

## On the Edge of Critical Thinking

—An Interview with W. J. T. Mitchell

On April 27, 2005, Lydia H. Liu conducted the interview with W. J. T. Mitchell at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin at the request of the journal *Wenyi yanjiu* (Studies in Literature and Arts), an official publication of the Chinese Academy of Literature and Arts in Beijing.

Liu: Professor Mitchell, your work on image and text over the past decades has cut across many fields of study: literature, art history, media, biocybernetics and so on. There is a sense of spontaneity, restlessness, and openness in your approach to any or all of these fields. I share those interests very much, and I also have many questions for you. Because of the time limitation today, I'm going to focus just on a number of areas in your work and I would like to begin by asking you: If you were to introduce visual culture or some aspect of your work to an audience outside your familiar milieu in the United States, how would you make that introduction? For instance, in English, we make a distinction between image and picture, and you have emphasized that distinction in your previous work. Given the difficulty of translation, how would you introduce the study of visual culture or your interest in the relationship between image and text to a foreign audience?

Mitchell: Usually, I don't start with images and I usually start with something simpler. That is just to talk about seeing and the other senses, to talk about sensory experience, how we perceive the world, how we recognize objects, what it means

to be an animal with sight. And one of the kind of first things I've ever approached in this area is the idea that seeing is not a simple, natural or transparent process. It's something which has to be learned at a certain point of your life. If you don't learn how to see by age five or six, it'll be very difficult for you to acquire just as difficult as to acquire a natural language later on.

Liu: Could you give me an example?

Mitchell: Suppose you were a child and I put a blindfold on you and forced you to wear your blindfold until you were twenty years old. When we took the blindfold off, you wouldn't be able to see the world, you wouldn't be able to recognize faces at a distance. You would have learned the world by touch alone and you might have some vague idea about what it means to see the world, but the actual experiences of seeing would be quite overwhelming. Oliver Sacks, a neuropsychologist, wrote an essay a number of years ago called "To See Or Not To See," and I often introduce things by looking at his article which develops the theme of blindness and vision together. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we've known that if people have been blind for a long time, if their sight is restored, that does not mean they can see. Seeing is a learned activity, a process of installing a software for processing visual reality which is a quite different reality from that which you can touch. A blind man can't touch the moon, we can see the moon. There are lots of things in our experience that are only accessible to sight and we have to learn through experience how to coordinate the vision of objects with what it might be to touch them. For instance, to estimate distance, that's not automatic, that's a learned kind of thing.

Liu: Would you say that there is a parallel to how we learn to read?

Mitchell: Yes, and to learn to walk as well. If you bind a girl's feet from birth and then take off the bindings, she'll not be able to walk, her feet would be crippled. Hearing is probably even more primitive but certainly the idea of seeing is something like learning a language that you have to learn to make a whole bunch of differentiations. You would need to know figure any ground. And you know, if you want to understand what losing the ability to do that would mean, think about when you are in a state of vertigo, that's what blind people would have if they suddenly had their sight restored. It would just be shifting sensations of light and color, and they wouldn't be able to tell objects from their backgrounds. Your eyes move all the time too. So you have to learn how to stabilize movement. Take the movie camera. The movie camera doesn't work like the eye. The movie camera stays on one thing, and then maybe it moves a bit, but you have to move it gradually. If you move it fast, it's all blurred. The same thing with the eye. Our eyes are moving, dancing, and jumping all the time. But somehow we've experienced this as a stable world. We've learned how to hold the world together. But if you hadn't learned that, your natural eye movements would completely confuse you and make you dizzy. So Oliver Sacks points out that he had this patient, whom he studied, who had been blind for twenty years. When his sight was restored, at first he was thrilled. He'd never seen light before but then he became more and more afraid, paranoid and disoriented. Finally, he returned to blindness. He became hysterically blind because it was too upsetting to try to learn this thing so late. So that's for me the first lesson. Seeing is learned and we mustn't assume that it's just transparent like a window. The second thing that I'd introduce then is seeing other people's faces which I think is

foundational for not so much human perception but the visual cultural structure of reality, the fact that we see that the other people see us. You look and you see somebody looking back, and all that takes, even fifty feet apart, two human beings looking at each other, or a glance. There may be recognition or a sight of attraction or hostility. It's this field of what's called "the eye and the gaze," back and forth, a dialectic between observers. I think that really constitutes the social field of vision or we call visual culture. So long before we look at images, I ask students to look at each other and to think about what it is to look at another person and when did it first become important. Of course, one answer, again, is that it's a very early imprinting process. We are programmed to recognize faces, just as animals are. All it takes is the idea of eyes, the impression of someone looking at you. So this is an experience of understanding the visual field not just of looking at things but being looked at, being the object of the gaze yourself and from that come things like shame, guilt, the feeling that I'm not alone in the world. Others see me, others make judgments, others have images of me, and so seeing, especially social seeing, is about a lot more than just seeing objects.

Liu: Would you say visual contact is fundamental to the construction of intersubjectivity?

Mitchell: Yes, absolutely. Just as speaking, hearing your mother speak, hearing her voice which probably precedes that because the infant in the mother's tummy is hearing her voice long before he sees her, so he feels and understands the vibrations of her body. That's, you know, the home. And hearing the voices of others, because the fetus in the womb can't see. You are blind then. So hearing is more primitive than that sense. You hear before you see. And then when they are

born into the world of light, at first babies can't see--just like kittens, puppies. They are born with their eyes closed and then they can't see much except light. But very very early, you know, the infant looks at or sees his mother's face or father's face or a brother, a sister or somebody close. You can tell right away that they know it's somebody else. Lacan talked about the mirror stage but the mirror is really irrelevant. You don't need to have a glass mirror, what you need is a face of another person and a feeling of the face's looking back. Even animals have this, the imprints of the faces of their parents and siblings, or whatever they first see in fact. A chicken, when it comes out of the egg, if the chicken sees you before it sees anything else it'll follow you everywhere and thinks you are the mother, the mother hen.

Liu: You speak as if you were a scientist. Are you a closet scientist, or an open...?

Mitchell: Yes, I'm an open scientist, and I've come out of the closet. For a long time I've thought, oh well, what we do is culture, humanities, it's impressionistic, it's subjective, it's not objective. I've contrarily rejected all those stereotypes of the difference between science and humanities or, you know, the hard sciences and the soft sciences. I think the science I do is not particularly quantitative. I don't work with numbers very much but I do work with facts, with objects and experiments, hypothesis and testing. And there are many kinds of science: there's the historical science, there's the experimental physical science, or theoretical and speculative. So I'm an image scientist.

Liu: Could you say more about image science?

Mitchell: Well, it's an emergent discipline, it's associated I think with the foundational principles of art history. Very early in the history of art history, there was a

notion that art history should be more than just the history of art. It should be the history of images and it should have a general theory about images. That tended to be lost especially when the European roots of art history were transplanted to the United States. Then it became a much more conventional sort of, closed of discipline which took mainly the master species of Western art and mainly paintings from the Middle Ages, Renaissance up to the modern era. And it's thought that as its basic archive and there were other things to supplement sculpture, architecture and so forth. But people like Aby Warburg, Alois Riegl and the other founding fathers of art history had a broader vision, I think it has been reborn in our time.

Liu: Your own books, for example, *Iconology* and *Picture Theory*, have played a very important role in introducing these other dimensions into art history. And art historians have been receptive to your work. In what ways do you think your work has helped transform the discipline?

Mitchell: I think it helps remind our art historians of their origins for one thing. It isn't just a question of going back, though. There has also been a transformation in many learned disciplines. Philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, the whole theory of signs, theories of culture, have come to realize that culture is mediated by a vast number of different kinds of signs and it isn't just language that makes culture what it is. Language itself is filled with metaphors, and figures, and verbal pictures. And there is the whole repertoire of images that go beyond the visual art in this primary field of visual culture—the realm of seeing the world, seeing other people especially, the world of fantasy and dreams. So I think about image science as covering a field that goes all the way from verbal images, images in

language to pictorial images, but also things like mirrors, and reflections, and shadows, the whole realm of optical phenomena in the natural world, and then things like memory, fantasy and the act of perception itself, that kind of middle area that gives rise to images and all the other areas. This conception leads to imagination, leads to memory and so forth.

Liu: This is much broader than what people usually think of as visual culture because it has this philosophical dimension to it. Now, art history has opened up and is moving toward visual culture, which would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago. But it seems that people hold on to a more or less conventional notion of what visual culture might be. Media, of course, would come to mind immediately. A scholar of visual culture is regarded as someone who has expertise in film, television, photography, and things like that. But what you are suggesting seems to go much further and border on the hard sciences as well as what we normally call image objects.

Mitchell: Yes, I am very interested in the way images work in science. Of course, you can't know everything, I mean, by trying to do image science, it doesn't mean that I could ever dream of mastering all of numerous disciplines being required, but I can do two things. One is trying to think generally about the problems of image, to think of the ways in which it transcends any discipline, trying to articulate some general founding principles of how we might think about images and their relationship to the visible world and also to other senses. That's one part of it. The other thing I'd like to do is—and you have mentioned this as you said that I'm improvising, I'm restless, I'm jumping around—is that I'd like to work by cases, to take a problem or an event, a moment, and think about the way

in which image plays a role in it. This is what allows me a lot of freedom to improvise various areas and build on other disciplinary knowledge. But I don't plan to be an expert film scholar or an expert art historian for that matter. I'm more interested in fostering a context in which film scholars and art historians, and scientists might find things to talk about. Somebody has to think about that in the course of translation and collaboration across these disciplines.

Liu: This is the work of a theorist. Take your new book, *The Last Dinosaur Book*. Does this book reflect your effort toward establishing the general founding principles for image science? Does it bring all the strands you just mentioned together? I heard that when you were a child, you didn't like dinosaurs, which was a surprise to me because I've always thought that American kids love dinosaurs more than anything else.

Mitchell: It's a myth. American children are always supposed to love dinosaurs and it's taken for granted, but I was one of the exceptions. I tell a story of this in *The Last Dinosaur Book*. When I was in the first grade, we had the usual thing, a dinosaur unit, when the teacher brought some images of dinosaurs and said: "OK, I want you to copy these images and I want you to produce your own drawings of dinosaurs" I thought it was a great assignment and I wanted to draw one of my own, so I drew a dinosaur and I drew a cowboy on a horse who was trying to throw a rope over the dinosaur, because I was growing up in the western United States where cowboys were a common sight. The teacher looked at it and said: "Well, that's not correct. The dinosaurs were gone long before the cowboys, and this was an impossible picture." I was disappointed because you don't like to be told that your work is bad. So I turned to dragons. I always

preferred imaginary things to boring reality. I love science fiction, fantasy and tales of the imaginary. So I turned to dragons. Much later when I saw the movie *Jurassic Park* it occurred to me that the dinosaurs really are dragons and they really are imaginary creatures even though they were real. We have made them into fabulous creatures, we've made them into symbolic animals just as dragons were. And we've created a myth and a cult around them. Instead of the cowboy, we have the paleontologist hero who is always an Indiana Jones figure, who is, a man's man. He is a big game hunter and he's got this biggest game of all. So I decided to write a book about the romance of paleontology and the myth of dinosaur and how they fit into modern culture.

Liu: The book is interdisciplinary in the real sense of the word. You did go into paleontology and that sort of thing, didn't you? Can you say more about it?

Mitchell: Well, I wanted to write not just about the myth but also about the reality and, particularly, how the reality gets recoded or translated into the mythical and also how the reality is established sometimes in relation to contemporary myth. And by myth, I don't mean anything necessarily false, I just mean, it's a narrative or a very common perception that a lot of people share. This is the thing that structures our experience. For instance, if you ask a real paleontological scientist "What killed off the dinosaurs?" and then you look at the history of their answers, you have to ask, what did the Victorians think? What did the modern thinkers imagine as an extinction scenario? What did the scientists say about the extinction during the Dust Bowl? What you find is that in every age, whatever the anxiety was about human problems, especially catastrophes or human extinction, that anxiety then shows up as part of the

extinction narrative of the dinosaur. So the first theory was that air pollution killed the dinosaurs, the atmosphere changed. This theory was developed by Richard Owen in Victorian London where the air was unbreathable. The second major theory was that they just ran out of gas. They became slower and slower. They couldn't compete. They were stupid. They were too big. They were slow, and more rapid moving animals must have pushed them aside, animals with more energy, because they were reptiles, slow and sluggish. So it was basically the theory of entropy, the laws of thermodynamics, i.e., that the dinosaurs ran out of energy. Of course, the fact that they went into the ground was often associated with oil and now it is as if we were digging up the stored energy that the dinosaurs ran out of. During the Dust Bowl, it was the theory of drought, and then in the modern contemporary era, there has been what's called the asteroid hypothesis: a catastrophic event that, like a nuclear blast hit the earth, enveloping in ash and killing off almost everything. So that image arose during the Cold War; it was an imaginary scenario of dinosaur extinction. And now I think you could probably guess what the modern contemporary extinction narrative is. It has to do with microorganisms, plague, and some invisible germ or virus that went through the dinosaurs' food chain and killed them off.

Liu: That's fascinating. Not surprisingly, scientists are developing the nanotechnology to work at extreme micro levels. Recently, you've published an essay in which you critiqued Walter Benjamin's idea of "mechanical reproduction" in his well-known essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In your article, you introduce a new concept called "biocybernetic reproduction." Could you perhaps give a quick summary of what lies behind your thinking? What is it

that characterizes our time, the age of biocybernetic reproduction?

Mitchell: Well, the simplest I could put it is that for Benjamin the key inventions, technical inventions, were on the one hand the assembly line and mechanical reproductions, and on the other the camera, movie camera, still camera, making exact reproductions of visual images. In our time, biocybernetic reproduction involves two technoscientific inventions, one is the decoding of the DNA molecule and the unveiling of the secret of life; the other is the invention of high-speed computing. We live in times often called the digital age, the age of the computer, and I think it's just not that, and I think it's the computer plus the new technologies of the life sciences, cloning being the figurehead of all this, as well as artificial life and artificial intelligence side by side. So biocybernetic reproduction, if you imagine the difference from Benjamin during the 1930s when he wrote that, when the prototype of technical reproduction was the assembly line and the automobile. Now the commodity coming along is an image but it's a living image, an organism, a new kind of plant, a new kind of microbe, a new kind of living thing. The commodification of living things is part of this, and also the idea that we can patent things like genes and patent seed strains. And biology is at the forefront of the sciences but aided by the super-fast computer.

Liu: Would you align yourself with those people who write about "post-modernity"?

Mitchell: Well, "post-modernity" I think is a term that arose in the 70s' and the 80s' as a way of talking about something that had shifted since the modern era, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But I never found it really adequate because all it is a parasite on the modern. There is the modern and there is the post-modern. I think

of it as a historical place order, something you use to designate a time, and it was very powerful in that twenty-year period, say from 1970 to 1990 as a way of saying “this is what’s different about our time, and we are post-modern.” Many artists felt very liberated by this, and scholars, intellectuals and art historians did too and said: “We want to think about what’s new and different about the present.” and the post-modern became the name for that. It was a kind of avant-garde in the intellectual work and in the arts. But I think very rapidly, like all these period terms, it became a bit reified, and became too easy just to say: “Oh, that’s post-modern, that’s post-modern.” The term itself didn’t really describe anything except to say “after the modern.” Pretty soon, people had to ask things like what’s after the post-modern—the post-post-modern?—that didn’t seem like a very good idea. So that’s what led me in part to think again through the classic paradigm of modes of production and reproduction, like the Marxist model of history. Marx said that the way people make things, the things they can produce, and the world they can create around them are what create history and creates culture and historical reality. That’s why I try to think specifically about the mode of production, not to depend on categories like modernism, premodernism, post-modernism which, I think, put too much weight on the reified concept of modernism. I wanted to say something more specific, as Benjamin had done when he said the era of mechanical or technical reproduction, so biocybernetic for me is the emergent form of technoscience in our time just as photography cinema and mechanical reproduction had been for Benjamin.

Liu: Can we move on to your current project? You’re writing a book called *What Do Pictures Want?* Have you finished it? When will it be in print?

Mitchell: I hope in two or three weeks, coming out very soon.

Liu: The title is very striking and makes me very curious. What is in the book?

Mitchell: Well, It's really a compendium of the essays I've been writing since around 1994 when the previous book *Picture Theory* came out. *What Do Pictures Want?* is exactly the third book, in a kind of trilogy. *Iconology* was the first, which was about the questions of image and text: what's their difference, what's their relation, and why is it important? *Picture Theory* then was about the relation of pictures and images, their difference, their relationship, and it was also an attempt to think about the world of image, or vision and the language of vision as something that's built into many different kinds of art forms and to think about what it means. So it looks at things like painting and theoretical discourse around painting or photography and writing that goes with photography, or it looks at even writing itself as both language and vision, because you see writing, writing is graphic, it's not just auditory. So this whole verbal visual complex was the subject of *Picture Theory*, but I felt like there was something more that I hadn't really come to terms with and that was the character of the image or the picture as something that seems to have a life of its own. I began to notice that it was almost impossible for people to talk about pictures without attributing some kind of animism to them or some vitality.

Liu: Could you give us some concrete examples?

Mitchell: Sure. One that is very well known is Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. He wrote the biographies of Michelangelo, Raphael and all of the great Italian painters. Chapter one of the *Lives of the Artists* starts with the first artist, as Vasari says, who is God. God is a sculptor, but first he is an architect and he

designs the structure of universe, but then on the sixth day, God says: “I need something else,” and he makes a self-portrait in clay, a sculptural image of himself. He makes it in his image and likeness, and then he breathes life into it, which is also sometimes: “He breathes the word into it;” he gives it language. So again, it is the image plus the language or the language that makes the image come alive, gives it a soul, and gives it something to say. Vasari starts with that, saying that’s where the arts began. Sculpture, according to him, is the oldest of the fine arts and that’s why Michelangelo is so important to him and why he would continually talk about Michelangelo’s sculptures as if they were alive, saying that Michelangelo was better than all the other sculptors because when you look at his, they seem to be alive. That principle then led me to think, well, what does it mean when they do that? The peculiar phenomenon I really became interested in was What sort of thing is going on when an image seems to have a life of its own?

Of course, if you go back to the biblical story, it [the image] has a perverse will of its own. It doesn’t just do what you want it to, and sometimes it does things you definitely don’t want it to. So there are innumerable stories like this, like the story of the Golem. The ancient Jews need a warrior to defend them, and so they make an artificial man out of clay, the Golem as a warrior. And then the Golem runs amok and starts attacking those who created him. Or Adam rebels against God. Even though he’s an image of God, he does not obey. So this led me to things like the second Commandment in the Ten Commandments which prohibits the making of graven images. It began to occur to me that the reason people are afraid of images, the reason that there is a problem, is because of this

life principle. They [images] seem to have it, of course we know they don't and they are not really alive, but that doesn't stop us from having a divided feeling or a divided conscience about it. We treat images as if they were nothing, as if they were just material things. But then we turn around and, a minute later, we are acting quite differently towards them as if they really had a life. That's why images are uncanny. They are familiar but strange at the same time, very paradoxical entities, merely material things but then they are also ghostly and fantastic. The whole idea is that they [images] might have desires, that they might want things from their beholders or need things. For instance, every picture needs a beholder to begin with. One answer to this question "what do pictures want" is that they want you, they want you to look, they want to have a relation or they need you to complete them. Without you, without the spectator, the image does not exist. So, that just spiraled into many essays. The biocybernetics essay is followed by an essay called "Showing Seeing" which is about visual culture; particularly it goes back to the thing we were discussing earlier, which is how the social experience of seeing begins with seeing the face of the other. And images are things that intervene in that process because when we look at other people, we are not just seeing them purely and transparently, we see them through a screen, and the screen is one of stereotypes, patterns of recognition. Immediately, I look at you, I see a woman; you look at me, you see a man. That's fundamental. We already have a kind of image that immediately divides the world by gender. And that's something we continually take for granted. But how do we do it? You know, many women look like men or men look feminine and so forth, but we are almost never wrong. Where we are wrong

is when we can't decide, then it's often disturbing to look and say: "So, what is what here? Who is who?"

Liu: That's where homophobia comes in.

Mitchell: Yes. The man who is effeminate or who bonds sexually with other men is very endangering to this simple binary structure. That is part of what I call "screen images" as if what we were doing is always looking through a veil at each other and the veil is not just transparent. It has stereotyped figures on it that help us sort out what is what. One of those is the difference between living things and nonliving things. We are very skillfully programmed to differentiate that and children can tell right away what is alive and what isn't. I just forgot what your initial question was..... Oh, yes, "what's in the book?"

Liu: Yes, did you also include "race"? I mean, visibility is so primary to the construction of racial categories.

Mitchell: Yes, absolutely. There is a chapter in the book called "Living Color" which is focused on a specific case, and that's the film *Bamboozled* by Spike Lee. It is a film about racial stereotype and about racial cross-dressing where white people put on black face and black people figuratively put on white face. They change places and it's partly about the hostility between the races, people being suspicious or having prejudices against racial others. But I think it's more complicated than just that. I stress ambivalence and the idea there is also a mystery in the other, and there is even a kind of affection, or admiration, or envy. For instance, the stereotype of the Chinese is mysteriousness and inscrutability. So the Western observer looks at a Chinese and thinks: "she must have a secret." When we think of the Western stereotype that "we are straightforward; we just

say what we think” except, of course, that the gender stereotype of man and woman intervenes, and then “men and women come from different planets,” so they don’t understand each other and they had stereotypes about each other. Spike Lee’s *Bamboozle* is brilliant at particularly focusing on the most dramatic, vivid pictorial case of stereotyping. That’s what’s called Black Face Minstrel show where the black people caricature themselves usually for white audiences. It was called coon shows. They would dress up in ridiculous costumes; they would take the stereotype of Afro-Americanness, and they would exaggerate it and make it grotesque, which moves then from stereotype to caricature. A stereotype is just a standard image. Caricature is when all the features become really grotesque and exaggerated. *Bamboozled* explores that racial divide—what’s called black face—and the stereotypes both of blackness and whiteness, how they change places, and how they interact, with all the ambivalences associated with them.

Liu: So you give a close reading of the film. Are you suggesting that caricature turns the stereotype upside down and inside out as a kind of counter-image?

Mitchell: Yes, it’s counter-image. I also think of it as a disfigurement of the stereotype. Stereotype is often normative, you know. It’s seen as the normalizing image, so you rely on it. You say: “Well, she’s a woman. That means I know at least a few of essential things...” but, with caricature, there is an exaggeration of everything that is in the stereotype and sometimes there is even the introduction of a new element. This is why often caricatures involve animals. You take a person and look at him, and suddenly he changes into a pig, or fox, or snake. This is the most common thing in caricature. Artists know that the way to make

somebody really ridiculous is to give him an animal face while preserving the memory of his human face, so the human and animal faces merge with one another.

Liu: We now move to our next question concerning your journal *Critical Inquiry*. Was the journal founded in the 1970s?

Mitchell: In 1974.

Liu: This is an extremely influential journal not only in the United States but, as you know, outside the country as well. The journal has been able to maintain the edge in theory and in critical thinking for several decades. How did you, as chief editor, manage to do that?

Mitchell: With a lot of help from my friends. I think it's very important that it's located at a place like the University of Chicago which is an internationally-oriented university. We have people from all over the world and it's also a university that is dedicated to introduce interdisciplinary and theoretical reflection. So it's not one of those huge, industrial type of universities where people never talk to each other and there is no contact between different departments. The University of Chicago is a perfect environment for a journal like *Critical Inquiry* because I have friends and colleagues I like to talk to in history, social science, anthropology, philosophy, art history, musicology, Middle Eastern studies and Far Eastern studies. That's what makes it an internationally interesting magazine. I think it's that basis.

Liu: And you've been able to attract the best minds in the world to write for your journal and to foster critical thinking in new directions. Can you name some of your favorite issues?

Mitchell: That would be hard to say because there are so many issues and I have been doing it for quite a while. But I think the special issue *On Narrative* is a very important first step. I also edited an early issue called *The Language of Images* which brought together people in art history and media studies to reflect on the problem of image. “Race,” *Writing and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, was very important, and also his later volume *Identities*. Elisabeth Abel edited a special issue called *Writing and Sexual Difference*. It was really the first major special issue of a scholarly journal, with a theoretical bent, that devoted itself to feminist theory and women’s issues. There have been many others, like *The Politics of Interpretation*, which was very important.

Liu: I also remember a special issue on the questions of evidence.

Mitchell: Yes, that one was in the 1990’s and it was driven by what was felt to be a crisis across the disciplines. One of the clichés of post-modernism or post-structuralism had been that there is no certainty, and there is no objectivity, and so the question naturally rises then: “Well, then what do we do?” You can’t count on the reliability of anything else; then what counts as fact? What’s evidence? How do we determine whether something is true or not? So we produced a volume called *Questions of Evidence* to focus exactly on that and we brought together a lot of very well-known people in various disciplines and also a quite few young people.

You asked about How can we stay at the cutting edge? I always think of it as a two-pronged strategy: one is you must seek out and get writing from the people who write very well and who are already famous and established. We try to attract them and get them to publish with us, which is very hard because we can’t

pay them any thing. You know, it's purely prestige and that's why we also have to keep our standards because if it begins to be evident that you are publishing secondary stuff, then the prestige disappears. But the other half of the strategy is to always be alert for young people. Like several years ago, I ran across a manuscript that came in. It says Lydia Liu, and I had never heard of your name. We read it and then debated it in our group and we said: "This is very important. This is good." She is a young, unknown scholar but let's publish this. I think that's the most important, that is, to recognize important scholarship of young people when they are coming along. For that, you can't be lazy, you have to actually read everything and be open to something new. I guess probably the most important single thing is to cultivate a sense of openness, feeling a willingness to be surprised. Once you think you know everything, then it's all over.

Liu: I'm sure that's how many graduate students have felt about your journal—not only my generation but, you know, several generations of graduate students who have grown up reading this journal, taking it as the benchmark of critical thinking. Didn't you publish Homi Bhabha's most important essay in *Critical Inquiry*?

Mitchell: Yes, we did, and I didn't know who he was. In fact, he wasn't very well-known. He hadn't published a book yet. I think he maybe had one article in print, maybe in the *Screen Magazine*. He sent me an essay and it was before the age of computers. It was hand-typed on a very old-fashioned typewriter on onionskin paper. It came out of the envelope and I thought "It comes from somewhere in India. What can this be?" I started reading it and thought "Well, this is... I don't understand this. This is very strange. It's different." He's quoting Lacan, and he's

quoting Derrida, but he's also talking about something that happened in Delhi in 1860. "Is there anybody who is going to be interested in this?" So we discussed it and the more we talked about it, the more everybody said, "Oh, maybe this isn't any good, and we don't know." But we have a principle with our editorial group that if there is a big division of opinion, as long as somebody thinks it's really great and they say: "I want this, I really want this," then we publish it even if they are a minority. What we try to avoid is when we look at it and everybody says: "Well, it's OK. Sure, why not? It's fine. You know, it's not bad." Then we don't publish it. It has to sparkle enthusiasm and controversy. That's what we want.

Liu: Can you think of some other authors you've published?

Mitchell: Well, we published early Edward Said... Gayatri Spivak sent us long ago her essay "Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism" which is quite wonderful. And she did a translation of a short story from Bengali. Henry Louis Gates, who was an assistant professor at Yale around 1980. When he read our special issue on feminist theory by Elisabeth Abel who also was unknown completely. He wrote me a letter, saying "You've never heard of me. I'm an assistant professor at Yale and I've read your issue on sexuality and gender. You need to have a special issue on race and I will volunteer myself to be the guest editor." We don't do it very often, and it's quite rare to take on a guest editor. But then Gates came to Chicago and he met with my editorial group and everyone was quite impressed. He sent us three times as many essays as we could possibly publish. So we had to work with him and cut down the number we'd accepted, but of course, it became a classic.

Liu: It's a classic. I guess that graduate seminars in the English Departments around the country and also in Comparative Literature and other departments adopt this as a textbook. I even taught it at Qinghua University in Beijing.

Mitchell: Really? In any case, that's the process. I think of the famous and well-established writers who publish with us as a kind of window dressing partly. I mean I want good essays from them, but their names then lure others and they lure the young people especially. They say I want to appear in an issue of *Critical and Inquiry* next to Jacques Derrida or Hayden White or somebody who is very well known.

Liu: I think your strategy has worked extremely well. Having worked with generations of theorists for all these years, I suppose, you have a very good sense of where we are headed in theory, or perhaps it is difficult to predict. But after the death of Said and after the recent death of Derrida, I'm sure a lot of people are wondering what's next.

Mitchell: I'm among them. I'm wondering what's next too. It's not that I have a crystal ball, so I can tell you what's coming. In fact, if I could tell you that, it would probably be a bad sign. Theory, like any kind of vital tradition of thought, is going to be volatile and unpredictable, and this is another principle that we try to follow in *Critical Inquiry*, that is, not to try to micro-manage the future, not to plan too far ahead. Of course, you have to plan, but a year, or two and so forth. The other thing is that I'd like to compare us to is a sail boat that is far out in the sea, so you have to watch which way the wind is blowing. You have to adjust your sails and you have to locate the wind and find the direction of the currents and, to do that, you have to be observant, critical, and open. If you know too well

where you want to go, then it can be actually a problem. It prevents you from improvising, prevents you from suddenly saying: “Oh, I wasn’t expecting this! But now that it’s here.....” Derrida left us one great gift that was what he called “l’avenir,” the idea of that which is to come, which he says strictly you can not predict. Of course, there are things we suspect are coming, we predict them, and we know they are coming, but is the democracy to come? We don’t know what it would be. It would have arrived as a stranger or a surprise of some kind. Maybe not a pleasant surprise, either. There is no guarantee about that. That’s the attitude I try to instill with my colleagues, that is, that we shouldn’t plan too far ahead and we should be alert and be ready for that which is to come.

Liu: To prepare yourself for that which is to come, you seem to travel a lot. You go to a lot of place and have contact with people in many parts of the world. Is this exposure important for you? You have just returned from Palestine. Was there a special occasion that took you there?

Mitchell: Yes, it was a memorial and a symposium in honor of Edward Said, the leading Palestinian intellectual of our time, who was one of my editorial board members and a great friend for over twenty years. I was invited to come to speak at the memorial that was both personal ceremonial scene for him but also an academic gathering to talk about what is to come, now that Edward was gone. It was a wonderful occasion to go to Palestine, to go to Ramallah, and to Birzeit University. It was my second visit there. The last time I was there some seven years ago was with Edward Said. We went for one of the first international conferences ever held in the West Bank at a university, a conference called “Landscape Perspectives on Palestine.” So it was a return journey to meet many

of the same people and also a lot of new, younger people who arrived at Birzeit University, and also to talk to Israelis as well. I spent a couple of days in Israel speaking in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv. I wanted to talk to people on both sides and I was welcomed very nicely on both sides.

Liu: Are there special memories that you have brought back with you this time?

Mitchell: I think the most important thing is the increased sense of admiration for the amazing endurance and resilience of the Palestinian people. They have been suffering terribly for half a century. I mean, one should think about what it means to live under military occupation. This is not just colonial oppression but everyday life is totally under the thumb of an occupying army which is not very sympathetic, to put it mildly. People are humiliated, they are embarrassed, they are prevented from getting into health services, prevented from having an education. The schools are often closed, the border is closed, and you can't travel. It's very much like living in a ghetto, and people have compared the Gaza Strip to the Warsaw ghetto. Now that the security wall was being built around Palestine by the Israelis, it feels even more like a big prison. You would think that would make people depressed, gloomy, and helpless. Of course, there are moments when you just feel like there is no any hope. But in spite of that, I found Palestinians incredible. Their spirit is amazing. Among academics, my counterparts, the people who do the humanities and who are scientists of various kinds, I found their continued commitment to education and intellectual work in the midst of this is awe inspiring. Because after all it's one thing to be an intellectual when you are sitting in a nice office in Chicago, you have a reasonable income, a nice place to live. It is quite another thing to be an

intellectual when your daily life is disrupted by roadblocks, by your students being harassed, not being able to move, by having your schools shut down, by not being able to get to a doctor, and by having a pregnant woman ready to deliver being stopped at a security checkpoint and not being able to get to the hospital. They live under great oppression and yet they maintain their optimism and their persistence. The only other time I felt quite this way was actually back in 1988 when I taught for a couple of months in China in Beijing. The Cultural Revolution was recent enough, so I met many intellectuals, professors who had gone through the Cultural Revolution. I saw what it meant to be an intellectual when it's not easy to be one and when a lot of people are making fun of you or don't respect you. That's when you find out who the real intellectuals are, not when the sun is shining but when the storms are all around you.

Liu: What about American academics? Are there intellectuals in the United States?

Mitchell: Yes, there are. I always urge my colleagues that they should travel a lot, they should get out and not think that the First World in Europe and in transatlantic democracies is the horizon of reality. I think one of the great events in our time has been the recognition that intellectuals and artists are everywhere. They are not just to be found in New York City at the imperial center or the big metropolitan areas. There are human intelligences everywhere in creativity, in Africa, in India, and throughout Asia. I think what's called Euro-centralism has been decisively smashed in our time. We know that Europe is part of the world and it's not all of it. It has its role to play and it's important, but we have to come with a little more humility to other places.

Liu: How does it feel to be an American intellectual when you find yourself in

Palestine or are traveling outside the First World? Do you become self-conscious for being an American?

Mitchell: A little bit, because people have stereotypes about what Americans must think just as we have stereotypes about what they must think. If I sense that somebody has a stereotype, I hope I can have the opportunity to do something to let them know that I'm an individual and that I have my own thoughts and my own beliefs that are not necessarily those of my government, for instance, with which I disagree with just about everything. I think that the part of democracy to come, I would hope, would be that people from everywhere could agree with each other as individuals that there would be this recognition of common humanity. If the humanities doesn't encourage that, I don't know what it is for.

Liu: People outside tend to look at the United States and think: "Well, that is the model of democracy for the whole world." How do you feel about the truthfulness of this? Is there such a thing as a "political dissident" in America?

Mitchell: I think, unfortunately, the United States today, instead of being an exemplar of what democracy could lead to, has become actually a threat to democracy partly because it's betraying its own principles internally with forms of censorship and suppression. There are a lot of things happening in American universities right now that involve the suppression of academic freedom, punishing professors who have the wrong opinions by denying them tenure, promotion, or just making things uncomfortable for them. At Columbia University right now, there is a very nasty campaign or harassment toward Middle Eastern professors, professors who are experts on the Arab cultures. The American form of democracy, the idea that you can export democracy to other

countries by military conquest and occupation is a complete contradiction of the idea of democracy. You can't import democracy at the point of a gun. You might import, as Mao said, political power which grows out of the barrel of gun, but political power and democracy are not the same thing. We're exporting and importing political power to Iraq right now, but I don't think we are doing a very good job bringing democracy there. The moment of democracy will come when the Iraqis say: "We want you out now, and we want your companies out too."

Liu: If the American form of democracy is in crisis, as many people seem to suggest, what can a theorist do in his or her own work?

Mitchell: Well, one thing you can do is to theorize democracy itself. I think it's a time of profound reflection on the futures, the multiple possible futures of democracy and the threats to it. We also need to be thinking about what development means. This year at the Wissenschaftskolleg (The Institute of Advanced Study in Berlin), again and again, we had very learned scholars talking about the idea of development and reconstruction of damaged areas of the world, great economic transitions and social transformations often accompanied by a great of human suffering, displacement, and lots of bad side effects. So theory's vocation is not like it has some kind of a specific object it has to deal with. It has to do with the imperatives of the human species and it has to ask: "What is our species? What is it going to become? Is it going to survive among other things?" which is why the big theories of systems, ecology and environment are so important, because we need to be thinking not just about self-interest, national self-interest, what's good for us, for the next five years, or the next five minutes. We need to be thinking globally about what's good for this species, and that involves a lot of intellectual

labor. It isn't just given to you as a program by some CEOs; it has to be thought out and tested and involves considerable reflection. So that, I think, is the vocation of theory. It is to think at the level of the species, at the level of the world, but also to focus those questions very precisely on situations in a critical way and learn from the past. This is why historians are so important in this too, so that we don't forget what has been done. Forgetting the past is just as bad as when you think: "Well, the future will take care of itself and I'm just going to act in the immediate self-interest."

I was very struck yesterday by one of our colleagues Jamie Monson talking about the moment when China decided to bring a railroad, to donate a railroad to Tanzania during the Cold War. Of course, there were self-interest reasons, and there were ideological reasons, but I believe it was Zhou Enlai who, I know, was a hero of intellectuals in the Chinese Mainland when he put out his guidelines for how the Chinese experts should behave when they got to Africa. He made it clear that they were not to come as colonial or imposing presences. He said they must carry their own baggage: "Don't make the Africans carry your suitcases." It's a little thing, but it was so profound and important. What we need to remember is that is those little things that contribute to a very large-scale effect.

Liu: Do you think *Critical Inquiry* can encourage thinking along those lines, like global issues, ecology and also ethical issues?

Mitchell: Yes, I think we already are. We have published many issues on those kinds of topics. Yes, we'll definitely be looking for people who are reflecting on those issues, trying to think across national boundaries and think about these very large-scale problems.

Liu: Thank you very much for your time!

Mitchell: You are very welcome!

(Transcription by Cao Leiyu at Beijing Normal University on June 1, 2005)