

Humanities Now. What Matters and the Speed we are Moving at. An Interview with Jeffrey T. Schnapp

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Pierpaolo Antonello: Jeffrey, I would like to start from your general background. You studied Comparative Literature, specialized in Hispanic philology, and taught in

¹ For full details, see <<http://www.stanford.edu/~schnapp/>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

France for a few years. Could you tell us how you finally became interested in Italian literature?

Jeffrey T. Schnapp: I came to Italian literary studies by means of a zigzagging course through various areas of Romance studies. The trajectory was conditioned by growing up bilingually between Latin America and the United States. I spoke Spanish with my siblings early on, forgetting it upon my family's return to the United States in the late 1960s, then relearning it in high school and deepening my knowledge at the University of Salamanca in the mid-1970s as well as at Vassar College, where I was part of the first fully coeducational class. I had studied French from the time I was a child, gradually took on ancient Greek and Latin in the course of my undergrad and post-undergrad studies, and eventually ended up tinkering with Provençal, Portuguese, and Romance dialectology. In the late 1970s, I worked for a number of years as a lecturer at the Université de Nice and it was during these years that I began seriously studying Italian literature. So Italian came last; but the Biblical edict applies: the last shall come first.

Odd as it may seem (especially as we approach the centenary celebrations of the publication of the 1909 manifesto), the initial impetus was Futurism. For reasons that were perhaps connected to the cultural-political climate of the late 60s and early 70s, I had become fascinated with Futurist performance and experimental art during my later high school years. These were years of experimentation with a wide array of guerrilla and street theatre tactics, as well as forms of performance art (from the San Francisco Mime Troop and the Bread and Puppet Theater to Ant Farm to the Yippies' assault on the Democratic 1968 convention in Chicago), some of which I was able to experience first-hand in Boston and New York.

Needless to say, there was never a coherent plan or vocational ambition in what I just described: just a loose constellation of linguistic, artistic, and literary interests. My passion for literature was initially ignited by the Latin American novel. In my third year of high school, I had the good fortune to have as a tutor a Harvard Ph.D. student in Latin American studies, with whom I read the likes of Borges, Cortazar, Garcia Marquez, and Paz. Brain-igniting stuff, but even as late as the period of my Ph.D., literary interests took a back seat to art practice. During my B.A. and Nice years, I mostly produced large abstract puzzle paintings, based on projected drawings and made up of many pieces, that worked the surrounding space optically (not unlike Al Held's paintings from the same period, but with cutout contours). I read the art press assiduously: especially the writings of the likes of Max Kozloff and Brian O'Dougherty on the pages of *Artforum*.

PA: Your first book was on Dante. How did this particular interest emerge?

JS: The answer is simple: John Freccero. When John arrived at Stanford in the late 1970s, I had entered my second year in the Comparative Literature Ph.D. program. Still active as a visual artist and doing freelance graphics, as well as editorial work as part of Jean Franco's Tabloid collective, I was floating sidelong amidst curiosities that were mostly Franco-Iberian and Latin American rather than Italian, alternately Renaissance or modern.

For all its strengths in the science and technology fields, Stanford can be a lonely place for a humanist. Up to that point, my own wanderings in pursuit of a teacher

whose mind challenged my own had met with limited success. The main candidate who had emerged was Robert Ball: a brilliant young Gongora scholar with a commanding knowledge of Latin antiquity and, as fate would have it, one of John's former students. Since I had found limited coursework that captivated me at Stanford, with Bob I had the pleasure of reading much of the Spanish Golden Age lyric in a luxurious sequence of yearlong tutorials.

But Bob had a little problem: the sort of problem that the rest of us only dream about — he was the heir to a Texas oil fortune. He needed to manage his capital. In the wake of some bad experiences with money managers, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Literally so: in order to become a professional quality money manager, he became just that, entering the training program at Merrill Lynch even as he was working in the Stanford Spanish Department. Within a year, his office hours were being held at the Merrill Lynch offices in downtown San Francisco.

John descended as if from on high at this delicate juncture in my graduate career and for the duration of his first Stanford year I belonged to a graduate court that was mostly composed of advanced students from the English department. I had never imagined working in Italian medieval studies, but had accumulated the necessary baggage in ancient and modern languages. John's teaching put these to work, but in ways that so absorbed me that the conversion was rapid. His greatest power was that of synthesis: of bringing together strains and strands that, for me, had been little more than loose ends. Theoretical and interpretive acuity of the highest order, flashy at times, but always of genuine substance (unlike some of what in that heady heyday of Theory passed for deep thought); a passionate belief in the transformative power of poetry; a panoramic understanding of the history of Western physics and cosmology; an ability to endow the study of Patristics with a spirit of adventure that, to me, was entirely new. In short: the very best of the traditions of thought embodied by his own teachers — men like Georges Poulet and Leo Spitzer — and something more that was distinctly his.

As fate would have it, a second mentor accompanied my turn to medieval studies and made sure that the modernist within was revitalized even if momentarily dormant: namely, Kurt Forster. Kurt was teaching in the Art History department at Stanford during these very years, and was an active presence on the regional architecture scene. Though I never formally enrolled in a course with Kurt, I was dazzled by his lectures on modern and contemporary architecture, with their rhetorical flair, imaginative construction, and learning.

Kurt and I became good friends in a most curious fashion: in the wake of a long battle, fought by means of book recalls, over nearly every new publication by Manfredo Tafuri ever purchased by the Stanford art library. Faculty had the right to see the name and number of who was recalling books they had on loan. One day, receiving yet another recall with my name and number affixed, he decided that enough was enough. Instead of telling me to go to Hell (as well he might have), he invited me to lunch at his house in Palo Alto. We conversed for three feverish hours about Terragni, Rossi, and Eisenman, but not without digressions on everything from mannerist painting to Roman ruins in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* to Massimo Bontempelli's *Vita intensa*. In one form or another, the conversation has continued to this day (so much so that Kurt wrote one of the wall texts for the

7000 square meter project that I directed this summer for the Regione Autonoma del Trentino-Alto Adige: a project entitled *I Trentini e la Grande Guerra*, built into two abandoned highway tunnels at the entrance to the city of Trento.²

In short, my scholarly career was launched under the aegis of two exceptional models, and on those fortunate occasions when I feel the muse infusing my voice as a cultural historian, the tonalities of that voice belong alternately to John Freccero and Kurt Forster.

PA: It seems that already in your first book your commitment to history is thematically and theoretically defined. At the same time, although links with ‘historicist’ Italian exegesis are visible, your approach is quite original and ‘American’, so to speak; for instance in relation to your interest in visual culture (your analysis of the Sant’Apollinare’s mosaics), and to theory (the use of Kristeva). There is also already a sense of the methodological eclecticism that characterizes your later work and your approach to literary studies.

JS: Having come of age, so to speak, during the heyday of Theory, I found myself admiring of the power of theory at its best — the occasional lightning flash in the younger Derrida or mature DeMan, the Barthes of *S/Z*, tidbits of Eco, *Tel Quel* and Deleuze and Guattari in light dosages — but resistant to its wholesale adoption as the sole toolkit of literary analysis, especially at the expense of historical research and the historicization of ‘theory’ itself within the genealogy of philosophy. The same ambivalence extended to the philological side of the divide. My undergraduate studies with the Hispanist German Bleiberg (who had been part of the circle of Ortega y Gasset’s *Revista del Occidente* and a friend of Julian Marias) had given me a strong appreciation for the powers of Romance philology and stylistics. But a year of rigorous training at the University of Salamanca had sometimes also promoted a mental equation between romance philology and kudzu-like vines whose botanical mission was to overgrow and strangle anything remotely resembling an idea.

On the literary side of the divide, Freccero resolved the contradiction. He cut away the weeds to expose the intellectual riches of the work of Spitzer and others of his generation, with its rich mix of philology proper, the history of ideas, poetics, and stylistic analysis. And this brought with it a broadening of intellectual horizons that made me feel that it was indeed possible to be a genuine medievalist and a cutting edge critical thinker and theorist grounded in the present, with a toolkit so powerful that it was able to shed light on everything from an Epicurean epigram to a Celtic rune to the label on a California orange crate.

PA: What is your opinion about Dante scholarship nowadays? How do you think it is evolving on both sides of the ocean?

JS: I suspect that I will make few friends among my peers by stating that I think the blush is mostly off Dante studies today. The air of excitement that I associated with 70s and 80s Dante studies seems to have diminished. Which isn’t to say that there aren’t fine scholars at all ranks working within the field. On the contrary, I think the crisis of Dante studies is of a piece with the recent contraction of medieval and early

² <<http://www.filmwork.it/gallerie/video.html>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

modern Italian in all the core areas of the Humanities from music and art history to history and literary studies. The causes are multiple: the plague of presentism sweeping North American universities; the lack of self-renewal within the universities of the so-called target countries and cultures (the implosion of the Italian university system being a worrisome case in point); shifting fashion trends, the turn within art history towards less studied areas of the northern Renaissance, for instance. But, to be frank, there's also the problem of the lack of methodological self-renewal within the philological fold itself. As I see it, the last real wave of innovation dates back to the so-called New Medievalism, when there was a concerted attempt to cross-fertilize literary work with anthropology, linguistics, and sociology. A caveat: my views may well be out of date, since I no longer manage to track the field very closely.

PA: In relation to Dante, in 1984–85 you acted as Associate Director of the Dartmouth Dante Project.³ Do you see that experience as a sort of anticipation of your later interest in the intersection between humanities and technology? What was the most interesting aspect of that project?

JS: Though I certainly wouldn't characterize myself as a geek, I had dabbled a bit with mainframe computing during my high school years. And though this interest was never central to my studies or art practice during undergrad and post-grad years, I remained interested in mechanically mediated and machine art, prompted in part by some memorable experiences of works on tape that fueled a special interest in computer-aided and -generated experimental music. By my first year of graduate school, it seems as if I was the sole humanist in the constant company of what then passed for a portable computer: a very clunky Kaypro One that required a special passport of its own to travel within Europe.

Five years later I handed in the first humanities dissertation (or so I was told by the then coordinator of such matters at Stanford) entirely composed on a computer and mechanically printed on a glacially slow daisy wheel printer. By then, I knew UNIX reasonably well, had played around with Basic to the point of being able to write short programs and to hack into broken files and to fix them. Amateur stuff, to be sure.

All this to explain that when I arrived at Dartmouth in 1983 with a freshly minted Ph.D. in Comparative Literature in hand, I soon came to consider myself a very lucky man. In addition to some fine medieval/early modern colleagues (including Nancy Vickers, Stephen Nichols, Kevin and Marina Brownlee, Walter Stephens, Carla Freccero, and Louise Fradenburg), I was greeted by the first truly wired campus. For this reason, the Princeton *dantista* Robert Hollander had settled upon Dartmouth as the ideal site for the development of a pioneering digital humanities project: the so-called Dartmouth Dante Project — a full database of the seven centuries of line-by-line commentaries on Dante's *sacro poema*, from Boccaccio and Dante's own sons to the present.

Though Bob and I didn't always share the same intellectual or political values, I came to admire greatly his vision, ambition, organizational skills, and generosity.

³ <<http://dante.dartmouth.edu/>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

Bob very successfully mobilized institutional networks — the project was, I believe, the NEH's first digital pilot project — and no less successfully established bridges with industry — DEC and Apple were among our early corporate sponsors. That this early experience informed some of my later ambitions for the Stanford Humanities Lab, there is little doubt.

To launch and administer the DDP project, Bob needed a Dartmouth-based counterpart and, in the early 1980s, the pool of 'technohumanists' (as they are sometimes now referred to), not to mention ones with chops as Dante scholars, wasn't exactly large. A friendship developed upon my arrival and I assumed the Associate Directorship of the project in its early years; the very years during which the Dartmouth Dante Institutes, also sponsored by the NEH, were also taking place. (I should add that, from the standpoint of intellectual growth and sheer enjoyment, the latter represent the summit of my Dartmouth years, involving the Dartmouth-based crew plus Rachel Jacoff, Peter Hawkins, and William Stephany.)

The launch of the DDP was far from easy given the project's scale, its chronological span (1250–1983), and the number of languages involved (more or less seven). The limitations of then state-of-the-art scanning and OCR technology were among the first obstacles we had to confront. Equipped with costly Kurzweil purpose-built workstations that were nearly the size of a small piano, we set about training a small army of undergraduate operators whose arduous task it was to train the machines to read a given text. Initial accuracy rates were usually dauntingly low and only with time did we manage to raise them above 90% by using tricks such as scanning oversized photocopies instead of the original editions. The cycle would have to be started anew with each and every new commentary because typographical differences were such as to require a complete reprogramming of the machines. Diacritical marks and abbreviations were a constant source of difficulty but even more insurmountable were the irregularities of pre-1850 typography. The solution that eventually imposed itself was having these keyboarded in directly either on-site or overseas. And there were thorny matters of indexing and of textual divisions: not all commentaries employ the same conventions for linking annotations to specific verses, so editing, subdividing, and the addition of metatags often was necessary. Whatever the solution adopted, coordinated oversight, revision, and, finally, correction efforts were required to insure the quality of the data.

Though I left the project when I left Dartmouth in 1985, there are two things that I learned from this experience: first, the transformative potential of even these relatively simple first-generation digital humanities projects. The fact that what once constituted 'research' in a given field of humanistic inquiry, requiring months of laborious information gathering, could now be carried out in a matter of seconds or minutes; second, the fact that, in and of themselves, digital tools don't answer any of the basic questions regarding their value or use. As I have written elsewhere:

any and all toolkits, whether databases or digital libraries or the technologies grouped under the Web 2.0 umbrella and, more broadly, everything from wikis to virtual worlds to immersive caves to semantic webs, in and of themselves, provide few if any answers as regards the present or future of institutions of scholarship. One can do more or less rigorous or sloppy things, things that replicate the roles performed by print supports or

that fundamentally alter them, that expand knowledge and enrich experience or that contract and impoverish both. The burden of placing the toolkits readily available to us to interesting and innovative uses is ours alone: as historians, museum and library directors, curators, artists, and communicators.⁴

PA: In 1985 you moved to Stanford where you became Associate Professor and then Full Professor in 1993. You were present, as an insider, at one of the most profound cultural and technical revolutions of the 20th century: the development of the Silicon Valley and the digital age. That had a considerable impact on the role and mission of the modern University, and on the way culture is constituted, elaborated, and disseminated in the contemporary world. How did this particular environment shape your interests? And in terms of teaching, how was your work affected by the fact of being part of a sort of west coast MIT?

JS: When I was a young faculty member at Stanford, I was sometimes surprised by the degree of suspicion and even outright hostility expressed by humanists towards the IT world. The motivation was usually a mix of anxiety regarding the relative political weight of the humanities vis à vis the sciences within the university and the perception of lingering connections between certain high technology research areas and the military. As someone who had lived the PC revolution up close from fairly early on, I saw things somewhat differently: as an ulterior development of the cyberculture/counterculture/experimental art crisscrossings of the 60s and 70s, and, accordingly, as a reprise of certain seminal early moments of cultural/technological cross-fertilization from the early avant-gardes (Futurism, Constructivism, Bauhaus).

I can't say that the effect on my teaching was immediate. But I was intrigued by the ease with which my students from the sciences and the Engineering school moved in and out of research labs and industry. Some were truly brilliant students even in the Humanities, so I wondered whether this expanded spectrum of learning environments (by comparison with those available to Humanities students) was playing a role in their intellectual development.

I suppose that these casual ruminations were one of the seedbeds for what later became the project of the Stanford Humanities Lab. I had begun to wonder why there weren't media labs, research laboratories, and 'applied humanities' research centers that accelerated the passage from study to producing original scholarship and/or mirrored the technology laboratory as a place of hands-on training. And I became increasingly struck by how thoroughly individualized and 'craft-based' remained humanists' concept of knowledge production and reproduction.

Don't get me wrong: I remain deeply committed to craft and to the solitary labor of critical and historical writing. But I began to dream about the possibilities of a complementary model of the arts and humanities, based on teamwork and the hands-on training of students, long-term and large-scale, that would explore conjunctions of experimental art practice, the most rigorous and imaginative iterations of historical research, technological and media experimentation.

⁴ 'Animating the Archive', *First Monday*, 13.8 (August 2008) <<http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2218/2020>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

PA: You have mentioned that your interest in Marinetti and Futurism extends back to high school years. How did you decide to embark on the analysis of such a controversial author in your early scholarship? And when you began your scholarly work on Futurism, did you have any ideological concerns? How did you see at that point the kind of ‘cordone sanitario’ that prevented the Italian (mostly leftist) critics from approaching seriously an author like Marinetti?

JS: As noted earlier, my interest in Futurism dates back to the early 1970s, the very period when neo-avant-gardes were beginning to rediscover this seminal moment in 20th-century culture. Was it the proliferation of street theaters, happenings, and be ins? I don’t know and was too young to have participated in any of these as more than an observer. But I’d say that the *conventium ad excludendum* was beginning to fray around the edges outside the academy. Note, for instance, the publication of Michael Kirby’s *Futurist Performance* in 1971 and Luciano Caruso’s two volume *Tavole parolibere futuriste* in 1975. Like a lot of people close to the contemporary art scene, much of which was outside the institutional left, I was struck by how the standard histories of experimental art and poetry reduced Futurism to a mere footnote. When I looked at and read the actual work, I found it to be much more than a footnote: rich in inventions, innovations, and intuitions, and just as rich in contradictions.

Among the contradictions that most captured my attention were, naturally, the political ones: Marinetti’s intransigent nationalism coupled to cosmopolitanism and efforts to construct an international movement; the anarchist ‘heroic’ phase followed by the convergence with Fascism; the odd left/right overlaps that run through the movement’s history — Gramsci who saw Futurism’s revolutionary impact; the various leftist Futurists from the younger Marinetti participating in factory occupations to Vinicio Paladini. In short, Futurism seemed to open up a Pandora’s box of ideological complexities and blurrings that required an outright rethinking of the standard narratives that equated avant-gardism with leftism.

This attempt to make sense of the puzzle that was Futurism soon led to trying to piece apart a related puzzle: that of Fascism and, more specifically, the question of why the dominant portion of the Italian intelligentsia embraced Fascism, whether passively or actively. The more deeply I dug, the more I realized that, for better or for worse, the Fascist decades had played a decisive role in Italian modernization and that the relationship between pre- and post-WWII Italy was more complex than usually acknowledged. To say that I wasn’t acutely aware of the political sensitivity of this sort of work would be an understatement. My earliest lecture tours in Italy presenting research on the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* of 1932 were routinely accompanied by public accusations of philo-Fascism followed by private post-lecture whispered messages, often from the very same individuals, about ‘how much courage was required to tell the truth about the interwar period’. I realized then that being an outsider for whom the antifascist battle was hardly a daily reality made a difference. The demons seemed rather more distant from a 1970s North American perch and, the more I probed the depths of Futurism and Fascism, the more the conformism of standard rightist and leftist historiography seemed thin, acritical, and inadequate.

PA: Marinetti is a figure who moves away from *belletrisme*, and uses literature as a polemical instrument, as an instrument for political intervention. With your work on Futurism, it seems there is a ‘cultural turn’ in your career, which implies a historical and symptomatic critical use of literature. How did this approach develop? Did the experience of New Historicism have any influence on your methodology? Was the move away from the centrality of the text to the contextual analysis of historical, ideological, and material conditions of cultural production motivated also by a particular political perspective on your part?

JS: As I already noted, my interest in theory was always tempered by a commitment to philology and historical research. The initial balance, at least in my earlier medieval publications, tilted more in the direction of interpretive and theoretical questions, particularly as concerns histories of reception, literary generations, and how modern vernacular culture arose through the use and abuse of the ancient Roman canon. Certainly there were traces of influences from a variety of sources from Harold Bloom to Erich Auerbach to feminist theory. But even when subordinated to questions of poetics, context, whether material or historical, was always there. I simply could never get away from the ‘dusty’ stuff — marginal literary phenomena, obscure patristic debates, palaeography, hagiography, notarial registers, chronicles, and the like — if only for reasons of a congenital contrarianism. No doubt, the sudden prominence of New Historicism, and the quality of some of its early iterations, helped to tilt the balance in a more emphatically historical direction. My first essay on Futurism is a case in point. It’s a close reading of Marinetti’s key words-in-freedom experiment *Zang Tumb Tuuum*; but it’s also a meticulous philological reconstruction of how the poem was generated out of the poet’s telegraphic dispatches as a war correspondent for the French daily *Gil Blas*. Was there a political impulse behind this gradual ‘coming out’ as a cultural historian? Probably not, though my intellectual instincts reminded me regularly that a lot of work that was being produced under the umbrella of Theory seemed far too frictionless. My natural taste seemed to lead me towards the investigation of frictions.

PA: Besides your affiliation to the French and Italian Department, at Stanford you have taught for both the Comp Lit and the Modern Thought and Literature Departments, which have been home to various (continental) philosophers and theorists (René Girard, Michel Serres, Sepp Gumbrecht, Hayden White, Franco Moretti, the late Richard Rorty). How has this kind of environment affected your work? You seem to be theoretically aware but not theoretically driven.

JS: I greatly admire the colleagues in question, though I have always considered myself an essayist and cultural historian, first and foremost, and a theorist, only secondarily. I have too much respect for the title ‘philosopher’ to designate myself as such (though, of course, my work is grounded in a philosophical stance that blends together elements of pragmatism, materialism, and aestheticism). The ‘theorists’ whom I most admire — thinkers like Alois Riegl, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Manfredo Tafuri, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and the early Kittler — are all ‘impure’ in the sense that all were steeped in the dust and details of history; all are eclectic, asystematic system builders who were poetic thinkers and/or refined stylists. I know that it’s unfashionable to say so openly, but the craft of writing

remains integral to my notion of scholarly quality. When I write essays, the dream is always to deliver rigor, finesse, and archival dust in seductive prose; all the better if the prose explores macro- or micro-history, but not the standard in-between layers.

Among the colleagues you mention, I especially admire the early Serres, the fearless Gumbrecht who dares to write on ancient Egypt or American football, the Girard who fulminates like an Old Testament prophet from atop Mount Hebron, even though my own intellectual stance sometimes diverges from them. Hayden White's work shaped my own commitment to cultivating the art of scholarly storytelling and I consider him a friend. Franco's bold experiments with quantitative approaches to core literary historical topics represent a challenge that I reflect upon every day. Within this distinguished group of thinkers, Dick Rorty is for me a special case, though he was often so shy that it could be painful to converse with him. Suffice it to say that, in addition to being lucid and brilliant, Dick was a model of how to reconcile thought with action. An individual of uncanny modesty, he practiced exactly what he preached with regard to the social responsibility of teachers and thinkers.

PA: On this score, I have a couple of questions which refer to your works on Futurism and on Fascism. First of all, my feeling is that some sort of theorization is needed to understand the historical emergence of the avant-garde at the beginning of the century and its cultural and ideological implications. The two most relevant reference texts on this regard are Renato Poggioli's and Peter Bürger's books, both entitled *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.⁵ How do you consider these two quite different works, particular in the light of the fact that Bürger confines Futurism to a footnote?

JS: I respect Poggioli's mind and read (and reread) his work carefully during my graduate years, also fascinated by his intellectual biography. This said, I have always found his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* more outdated than the best of his essays as a slavacist. For all his considerable critical brilliance, Bürger was for me the orthodoxy that needed to be nuanced or overturned. Bürger's lack of an understanding of Futurism, the founding political-cultural avant-garde of the past century, his inability to imagine a non-leftist avant-garde, seemed to me more than an omission. Rather it compromised aspects of his overall vision of 20th-century cultural history, much like those well-meaning progressive historians and philosophers who continue to scratch their heads at the constant swerves away from the Enlightenment project that they presuppose modernity to be. I suppose I'm less optimistic than they are about the balance between rational and irrational urges in the human soul and in human history; less willing also to believe that secularization will ever truly take command. Much of my own work has been devoted to teasing out the persistence of a strong transcendental or mythical imagination even in areas with impeccably secular credentials like engineering journals devoted to the science of new materials. My aim has long been to complexify, not to dismantle, our understanding of how processes of cultural modernization actually occur, whether in deviant cases like the Italian one, or in countries such as Mexico or Brazil where they follow no less 'anomalous' paths.

⁵ Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

With respect to Poggioli and Bürger, I prefer Benjamin's sidelong wanderings within the terrain of the avant-gardes, mostly because I find him a deeper, more eclectic, richer writer, not to mention one who is more intimately attuned to the material culture of the period. As a passionate devotee of flea and junk markets from Milan to Monterrey to eBay, I have found this sort of intensive hunting and gathering activity around everyday artefacts increasingly important to my own work as a cultural historian. So I especially appreciate this distinctive feature of Benjamin's work, even as I find myself dismayed by the piety with which he is sometimes handled by the academy.

PA: You have suggested that Fascism is 'more a mobile constellation of leitmotifs than a systematic doctrine, Fascism usually amounted to little more than a complex of ethical principles, credos, and aversions, held together — sometimes tenuously — via rhetorical-aesthetic sleight of hand. Hence Fascism's lack of internal coherence, and its tendency to undergo constant self-redefinition'.⁶ Should this impossibility to define clearly the origins and the essential features of Fascism be seen as a historiographical veto, which confines any historical analysis to the descriptive level? Or is it rather the case that the analytical and philosophical categories that have been used so far to explain the phenomenon have been insufficient or unsatisfactory?

JS: This view of Fascism, which I developed with polemical verve in a lead chapter of *Staging Fascism*, has come to be associated, for better or worse, with the so-called 'culturalist turn' in studies of Fascism and totalitarianism. (I say 'for better or for worse' because my actual stance is regularly caricatured by anti-culturalist historians who, if they took the trouble to read my work more carefully, would find that my position and values are far closer to their own than they'd like to admit.) It was intended as a provocation to various then-dominant schools of historiography that sought, in my view too rigidly, to make Fascism equal to x, y, or z ideological stance, rather than taking its vitalist underpinnings seriously and accepting the resulting drift that characterizes its career as an ideology. The drift in question is a constrained and coherent drift, where fragments of socialist ideology coexist with mystical nationalism and forms of Romantic anticapitalism; but it is one that frequently fails the test as a systematic ideology. In my view, to speak of drift isn't to imply at all that one can't 'define the origins and the essential features of Fascism.' It's just that the constellation of beliefs remains relatively mobile and the story that I wanted to tell was about that mobility.

My goal was to answer adequately several questions that seemed to me the most troubling from the standpoint of the cultural history of the 20s and 30s and even 40s: how and why did a whole generation either give its consent or actively embrace Mussolini's revolution to the point of striving to give birth to a genuinely Fascist culture characterized by a plurality of solutions? How could so-called 'left Fascism' have sustained itself well into the regime's second decade, as the corporatist revolution quickly revealed its limitations? Name calling and accusations of opportunism seemed about as weak an explanation as the myth of cultural resistance to Fascism.

⁶ Jeffrey Schnapp and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 'Fascism-in-the-Making', *Stanford Humanities Review*, special issue on 'Cultural and Technological Incubations of Fascism', 5 suppl. (1996), iii–v (p. iii).

And certainly neither did very much to explain the remarkable quality of much of what was produced in the artistic, literary, design, and architecture communities during the Fascist decades.

My point of arrival to the study of Fascism, as noted above, was Futurism, which is to say the muddy and heady ideological brew of the post-WWI crisis, crystallized not only by the birth of Fascism, but also by the extraordinary adventure of Fiume: a historical episode to which I return on a regular basis because it continues to fascinate me. Recently, I published a long essay on the gay American expatriate writer/journalist Henry Furst that began with the question of how D'Annunzio's Fiuman Minister of Propaganda could possibly have been an American.⁷ I am forever collecting materials about Furst's friend, Guido Keller, the flying ace who led numerous Fiuman 'colpi di mano'.

Before moving on, I should note my enduring debt to my friend and one-time collaborator Barbara Spackman, whose own words and work directly shaped the quotation you cite. Barbara and I had begun collaborating on the 'Fascism and Culture' special issue of the *Stanford Italian Review*, 8.1–2 (1990) back in the mid-1980s and her thinking, along with that of Paolo Valesio, and, in the field of architectural history, Kurt Forster and Diane Ghirardo, all contributed to the sudden opening up of a space for a new cultural historiography of the period. The greatest debt of all, however, is perhaps owed to the late Renzo de Felice, whose commitment to archival rigor, independence of mind, and intellectual generosity left an enduring mark on my work from this period.

I think we all shared a common goal: to inaugurate a serious, critically aware exploration of the Fascist decades without ideological blinders of the sort that had long marred both left- and right-wing historiography. I just completed a brief review essay for *Domus* on a new biography of Bruno Zevi, so the case of Zevi comes immediately to mind as an illustration of why change was needed.⁸ A Jewish victim of the Fascist racial laws, Zevi was early to recognize the architectural importance of Giuseppe Terragni to the history of the modern movement. Yet Zevi was also well aware of Terragni's deep Fascist convictions even as late as the Republic of Salò. How to save appearances (since for Zevi 'true' Fascist architecture was the very definition of the anti-modern)? To elaborate the fiction of a late disillusionment on Terragni's part, followed by a possible suicide on the Russian front: fictions both, that end up weakening Zevi's otherwise important and influential work.

PA: Your interest in Fascism seems to be an expression of your interest in mass phenomena: in the social and cultural behavior of crowds and the organization of political consensus in mass society; as in the case both of your book *Staging Fascism* and of one of your more recent projects, *Crowds*.⁹ Is this a fair assumption?

JS: Your observation is well taken. The nervous dance between avant-garde cultural-political phenomena and mass movements and/or mass culture has indeed interested me from the start, whether with respect to Dannunzianism, Futurism, or the 60s

⁷ 'Un ponte sull'oceano: Henry Furst,' in *Italiamerica*, ed. by Emanuela Scarpellini and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2008), pp. 13–33.

⁸ Review of Roberto Dullio, *Introduzione a Bruno Zevi*, forthcoming in *Domus*, 920 (December 2008), 122–23.

⁹ See <<http://crowds.stanford.edu>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

counterculture on both sides of the Atlantic. The interest was cemented during graduate years when I was a founding member of the *Tabloid* collective (with some really smart people such as Jean Franco, Mary Louise Pratt, Dana Polan, Tania Modleski, Peter Gibian, and Jon Spayde). *Tabloid* was a review ‘of mass culture and everyday life’ and we were trying to devise a new language that took mass cultural forms seriously, rejecting at once the elitist biases of Adornian ‘manipulation theory’ and the then acritical populism of American popular culture studies. Much of what we did involved a bottom-up approach to media history that emphasized media rarely studied or taken seriously at the time (viz. television, display window design, pop music) or the innovative roles played by technicians, animators, graphic and commercial artists, and the like. Our aim was to rethink the role of mass culture with respect both to politics — i.e. to explore progressive features and potentialities that the left had neglected — and cultural history — i.e. to establish a richer understanding of how cultural innovation and change actually take place both in the top-down and bottom-up sense.¹⁰

The Crowds project came nearly two decades later, but I suppose that it shares some features with the above. The idea, carried out within the framework of the Stanford Humanities Lab, was to take on an inherently oversized ‘Big Humanities’ question — the role of multitudes in modern life — by means of a large-scale collaborative research process involving dozens of faculty and many dozens of students. The result was a crowded book, a touring exhibition built around the political poster collection of the Hoover Institution (‘Revolutionary Tides’), and a website that continues to be built into an enduring learning resource.

PA: Among your colleagues at Stanford, you developed a long standing collaboration with Sepp Gumbrecht, with whom you promoted a variety of interdisciplinary research projects, initiating collaborative ventures with Philosophy, History, Anthropology, Music, Art History, Athletics, and the Law School. I want to ask you about Sepp’s epistemological and critical project to move away from ‘interpretation’ and the hermeneutical field, which prompted some of these projects.

JS: Sepp’s arrival at Stanford was important for me both personally and professionally inasmuch as I had been working in my own eclectic fashion towards the sort of kaleidoscopic profile that makes Sepp stand out within the academic crowd. In him I found the most intellectually adventurous, and entrepreneurial colleague one could imagine and this was an inspiration to me, even if our stances vis à vis the digital turn are divergent and my orientation towards art and architecture and his towards philosophy differentiate us. There was never a topic area that didn’t engage him or where he would fear to tread. From medieval manuscript culture to systems theory to American football, Sepp was there and had stimulating things to say. His understanding of ‘literature’ was, like mine, a capacious one extending from runic inscriptions to notes on paper napkins. And Sepp’s energy level was, well, infectious. It liberated the hyperactive reserves that I had always possessed but that schooling had restricted over the years. Though I suspect he wouldn’t recognize himself in the large-scale partnerships with museums, foundations, and industry

¹⁰ On *Tabloid* see the anthology *The Tabloid Reader*, ed. by Peter Gibian (New York: Routledge, 2000).

undertaken by the Stanford Humanities Lab, he surely played a role (and, indeed, was on the SHL advisory board during the first couple of years).

I should also note that, as a medievalist drawn to certain estranging elements within the field, from the material aspects of manuscript production and circulation to marginalia and esoteric literary games, Sepp's broad interests fit mine. There were also some shared enthusiasms (Luhmann, Kittler, the history of Romance philology), as well as a common concern with the material underpinnings of communications systems, at least in my case, intensified by Sepp's arrival at Stanford. Soon we found ourselves teaching together and the result were some memorable seminars and memorable initiatives in what I now consider the golden age of my tenure at Stanford, whether from the standpoint of the quality of students (you were one of them) or from that of the sometimes vertiginous rhythm and pace. Among the seminars I would single out: *Sports and Culture* (associated with the conference *The Athlete's Body*; at the origin of Sepp's recent book on form in football); *Philosophies of Form* (perhaps the most challenging course either of us has ever taught); and *Cultural and Technological Incubations of Fascism* (co-taught with Tim Lenoir; a seminar that gave rise to at least three doctoral dissertations and a handful of student publications in prestigious venues).¹¹

PA: 'Interdisciplinary' is for many just a catchy word to be used in grant applications, but basically an intrinsically flawed project, while for you it seems a key methodological component of your work.

JS: I suppose that I have a paradoxical attitude towards this question. On the one hand, I think it absolutely essential that one have a home in a discipline, because disciplinary traditions are wellsprings of quality, depth, and rigor. On the other, I believe in the virtues of a kind of ultimate disciplinary 'homelessness', by which I mean that I feel that is essential for scholars to constantly stretch their boundaries and reinvent themselves. In my own case, for instance, I have come to believe that the oscillation between medieval and modern studies has proven productive on both sides of the divide, estranging my approach to the modern and sharpening the questions I ask of the medieval. Accordingly, I tend to encourage my own graduate students to follow a similar course: burrowing deep into two discontinuous areas of research.

This said, the scars that cover my (figurative) body attest to the fundamental difference between the sorts of interdisciplinarity that nearly every dean, provost, and president waves like a banner and the realities of risk-taking trans- or interdisciplinary work. True interdisciplinarity begins when one is forced to alter one's standard disciplinary practices in fundamental ways: for instance, to translate one's professional language into a language intelligible to specialists in other areas. And this is what I have done increasingly as my work has sought broader audiences, even outside the walls of the academy. I would characterize my Stanford Humanities Lab work as truly interdisciplinary, but not my earlier work.

¹¹ See 'The Athlete's Body', *Stanford Humanities Review* 6.2 (Winter 1998); H. U. Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); 'Cultural and Technological Incubations of Fascism', *Stanford Humanities Review*, 5 supplement (1996).

PA: Your book on Gaetano Ciocca is quite a neat example of your interdisciplinary attitude. He is a very little known — and in the Italian context quite unusual — figure of a polymath. There is an element of pragmatism in his work that goes beyond the typical ideological framework normally associated with Fascism and the Fascist period. How did this apparently marginal figure come into your horizon of interests? He seems to propose a different perspective and attitude to the relationship between Fascist culture and modernity, which for critics has perhaps been too exclusively filtered through Futurism.

JS: I have a weakness for so-called minor figures such as Ciocca and Furst, in part because I often find that they crystallize the complexities and contradictions of an era better than widely recognized, canonized figures. In the case of Ciocca, I discovered him when I was writing *Staging Fascism* and researching the 1934 Volta congress on the theater: an event organized by Pirandello and attended by some of the leading lights of the international stage, including George Bernard Shaw, Edward Gordon Craig, and the Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius. Alongside Gropius appeared this now obscure but fascinating engineer who believed passionately in the social mission of the new architecture. So much so that he set about realizing his dreams in both the Soviet Union of Stalin's first Five Year Plan and in Mussolini's Italy; and so much so that the compass of his activities extended from social housing to the design of transportation systems to stadium designs to functionalist pig farms. Part of the Rationalist circle of the review *Quadrante*, Ciocca seemed to me an exceptionally rich point of entry into the world of so-called 'left Fascism' with its sympathies for collectivism, corporatist ideology, and need to explain away the retrograde and reactionary realities of the actual state.

PA: Traditional literary studies have been challenged by the emergence of 'cultural studies', and you have crossed the lines of different camps. How do you place yourself in relation to cultural studies as they originally emerged in the UK — through a rethinking of Gramsci and the relationship between culture, masses, and hegemony — and the character they assumed in the US.

JS: As a critic of identitarian discourses, I probably feel a greater sense of affinity with the Gramscian/UK camp: an identification cemented during graduate years when, as already noted, I was part of Jean Franco's Tabloid collective, a review 'of mass culture and everyday life' that was working in the British vein of cultural studies but with a continent-wide American bias and base. (I should note, however, that I was never swept up in the cult of Gramsci that was then prevalent in progressive intellectual circles.)

This said, I have never felt any real degree of comfort with the label 'cultural studies.' I remember thinking long and hard about the question when Hal Foster contributed a fine preface to *Staging Fascism* in which he located my work within the cultural studies fold. I came to the conclusion that Hal was right and that the label was useful for Anglo-American audiences. But it also made me realize that I consider myself a cultural historian.

PA: Italian literary studies have nonetheless proven resistant to the intrusion of Comparative Literature, literary theory in general, and cultural studies. How do you

explain this resistance? And how do you see the field being transformed and re-shaped in recent years?

JS: Again, at the risk of offending some colleagues whom I respect and admire, I view the current situation as challenging to say the least. The crisis of Italian universities themselves, signaled by a lack of investment in research and a lack of generational renewal within the professorial ranks, particularly in the humanities fields, has led to a professoriate whose generational profile is too old and where the rewards system favors slavish imitation and a non-renewal of scientific models. Models of erudition that, much as I admire them, have ended up impeding a renewal of scientific languages.

PA: A quite unique project that you devised and developed in recent years is the Stanford Humanities Lab that you directed since its foundation in 2000 and are now co-directing. How did this idea emerge? And how is research carried out in such a peculiar laboratory?

JS: SHL has become relatively famous outside of Stanford but was under political pressure from within almost from the outset.¹² It was born of the conviction that traditional craft-based humanities training could be enhanced by the creation of a Humanities-specific type of laboratory structure founded on principles of co-creation, the hands-on training of future generations of humanists (thinking through making and doing), and partnerships involving industry, museums, and foundations. The idea was to create a site-specific, transdisciplinary platform dedicated to exploring innovative scenarios for the future of knowledge production and reproduction in the arts and humanities in the digital age: not just a Silicon Valley-based tech or media lab that builds robots that can do backwards somersaults, but a true humanities research center where hard/soft technology development and experimentation with new media hybridities could take place within a content-rich and content-driven environment. A Humanities Center for the 21st century committed to a Big Humanities/Big Arts approach to humanistic inquiry and artistic practice, modeled along the lines of Big Science: large-scale, long-term, team-based projects that build big pictures out of the ever smaller tesserae of expert knowledge that (appropriately) characterize the post-WWII research landscape.

(N.B. SHL's logo was developed around the fragment of an Ivan Puni constructivist relief showing a hammer profiled against a piece of paper: an emblem of the merger between doing and thinking, manual and intellectual labor. A genealogical pointer in the direction of the laboratory of constructivism.)

In the course of its eight years of existence, the lab has pivoted around a shifting core group of faculty and students made up of literary historians (myself, Haun Saussy), historians of science (Tim Lenoir, Henry Lowood, Michael John Gorman), an archeologist (Michael Shanks), an educational theorist (John Willinsky), a small group of technologists, and a scattering of colleagues from English, history, art history, classics, music, and drama, among other disciplines. Twenty or so projects have been undertaken over these years that merge research, pedagogy, publication, and

¹² <<http://shl.stanford.edu>> [accessed 5 January 2009].

practice, including experiments with ‘animated’ archives, mixed reality approaches to scholarly collaboration and cultural programming, art exhibitions, and interactive public art works.

The projects are structured along the lines of a natural science lab. There’s a project principal investigator (a faculty member or curator), a project manager (an advanced graduate student), a team of researchers composed of students at all levels (paid for their labor), and, often, external collaborators at other universities. A recurring seminar or course is directly tied to the project, often involving a live link to the partner institution. Projects go through an initial ‘germination’ phase, during which some sort of proof of concept is built up, at which point both partnerships and external funding are sought, as a function of the project’s needs.

PA: From more traditional quarters however, an enterprise like that could be seen as a concession to the ‘enemy’, watering down the intellectual and cognitive specificity of literary studies and the humanities in general. Some of your colleagues in fact seem rather to invoke a return to traditional scholarship, to the importance of philological work, to the reading of the classics as the main specific cultural contribution our field can give to the modern University and to culture in general.

JS: The opposition between the two ultimately strikes me as spurious. The sort of revolution that SHL is promoting is meant: a) as a complement (not a substitute) to traditional classroom teaching and scholarly labor; b) as a means to reinvigorate even the most traditional forms of humanities scholarship (from close reading to critical editions); and c) to defend and promote the humanities in a world in which they find themselves ever more isolated. The traditional distribution system for humanities scholarship, built upon university presses, has entered what seems to be a definitive crisis. Yet this in circumstances within which there are solutions immediately at hand that have the potential to vastly expand and democratize the audience for high-level scholarship, as well as to enrich the media of scholarly communication. Why should print, after all, be the ‘natural’ medium for scholarship in fields that involve event- or time-based art, not to mention music or the cinema?

The question of to whom scholarship speaks and of its social utility are not avoidable questions in the long run and SHL, like other digital humanities centers of its kind, was an experiment with a pragmatic goal: that of modelling future scenarios for what digital era scholarship might look like. The first wave of the digital humanities revolution was driven by libraries; the second wave aims to bring the digital into close contact with the interpretive and qualitative work that has played a dominant role on the research and teaching side of the divide.

PA: The strand of your research that I find most fascinating is the one on material history and material culture. Among other things, you are writing a book on the culture of modern materials such as steel, aluminum, tempered glass, plastic (provisionally titled *Songs of Matter*). We could say that in the study of modernity and modernism, perhaps too much emphasis has been given to technological innovations and machines but not enough to the new materials with which 20th-century culture and life have been flooded, and which radically reshaped our perceptions, attitudes towards objects, imagination, etc.

JS: Whether as a cultural historian, a collector of design objects, or someone with strong manual urges, I have always been fascinated by materials, whether by their physical properties or by the human tendency to invest them with meanings. And the cavalcade of new materials that accompany the history of industrialization makes materials themselves central protagonists of the cultural history of the era of industry.

I came to this line of inquiry by way of Maxime du Camp, whose 1855 *Chants de la matière* caught my attention back when I was studying the history of glass architecture. Du Camp was no Baudelaire, but his sense of excitement regarding cast iron and steel resonated with so many later celebrations of everything from steel to aluminium to plastic that I began collecting materials for a panoramic history built around case studies of individual materials. My objective was not simply to document the material mythmaking of poets, artists, and architects, but to show how these very myths were no less strongly present within the technical literature of scientists and engineers. I began with tempered glass, then moved onto artificial fabrics (rayon), and then continued with aluminium. Other chapters on steel, cement, plastics, and green materials await.

Throughout this work, my core aspiration has been to demonstrate that, however central the principle may be to the rhetoric of the modern movement, functionalism does not fully or adequately account for the central role that materials play in modern architecture. Just as in the case of aircraft construction, aluminium arrives long before it is technologically necessary; so the physical/symbolic value of materials plays a decisive role in design, engineering, and architecture in ways that transcend practical claims.

PA: It seems that you are increasingly moving away from the institutional limits of the University towards a more systematic interaction and collaboration with cultural institutions at a wider level. In that sense I wanted to ask about your experience as a curator, and your work with such institutions as the Cantor Arts Center, the MART in Rovereto, the Milan Triennale or the Regione Autonoma di Trento? Is this just a personal desire and preference, or do you also reckon that the future of the Humanities lies in further institutional cross-contaminations and collaborations?

JS: To curate means to make arguments through objects as well as words. It implies a spatialization of the sort of narrative tasks that, while not unfamiliar to historians, are fundamentally different when carried out in space rather than in language alone. Which is to say that we are talking about a separate medium with its own distinctive language, skill set, and complexities.

Foremost among the complexities are the realities of budgets often reaching well into the six-seven figure range, long approval and development timelines, and the need for large-scale teamwork at every stage. To undertake curatorial work is to enter a world of budgetary, spatial, and temporal constraints unfamiliar to most scholars. It is also to expose one's scholarly judgment to constant scrutiny and critique at every stage of the planning process. In short, it's not a leap for the faint of heart, but it's one that provides enormous satisfactions and intellectual rewards of a kind that are fundamentally different from print-based scholarly work.

My personal view is that the universe of humanities research would be enriched by the addition of curatorial work to the range of possible 'outputs' for scholarship. The challenge of communicating high-level research to heterogeneous non-specialist audiences is, of course, very real. But I have found that, much like teaching, it helps one to step outside the boundaries of one's own expert language into a more fluid public realm. The result can be the sort of multipurposing of scholarship that has been central to many of the experiments carried on within SHL.

PA: You edited several volumes by Marinetti for Mondadori and more are in the pipeline. 2009 is the centenary of the Futurist Manifesto and a deluge of publications is expected. Which aspects of Marinetti's oeuvre and in general Futurist activity do you think have been underexplored and do you still have other long term plans on this score?

JS: I think that Marinetti's legacy has already been a rich one. He remains a figure with enormous strengths and enormous flaws, capable of flashes of artistic brilliance but uneven as a writer. Certainly he was less a systematic thinker than a tireless instigator, a catalyst, and a disseminator whose contradictions are legion. I know this may sound strange, but his works are much cited but rarely if ever read.

To this lack of interpretive scholarship I would add that many pieces of the larger Futurist puzzle still await reconstruction: among them, the movement's naturist phase, and the lives and careers of major figures such as Enrico Prampolini or Anton Giulio Bragaglia.

I remain interested in working with Futurist materials and archives, and had contemplated writing an unconventional biography of Marinetti some years back. At present, however, my main commitment is to *SPEED limits*: a mixed reality exhibition concerned with the pivotal role played by speed in modern life, from economics and psychology to art, architecture, and design to the material culture of the eras of industry and information. The event in question marks the centenary of the publication of the 1909 manifesto which, of course, famously proclaimed that 'the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.' Whereas other shows will explore Futurism's impact on the visual arts, *SPEED limits* is critical and speculative in character, and heterogeneous with respect to the domains and media it encompasses. Broadly exploring a single Futurist theme, it interweaves a virtual and a physical exhibition in ways that I think would have excited the movement's founder far more than a conventional commemorative show. *SPEED limits* will be opening at the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal in May 2009.