

**Reading the Image World?**  
**Playing with Pictures?**  
**Looking beyond words and pictures?**  
**An Interview with Professor W.J.T. Mitchell by Sheng Anfeng**  
**Tsingua University, September 2010**

Sheng: What is the relationship between art and environment? The binary opposition between art and nature. Nature is also environmentalized. Nature is almost equal to environment. So do you think there is the possibility that art is naturalized?

Mitchell: Absolutely. As Shakespeare puts it in *The Winter's Tale*, "over that art which you say adds to nature, is an art that nature makes." That is why I insist that the relation of art and nature be indicated, not by a plus sign (+) but by the sign of times and multiplication (X): "Art X Nature." Art and nature "cross" each other, multiply each other, and change places in the rhetorical figure of chiasmus (X): the art of nature and the nature of art. In the era of the anthropocene, when human activity has a greater impact on the environment than the rain, when global warming is an indisputable scientific fact, the relation of nature and human artifice has been made manifest in a radically new and far-reaching way. Since the 1960s, earth art, land art, and site-specific art have expanded the field of artistic practice to include and be included by natural processes. Robert Smithson's "paleoart," which engages with the "deep time" of natural geological processes and extinct life-forms is perhaps the most dramatic instance of this newly evident relation of art X environment.

Sheng: As a western art historian from the United States, What's your impression of contemporary Chinese art?

Mitchell: The first time I visited China in 1988, I felt like Chinese art was poised for a great leap forward an intuition that subsequent developments have shown to be correct. I visited the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which was then in the center of Beijing, where the Grand Hatt Hotel is now located. I look back now at a painting by Hung Hao from 1989 called "A Political Map of the World," The artist took all of the names and places and transferred them to new places, scrambling the names of countries while keeping the shapes of the great continents intact. He took the People's Republic of China and moved it into the position of the United States, a kind of geographical prophecy of the New World Order that seems likely to emerge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And I saw so much other exciting, innovative work being done at that time, especially by the students. I bought a painting by a student, Ma Qiang, a large rice-paper composition all designed around the Chinese character of "Revolution," but reversing, inverting, exploding, and transforming that character. He called it "Revolution Deconstructed," a sign that a new Cultural Revolution, this time at the level of the visual arts, was in progress. And of course you remember that in 1989 the young artists were part of the

vanguard of the Tiananmen Square events, and they built the world famous statue of the “Goddess of Democracy” as a symbol of the new spirit, which was not just political, but cultural and artistic. So I think that was the harbinger of great changes to come in Chinese aesthetics. Since then my colleague Wu Hung has spent the last twenty years travelling everywhere in China to try to identify the most promising artists and to bring them to the public. Before 1989 contemporary Chinese art had almost no presence in the United States, Europe, north America. Now it’s everywhere. There is an enormous presence of Chinese artists in every international exhibition.

Sheng: It seemed that you have no difficulty in understanding Chinese arts although you don’t know Chinese language. At present, people are talking about world literature. but literature with translation is very difficult to cross the national boundaries. So do you think Chinese art will go to the world faster than Chinese literature?

Mitchell: Well a good question. I think you put your finger at the exact point, and that is the difficulty of translation. The international art world now has produced a new kind of connection across the arts, very different from the insular, Eurocentric world of high modernism which was primarily centered in the North Atlantic—Paris and New York. In the Sixties, American artists began to move out to the Western frontiers of the U.S, away from metropolitan galleries and museums. Los Angeles emerged as a new center, but also Australia and the former colonies of the European empires. A new sense of global contemporaneity emerged, in which the center was much more difficult to locate. Today there are many centers, the Middle East, the global south, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Africa, India, and of course China. My old friend Terry Smith has just published a book entitled *What Is Contemporary Art?* Europe is positioned as simply one among many centers of significant artistic production.

Sheng: Professor Mitchell, let’s start with the reason why you study pictures and icons instead of the more traditional literary texts, or do you also do research of literary texts?

Mitchell: Well, partly because in my early formation as a scholar, I began by writing my PHD dissertation on William Blake, who was both a poet and a painter. And I felt that in order to do justice to his art, I need to be both a literary scholar and a scholar of the visual arts. So I did double training, I got a PhD in English but I also trained myself as an art historian at the same time. I thought Blake’s work made the links between the verbal and the visual manifest and inevitable. It wasn’t that he just happened to be both a painter and a poet. He brought the two sides of his work together in illuminated books, artist books where images were constantly interacting with one another and with text. So I needed a double literacy in order to address that work.

Sheng: That was very interesting. Just now you mentioned your PhD dissertation about William Blake, did you write your PhD dissertation under the supervision of J. Hillis Miller?

Mitchell: Yes, he was one of my supervisors for my PhD dissertation. He introduced me to the phenomenological reading of literature, especially poetry, and subsequently to the work of the structuralists and deconstruction.

Sheng: So you have some other supervisors?

Mitchell: Yes, the other two were Ronald Paulson, a scholar of British art and literature, especially William Hogarth. Paulson was a very crucial advisor, helping me understand the relations of image and text, visual art and literature. The other advisor was Earl Wasserman, who was a great scholar of Romantic literature, 18<sup>th</sup> century literature. Wasserman was the person who taught me how to read, how to read very carefully and closely, unpack the meaning of poems, and literary texts of all kinds.

Sheng: About William Blake's poems and his pictures. So what is the title of your PhD dissertation?

Mitchell: It's called *Blake's Composite Art* (1977), which was later published as my first book with the same title by Princeton University Press.

Sheng: Are traditional texts also part of Iconology in your theory?

Mitchell: Yes. The subtitle of *Iconology* (Chicago, 1986) is "Image, Text, Ideology." So the idea of the relation between image and text is very crucial... and even the word iconology is a double word, the icon and the logos, the image and the word. So iconology in its foundations is not just about images but also about words, about investigating the conditions under which words and images come together, or pull apart and contest one another.

Sheng: In the lecture you gave this morning in Tsinghua University, you have paid much attention to the extreme social environments (specifically the Gaza strip in Palestine/Israel) and you have also tried to discover elements of opposition or resistance in those environments. In addition to this, what can intellectuals and scholars do to help bring about a more equal and freer world?

Mitchell: I think it is the responsibility of the intellectuals to engage in worldly issues, politics, social affairs, and not simply remain cloistered as scholars in the library, but to reach out to the world. We can do this in many ways through writing, teaching, interpretation of not only literary texts but also the texts of everyday life, the behavior of people, and in my case, the images that circulate in the media and mass culture, the images that arouse human passions. I think these images can be very important political agencies. We need to be alert to them, pay attention to their meanings, and criticize them. So that's to me a very important thing to do. I don't try to dictate to anybody else, but I feel called to do that.

Sheng: Do you also make these ideas you've just mentioned known to your students in the class?

Mitchell: Yes. Of course.

Sheng: Are these things close to activism?

Mitchell: I would distinguish it from direct activism, which involves demonstrations, protests, political organizations, running for political office. I try to express my ethical and political views in the way I work in the classroom. I try to create a democratic classroom, in which I learn from the students, and the students learn from each other. It's not all one way as if I am the fountain of wisdom and they must simply drink the knowledge I gave them. I think that is a sterile, one way notion of education. So it really begins in the classroom with a democratic atmosphere of mutual respect and mutual learning.

As for writing and publishing: of course I hope my ideas would have an effect. I think of that not as activism in the direct sense, it's an intellectual activism in a sense that you produce interpretations; you try to offer alternative points of view that may affect action directly or indirectly. There is no way, however, to know in advance how much effect you are going to have. But I am happy to say that a lot of my writing about Israel and Palestine is now translated into Hebrew and published in a book of my essays there. So many Israelis and Palestinians read my analyses of the politics and symbolism and images of the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts. That's not activism in the usual sense, but it's the kind of things that Edward Said cultivated, he is one of my models and mentors for writing a secular, worldly, and committed criticism. It is not, I hope, a criticism that follows dogma or crude polemics, but an aesthetically sensitive formalism that tries to unfold the relations among works of art and literature, and the socio-political world in which they are situated.

Sheng: I haven't read your work very much, so perhaps my question is a fake one. But some scholars believe that we are now living in the age of images and many are becoming more and more keen on studying all kinds of icons instead of literary text, so the traditional literary study might be diminished in some way. What do you think of this change of situation? Do you also share with them the worries for the future of literary studies?

Mitchell: That's doesn't worry me very much. For one thing, I still read literature and bring it into my teaching and writing. For instance, my lecture today, probably the most important single thing is Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar," a poem about the relation of art and the environment. So I am constantly going back between literature and visual arts, words and images. That early influence of William Blake in two disciplines, one in language and the other one in visual media, has never left me. So I don't see the study of images as a threat to literature, but an enrichment of it. The

images we see in the world only make sense, in fact, in relation to the words that circulate through them, and that we bring to them. Like the Chinese character which is *seen* and *heard* simultaneously, literature is a structure of words in which pictures, scenes, and images of all kind (both optical and acoustic) are nested. The important thing in the analysis of culture and the arts, in my view, is the training of the double disciplines—so that we both read and see, hear and behold, as we make sense of the world.

Sheng: Could the study of visual media be considered an enrichment to the traditional study of literature?

Mitchell: Yes, I hope so. I want both literature and visual arts to be connected with real life, to be linked to the world, not clustered in the library where they have no communication with the experience of ordinary people.

Sheng: Some people consider visual art as part of the cultural study. What do you think?

Mitchell: In the United States, visual arts are mainly the province of art history. The discipline has certain canon, an established hierarchy in which painting is extremely important, but things like advertising images or journalistic images are not so important, and are placed at the outer borders of the discipline. So, the expanded field of art history that I have been part of is called visual culture. That means we still look at visual arts, you still have a sense of art history, but it's art history in the expanded field, paying attention to mass media, to other visual media of televisions, cinema, to the journalistic images, commercial images. The distinctness of arts, of visual arts, I think, begins to be much clearer, when you put it in the larger field, just as the same thing goes with literature, you have to put them in the larger field of discourse of everyday language, of conversation, opinion, prose of all kinds. Not all language is literature, and not all visual culture is art; literature and art only make sense, in my view, in this larger field of language, discourse, narrative, and visual culture. The unit of meaning that I focus on, therefore, is the *image* that circulates across different media and genres, and that's why I call my discipline "iconology," the study of images, both verbal and visual (and even musical) across the media.

Sheng: I noticed a little history of your career. You first taught in the Ohio State University for nine years and then moved to University of Chicago. What do you think of University of Chicago? Is it the best university in the United States? What is the thing that attracts you most in University of Chicago?

Mitchell: Well I regard, the University of Chicago as the best university in the world. I am of course prejudiced in its favor. I have been teaching there for 32 years now. I believe it's objectively true that it really is one of the best universities in the world, and this is partly because the faculty is so good, very distinguished. But it is not just the quality of the individual faculty. It is also the atmosphere of constant debate and

discussion. We often talk about “Chicago Moments,” when professors and students in different departments, different fields, suddenly find they something in common and a whole new idea comes into the world as a result of cross-fertilization between disciplines. Chicago has been interdisciplinary in its intellectual culture for a very long time, and recently we have instituted a “Center for Disciplinary Innovation” in Humanities Institute. This interdisciplinary culture is why there are committees on politics, ethics and rhetoric, the conceptual foundations of science, the history of culture, ideas and methods, the committee on social thought. These are formations that are not like ordinary disciplines, they are inter-disciplines or what I prefer to call “indisciplines,” where a productive anarchy and brain-storming can take place.

So I am in four departments in Art History, English Literature, Cinema and Media Studies, and the Department of Visual Arts (which is concerned with studio art). And that seems normal to my colleagues; I’m not unusual in that way. When Homi Bhabha was at the University of Chicago, he was also involved in the visual arts. I have other colleagues who work between law and literature, or history and literature. So I think that’s unique to Chicago. It is small enough, so these interactions are possible, a lot of collaborative work, a lot of team teaching. Last year I gave a seminar on “Race, Media, and Visual Culture” with a colleague (Darby English) who is a distinguished scholar of contemporary African American art. This year my seminar is “Seeing Madness,” which I will give in collaboration with my colleague in French, Françoise Meltzer, that will look at visual and verbal representations of insanity in literature, philosophy, film, and the visual arts. And then there are the students, who are outstanding. The students who come to Chicago select themselves: they are very bright, ambitious, and they want to work hard, so when you walk into your classroom, you don’t feel that you have to sell ideas or learning. It’s already that they are there, hungry and thirsty for the knowledge you have; they are ready to learn and they also ready to try to produce knowledge. One thing I love about teaching in the University of Chicago, is I that can expect my students to be knowledge-producers, not just consumers. In my media theory classes, my students have produced an electronic textbook, called the *Glossary of Keywords in Media Theory*. <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/navigation.htm>> It’s an online resource, a reference which is consulted by millions of people all over the world, and it is all a product of students’ research conducted in my class. To me that’s when education becomes really great... when students are not just passive consumers but producers of knowledge.

Sheng: You mentioned Bhabha just now, but he moved to Harvard University later in 2002. So if he could move, what makes you stay? Why not Harvard University, which is usually considered the best university in the world?

Mitchell: Because Chicago has intense gravitational field for me. I am deeply tied to my journal *Critical Inquiry*, which is a life time project, to try to bring the best criticism and theory into the world, to help improve and circulate humanistic knowledge. I have a large group of collaborators, intellectual friends, so it is very difficult for me to leave Chicago, even though I have had many tempting offers. Homi Bhabha still talk on the

telephone from time to time, and I always see him when I go to lecture at Harvard. I know he misses Chicago a great deal, and particularly this atmosphere. Harvard is very fine, but it doesn't have that kind of culture.

**Sheng:** You have come to China for many times recently and lectured or attended conferences in several big universities such as Tsinghua University, Fudan University, and Shanghai Jiaotong University, and you know Chinese universities are undergoing some reforms and changes in recent years. So what do you think of Chinese universities? What do you think Chinese universities most lack and to be improved? And what do you think of Chinese education in general? Just tell the truth please.

**Mitchell:** Well, it seems to me that Chinese universities are in the position now that the visual arts were in the 1980s, poised to make a Great Leap Forward (I hope you will forgive my echoing this Maoist slogan!) The reason is simple: the Chinese economy is expanding rapidly. There is so much more money now than there was twenty years ago. But I think there is also a concern that, with the arrival of capitalism in China, the obsession with money can produce quick returns but long term disaster. I worry that there will be an over-emphasis on technology and science, as well as business and economics, at the expense of the great legacy of Chinese literature and art. But I would say the same thing about Europe and the United States, where money is not so plentiful as it is in China, and so the study of culture and the humanities is being sacrificed to short-term "pragmatic" interests like markets, money, and machines. The humanities are crucial, in my view, to a balanced education, and to the long-term health of the human species. The modern world needs and demands more than practical, instrumental know-how, new ways of making money and high-tech gadgets. It needs "know-why," the cultivated wisdom, ethical awareness, and political criticality that are essential to just, democratic societies. We need idealism right alongside our realism, and that is the task of the humanities. It is the primary source of *cultural* as opposed to financial capital, and provides an endowment that is re-invested every time we behold a work of art, or become absorbed in a poem or novel or film.

**Sheng:** Thinking about future, do you have any future plans for your research? I know one of your new books is on the way, which will be published by

**Mitchell:** It's called *Cloning Terror*, the subtitle is "The War of Images, 9.11 to the Present". And it's about the whole history of the United States' Global War on Terror and the way that certain images and metaphors are help to motivate and define this war. So many of the images are quite memorable and familiar, even famous, probably the most famous has been the image of the destruction of the World Trade Center, which provided the excuse and the launch-pad for the war on terror. There is also the episode of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, which exposed the American torture regime

inside of Iraq. There is the use of images or spectacle in terrorism and war, to subdue a population—the tactic called “shock and awe” which is meant to traumatize a population and destroy its ability to resist.

Above all, I am concerned with a *metaphorical* image, namely the image of a “war on terror” as such. That foundational metaphor has framed U.S. foreign policy for almost a decade, but it ignores an even more fundamental question: how could you make a war on terror? It doesn’t make any sense—would we agree to have a “war on nervousness” or a “war on anxiety”? How can you make a war on an emotion? The effect of this metaphor has been to produce a phantom enemy, that it is everywhere and nowhere, an enemy that is defined not as a nation, not Iraq or Afghanistan, north Korea or any other country, it’s a metamorphic phantom, a shape-shifter that never shows its true face, and which can be projected on anyone, anywhere. And yet, even though it is an imaginary conception, the image of a War on Terror has become real; the metaphor has been made literal, by the brutal, real-world tactics of invasion, occupation, and the bombing of civilian populations. The US government has made the War on Terror a hideous reality, mobilizing popular support out of a sense of revenge for “9.11”, and a sense of paranoia about the possible threats from unknown resources. Couple this with the centuries old antagonism between the “Judaio-Christian West” and Islam, and you have a very toxic combination, one that goes beyond any realistic foreign policy into the domain of “Holy War”—on both sides (if it makes sense to speak of distinct “sides” at all).

Sheng: so when we go through the airports we now have to go through series of most strict security checks, especially for those coming from the Arabic worlds and Asian countries.

Mitchell: And the emphasis on security and surveillance produces intensified governmental power, extraordinary power produced by a state of emergency. So that’s half of the story of the book.

The other half concerns the conception of the cloning, which represents the new regime of image production, that was simultaneous with the war on terror. Cloning epitomizes the imitation of life that I summarize as the bio-picture—that is, pictures that behave like viruses, taking on a life of their own, and spreading across the world like the SARS epidemic. The clone is a symbol of this new kind of picture, an image that is not only an imitation of life, but is itself alive—a “living image.” We have entered a new technological phase in the world system that I call (echoing and updating Walter Benjamin) the age of “biocybernetic reproduction,” based in the twin revolutions of computers and biotechnology. We can now literalize the ancient metaphor of creating a living image, and realize the fantasy of producing artificial life forms—living copies of living things.

The phrase of “cloning terror” refers to the fact that the war on terror had the effect of



enhancing the terrorist program, paradoxically producing more terrorists. Since the US launched the war on terror, the number of of terror attacks have increased rapidly, and every National Intelligence Estimate released by U.S. intelligence services in recent years has reiterated this fact: the war on terror has increased the numbers and determination of the terrorists. London, Madrid, Italy, the Middle East, Africa find new terrorist cells proliferating. The analogy would be if you try to kill a cancer by pouring acid on it, causing it to spread. A war against terror is asymmetrical, there is no determined enemy, no locatable national enemy, so you end up killing many innocent people. As a result you strengthen the force of the terrorists. Al Qaeda was a tiny marginal, unpopular group of fanatical criminals, but the US has made it stronger by going to war against it, treating it as a global threat. (Al Qaeda was not even in Iraq when the U.S invaded it, and in fact Osama bin Laden's whole strategy on 9-11 was to lure the U.S. into a foolish invasion of this sort, knowing that it would ruin the U.S. military, not to mention the U.S. economy). So that's what cloning terror means. By trying to destroying terrorism with the blunt instrument of war, you have effectively enhanced its power. It also has to do with the peculiar formation of American politics during the era of the war on terror. At the same time I am the form of policy front America was waging this form war on terror, it was a domestic war going on that was circulating around the issue of cloning. Cloning is associated with, and iconic of contemporary reproductive technologies, abortion, and gay marriage. So it is no accident during this period of war on terror, there was also something that might be called the "clone wars," articulated around the whole debate on biotechnology. The *Attack of the Clones*, the title of George Lucas *Star Wars* film about the generation of cloned armies typified some of the fantasies about cloning in this period: the new horror of (un)limited reproduction of dangerous images, dangerous living organisms, including, of course, terrorists, who were often portrayed as faceless, anonymous enemies, just like clones. So these images—clone and terrorist—come together in many ways in this period of recent history. I am not telling you the whole story of the book, but that's the basic convergence I see in the war on terror.

Sheng: have you any other new project for some new books besides this coming one?

Mitchell: Yes I have an idea for a book called *Medium Theory*, a sequel to my earlier book, *Picture Theory* (1994), which argued that pictures are capable of theoretical reflection on their own nature. I want to make a similar, but distinct, argument with media as self-theorizing institutions. Instead of thinking of media as the *target* or object of theoretical reflection, this would involve looking at media as reflecting on their own nature. The title is also a little bit of a joke on the common distinction between Small, Medium, and Large, or Low, Medium, and High temperatures. Everyone is familiar with we used to call "High Theory": very general, abstract, and schematic (this is often associated with "French theory" of the sixties and seventies).

Sheng: the French School as high theory...

Mitchell: Yes the French School of High Theory. But I would also want to focus on what we might call Low Theory, which is kind of the theory that produced the war on terror, the theory of the neo-conservatives, in Iraq there is holy war with the Islam, the clash of civilization thesis, Samuel Huntington, etc. Low Theory divides the world into black and white, good and evil. The theory I want to is in-between: it recognizes its immersion in practical affairs, both political reality and political ideals interacting in everyday experience as well as in the arts: this would be the location of Medium Theory.

Sheng: We also have media studies which is very popular now in China. In Beijing there is a University of Communication and Media and In this university we have School of Journalism and (Media) Communication.????

Mitchell: Yes. The other thing I would like Medium Theory to accomplish would be to bring together three different areas of media theory that often diverge, and have no communication with each other. I'm thinking, of course, about the mass media, the broadcast media (television, radio, newspapers, etc) But then there are also the *social* media of lateral communication (the postal system, telephones, the internet, Twitter, Facebook). And there are the various kinds of political mediations like polls, elections, representation and representativity. And finally, there is aesthetics, the idea of the medium of art, intermedia and the material social practices of artistic production. These ideas of media tend to go on separate tracks. They don't talk to each other. People in journalism schools don't think about artistic media very much. And the artists focus on their own media (painting, photography, sculpture) and tend to not to think about the social and mass media. I'd like to produce a convergence in which we mediate the theories of media to bring them together in conversation. So that's would be the fundamental project of this new book.

Sheng: Sounds really interesting!

### **More questions:**

Sheng: You once wrote an article: "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture" (1995), what do you think of the interdisciplinary tendency of contemporary humanities or the interdisciplinarity? Is there any danger that a scholar might become a Jack of all trade?

### **Mitchell:**

Sheng: Years ago you talked about the so-called "digital humanities," which referred to "three basic areas of interaction between the new technologies and the study of culture:

1) the transmission of humanistic knowledge in pedagogy and publication; 2) research in the humanities which has the effect of turning culture into an archive for data-mining; 3) the treatment of the new informational technologies as themselves the object of cultural analysis.” How is it going? Are you still pursuing the same theoretical dimension or do you have any new development out of it?

**Mitchell:**

Sheng: Scholars in Humanities, what can we do to improve the living conditions of human beings? Some people say that humanity scholars are not as important, or as productive, as scientists and technologists. What do you think about the relationships between scholars in the field of humanities and in science?

**Mitchell:**

Sheng: Technology is undoubtedly very important in our modern life. Whether you like it or not, whether you are concerned with its possible bad results or not, it is with us. And obviously you are quite at home with various technologies such as PPT, internet, blog, twitter etc, using them in both doing researching and teaching. And you actually call yourself an addicted “pedagogical technophile.” Why do you like technologies? What made you a fan of them? Could you see anything inconvenient in them? What do you say to those who hate technologies and would rather use the traditional ways of studying and teaching in college?

**Mitchell:** I think the important word is “pedagogical,” not technophile. I am actually a bit technophobic, and I have great difficulty with gadgets, and I probably waste too much time and emotion in futile attempts to master them. Where technology excites me is in the emergence of social media as an instrument of teaching. I have always wanted the classroom to be a democratic space where students learn from each other. But now the web-based classroom permits this to go on all the time. I don’t think it is a substitute for face-to-face interaction, but it is an excellent supplement and enrichment.

I also love the new search technologies that allow us to seem much smarter and learned than we actually are. I remembered the Shakespeare quotation about art and nature with which we began this interview, but I was able to verify the exact words and the location within minutes using an online Shakespeare concordance. And if I need a slide of a painting or a news photograph, there are numerous search engines that make them available very quickly. Then the task is to slow down and actually concentrate on an image, to slowly let it come into focus, and to track the lines of discourse that circulate through it.

Sheng: You are surely very good at reading pictures, images and other icons, while most people couldn't. How could you do that? What are the secrets to the depths of these icons? What kind of training or theories do people need to read this kind of "texts"?

**Mitchell:** the training has to be a double discipline of seeing and reading, spatial and temporal analysis, beholding and deciphering. One has to let the images speak and tell their stories, divulge their desires in their own way, not by imposing a preconceived verbal program on them, but by testing them against one's own perceptions and intuitions. Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* tells us to forget the proper names and standard interpretations of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, and to adopt a kind of innocence or ignorance in front of the picture, to allow its illuminations to unfold themselves. That is half the task. The other is to do something similar with language and literature, to listen to the language, allow its music to sink into the soul, watch for the apparitions that it brings to mind, the scenes that it unfolds in the mind's eye. Then, perhaps, one is prepared to bring previous knowledge, the views and words of others, to bear on the image or text—the image-text. One is then prepared to do another double kind of work, to historicize of course, which is the automatism of the scholar—to situate the image in its context. The past moment of its production and reception. But also, and equally important, to *anachronize*, to bring the image into the present, and perhaps to see what future it opens up. The image, and imagination, "goes before us" as the Israelites say when they ask the artist, Aaron, to create an idol to express their tribal, national identity. It is also what a scientist does when he creates a model, a schematism to explain a phenomenon. The imagination, in other words, is the first step on the road to understanding.

Sheng: In a interview done in 2001, you mentioned several times the word "vernacular", including the term "vernacular visuality." In what sense do you use the word "vernacular"? Is your vernacular bearing the same meaning as Homi Bhabha's vernacular in his so-called "vernacular cosmopolitanism"?

**Mitchell:** I think there is a close resemblance to Bhabha's concept, but I would qualify it to the extent that "cosmopolitanism" (like "visuality") is not an exclusive province of transnational elites or world travelers. Every human being is the center of a world, a cosmos of experiences and intuitions, a universe in which he or she finds a place—or finds oneself lost, adrift, perhaps even displaced. Every human being, even the blind, inhabits a world of visuality populated by images. Their native language for discussing that world with others is shared and shareable to some extent. I regard the vernacular as distinct from the technical, esoteric languages of priesthoods and professionals. It is the ordinary language of communication and reflection, the medium we hold in common. It is thus linked with "medium theory" (which we discussed before ) understood as *vernacular* theory, the capacity of ordinary language

to engage in reflection on practices and norms. It is the moment of the demotic and democratic potential that links us all as language and image users, the media that make social life possible—and of course sometimes impossible.

Sheng: As a researcher and expert in the field of art and architecture appreciation, what do you think of Chinese architecture, including the recently-built and changing city landscapes (including the city squares and statues, which have become extremely popular in the last twenty years also and seen as an emblem of the cultural taste of the city) in such big cities as Beijing and Shanghai? Are they merely, as some commentators said, awkward caricatures and imitations of architectures in other countries?

**Mitchell:** The explosion of architectural innovation in China since the eighties is perhaps the most visible sign of the Great Leap Forward your country has experienced in the last twenty years. It is, of course, a mixed bag. Some of it is awful, an elephantine caricature of Western styles mixed with “orientalist” motifs. But some is truly sublime—e.g., Rem Koolhaas’s massive dolmen-like structure at the center of Beijing, housing the center of Chinese communications. At its worst, the new Chinese architecture is no worse than some of the monuments to capitalism being erected in the Middle East. For instance, the massive replica of London’s Big Ben clock tower in the center of Mecca in Saudi Arabia may be the most appalling example of bad architectural taste in the world today. Perhaps it is no accident that the words “monstrosity” and “money” begin with the same three letters!

Sheng: *Critical Inquiry* has long been one of the core academic journals in literature and culture since decades ago. What do you think of the purpose or the mission of this journal? What kind of ideas does it promote? What roles does it want to play in literary history or the contemporary cultural arena? As the editor-in-chief of this prestigious and internationally influential journal, you must have some principles of managing the journal and selecting quality articles? Always being critical, always inquiring?

**Mitchell:** The goal of *Critical Inquiry* has been to publish the most innovative, inspiring critical thought by the leading thinkers on literature, culture, the arts, politics, philosophy, and the other disciplines. Its aim is global, and its disciplinary reach is universal, so we aim to provide access to many disciplines, and to welcome writers from all parts of the world. We have several principles or norms that govern the acceptance of submissions: 1) is the essay well-written, interesting, and engaging to a non-specialist reader? 2) does it provide a new and fresh re-framing of a topic, or broach an idea that has been neglected in an innovative way? 3) will it be read and cited as a new direction in the progress of knowledge? Beyond that, our general principle is to favor the controversial intervention that will provoke debate and discussion, over the

safe “contribution” that merely adds on to a discussion. If an essay provokes passionate debate among my co-editors, that is often a good indication that we should publish it.

Sheng: You are among the earliest to publish Spivak’s and Bhabha’s articles in postcolonial studies and you are also a great friend of the Edward Said and Bhabha. So you yourself as a critical thinker and theorist, what do you think of postcolonialism as a literary and cultural trend? Many scholars think that it has already become much weaker and less powerful than two decades ago. What do you think?

**Mitchell:** I personally tend to favor Said’s skepticism about the post-colonial, insofar as it implies that colonialism is in the past. I prefer the term “neo-colonialism,” which is a more apt term for the tendency of my own country to establish military bases all over the world, and to conduct a foreign policy built around the extraction of natural resources from other parts of the world—principally oil, but also many other valuable commodities. And more generally, I think the “post-“ is a highly over-used prefix. It too often is merely a place-holder for some kind of positive inquiry into the nature of a historical epoch. So I regard “postmodernism” as merely a place-holder that is still awaiting a more rigorous and descriptively apt account of the historical period that opened up after the convulsions of the 1960s in the U.S. My own way of thinking history has been to seek out terms that capture the specific nature of media technologies and metaphors that reproduce social life in an era. That is why I call the contemporary period an “age of biocybernetic reproduction,” to reflect the twin revolutions in the technosciences of information and biology that have occurred since the 1950s. More immediately, I think of the last decade, especially in the West (and of course the U.S.) as the epoch of “cloning terror,” characterized by ideological crusades against the phantom enemy of terrorism, and the spectre of a new, dystopian biopolitics.

Sheng: You are often very critical of political policies both inside and outside of the United States. And you have shown persistent concerns about the society, the injustice, and the sufferings of the wretched, to use a word from Frantz Fanon, no matter because of war, poverty or other disasters. Would you call yourself a public intellectual as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said are called? What kind of responsibilities do you take on as an intellectual, a scholar, and a humanist? What kind of responsibilities should a public intellectual take on himself at the time?

**Mitchell:** Well, I do take Said and Chomsky as role models, but I have to disclaim any notion that I am a public intellectual comparable in stature to them. They have both been much more closely identified with specific political movements, and they have commanded the public stage by writing and speaking in the mass media—radio, television, newspapers, etc. My work mainly appears in scholarly venues, and it is generally focused on the question of images in media. So if I am a public intellectual, it is in a much more limited and modest way than these great critics.

Sheng: You have been writing all the time and you have been lecturing all over the world, and even you yourself also admit that you are very productive: you have written and published a lot in the past years. So how could you be so productive? I mean you are very busy with many other works and responsibilities, including editing a very important journal the Critical Inquiry.

**Mitchell:** I have no idea. Ah...It's a mystery to me, because I think of myself as a lazy person.

Sheng: But you are very active in your mind!

Mitchell: I must be without even knowing it. Then suddenly I woke I wake up in the morning and I write. It's there with the morning coffee. ...Sometimes I write an essay in one day. It doesn't happen often but it does happen. Or sometimes it happens in two or three days or a week. Once the idea is fixed somehow it seems to write itself, and often it will generate a surprise, or lead in a direction I had not anticipated. But it's not because I am hard worker or energetic, it's more a gift, I don't know. I do work pretty hard but I rarely feel chained to a job. The other thing is: what is work? If you love it, it doesn't feel like work. It's like "Oh I am still breathing."

Sheng: so that must be the secret of your productivity. I think these are all the questions I want to ask right now. Thank you very much!

Mitchell: thank you! It's a pleasure!