Review

Michael J. Shapiro: *The Time of the City: Politics, Philosophy and Genre*, Routledge 2010

Reading Michael J. Shapiro's *The Time of the City*, one enters the space movies, literature, bodies and forms: an urban space. The complexity of the urban experience, of the urban structure and its poetic politics is the topic of Shapiro's work. The framework is outlined in the first chapter of the book. After that the reader is on their own, with the author's narratives of American cinema, literature, and finally visiting Berlin and Hong Kong, simultaneously.

Following Shapiro's train of thought is entertaining: eloquent references, drawing together themes and theories – some familiar, others less so. Lack of conclusive conclusions makes me float from one artefact, one story, one narration in Shapiro's voice to another. Contempt. This is a great book, and once I finally got hold of it, I first was reading it in Bologna, Italy – without a shortage of sunshine or refreshments. Yet, a nagging voice asked disrupting the pleasure: you are actually reviewing this book. What is it about?

Is *The Time of the City* about the city or about cinematic or literary reflections? It is about micropolitics of cities – the definite form does not apply here – or more precisely about urban encounters, which offer glimpses to urbanity. Films or literature are but texts or images about the city. The problematic of the book relates to "the struggles of marginalised people to manage their life worlds and rhythms of moving bodies in, though, and out of urban spaces" whose politically-relevant problematics do not gain disciplinary recognition (p. 4).

In short, Shapiro turns to "novels, films and 'the arts'" to offer an "alternative approach to the power-city relationships." (p. 4). Rather than urban theory, this generates "ways to think 'the political'." (p. 4) However, Shapiro criticises political theory for avoiding modernity, being nostalgic about the Greek polis, going for harmony rather than fragmentation, and working on basic concepts of participation when engaging with the micro level. Quite rightly, he concludes that geographers such as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have a more elaborate perspective to the matter. (pp. 5–6) No wonder, an

increasing number of us political theorists and scientists, including myself, have found our second if not first home among the geographers. For us, what matters in urban politics is not only the simple access to "who decides": the primacy rests on the political rather than the urban or spatial.

The method or "strategy" is outlined in the last two pages of the first chapter: Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics" treating the city in terms of 'the states of encounter' it 'proposes' but politically and philosophically framed. Here Shapiro draws from Casarino's "methodological manifesto" the concept of "philopoesis", that as Shapiro quotes Casarino "names a certain discontinuous and refractive interference between philosophy and literature", where "philosophy [is following Deleuze and Guattari] 'an art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts'", "while the arts […] involve "the production of a 'bloc of sensations … a compound of percepts and affects'." (p. 23)

Shapiro manages to develop Deleuze's methodological concept of interference into one with political value with Casarino, and Rancière. He names two key concepts which disrupts the familiar divisons of knowledge: "The indisciplinarity or 'poetics of knowledge' of Rancière and Casarino's 'philopoesis'." Again, rather than urban theory, Shapiro is offering "poetics of the city, a series of interventions that figure the city by composing encounters between artistic texts and conceptual frames." These seek to "illuminate aspects of the actual encounters that constitute the micropolitics of urban life words". (p. 24)

In Chapter One Shapiro discovers "the global contacts between the Los Angeles' surveillance and policing practices and the city's Latino presence", the "temporal rhythms, which operate outside of territorial enforcement", the political temporality as increasingly securitizing that seeks to inhibit the flow of immigrant bodies, a globalizing economic temporality" (p. 41), in short the global city, with politics that form a contrast "to neo-Hegelian fantasies of the end of history and the end of contentious global politics". (p. 44) In Chapter Four Shapiro engages with *film noir*, *neo-noir*, and gendered spaces of the city through Wachowski brothers' film *Bound*, that works on the "dichotomy between domesticity and public life in a city" through micropolitical encounters. (p. 89) It seems impossible to summarise the chapters, results of long associative thought ranges – for me or, as often, for the author himself. It would do violence to the thought process.

I love films. We all do, us intellectuals. But what makes films such a special point of reference for a political or cultural theorist? Shapiro's Cinematic Geopolitics is itself an answer to question. Still, at times I have doubts of these references, maybe in the same vain as I hate reading about the chosen film right before entering the cinema. Theoretical cinematic references I often find exhausting, even though they can be illuminating – and still, in the fragmented global existence, films have become nodal points of our collective existence. They are modern day sagas, revisited, retold, with the possibility of eternal repetition of the story captured on film and ever more often available in bit-based formats online. Shapiro not only makes us (re) visit films, cities and spaces, with characters struggling by. In the preface he cites a critic, who "complained that 'the author seems to think that it goes without saying that she/he can analyze novels and films'." (p. xiv) His aim is not merely to analyse films, but engage with storytelling.

Reproductions are designed not merely to document but to provoke, and that applies both to the artistic production, a film, literature, and Shapiro's academic writing. Furthermore, narration is never straightforward. Derrida's concept iterability notes the contingency of those moments of repetition, every reading of those films may slightly differ. Analysing the films or literature to his readers, Shapiro engages in an exercise of iterability, which is never "mere" repetition. In Shapiro's readings, the film triggers thought rather than containing thought. This is the crux of his analysis. In this sense, Shapiro works as a Benjaminian *flâneur*, browsing the city, in this case through filmed images. He relates these to past experiences and thoughts, projecting for future. He shows a fragmented urban life world, through fragments: narrated by others or artefacts themselves, in manner not completely dissimilar from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. The framework of analysis legitimates the aesthetic forms, continuities and disruptions as an object of study.

Talking about genres – and repetition that I have added to the table: if films, why not TV-series? Are TV-series not in their repeatability-iterability, something that crucially forms our life-worlds? Meeting the same characters time and again, often in the same settings. What do they tell us about the time of the city? Apart forming generations series also bring together generations. Some of them have movie-like character, with extensive plot or no longer shoot in one or two settings such as a living room and a café.

Well-made series such as the Game of Thrones (HBO, based on George R.R. Martin's series of fantasy novels) and the Danish political drama Borgen have been compared to extended movies, in the same vain as movies with sequels have become more like extended series. These encounters are not as singular and intensive as the cinematic, but could we not make a similar comparison between a parliamentary term and elections, for political theory?

Literature is much present in Shapiro's work. For example, in Chapter Seven of *The Time of the City* he engages with Walt Whitman, the 19th century poet voice of New York. "Fulfilling both the Deleuze and Guattari's and Benjamin's post Kantian construction of an embodied subject, Whitman extols the city as an inter-penetration of body- and image-space and deploys haptic mode of perception as his I-subject become an engaged body and his Kantian fixation on consciousness, so evident in many of his poems, is displaced by a bodily charge he receives from other bodies." (p. 145) Shapiro contrasts Whitman to John Yau, an "ethnic poet", who equally as Whitman crosses Brooklyn Bridge, but while Whitman shows how this is something generations share, for Yau the Bridge becomes an ethnic boundary. Both Yau and Whitman for Shapiro capture the "rhythms of city life", yet for Whitman, an I-centred poet producing an "I-subject" (an I-poet as opposed to iPoet?), is however "less focused on specific venues and moments" it is "more concerned with himself than with the vagaries of other lives", which makes Shapiro turn to Bakhtin's ideas of the role of the poet versus a prose writer and polyphonic novels. (p. 145)

After realising the limits of the political apprehensions in the grammar of his address, this leads Shapiro to look for the Whitman effect in Richard Powers's novels *The Time of Our Singing* and *Gain*. The latter features a passage from Whitman's famous Brooklyn Ferry poem, which a terminally ill mother helps to open up for her son – and which for her is telling something important whether she realised it or not. "While Whitman's single-voiced poem is pregnant with potential significance for a variety of profound personal and interpersonal experiences, a realization of that potential is effected through the novel's polyphony, its staging of a dialogic encounter between mother and son [in Powers's *Gain*], mediated through yet a third voice, Whitman's." (p. 149)

Whitman is not a "psychosocial type" but a "conceptual persona", Sha-

piro argues borrowing concepts from Deleuze and Guattari: "their movements or acts of perception reveal […] 'thought territories;' they are vehicles for thinking". These are different for Whitman, who "issues in a single-voiced chant about New York's increasing ethnic diversity" in 19th century New York, and for Powers, who in *Time of Our Singing* presents alternative voices, of an inter-ethnic couple, who met in 1939 and whose cultural (dis)harmony is staged through musical matchmaking. (p. 149) "It is evident that Powers's 'our' articulates a more complicated (or contrapunctual) subject than does Whitman's singing, I-subject", Shapiro argues (p. 150) and moves to another theme: time.

Or perhaps to timelessness: "Yet despite his 'acute temporal sense,' [noted by Paul Bové] Whitman sees human nature as timeless. […] Further, Whitman, despite his polemics against slavery, presumes a homogeneous social space from which all observers, even unto future generations will see and feel 'as I feel', as he suggests in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'." Shapiro quotes Philip Fisher's reading: "the politics of any aesthetics within a democratic social space requires that there exists experiences across time that not only will happen in identical ways but will be noticed – that is arouse attention – and will even produce the same feelings within people living centuries apart." (p. 150) Powers's *Time of Our Singing* the "city-body relations" deal with the "modes of becoming-racial experienced by the Daley-Strom children" whereas Whitman's poesis "concerns the changing status of the homoerotic body". (p. 151) The crucial observation made by Hortense Spillers is reaffirmed by Powers, Shapiro notes: "ethnicity and race achieve their reality through the freezing of time." (p .152) While Whitman tries to construct a "democratic time" with "ethnic beings" and individuality, Powers's time is finite historical time with ethnic bodies that music only stress.

After reflecting in a separate section on Langston Hughest, "the best known Whitman-inspired 'Black-poet'" (p. 154), and the Nuyorican poets, and Shapiro moves to Colin Harrison's Whitman-inspired novel *Bodies Electric* of Euro-American-Puerto-Rican experience. "Harrison's novel is *about* New York. In addition to creating such city scenes, it contains a drama surrounding a relationship between Jack Whitman, a fictional descendent of Walt Whitman, living in Brooklyn and working in Manhattan and the young, temporarily homeless Puerto Rican woman, Dolores Salcines, whom he meets on the subway." (p. 159) The plot, which Shapiro quickly

alludes to, is secondary to the narration of contemporary New York with its boundaries. Jack's office building turns out to be one of those Deleuzian "societies of control", marked by "vertical separation" and in Jack's words "each floor […] marked with certain degree of fear" (p. 160). In contrast, the subway and chaotic streets offer changes of encounter, "a place of contingency where 'quotidian humanity,' show up, introducing each other to an 'alterity'", as Shapiro notes.

Concluding the chapter on the difference between Harrison's and Whitman's poetics, Shapiro notes that "Harrison's poetics goes beyond the side-by-side idioms and monocular and optimistic (often dissensus denying) point of view that dominates Whitman's riffs of the city." Harrison's is a "cacophony of voices and realistic model of the contingencies of the encounter, which offers both promise and possibility of catastrophe." (p. 162) This leads Shapiro to finish the chapter with a Spinoza-inspired quotation from Deleuze, where bodies encountering one another may "combine to form a powerful whole" or to decompose, destroy the coherence of the other's part (p. 162). What the reader is left with is bodies, encounters – and contingency.

In the final chapter, Shapiro takes us to Berlin, to the Berlinale of 2007 – where, I also went, he made me remember. Berlin gets entangled with the analysis of the movie *Eye in the Sky* set in Hong Kong. Shapiro negotiates a "dual spatiality", "consuming the historical city", timing for access to the festivals, eating, transport. At the crux there is control: former control of the historical Berlin, the controlled festival with set time limits, and finally the film about control. "Just as I was continuously involved in timing my movements within the rush of the city, one of the film's main protagonists, the head of a theft ring, was also busy timing Hong Kong's movements. My film experience thus involved movement from one tension-filled temporal habitus to another. In addition, both the city that was the locus of my viewing and the city of the film are newly configured. Berlin, now a united national capital after a significant political reorientation, also like Hong Kong's took place in a highly politicized context - in Berlin's case, an attempt at 'an architecture of civil society,' of 'public space' and of 'democratic transparency'." (p 167) It is almost impossible to talk about architecture, film, transition and the Berlinale in the space of one chapter, but it all flows well. Shapiro's point is to connect and in that also to arrest thought,

disrupt the dwelling on the same topic for too long. This is related to the critical capacity of the method, and it is at the basis of flanerie.

Sometimes, reading Shapiro and others, I wonder about the value of mediated artistic processes. Yet works of art have the virtue of providing iterable experiences. Reading a book or watching a film we are a step closer to experiencing a similar poetic moment as the analyst whose text we already read. Still, thoughts of the one watching, produces another unique poesis, where the present, past and future get entangled. The previous readings, the current settings, the subsequent readings and recallings flash by in the experience of the reading-watching-reflecting subject. It is not evident that we end up with the same moments of interferences. Yet, unlike a truly unique first-hand experience that we ourselves cannot stage again, we can try to repeat the experience, even if it would lead to dissimilar conclusions. For example, Colm Toibín's novel Brooklyn (2009) made me ponder on time and space from a more trans-Atlantic perspective than Shapiro's urban reading in this book. Furthermore, reality *is* mediated, and analyzing art can be equally insightful as analyzing factual events. As Shapiro alludes to in his discussion of Harrison's Jack Whitman in New York, we do not have access to those first-hand experiences, whether temporal or spatial. We cannot enter those worlds or witness those struggles, although they or something similar exist.

Shapiro demonstrates throughout the book the mastery of reflection on these processes. He highlights a crucial aspect of the academic endeavour: as theorists or analysts we ought to make visible ourselves when despite the increasing calls for critical distance "when doing science" and for a repeatable method, which does not account for iteration, the singularity of each repeating moment and the possibility of the revelations that this experience, encounter would entail for reflexive processes or analysis. Furthermore, his work affords value on the encounters between seemingly separate (in terms of genre or time) micro level struggles and macro level theorising. Shapiro leaves us in Berlin, but the flânerie – of a reflexive, political Benjaminian flâneur continues.

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