at hand is perceptive as it explores the issues in a broader and deeper way than one would gain by simply adopting a more orthodox political science approach where, for example, only policy was explored.

Shapiro’s optimism for how art can be predominantly a tool of critique and challenge shines through in his chapter on anti-fascist aesthetics. This chapter makes the point that an aesthetic approach incites inventive staging rather than psychological investigation and can thus be a useful tool for social sciences in challenging dangerous mentalities[7]. Indeed, this alternative methodological strategy is utilised for good effect in highlighting the multiplicity and complexity of issues such as the micropolitics of justice and the dynamics of the U.S-Mexican border in further chapters.

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The final chapter addresses the presence of war, looking explicitly at texts that frame war “within a critical politics of aesthetics”[8]. By drawing upon a remarkably diverse set of philosophers and artistic texts, Shapiro explores the blurring of war in the public and private sphere. This inter-articulation of conflict and the domestic sphere in art is investigated and once again Shapiro’s optimism for how art offers a critique and challenge of traditional thinking comes through. Making this point with specific reference to the photomontages of Martha Rosler, the film *In the Valley of Elah* and the Annie Proulx short story *Tits-Up in a Ditch*, Shapiro reflects on the ways that art displaces the authoritative “sense that shapes the familiar world of a warring state”[9]. His investigation is interesting and his approach does highlight how aesthetic examples can be used as critical spaces to perhaps incite change and alternative ways of thinking and acting, a point exemplified best in the final chapter.

Throughout *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* there is no reference to the ‘aesthetic turn’ in IR that has been explored by the likes of Roland Bleiker[10], which is a little disappointing. For Shapiro, the aesthetic turn refers to the broader, trans-disciplinary philosophical sense rather than the IR specific example, however one cannot help but wonder whether the book would be enriched by an engagement with this IR literature or at least a recognition of it. Nonetheless, the book provides an original and insightful contribution to, and in some senses a radical rethinking of, methodology and method.

In conclusion *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* does not present the reader with an easy to use, clear cut guide of post-hermeneutic methods. It does however make a series of interesting points in an innovative way that highlights how Shapiro’s writing-as-method and the stories of aesthetic subjects can be used to explore issues at a deeper level than psychological approaches. At times the way Shapiro approaches issues can make for challenging reading and maybe it would be nice to be presented with a straightforward methodological guide, especially for students who are wanting to draw upon aesthetic approaches. However, this would go against Shapiro’s approach which aims to avoid direct explanation and judgment in favour of making the reader think. Through an exploration of an incredibly diverse set of aesthetic subjects using an equally impressive range of philosophical theories, Shapiro aims to gain deeper understanding of issues that are not only thought provoking, but relevant to many students, scholars and practitioners of International Relations.

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Rhys Crilley is a PhD doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham and an Associate Editor at e-IR. He blogs at rhyscrilley.tumblr.com and can be followed on twitter @rhyscrilley.

[1] Shapiro, M. J. (2012) *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (Routledge, Abingdon) p.xv

[2] Ibid, p.11

[3] Ibid, p.xv

[4] Shapiro, M. J. (2012) *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (Routledge, Abingdon) p.20

[5] Ibid, p.31

[6] Ibid, p.38

[7] Ibid, p.99

[8] Shapiro, M. J. (2012) *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method: After the Aesthetic Turn* (Routledge, Abingdon) p.154

[9] Ibid, p.154

[10] See Bleiker, R. (2001) ‘The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory’, *Millennium*, Vol. 30, No. 1,

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pp.509-533.

About the author:

Rhys Crilley is a Research Associate at the Open University, UK. He is currently working on an AHRC funded project 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?'. His research explores social media, visual politics, and narratives in global politics. He tweets at @rhyscrilley.