

The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory

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Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.¹

We have all grown accustomed to familiar representations of the international and its conflicts. Wars, famines and diplomatic summits are shown to us in their usual guise: as short-lived media events that blend information and entertainment. The numbing regularity with which these images and sound-bites are communicated soon erases their highly arbitrary nature. We gradually forget that we have become so accustomed to these politically charged and distorting metaphors that we take them for real and begin to 'lie herd-like in a style obligatory for all'.²

Those who make the analysis of these political events their professional purview—the students of international relations (ir)—adhere to representational habits that have become equally objectified and problematic. Many of them are social scientists for whom knowledge about the 'facts' of the 'real world' emerges from the search for 'valid inferences by the systematic use of well-established procedures of inquiry'.³ But relatively little practical knowledge has emerged from these efforts, even after successive generations of social scientists have refined their models and methods. Our insights into the international have not grown

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1. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 139.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn', in *Erkenntnistheoretische Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 103.

3. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sydney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Interference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 6.

substantially, nor have our abilities to prevent deadly conflicts. From Kosovo to Afghanistan violence remains the *modus operandi* of world politics. Even proponents of scientific research lament that 'students of international conflict are left wrestling with their data to eke out something they can label a finding'.⁴

This essay argues for the need to validate an entirely different approach to the study of world politics: aesthetics. More specifically, it contrasts aesthetic with mimetic forms of representation. The latter, which have dominated ir scholarship, seek to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as-it-really-is. An aesthetic approach, by contrast, assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics.

Some of the most significant theoretical and practical insight into world politics emerges not from endeavours that ignore representation, but from those that explore how representative practices themselves have come to constitute and shape political practices. Although most approaches to international political theory remain wedded to mimetic principles, an increasing number of scholars are confronting the question of representation. One could, indeed, speak of an actual aesthetic turn. To be more precise, this turn has been generated through two inter-related shifts in the production of knowledge about world politics. The first occurred in the 1980s, when so-called postmodern scholars began to challenge the positivist foundations of international theory. It then became possible to recognise a number of ensuing political implications, including the reproduction of cultures of violence as well as their state-centric and masculine nature. A second and equally significant shift took place in more recent years, as various scholars have started to think through the implications of the postmodern critique. They began to explore different forms of insight into world politics, including those that emerge from images, narratives and sounds, such as literature, visual art, music, cinema and other sources that extend beyond 'high art' into popular culture. Of course, not all of the ensuing endeavours are necessarily convincing. Nor do they supersede the need for more conventional social scientific inquiries. But aesthetic approaches have initiated an important process of broadening our understanding of world politics beyond a relatively narrow academic discipline that has come to entrench many of the political problems it seemingly seeks to address and solve.

The key challenge ahead consists of finding ways to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic. To do so is no easy task, for the modern triumph of technological reason has by and large eclipsed the aesthetic from our political purview.⁵

4. Nathan Beck, Gary King and Langche Zeng, 'Improving Quantitative Studies of International Conflict', *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 1 (2000): 21.

5. Following Martin Heidegger, I refer to technological reason not as something technological per se, but as the most influential modern mode of revealing; one that frames thought and knowledge around the dominate influence of a few select faculties. See Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

Overcoming the ensuing construction of common sense would amount to far more than simply adding an additional, sensual layer of interpretation. The aesthetic turn reorients our very understanding of the political: it engenders a significant shift away from a model of thought that equates knowledge with the mimetic recognition of external appearances towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political. The latter allows for productive interactions across different faculties, including sensibility, imagination and reason, without any of them annihilating the unique position and insight of the other.

Mimetic versus Aesthetic Theories of Representation

What a monstrous lie his brain would have to invent to catch up with and explain state of his senses!⁶

Before exploring the significance of aesthetic insights it is necessary to juxtapose them, if only briefly, to the prevailing wisdom of ir scholarship. One perhaps could, with Jacques Derrida, speak of two fundamentally different approaches. The first seeks to discover a truth or an origin that somehow escapes the necessity of interpretation. The second accepts or even affirms that representing the political is a form of interpretation that is, by its very nature, incomplete and bound up with the values of the perceiver.⁷

Much of ir scholarship has, undoubtedly, been conducted in the former, mimetic mode of representation. The most influential contributions to the discipline, particularly in North America, continue to adhere almost exclusively to social scientific conventions. They uphold the notion of a neutral observer and a corresponding separation of object and subject. J. David Singer proudly announced during the behavioural revolution that 'there is no longer much doubt that we can make the study of international politics into a scientific discipline worthy of the name'.⁸ Much has changed since then, of course, but representation is still widely seen as process of coping which, ideally, erases all traces of human interference so that the 'artistic' end-product looks just like the original. Realism has made 'the real' into an object of desire, Hayden White would say.⁹ Or, as one of the most

6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *From Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 67.

7. Jacques Derrida, 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 427.

8. J. David Singer, 'The Incomplete Theorist: Insight Without Evidence', in *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, eds. James N. Rosenau and Klaus Knorr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 68.

9. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 21.

influential contemporary methodology textbooks in political sciences states: ‘the goal is to learn facts about the real world’.¹⁰

Mimetic approaches do not pay enough attention to the relationship between the represented and its representation. Indeed, they are not really theories of representation.¹¹ They are theories against representation. But political reality does not exist in an a priori way. It comes into being only through the process of representation. A political event, for instance, cannot determine from what perspective and in what context it is seen. Our effort to make sense of this event can, thus, never be reduced to the event itself. This is why representation ‘always raises the question of what set of true statements we might prefer to other sets of true statements’.¹² It is a process through which we organise our understanding of reality. Note as well that even if the ideal of mimesis—a perfect resemblance between signifier and signified—was possible, it could offer us little political insight. It would merely replicate what is, and thus be as useless as ‘as a facsimile of a text that is handed to us in answer to our question of how to interpret that text’.¹³

Aesthetic approaches, by contrast, embark on a direct political encounter, for they engage the gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent. Rather than constituting this gap as a threat to knowledge and political stability, aesthetic approaches accept its inevitability. Indeed, they recognise that the difference between represented and representation is the very location of politics. What is at stake, then, is ‘the knowability of the world’, as Elaine Scarry puts it, and the fact that ‘knowability depends on its susceptibility to representation’.¹⁴

Consider, by way of illustration, the similarities between the work of a painter and a social scientist. Both portray their objects through particular modes of representation. Even a naturalistic painting is still a form of representation. It cannot capture the essence of its object. It is painted from a certain angle, at a certain time of the day, and in a certain light. The materials are those chosen by the artist, as are the colours and size of the painting, even its frame. Recall for a minute the famous painting by the surrealist René Magritte: the one that features a carefully drawn pipe placed above an equally carefully hand-written line that reads ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (‘This is not a pipe’). What becomes obvious fairly soon—that the painting is not a pipe itself, but only an artistic representation thereof—challenges the very notion of mimesis. It draws attention to what, in Saussurian language, is called the arbitrariness of the sign: the fact that the relationship between signifier (the drawing of the pipe) and the signified (the pipe)

10. King et al, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 6.

11. For an insightful study, see F.R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

12. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

is contingent on a range of interpretative steps.¹⁵ A photograph is no different, even though its seemingly authentic reproduction of external realities may deceive us initially. It too is taken at a certain time of the day, with a certain focus and from a certain angle. Indeed, these choices make up the very essence of the photograph: its aesthetic quality. But, of course, they result from artistic and inevitably subjective decisions on form taken by the photographer; decisions that have nothing to do with the essence of the actual object that is photographed.

The very same principles engulf our attempts to analyse and understand the realities of world politics. No social scientist can ever represent a political event or issue independently of the form chosen for this task. Even the most thorough empirical analysis cannot depict its object of inquiry in an authentic way. It too reflects colour choices, brushstrokes, angles, framing. It too remains a form of interpretation, and with that an inherently political exercise. It too says just as much, if not more, about the artistic choices of the interpreter than the object of interpretation.

The aesthetic alternative to mimesis, it must be stressed, refers to much more than art. There are compelling reasons to return to an earlier and much broader Romantic understanding of the aesthetic. This approach had to do with validating the whole register of human perceptions; not only the practices of reason and logos that triumphed in the wake of the Enlightenment, but also a range of other, more sensuous and perhaps more tangible, yet equally important forms of insights, from the poetic to the purely visual.¹⁶ Questions of evaluation and taste, for instance, tend to be seen today as being of a purely private and thus subjective nature. Not so at the end of the eighteenth century, when the concept of taste, despite being located outside the realm of reason, was seen as an important 'mode of knowing...that is not a private but a social phenomenon'.¹⁷ Kant believed that heeding to such aesthetic experiences opened up an alternative to the deeply embedded modern assumption that our knowledge of the world is structured according to the objects we seek to know. Because all attempts to know something about them had failed, Kant proposed that we proceed like Copernicus. Instead of assuming that the stars circle around us, he approached the problem the other way around. Knowledge of objects was, thus, not seen as being structured primarily by their a priori existence, but by the nature of our perception of them.¹⁸ It is in this sense that Kant, despite his often problematic search for a transcendental subject, has inspired a tradition of critical thought that affirms contingencies and actively engages the struggle between reproductive and productive thought or, as Michael

15. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique général* (Paris: Payot, 1987).

16. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); and Wolfgang Iser, *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1993).

17. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 36. See also Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

18. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, Vorrede zur zweiten Auflage (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996).

Shapiro prefers to put it, between 'the demands of reason and the work of imagination'.¹⁹

One of the most insightful and politically relevant extensions of Kantian aesthetics can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze. He too detects problems with the prevailing mimetic image of thought, but conceptualises them in a slightly different way. Orthodox approaches, Deleuze stresses, are based on the principle of recognition, which he defines, in Kantian terms, as 'the harmonious exercise of all the faculties upon a supposed same object'.²⁰ Such a harmonious state is possible if all faculties (such as perception, memory, reason, imagination and understanding) collaborate along the same model of recognition towards a particular object. The object itself is assumed to remain the same independently of whether it is perceived through sensual, rational, memorial or other forms of representation. The ensuing construction of common sense is problematic, for it conflates thought with knowledge and supposes that knowledge is ultimately based on recognising external appearances.²¹ The consequences are far-reaching, because a few dominant forms of insight, usually those emerging from reason, are being given the power to coordinate and synchronise a variety of otherwise rather disparate faculties. Harmonious as the resulting notion of common sense may be, it can neither explain its emergence nor become aware (and critical) of its own values. As a result, the established mode of thought makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to locate and explore a wide range of other and potentially very valuable insights into the political.

Deleuze finds hope in Kant for overturning this orthodox or dogmatic image of thought, for it was Kant who first provided a model of discordant harmony among the faculties. By examining how the beautiful and the sublime generate an inherent tension between imagination and reason, he sought to find ways for allowing each faculty to cultivate its unique insights and passions. But what is communicated across irreducible differences between faculties should not and cannot result in a shared recognition of objects. These traversing and transgressing insights neither converge in common sense nor are they necessarily the object of any one faculty in particular. Rather than embarking on a project that requires synchronisation and submissive integration, aesthetics promotes productive interactions across different faculties. Insight is then no longer associated with recognition, but with a process that flows 'from sensibility to thought and from thought to sensibility, capable of engendering in each case, according to their own order, the limit—or transcendent—object of each faculty'.²² The notion of common sense, which freezes knowledge and imagination around the overwhelming influence of a

19. Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation and Gender* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2.

20. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 133.

21. See Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Daniel W. Smith, 'Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality', in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

22. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 146.

dominant faculty, must give way to a multiplication of common senses or, as Deleuze prefers, to a 'para-sense', which does not create a harmonious accord, but 'determines only the communication between disjointed faculties'.²³

Legitimising Aesthetic Insight

Nothing is harder than to notice the obvious that was not noticed before.²⁴

The task of critically analysing world politics is to make fuller use of various faculties and to challenge the mimetic and exclusive conventions of Realist international politics, just as Magritte's painting of a pipe was aimed at undermining 'the mimetic conventions of realistic painting'.²⁵ But few tasks are more daunting than that. We all have an intuitive longing for the hope that what we represent is what we see and think, and that what we see and think must, really, be real. The belief in resemblance and recognition is part of our desire to order the world. We know, of course, that Cold War spy films are not real, yet it is much more difficult to accept, for instance, that a scientific analysis of Cold War intelligence, based on quantitative archival research, can contain equally subjective representational dimensions. This is because we are wedded to conventions of language; conventions that tell us, to appropriate Michel Foucault's words, that the entire purpose of a scholarly analysis 'is to elicit recognition, to allow the object it represents to appear without hesitation and equivocation'.²⁶

Representation is always an act of power. This power is at its peak if a form of representation is able to disguise its subjective origins and values. Realism has been unusually successful in this endeavour: it has turned one of many credible interpretations into a form of representation that is not only widely accepted as 'realistic', but also appears and functions as essence. Realism has been able to take historically contingent and political motivated commentaries—say by E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau about how to deal with the spread of Nazi Germany, or by Kenneth Waltz about how to interpret the 'logic' of 'anarchy' during the Cold War—and then turn them into universal and a-historic explanations that allegedly capture the 'essence' of human nature and international politics.²⁷ Expressed in other words, Realism has managed to suppress what Kant would have called the 'aesthetic quality' of politics, that is, the elements which are 'purely subjective in

23. *Ibid.*, 146 and 136-37.

24. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*, 16.

25. Martin Jay, 'In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. D.C. Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 185.

26. Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 19-20.

27. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1946); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973 [1948]); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

the representation of an object, i.e., what constitutes its reference to the subject, not to the object'.²⁸

The power to raise subjective interpretations to a level of objectivity is rooted in a variety of factors other than the mere persuasiveness of the respective perspective. Time is one of these factors: a simple but important one. Realist theories of (anti)representation have been around for so long that the metaphors through which they legitimise their political view of the world (from the primacy of the 'national interest' to the dictates of 'Realpolitik') no longer appear as metaphors. Through decades of dominance in academic scholarship, policy formation and public discourse, the anti-representational values of Realism have shaped how we perceive the boundaries between the rational and the irrational. As a result, we have forgotten whether we understand Realist interpretations by noticing resemblances to the world or whether we notice resemblances as a result of having internalised such interpretations.²⁹

Before examining attempts to challenge mimetic representation it is necessary to draw attention to some of the blurred boundaries between the aesthetic and the mimetic. First, one must note that existing social scientific approaches to ir already have an aesthetic. Notwithstanding their mimetic objectives, dominant Realist and Liberal views of the international rely on a particular set of representations. The exact nature of this aesthetic is debatable, and its form varies from author to author, but it undoubtedly contains elements of the Western intellectual heritage, particularly the Enlightenment and Romanticism. What has been retained from the romantic ideal is the autonomy of the Self, the quest for independence and self-determination, the belief that people can shape history.³⁰ In the world of ir scholarship this translates into a masculine preoccupation with big and heroic events: wars, revolutions, diplomatic summits and other state actions that are imbued with international significance. This very selective romantic aesthetic is supplemented with the scientific heritage of the Enlightenment, with the desire to systematise, to search for rational foundations and certainty in a world of turmoil and constant flux. Ensuing attempts to 'extract the eternal out of the transient' are manifest in the strong social scientific dominance of ir scholarship.³¹

To highlight the omnipresent nature of the aesthetic is not to deny the importance of social science or of mimetic approaches in general. Not all social science is mimetic and not all mimesis is of a social scientific nature. Debates in the philosophy of science range anywhere from the openly positivist to the hermeneutic. Even in its positivist form, social science can be not only insightful,

28. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 29.

29. See Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

30. See Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

31. Jean Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 1163.

but also subversive of existing political practices.³² Mimesis is as diverse and ambivalent as social science. This is in part because the concept of the mimetic is used in various different ways, in part because the boundaries between the aesthetic and the mimetic overlap. Theodor Adorno, for instance, considers mimesis a central strategy of resistance, for 'art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated'.³³ Mimesis is seen here not as imitation, but as a way of reversing years of alienating processes of commodification. Look at Andy Warhol's interpretation of Campbell soup cans. His famous series of paintings seem perfectly mimetic at first sight: they seek nothing but a naturalistic representation of a common consumer object, soup cans; total correspondence between signifier and signified. How can a useful, yet alone critical understanding emerge from such an attempt at perfect mimetic resemblance? 'If art adapts to [the] most superficial element of the commodity society', Peter Bürger warns, 'it is difficult to see how it is through such adaptation that it can resist it'.³⁴ For some, though, such undistorted representation of external realities can be subversive insofar as it draws attention to what is taken for granted and would otherwise go unnoticed. The challenge to commodification and consumerism, thus, works through ironic mimesis. But this is not to say that it is mimetic, at least not in the sense described above. The very nature of irony is located in the tension between representation and represented. Irony is a process of metaphorical distinction; and this distinction is of an inherently aesthetic nature. Like Magritte's painting of a pipe that is not an actual pipe, Warhol's paintings of soup cans are not soup cans per se. They are representations thereof. The fact that Warhol's naturalistic style deceives us initially only highlights the problematic objectives of mimesis: the impossibility of perfect resemblance.

Some of these tensions between the mimetic and the aesthetic have insinuated themselves into prevalent ir scholarship. Kenneth Waltz, in one of his relatively frequent escapes from mimetic conventions, stresses that theories result from a process of abstraction and are, thus, distinct from the realities they seek to explain. He goes as far as arguing that 'explanatory power is gained by moving away from

32. For instance, the simple statistical fact that more than 30,000 children under the age of five die each day from preventable causes problematises the prevailing aesthetic of media representation: it reveals how market-dependent and entertainment-oriented television networks favour heroic and spectacular images of wars and terrorist attacks over more mundane daily problems, even if the human, social and economic impact of the latter is far more devastating and consequential in nature. United Nations, *Human Development Report* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2001), 9.

33. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21; J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Judgement from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). For other attempts to explore the mimetic as a strategy of dissent, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'est pas un* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977); and Necati Polat, 'Poststructuralism, Absence, Mimesis: Making Difference, Reproducing Sovereignty', *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 4 (1998): 447-77.

34. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 61.

reality, not by staying close to it'.³⁵ In some passages, Morgenthau too acknowledges that representation is an imperfect process, that mimesis is by definition impossible. He does so by likening the difference between the practice of international politics and the attempt to derive a rational theory from it to the difference between a photograph and a painting. The photograph, Morgenthau argues, 'shows everything that can be seen by the naked eye'. The painting, by contrast, does more. '[I]t shows, or it seeks to show, one thing that the naked eye cannot see: the human essence of the person portrayed'.³⁶ The most explicit contemporary extension of this approach is perhaps found in Alexander Wendt's attempt to theorise unobservables through scientific realism.³⁷

Why, then, are there significant problems with the mimetic conventions of prevalent approaches to international political theory? Two points are particularly crucial here. First, most of the prevailing approaches fail to recognise and deal with their own aesthetic. Mimesis in Realist scholarship contains few if any elements of irony or self-reflection. Social science, as a result, is not presented as a form of interpretation. Instead, the main objective remains to elicit recognition and to close or ignore the gap between a representation and what is represented therewith. The complexities mentioned above fade when it comes to affirming the core values and purpose of its research. While acknowledging limits to what 'the naked eye' can observe about the political, Morgenthau nevertheless is convinced that it is possible to capture the 'essence' of politics and society, namely the 'objective laws that have their roots in human nature'.³⁸ Wendt, likewise, believes that 'epistemological issues are relatively uninteresting' because 'the point is to explain the world, not to argue how we can know it'.³⁹

Second, and far more consequential: a relatively narrow, positivist and exclusive understanding of social science has come to dominate much of its scholarship. In the extreme version, this approach holds that all hypotheses 'need to be evaluated empirically before they can make a contribution to knowledge'.⁴⁰ Or so at least argue three prominent political science and its scholars. The consequences of such positions are far-reaching. They have dramatically narrowed the scope of inquiries into world politics and the tools available to pursue them. They have elevated a few select faculties, reason in particular, and given them the power to order all others. The result is the erasure of a crucial location of political struggles, the domain of representation, from our purview. This is why Waltz's otherwise commendable attempt to move away from resemblance and recognition ends up in a science-driven process of abstraction that isolates a few select features and produces generalities from them. The problem here is not with abstraction per se,

35. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 7-10.

36. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 8.

37. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

38. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4.

39. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 90 and 373.

40. King et al, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 6 and 16.

for abstraction is an inevitable component of any process of representation. 'We end up with abstraction whether we want "it" or not', Christine Sylvester stresses.⁴¹ But Waltzian abstraction is obsessed with deduction, categorisation and scientific legitimacy. Rather than celebrating the diversity of life and drawing from its sensual potentials, as abstraction in art seeks to do, the neorealist version 'blocks the construction of people in international relations and hinders our view of states as more than the proverbial empty boxes'.⁴² The result is a narrow and problematic form of common sense. This is why even the more moderate constructivist scholars rely on analytical tools that are largely confined to mimetic principles. Consider Wendt's highly indicative position that knowledge needs to be both systematic and scientific to be of any value. He stresses that '[p]oetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines...are not designed to explain global war or Third World poverty, and as such if we want to solve those problems our best hope, slim as it maybe, is social science'.⁴³

Hope for a better world will, indeed, remain slim if we put all our efforts into searching for a mimetic understanding of the international. Issues of global war and Third World poverty are far too serious and urgent to be left to only one form of inquiry, especially if this mode of thought suppresses important faculties and fails to understand and engage the crucial problem of representation. We need to employ the full register of human perception and intelligence to understand the phenomena of world politics and to address the dilemmas that emanate from them. One of the key challenges, thus, consists of legitimising a greater variety of approaches and insights to world politics. Aesthetics is an important and necessary addition to our interpretative repertoire. It helps us understand why the emergence, meaning and significance of a political event can be appreciated only once we scrutinise the representational practices that have constituted the very nature of this event.

To broaden our knowledge of the international does, however, require more than simply adding a few additional layers of interpretation. What is needed is a more fundamental reorientation of thought and action: a shift away from harmonious common sense imposed by a few dominant faculties towards a model of thought that enables productive flows across a variety of discordant faculties. For Deleuze, this difference amounts to a move from recognition to a direct political encounter, from approaches that affirm appearances without disturbing thought towards approaches that add to our understanding and, indeed, force us to think.⁴⁴

An illustration from the world of art may help: consider how the significance of Picasso's *Guernica* as a form of insight into and historical memory of the Spanish Civil War is located precisely in the fact that the painter aesthetically engaged the difference between the represented and its representation. *Guernica* allows us to

41. Christine Sylvester, 'Art, Abstraction and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 544.

42. *Ibid.*,

43. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 90.

44. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

move back and forth between imagination and reason, thought and sensibility, memory and understanding, without imposing one faculty upon another. Abstraction here seeks to free our senses from the compulsion to equate knowledge with the rational recognition of external appearances. This sensual transgression of mimetic conventions is perhaps at its most extreme in those visual instances where figuration is given up altogether. Abstraction then draws attention to the fact that a figurative painting runs the risk of leading the eye to the temptation of recognition. Abstraction, by contrast, projects an immediacy of sensation that is not linked to direct representational tasks. To preserve political relevance in such a process is, of course, far from self-evident. And yet, abstraction has taken on very explicit political dimensions, as the close association of Abstract Expressionism with Cold-War politics amply demonstrated.⁴⁵ This is why the Australian painter David Rankin, whose abstract canvasses engage political themes from the Holocaust to the Tienanmen massacre, stresses that the paintings of Paul Klee and other seemingly non-political artists 'were political in an exciting way because they were leading to shifts of sensibility within society'.⁴⁶

How, then, is one to legitimise approaches to thought, knowledge and evidence that contradict virtually every central principle that has guided its scholarship since its inception as an academic discipline? Knowledge communicated through artistic, philosophical and historical insights cannot always be verified by methodological means proper to science. Indeed, the significance of aesthetic insight is located precisely in the fact that it 'cannot be attained in any other way'.⁴⁷ It produces what can be called an 'excess' experience; that is, an experience, sensuous at times, which cannot be apprehended or codified by non-aesthetic forms of knowledge. Indeed, aesthetic understanding is based on the very acknowledgement that signification is an inherently incomplete and problematic process.⁴⁸ And this is why aesthetic truth claims need to be validated by means other than empirical evidence and scientific falsification procedures. They require productive and respectful interactions among different faculties or, as Hans Georg Gadamer puts it, an investigation into the very phenomenon of understanding.⁴⁹ The remaining parts of this essay now explore efforts at such forms of legitimisation in the context of its scholarship.

45. See Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (London: Paul Chapman, 1985) and Christine Sylvester, 'Picturing the Cold War: An Art Graft/Eye Graft', *Alternatives* 21, no. 4 (1996): 393-418.

46. 'Abstracting the Political: David Rankin Interviewed by Roland Bleiker', *Social Alternatives* 20, no. 4 (2001): 16.

47. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxii-xxiii. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

48. See Jay Bernstein, 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism', *Radical Philosophy* 76, no. 2 (1996): 7-18 and Prem Kumar Rajaram, 'Theodor Adorno's Aesthetic Understanding: An Ethical Method for IR?', *Alternatives* (forthcoming, 2002).

49. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxii.

The Postmodern Turn

But here and there isolated and passionate cries are raised. How could they not be isolated when they deny what ‘everybody knows...’? And passionate, since they deny that which, it is said, nobody can deny?⁵⁰

Although mimetic approaches still dominate much of the discipline’s scholarly debates, the legitimisation of aesthetic insight into world politics is well on its way. The first aesthetic turn took place in the 1980s, when so-called postmodern scholars started to question the epistemological and ontological certainties of orthodox thought. The issues raised by this body of literature range from critiques of the positivist and state-centric nature of prevalent approaches to attempts at understanding how ensuing theoretical assumptions were intertwined with the violent nature of political practices.⁵¹

For many commentators the key feature that unites all these diverse approaches has to do with the need to come to terms with ‘the death of God’, the disappearance, at the end of the medieval period, of a generally accepted world view that provided a stable ground from which it was possible to assess nature, knowledge, common values, truth, politics, in short, life itself.⁵² Rather than continuing a long modern tradition of finding replacements for the fallen God, postmodern scholarship accepts the ultimately contingent nature of political life.

A slightly different way of conceptualising postmodern approaches would be to draw attention to their aesthetic qualities. From such a perspective postmodern scholarship has started an important engagement with what David Campbell called ‘the manifest consequences of [choosing] one mode of representation over another’.⁵³ What is significant here is the recognition that language is the precondition for representation and, by extension, all meaningful knowledge of the world. It is in this sense that postmodern scholarship has taken the ‘linguistic turn’ and recognised that our understanding of the world is intrinsically linked to the languages we employ to do so; languages that express histories of human

50. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 130.

51. James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Jean Bethke Elshtain *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); R.B.J. Walker, *One World, Many Worlds: Struggles for a Just World Peace* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1988); J. Der Derian and M.J. Shapiro, eds., *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989); and Richard K. Ashley and R.B.J. Walker, Special Issue, ‘Speaking the Language of Exile: Dissidence in International Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990).

52. See Chris Brown, “‘Turtles All the Way Down’: Anti-Foundationalism, Critical Theory, and International Relations”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23, no 2 (1994): 213-36 and Steve Smith, ‘The Self-Images of a Discipline: A Genealogy of International Relations Theory’, in *International Relations Theory Today*, eds. Ken Booth and Steve Smith (University Park, PN: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 26.

53. David Campbell, *Writing Security: US Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 35.

interaction; languages that have successfully established and masked a range of arbitrary viewpoints and power relations.⁵⁴ Linked to this insight into representation is a more broadly conceived discussion of positivism and its relationship to the theory and practice. Contrary to prevalent social science wisdom, aesthetic approaches stressed that our comprehension of facts cannot be separated from our relationship with them, that thinking always expresses a will to truth, a desire to control and impose order upon events that are often random and idiosyncratic. Positivism, whether based in science or not, is, thus, presented as an approach that ignores the process of representation and holds the problematic belief that the social scientist, as detached observer, can produce value-free knowledge.⁵⁵

Postmodern contributions moved from a process of recognition towards a political encounter. Instead of simply adding an extra layer of interpretation, they sought to challenge, sometimes passionately, the very nature of world politics by questioning the notion of common sense that had established itself at the heart of the discipline. The reaction, as is often the case in a fundamental political encounter, was unusually hostile. There was widespread and dismissive talk of nihilism and relativism, of an 'anything goes' ideology, but often with very little understanding of the actual theoretical and practical issue that postmodern authors had tried to grapple with. As a result, the so-called Third Debate never actually took place and orthodox scholarship has remained by and large unaffected by the postmodern challenge.

Postmodern contributions are, of course, not without problems, but to identify them is no easy task. The actual pursuit of postmodern inquiry is characterised more by diversity than by a single and coherent set of positions and assumptions. If there is a unifying point in postmodernism then it is precisely the acceptance of difference, the refusal to uphold one position as the correct and desirable one. And yet, some salient critiques can nevertheless be identified, although they do not revolve around the often lamented relativist abyss that allegedly lurks at the centre of postmodern thought.

First, for all their theoretical engagement with the later Wittgenstein, postmodern writings have fallen short of recognising the practical significance of language games. Many postmodern texts remain buried in a highly abstract and inaccessible language that has, at times, become as predictable as the practices they seek to oppose.⁵⁶ As a result, the critical insight they may contain has failed to reach the

54. Michael J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding: The Politics of Discursive Practices* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Jim George and David Campbell, 'Patterns of Dissent and the Celebration of Difference: Critical Social Theory and International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1990): 269-93.

55. See Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 225-86.

56. Some commentators, for instance, applauded postmodern attempts to decentre knowledge and listen to critical voices, but lamented at the same time that 'feminist writings [remain] marginalised or pre-empted by those who plead for a more inclusive IR'. See Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

broad audience necessary to achieve social transformation. The issue is, of course, not easy. The innovative potential of a text emerges precisely from its refusal to take existing linguistic conventions for granted, from the attempt to search for new ways of speaking about issues that had been rendered unproblematic through a series of worn out metaphors. But a text can, of course, not depart too radically from existing linguistic conventions either: to do so would be to construct a private language that loses its social dimension. The key task, then, is to walk a fine line between these two extremes; a challenge that remains by and large unmet.

A second and related shortcoming of early postmodern contributions is their focus on criticising/deconstructing the shortcomings of dominant Realist and Liberal approaches to international political theory. While essential at a time when there was little space for alternative knowledge, this process of critique has nevertheless limited the potential of postmodern contributions. Discourses of power politics and their framing of political practice cannot overcome all existing theoretical and practical dilemmas. By articulating critique in relation to arguments advanced by orthodox approaches to ir, the impact of critical voices remains confined within the larger discursive boundaries that were established through the initial framing of these debates.

My suggestion is, thus, to 'forget IR theory', to see beyond a narrowly defined academic discipline and to refuse tying future possibilities to established forms of life.⁵⁷ Instead of seeking nostalgic comfort and security in the familiar interpretation of long gone epochs, even if they are characterised by violence and insecurity, conscious forgetting opens up possibilities for a dialogical understanding of our present and past. Rather than further entrenching current security dilemmas by engaging with the orthodox discourse that continuously gives meaning to them, forgetting tries to escape the vicious circle by which these social practices serve to legitimise and objectivise the very discourses that have given rise to them.

Beyond Academic Disciplines

I love books, the solid substance of the work of poetry, the forest of literature,
I love all of it, even the spines of books, but not the labels of the schools. I
want books without schools and without classifying, like life.⁵⁸

The process of forgetting the restraining boundaries of conventional ir scholarship is well on its way. One could, indeed, speak of a second aesthetic turn. This more recent shift in knowledge-production is characterised by various scholarly attempts to understand or depict world politics in ways other than through the languages and concepts of social theory. By moving away from established forms of representation, scholars seek to explore, as Costas Constantinou puts it,

57. Roland Bleiker, 'Forget IR Theory', *Alternatives* 22, no. 1 (1997): 57-85.

58. Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 294.

'theoretically playful—but plausible—narrative[s] through which to reread and revise the picture of world politics'.⁵⁹ The purpose, then, is not primarily, or at least not only, one of critique. Rather, the key objective revolves around finding new ways to understand the dilemmas of world politics.

Being aware of the problematic dimensions of representation, aesthetic approaches view academic disciplines as powerful mechanisms that direct and control the production and diffusion of knowledge. Disciplines establish the rules of intellectual exchange and define the methods, techniques, and instruments that are considered proper for the pursuit of knowledge. While providing meaning, coherence and stability, these rules also delineate the limits of what can be thought, talked, and written of in a normal way. Innovative solutions to existing problems cannot be found if our efforts at understanding the international remain confined to a set of rigid and well-entrenched disciplinary rules.

The key, rather, lies in recognising that the international operates in spheres other than the heroic domains of state action and high politics prescribed by existing scholarly conventions. Significant here are early feminist attempts to locate the political and the transnational in spheres that had hitherto been invisible, such as sweat shops or brothels outside foreign military bases. The work of Cynthia Enloe deserves particular mention. Her investigations revolve around a complete disregard for the established academic canon. Instead of starting with or anchoring her inquiries in the usual discourse on Thomas Hobbes, Morgenthau or Waltz, Enloe begins and pursues her observations from popular images she finds in the margins: in the songs and deeds of Carmen Miranda, for instance, a Brazilian dancer cum Hollywood star cum symbol of United States political and economic policy towards Latin America. By doing so, she circumvents disciplinary boundaries and reveals what otherwise would remain unnoticed: that 'relations between governments depend not only on capital and weaponry, but also on the control of women as symbols, consumers, workers and emotional comforters'.⁶⁰ Enloe's non-disciplinary based inquiries represent an encounter, for they challenge both the conventions of IR scholarship and the narrow 'realities' they have created through well-entrenched representations. By doing so, she blurs the boundaries between the mimetic and the aesthetic in a way that subverts existing practices of domination and creates the preconditions for the establishment of a more just and inclusive political order.

An aesthetic move beyond the comfort of academic disciplines inevitably highlights the problematic dimensions of representation. Indeed, the closer one observes political struggles on the ground the more one realises the manipulations

59. Costas Constantinou, *States of Representation*, manuscript 2001, 7. Among the numerous works in this genre see, Stephen Chan, 'A Story Beyond Telos: Redeeming the Shield of Achilles for a Realism of Rights in IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999): 101-15; Costas Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and James Der Derian, *Anti-Diplomacy: Spies, Terror, Speed, and War* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

60. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora, 1989), xi.

of realities that are part of the very essence of politics. Look at how Michael Ignatieff has learned not from academic ruminating, but from extensive on-the-ground-experiences that 'all exercises in political judgement depend on the creation of "virtual realities", abstractions that simplify causes and consequences'.⁶¹ Indeed, the unproblematised understanding of reality-as-it-is, which permeates all mimetic approaches, can make sense only as long as it stays within the detached and neatly delineated boundaries of academic disciplines. As soon as one confronts the actual realities of conflict zones, it becomes evident that 'war is the easiest of realities to abstract', and that this abstraction process is intrinsically linked to whatever representational practices prevail at the time.⁶²

Nowhere are the representational dimensions of politics, and our mimetic attempts to conceal them, more evident than in the domain of television; perhaps the most crucial source of collective consciousness today. Abstractions about war are intertwined with representational practices that are increasingly shaped by the dictates of the entertainment-oriented media industry. Consider the fact that 'the entire script content of the CBS nightly half-hour news would fit on three-quarters of the front page of the *New York Times*'.⁶³ Or note how in the period from 1968 to 1988 the average sound-bite during televised coverage of US elections decreased from 43 to 9 seconds.⁶⁴ Figures are probably even lower today, and whatever substance can still be packed into what remains is likely to get further blurred when presented in the context of other news and no-news, from drive-by shootings to touch-downs, famines, home-runs and laundry detergent ads. The numbing regularity and the mimetic conventions with which these images and sound-bites are communicated to great masses soon erases their highly subjective and problematic representational form. We all distance ourselves, in one way or another, from the often highly disturbing realities that are communicated to us. We create a moral shield from wars and famines that are not our own.⁶⁵

Aesthetic insight is one of the tools we can employ against such forms of numbing regularity and complacency. Confronting the massive tragedy of the Bosnian War, Ignatieff looks for help in the example of Goya's *Horrors of War* and Picasso's *Guernica*, 'which confront [the] desire to evade the testimony of our own eyes by grounding horror in aesthetic forms that force the spectator to see if as for the first time'.⁶⁶ Furthermore, high art is not the only location of such aesthetic encounters with the political. John Docker, for instance, suggests that significant critical potential is hidden in the seemingly homogenising and suffocating forces of

61. Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 6.

62. *Ibid.*.

63. Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Random House, 1998), 26.

64. Daniel C. Hallin, 'Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections', *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 2 (1992): 5-24 and Kiku Adatto, 'The Incredible Shrinking of the Sound Bite', *New Republic*, no. 202 (1990): 20-25.

65. See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

66. Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, 29-30.

popular culture, where he detects, carnivalesque challenges to the narrow and single representation of reason in the public sphere.⁶⁷

Direct aesthetic encounters with the political can contribute to a more inclusive and just world order, for they challenge our very notion of common sense by allowing us to see what may be obvious but has not been noted before. This is why we have a responsibility, both as numbed spectators of televised realities and as scholars wedded to social scientific conventions, to engage our representational habits and search for ways of heeding to forms of thought that can reassess the realities of world politics.

Art, Sensibility and World Politics

The arts are neglected because they are based on perception, and perception is disdained because it is not assumed to involve thought.⁶⁸

There is already an impressive array of works that draw on alternative forms of knowledge about the international; sources that make the issue of representation central to their purpose.⁶⁹ By legitimising images, narratives and sounds as important sources for insight into world politics, aesthetic approaches have moved scholarship away from an exclusive and often very narrow reliance on diplomatic documents, statistical data, political speeches, academic treatises and other traditional sources of knowledge about the international.

Art is, of course, only one among many forms of aesthetic insight. The latter encompasses all approaches that take into account the role of human perception, interpretation and representation. Likewise, not all art is necessarily of an aesthetic nature. The history of art is inevitably intertwined with the modern tendency to privilege mimetic forms of representation. Until the advent of expressionism and other modern movements, approaches to art were dominated by what could be called representationalism: a strongly mimetic position that placed great values on life-like portrays, as those by Rubens and Velázquez. From such a vantage point an abstract painting or sculpture would have lacked any artistic qualities. Indeed,

67. John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Examples of inquiries into this domain can be found, for instance, in the growing literature on Star Trek. See the science fiction section in this issue and Jutta Weldes, 'Going Cultural: Star Trek, State Action, and Popular Culture', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999): 117-34.

68. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 3.

69. Such attempts have proliferated in recent years. Note, for instance, that besides the current *Millennium* project several journals have published special issues on aesthetic themes, including Roland Bleiker, ed., 'Poetic World Politics', *Alternatives* 25, no. 3 (2000); 'Painting Politics', *Social Alternatives* 20, no. 4 (2001); and Tracey Seeley, ed., 'Literature and Peace', *Peace Review* 13, no. 2 (2001). Other engagements include Christine Sylvester, '(Sur)Real Internationalisms: Émigrés, Natives Sons, and Ethical War Creations', in *Alternatives* 24, no. 2 (1999): 219-47; Cynthia Weber, 'IR: The Resurrection of New Frontiers of Incorporation', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 4, (1999): 435-50; and Vivienne Jabri, '(Uni)form Instrumentalities and War's Abject', in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (1998): 885-902.

artistic value was measured in direct relation to the ability to produce life-like representations.⁷⁰ But, of course, even the most 'perfect' painting is, as outlined above, still a form of representation. Consider how John Constable, one of Britain's most popular and most naturalistic landscape painters, had to create his illusions of perfect resemblance by employing blues and greens that could not actually be found in natural sky or foliage.⁷¹ Modernism moved art away from mimesis to the point that some commentators now see inherently anti-mimetic qualities in art. The aesthetic has taken over, they argue, because a modern artist does not merely try bring about *trompe l'oeil* effects, attempts to create representations so realistic that they give the illusion of the actual thing depicted. To be of artistic value, a work of art must be able to engage and capture not only exterior realities, but also, and above all, our human relationship with them. The key, the argument goes, is to offer an interpretation of reality that *actively* differs from reality itself. Gadamer calls this process 'aesthetic differentiation'⁷² and F.R. Ankersmit stresses that this difference between representation and represented 'is the source of and condition of all aesthetic pleasure'.⁷³

While appreciating its unique insight, it is important to remember that art too is a form of representation; incomplete and problematic by nature. Human relations inevitably engulf the domain of the aesthetic, and this includes forms of visual representation that are seemingly independent of linguistic conventions and restraints. The 'eye', says Pierre Bourdieu, 'is a product of history reproduced by education'.⁷⁴ This is why aesthetic insight does not necessarily entail good taste or lead to morally commendable positions. Not 'everything will flower at the edge', as some would have it.⁷⁵ Artistic and aesthetic knowledge does not automatically produce convincing insight. Nor is it situated beyond power and domination. Aesthetics can be just as suffocating as mimetic objectifications of oppression, as the poetic 'transgressions' of Ezra Pound, Ferdinand Celine or Martin Heidegger amply demonstrate. But that in itself does, of course, not invalidate aesthetic insight. 'The aesthetic dimension of ethics is clearly susceptible to misuse', Jane Bennett acknowledges, 'but so is the commitment to moral command or the scientific method or the exercise of authority'.⁷⁶ Despite its insinuation into the matrix of power relations, or perhaps precisely because of it, aesthetics is part of an important process of broadening our insight into political dilemmas, and, thus, also the range of possible responses to them.

70. See Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 87-88.

71. *Ibid.*, 89.

72. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 85.

73. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics*, 45-46.

74. Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979), iii.

75. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 81.

76. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152

A good illustration of the complex political dynamics intrinsic to the relationship between artistic and 'scientific' representations can be found in photographic practices. Nicolas Higgins demonstrates how Western knowledge of the indigenous population of Mexico emerged in the context of early anthropological explorations. The ensuing visual documentation was intrinsically linked to the larger colonial quest to establish order and policing methods through the imposition of the modern state upon the object of colonisation. A case in point is Alphons Bertillon's attempts, dating back to the 1870s, to establish a photographic databank that systematically represented racial identity types. Even today, Bertillon's typical face/profile shots remain the standard identifying practice in police stations, prison and intelligence units world-wide. But this photographic tradition did more than merely identify people. It created stereotypical images of identity that then were superimposed upon the far more complex lives of colonial subjects. The linkages between photographic depiction and colonial subjugation led to practices of seeing and policing in which one form of identity (usually race-related) tended to annihilate all others (such as gender, age, religion and class).⁷⁷ But photography, also has the potential to provide us with a more inclusive view of the world. It may allow us to 'see' the spirit of an age and move beyond a merely external depiction of the world. This is why the best photographic art strives to capture 'that which you cannot see'.⁷⁸ Rather than superimposing an externally perceived image, it seeks to bring out multiplicities and ambiguities. In the case of Mexico this photographic quest for inclusion would need to be directed towards establishing images of a world in which the indigenous population can live 'as both Indians and Mexicans without one identity subsuming the other'.⁷⁹

While artistic representations do not necessarily lead to good taste or a better world, they nevertheless provide us with an important model of thought. Whether in the form of images, narratives or sounds, aesthetics not only adds layers of perception or sensation, but also promotes interactions among different faculties. Kant saw judgements of the beautiful and the sublime as examples of instances where no faculty rules over others. Aesthetic judgements are questions of taste that take place somewhere in the 'middle between understanding and reason'; without either of these determining the rules for identifying the object that is to be judged.⁸⁰ Indeed, Kant went one step further and granted the feeling of pleasure or displeasure its own constitutive status, which is to say that it became irreducible to any other faculty.⁸¹ But even though we perceive and judge a work of art through means that are constitutive, we need to rely on other faculties, including reason, to process these perceptions and judgements. Even a visual image is never located in a separated aesthetic realm. The perceived effects of a painting, for instance, are

77. Nicolas Higgins, 'Image and Identity: Mexican Indians and Photographic Art', in *Social Alternatives* 20, no. 4 (2001): 22-36.

78. *Ibid.*, 35.

79. *Ibid.*, 26.

80. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 14-18.

81. See Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, 3-4 and Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 40-49.

clearly different from the process of understanding and judging them, yet alone communicating the so-experienced sensation to others. The latter is a linguistic process, even though it originates in and refers to a non-linguistic realm. This is why understanding art, or politics for that matter, expresses an aesthetic relationship not only to a given object, but also to the 'history of its effect'.⁸² Sensibility and imagination can offer an encounter with this history. They can reorient our thoughts in a way that a mimetic process of recognition cannot. It is in this sense that a work of art can serve as an example of thought that generates productive flows between sensibility and reason, memory and imagination or between 'mind, body and soul, thought, power and desire'.⁸³

Reclaiming the Political Value of the Aesthetic

The fact that through the work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalise it away.⁸⁴

The political value of the aesthetic needs to be reclaimed; not because it can offer us an authentic or superior form of insight, but because the modern triumph of technological reason has eclipsed creative expression from our political purview. The dilemmas that currently haunt world politics, from terrorism to raising inequalities, are far too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence to understand and deal with them. Indeed, solutions to entrenched political problems can by definition not be found through the thinking patterns that have created them in the first place. A sustained and critical engagement with technological reason, Heidegger stresses, 'must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it'.⁸⁵

There are major disagreements, however, about how to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic. At least two distinct approaches are visible. The first is exemplified by the modernist movement and its promotion of *l'art pour l'art*. Art, then, is seen as having no other purpose but itself. In such a situation, says Clement Greenberg, 'content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything but itself'.⁸⁶ Heated debates did, of course, emerge about the relative merits of art that seeks to be autonomous from society. For some, a piece of art that represents nothing outside of itself lacks political relevance. By contrast, those who defend the autonomous

82. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxxi.

83. Costas Constantinou, 'Hippopolis/Cynopolis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 787.

84. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxiii.

85. Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', 341.

86. Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 [1939]), 531-32.

work of art locate its political relevance precisely in the attempt to create a critical distance from moral norms and social practices. Adorno, for instance, feared that committed and overtly political art is already a form of accommodation, for it often merely struggles in the name of a noble cause that has already become a political trend. Autonomous art, thus, contains critical potential precisely because of its refusal to identify itself with the socio-political, because of its hidden 'it should be otherwise'.⁸⁷ This is why, for Gadamer, the key difference between the natural and human sciences lies with the latter's aesthetic consciousness which, he argues, 'includes an alienation from reality'.⁸⁸ For both Gadamer and Adorno this autonomy has limits: while loosing its historicity by self-consciously distancing itself from representational objectives, the work of art remains historical insofar as an understanding of it cannot take place outside the cultural sphere in which the perceiver operates. 'Art is autonomous and it is not', Adorno would say.⁸⁹ But some commentators would go further.

In the process of creating critical distance from moral norms and mimetic conventions, the modernist search for an autonomous aesthetic sphere may, paradoxically, have undermined its very power to provide significant insight into the political. Or so argue a number of commentators who, in the wake of Heidegger, have explored how efforts to secure an autonomous domain of aesthetic judgement have contributed to its separation from the realm of modern science and technological reason.⁹⁰ The latter, of course, have meanwhile been elevated to the most widely shared form of legitimate knowledge. Technological reason has led to 'a kind of revealing that is an ordering', and 'where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing'.⁹¹ The only legitimate production of knowledge left today is intrinsically linked to mimetic forms of representation, for, as Heidegger stresses, the revealing promoted through modern technology 'puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such'.⁹²

This is why one of the main political challenges today may consist not of retaining the autonomous sphere of art, but of rendering the aesthetic central again as a way of promoting non-coercive relationships among different faculties. It is essential that ensuing legitimisation processes reach beyond the Western sources and values that still dominate most approaches to aesthetics. This process is, thus, intrinsically linked with the challenge of internationalising the aesthetic, with redeeming the unthought cultural insights that remain eclipsed by the present obsession with the occidental gaze.

Indeed, the sensibility that the aesthetic promotes, and that technological reason is unable to apprehend, revolves precisely around the unknown, the unseen and the

87. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Art in Theory*, 762.

88. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 84.

89. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

90. The 'definitive' text here is Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*.

91. Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', 332.

92. *Ibid.*, 320.

unthought. For Walter Benjamin this is the very task of art: to generate a demand for which a sense of need has not yet arisen.⁹³ To think of the unthinkable, however, is not as far-fetched as it seems at first sight. Most people experience moments when the language available to them is not adequately suited to express exactly what they feel. For Gadamer, this common occurrence is particularly pronounced when we are faced with a work of visual art; a confrontation that highlights the extent to which our desire and capacity for understanding goes beyond our ability to communicate them through verbal statements and propositions.⁹⁴

Aesthetic explorations of sensibilities may well offer insights that cannot be reached or even comprehended by way of mimetic recognition of external appearances. It is important that they do not get lost in a political environment that tends to reduce strategic discussions to interactions among a few select members of the policy community. Especially at moments of incomprehension and despair, what is needed is not a return to the familiarity of past habits, reassuring as such a move may seem at first sight. Innovative solutions to entrenched political problems are unlikely to emerge from the mindset that has come to frame existing political interactions. What is needed is a more fundamental aesthetic encounter that explores, as James Der Derian suggests, 'how reality is seen, framed, read, and generated in the conceptualisation and actualisation of the global event'.⁹⁵ Decisions that emerge from encounters between imagination and technological reason can never be based on certainty. That is, indeed, the very essence of a decision: that it is a leap of faith beyond the known. A decision is a terrible thing, Søren Kierkegaard already knew, because its consequences cannot be calculated at the moment it is taken.⁹⁶ Knowledge cannot absolve us from taking responsibility. But our decisions would be better informed, and our political options would broaden significantly, if we found more ways of appreciating the insight of those who aesthetically explore, with whatever means available to them, the multitude of interactions that exists between different faculties, including those that had been banished or subjugated by the prevalence of technological reason.

Conclusion

On the path which leads to that which is to be thought, all begins with sensibility.⁹⁷

93. Walter Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 162.

94. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 401.

95. Der Derian, 'Global Events, National Security and Virtual Theory'.

96. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannary (London: Penguin, 1985) and Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999).

97. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 144.

No representation, even the most systematic empirical analysis, can be identical with its object of inquiry. Any form of representation is inevitably a process of interpretation and abstraction. The power of aesthetics, and its political relevance, lies in this inevitability. This is why the discipline of it could profit immensely, both in theory and in practice, from supplementing its social scientific conventions with approaches that problematise representation. Paraphrasing Gadamer, we could then recognise how we make every interpretation of world politics into a picture.⁹⁸ We chose a particular representation, detach it from the world it came from. We then frame it and hang it on a wall, usually next to other pictures that aesthetically resemble them. We arrange them all in an exhibition and display them to the public. In this manner we have all admired 'blockbuster' exhibitions of realist and liberal masterpieces of world politics. Some of us may have visited the occasional smaller exhibit of, say feminist and postmodern sketches of the international. Or perhaps we have stumbled upon an opening of a new postcolonial gallery, or caught the occasional glimpse of a radical experimental installation. Such aesthetic adventures do not tend to be very popular with a public used to figurative eye-pleasers. The most admired paintings remain the old masterpieces: the massive and heroic realist canvases. Indeed, we love them so much that we have embarked on extensive and costly attempts to restore the gargantuan Thucydides and Machiavelli frescos that adorn the intellectual temples of our discipline. Some parts of the original paintings were faded, damaged or at times effaced altogether. Fortunately, though, the skilful restoring experts interpreted the missing brush strokes confidently and repainted them with gusto. All new and shiny again, our old and cherished masterpieces have meanwhile been displayed so often and admired for so long that their figurative form of representation has come to be viewed as real. We have forgotten that they too are, in essence, abstractions: representations of something that is quite distinct from what they represent. And in the age of globalisation and mechanical reproduction we have come to see these celebrated artistic representations multiply *ad infinitum*: reprinted in catalogues and books and posters and projected unto T-shirts and public buses and transposed into songs and films and other cultural memory banks.⁹⁹

But what if? What if we were to hold bold new 'blockbuster' exhibitions: arrangements of art not yet appreciated or even seen? Or abandoned the notion of 'blockbusters' altogether? Seek a fundamentally different understanding of art and its role in society, of politics and its relationship to aesthetics? What if we were to search for a cultural appreciation of painting techniques other than those few Western ones that have set the standards of beauty and taste? What if we rearranged the paintings that hang in our public buildings, our offices, our living rooms, our minds?

Yes, what if?

98. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

99. See Benjamin, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter'.

Perhaps we would then be more modest about our claims to know the realities of world politics. Perhaps we would grow more suspicious of judging interpretations of the international by the extent to which they reassure us of the familiar inevitability of entrenched political patterns, violent-prone as they are. Perhaps insights into world politics could then be judged, with Gadamer, by their aesthetic qualities, that is, by their ability to project a form of truth that is not linked to an exclusive mode of representation, a form of truth that 'opens up an open place'.

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