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Lola Frost
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Aesthetics and Politics

LOLA FROST

This article approaches the relationship between aesthetics and politics from a particular perspective, one to some extent articulated by Jacques Rancière. For Rancière aesthetic practices are informed by what he calls the aesthetic regime. In extending Rancière’s insights, I proceed from the assumption that aesthetic experience has a double character where artworks render thought foreign to itself and invite reflection on a range of political and discursive predicaments and thereby also engage issues pertinent to International Relations (IR). In this paper I sketch the contours of the aesthetic regime and its deployment in a selection of postcolonial and postmodern works of art and offer some thoughts on how this regime is implicated in global politics and how it relates to, and differs from, what has been termed the aesthetic turn in IR. My argument is that the performative and disruptive politics of aesthetic practices are at odds with all reflective and interpretive practices, even if both disruption and reflection are components of aesthetic experience. In making this claim I hope to make a contribution to understanding how the products and practices of the aesthetic regime not only service the provision of insights about the predicaments of global or international politics but also are the enactment of a politics that prevaricates between sense and understanding.

Introduction

I begin with a brief consideration of the contours of the aesthetic turn in international relations (IR) and of the politics of the aesthetic regime. Roland Bleiker coined the term the aesthetic turn in his article titled “The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory” in 2001. In addressing the shortcomings of mainstream and realist IR Bleiker proposed that aesthetic practices, generally conceived, are political in so far as they promote a complex interplay between our cognitive, imaginative, perceptual and interpretive capacities. From this perspective the aesthetic turn in IR is understood to be a reflective and interpretive practice that informs our political understandings and actions. Furthermore, in making the aesthetic turn, IR writers mobilise interpretive faculties and methods that have been denigrated by the hegemonic realist regimes that have dominated the study and practice of IR in the late 20th century. Bleiker’s point is that mimetic or representational practices valued within realist systems are the articulation of certain power relations. In mobilising the excessive, plural,
interpretive and reflective protocols of a general field called the aesthetic, political theorists and actors can resist the values of rationalising anti-aesthetic regimes that have dominated world politics. He writes: “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 mimetic recognition of external appearances towards an approach that generates a more diverse but also more direct encounter with the political.” Broadly speaking, this conception of the politics of aesthetics has been enthusiastically and productively taken up by IR scholars committed to the aesthetic turn in the last two decades.

Many IR scholars qualify here but by way of example I mention only a few. Gerald Holden in his paper titled “Cinematic IR, the Sublime and the Indistinctness of Art” raises questions about the boundaries between the aesthetics of the sublime and IR, and how scholars of the aesthetic turn in IR need to specify the terms of this engagement. My paper here is an attempt to address such specificity from the perspective of being a practising artist who has some expertise in the field of aesthetics. Michael Shapiro makes the case for the production of a “subject-in-disarray” by a sublime encounter staged in Steven Frear’s film *Dirty Pretty Things* and how this impacts on the production of global subjectivities, whilst Vivienne Jabri makes the case that sublime art mobilises an unrepresentable excess different from, and in resistance to, the politics of spectacle which was deployed by the Bush regime in the United States’ use of shock and awe bombing in Iraq. Both Shapiro and Jabri engage with the disruptive effects of art, as does my paper, but my contribution is written from the perspective of drawing out the distinctions between aesthetic practices and the study of IR. This paper is also not a contribution to a field of hermeneutic studies in IR, where, for example, Cerwyn Moore’s paper titled “Reading the Hermeneutics of Violence: The Literary Turn and Chechnya” seeks to find ways of understanding violence through the study of literature. Unlike Stephen Chan’s memorable book *The End of Certainty: Towards a New Internationalism*, which not only reinvigorates IR academic writing by deploying an aged essayist style but also forcefully and richly invites us to rethink and re-imagine the values and facts of an emerging global world order, this paper considers the subversive role of the aesthetic regime in global aesthetic practices.

It is the aesthetic writings of Roland Bleiker that most inform this paper. In his paper titled “The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory” Bleiker argues that aesthetic approaches engage a gap that opens up between the form of representation and the object of that representation and that this hiatus is the very space of politics. He goes on to identify this gap with the arbitrariness of the sign, and with the gap between the signifier and the signified and how

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this gap always invites interpretation.\footnote{7} Seen from this perspective all signs are open to interpretation.\footnote{8} I would suggest, however, that the aesthetic regime mobilises a particular type of signification in its objects and practices, one which makes thought strange to itself. It is this distinction that sits at the heart of my argument, which is indebted to Rancière’s, in so far as aesthetic objects and practices mobilise a dissensual politics that operates in the gap between thought and that which cannot be thought, and that such processes of signification both invite and refuse interpretation. Understood in this way those objects and practices of the aesthetic regime enact a politics of resistance to all thought, even if such objects and practices paradoxically also provoke interpretation and understanding.

In his book \textit{Aesthetics and World Politics}\textsuperscript{9} Bleiker defends the idea that aesthetic practices matter in the study and practice of IR in so far as aesthetic sources are models for rethinking political global predicaments. Here, aesthetic practices can improve the political understanding of political theorists and practitioners because they “can offer important insight into the nature and meaning of international events”.\textsuperscript{10} This dialogical approach is predicated on a hermeneutics which “opens up an open place”\textsuperscript{11} between the negativities of aesthetic practices and the positivities of political theory. Bleiker introduces his discussion in this book with a quote from Gadamer’s \textit{Truth and Method}\textsuperscript{12} which states: “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.”\textsuperscript{13} I suggest that there is a tension in Bleiker’s position, between such recognition of art’s singularity and its capacity to improve political understanding. This paper goes some way in making sense of this tension.

For Rancière the dissensual politics of the aesthetic regime are not predicated on the improvements they make to thinking through the predicaments of world politics or to resisting certain power relations, for example modernism, patriarchy and colonialism. Instead, aesthetic practices are deemed to be political in so far as they both sustain their distinctiveness from other spheres of experience and are “‘ways of making and doing’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of making and doing.”\textsuperscript{14} Such interventions are political because they disrupt the accepted order of things. Furthermore, for Rancière, the specificities of the aesthetic regime were instantiated as a resistance to a representative or mimetic regime in the arts. The aesthetic regime is thus situated and discursive. In his book \textit{The Politics of Aesthetics} he resists the idea that this aesthetic regime is associated with the emancipatory politics of modernity but is simply associated with an epoch in which artistic products are inhabited by a “form of thought that has become foreign to itself”\textsuperscript{15}.

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item Roland Bleiker, \textit{Aesthetics and World Politics} (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
\item \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 186.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 47.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 18.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 23.
\end{enumerate}
Rancière’s ideas are central to the distinctions I draw between aesthetic objects and practices and reflective interpretation, in so far as aesthetic objects and events resist unambiguous thought by mobilising the indeterminate negativities of aesthetic affect (emotion, perception, sensation) and of aesthetic signifying processes which produce confusion, indeterminacy, ambivalence and irresolution. Understood in this way, those objects and practices proper to the aesthetic regime invite a politics of experience. We might therefore understand that this regime has its own history and politics. It has been a highly valued discourse in the history of Western culture and continues to spread its influence in the new global order. But it is a regime that is under threat from, or in competition with, other discourses. For example, it exists in an antagonistic relation to realist, bureaucratic, instrumental and rationalist regimes, themselves opposed to disruptive, aesthetic and interpretive practices. The aesthetic regime is also in competition with artistic regimes critical of and opposed to, the sensibilities required by thought being made strange to itself. It also exists, I suggest, in a complex relation to disciplines like cultural theory and art history which are generally structured by categories of knowledge and taxonomies of identification and are thereby committed to clear and unambiguous thought.

We might also note that the contours of the aesthetic regime differ from those of the aesthetic turn in IR. The politics of the aesthetic regime are predicated on aesthetic effects and processes which render thought foreign to itself and thereby provoke reflection, whereas the aesthetic turn in IR (like all interpretive practices) renders the art objects and practices it engages, irrespective of their aesthetic qualities, open to thought, comparison, education, political action and critical reflection. This distinction has consequences because it marks a politics in which aesthetic objects and practices sustain their independence from the theoretical and interpretive practices which frame or supplement them, by making thought strange to itself. This tension sits at the heart of our struggles to think through the politics of aesthetics.

In addressing this conundrum, my argument, indebted to both Kant and Rancière, is that aesthetic events register a double moment, which, at its most basic, is both a destabilising aesthetic or performative experience where thought is made strange to itself and a moment of reflection on the aesthetic, political or ethical consequences of this experience. For Rancière the “aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself. Moreover, this is the moment of the formation and education of a specific type of humanity.” For Rancière art produced within the aesthetic regime is disruptive because it is “inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced”. This is a singular process which “establishes the autonomy of art”. Rancière’s understanding of aesthetic disruption is thus indebted to the Kantian idea of aesthetic autonomy and to the dialectical relation that exists between aesthetic ideas and reflective judgement. In The Critique of Judgement Kant argues that “an aesthetic idea, cannot become a cognition, because it is an intuition (of the
imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found”. The aesthetic idea, from this perspective, is an indeterminate event in which the imagination is disfigured or interrupted. This disruption in turn provokes a determinate judgement, one which reassembles thought and invites reflection. This double moment not only registers the core identifying politics of the aesthetic regime which is to disable thought but also multiple political interests available to thought, critique, education and use.

The Aesthetic Regime

The aesthetic regime is usually registered in romantic and modernist art as a dialectical operation between the negativity of affect and the positivity of reflective understanding, an arrangement which takes the disruptiveness of aesthetic experience seriously even as this presumes the constitutive effects of reflection and understanding. This dialectical relation was challenged within postmodernism, which registered a distrust of the supposedly emancipatory effects of the project of modernity whilst still sustaining a relation to the aesthetic regime in its commitments to unrepresentability. For Lyotard, sublime feeling is prior to events and understanding. It is an event where the “relation of thought to the object breaks down”. The postmodern sublime is thus characterised by the uncoupling of the relation between unrepresentable aesthetic affect and reflective interpretation. Against that postmodern scepticism Nicholas Bourriaud, the curator of the 2009 Tate Triennial titled Altermodern, has proposed a new episode of the aesthetic regime. In this schema the protocols through which art makes thought strange to itself not only engage the estrangement of time and place, or a “heterochrony” as he calls it, and the displacement of the margin/metropole binary, but revive the dialectical relation between aesthetic experience and reflective interpretation. What we have then is a re-articulation of the contours of the aesthetic regime, but also a preservation of its dual features: where thought is made strange and where reflection on that strangeness services, in this case, an idea of global mobility and interconnectedness. Understood in this way the aesthetic regime not only enables and regulates its practitioners, and invites resistance, but also dispenses power in an anarchic and global order.

The protocols of the aesthetic regime presume that any engagement with a work of art is experience specific. Such specificity implies that the aesthetic features of works of art cannot be confined to the conceptual supplements we bring to, or take from them, in the form of prior and prejudicial knowledge and interpretive understanding, or through reproduction and exhibition supplements (pamphlets, photographs, etc.). My analysis of the following artworks is thus dependent on an actual experience of these works even as my interpretation of this experience also presumes that I do so from the perspective of my existing cultural knowledge and prejudices. The paradoxical feature of this regime is that its products stage a

gap between sense and understanding through a variety of techniques that are affect specific even as it presumes our need to frame or situate these through conceptualisation and interpretive reflection. In this paper I consider how artworks mobilise sublime irresolution, beauty, abject feeling, sensation or indeterminacy in the service of aesthetic affect.

Aesthetic tropes like these, I suggest, are inherent to the products and processes of the aesthetic regime which render thought strange to itself and are to be distinguished from the products and practices of other artistic regimes and cultures. For example, art which unambiguously negotiates certain power relations, like murals made by township residents in South Africa in the early 1990s which registered the political struggles of Africans against the forces of apartheid. Such art, in delivering an unambiguous political message, was not at all interested in making thought strange to itself. From a different perspective, cultures with non-modern values, like that of Aboriginal Australians, whose dream paintings have become so popular today, are informed by a set of structures internal to it that make spiritual links between generations and places. Reading these values through the prism of the values of the aesthetic regime may engage Western viewers of these works, and possibly accounts for their contemporary popularity, but the aesthetic inherent to an ancient Aboriginal culture is not guided by the imperative to make thought strange to itself, or at least not in a way that resists modern instrumental reason.

If the core feature of the aesthetic regime is to render thought strange to itself, the way artworks do so varies immensely. For example, Siemon Allen’s *The Birds* is a large wall “tapestry” made from a copy of Alfred Hitchcock’s film titled *The Birds.*22 This work mobilises a trope of cultural integration through its reference to African weaving practices. But this work also overwhelms its cultural politics, for any viewer the primary signifying event is the experience of unspeakable affect. This large shimmering and beautiful object refuses comprehension and only announces its identity as a particular film in the smallest of unreadable 16 mm frames. Here, thought is rendered foreign to itself in ways that we might, upon reflection, identify as sublime, as something we cannot name, even as we experience it as overwhelming. Allen’s work thus engages that double moment that characterises the aesthetic regime, a moment where thought is disabled, which in turn provokes a multitude of reflections which include its cultural politics and its sublime identity.

Nicholas Hlobo’s work titled *Ingubo Yesiwe,* on show at Tate Modern in early 2009, consists of hundreds of small pieces of leather and rubber stitched together to make a large tadpole-shaped and bestial object.23 The exhibition pamphlet explains that the use of leather on the top surface of this abject “thing” relates to the importance of cattle in Xhosa culture and that the use of rubber on the bottom signifies the degraded material of violent urbanisation.24 This supplement describes a particular identity politics which interrogates, but which also sustains the binary between the superioriety of traditional African culture and the terrors of

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modern urbanisation. We are also called upon to reflect how the display of this artist’s work in Tate Modern is the tentative displacement of the margin/metropole binary with a conversation between locales. Such additional and contextual information may well make this work accessible and comprehensible, but it is, I stress, the aesthetic character of this bestial object that makes this transfer less an exercise in IR and more an enactment of aesthetic disruption. For this abject object renders thought foreign to itself, even as it provokes us to stabilise that experience with a moment of reflection and mark its postcolonial politics.

Berni Searle’s video artwork titled *Alibama* and exhibited at the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town in 2008 also engages identity politics and aesthetic feeling.\(^{25}\) It consists of two interrelated scenes: as a beautiful rendering in Afrikaans of the song “Daar kom die Alibama”, sung by a Cape Malay male choir which commemorates the advent of the American Confederate ship *The Alabama* passing the Cape in 1863. This song is accompanied by a view of a woman and a boy throwing red streamers off a parapet at sunset and which is extended into the slow panning of a visual field across the sea from Camps Bay to Robben Island. A visual burst of light and the sound blast of cannon breaks this emotionally moving and contemplative narrative, which is then replaced by the discordant and hesitant singing of a mother and child of the same song, as we watch a small red paper boat eddy about unsteadily in a bath of water as the colour of black paper streamers bleeds into the water.

The formal symmetry and beauty of this work is a container for its formless longing, a longing without boundaries, even as this may also be associated with the predicaments and identity politics of local South African populations. This heterochronic work moves backwards and forwards in time, in and out of history, from the tip of a continent to infinity. As such it mobilises the core feature of the aesthetic regime, where affective beauty and the displacement of time render thought strange to itself. In turn, this estrangement prompted me to reflect on how through a collection of traces we might re-imagine ourselves, recollect our histories and constitute ourselves in new social relations (reflection always entails each individual’s prejudices, cultural perspectives, and aesthetic and theoretical competences).

Jeremy Wafer’s work titled *Stones* (alternatively titled *Xoe*) occupies similar territory.\(^{26}\) This work was exhibited in 2000 as an installation in the small hamlet of Nieuw Bethesda, in the dry stony area of the Karroo. It is articulated as a series of framed photographs, each of which is an image of a stone, 10 centimetre square and hung on a barbed wire fence at intervals of 10 metres for a total distance of one kilometre. These repetitions imply that it could exist as a series which covers vast distances, in so far as this code could shift from intervals of 10 to 100, or 1,000 kilometres, so that this installation could extend, as the artist has suggested, from the Karroo to Australia. Yet the aesthetic character of this work is not only activated by these possible extensions of its internal code but also by the disruption of its codes of display. For the display of photographs of stones, as the displacement of materials freely available on site, on a fence and not a
gallery wall, produces such a confusion of categories that thought again is made foreign to itself. This privation could provoke us to reflect not only on the possible extension of the code sketched above but also on the metaphorical, social and historical meanings of fences and boundaries and spaces which stretch from South Africa to Australia ... and beyond. Such reflection could engage political issues pertinent to the study of IR: disputes about boundaries, histories of exclusion, practices of oppression, sites of resistance, etc.

Pieter Hugo’s 2009 exhibition titled Nollywood (also at the Michael Stevenson Gallery) consisted of a series of photographs of re-enacted tableaux in which Nigerian actors deployed local symbolic imagery used extensively in the Nigerian film industry, to create bizarre, surreal and beastly scenes like this one titled Princess Adoabi.27 Hugo’s staged photographs could be read as the spectacularisation of otherness. Exotic otherness usually functions within a primitivist discourse as the binary opposite of European civilisation, and thus also sustains the margin/metropole power relation characteristic of colonial discourses.

The exhibition website makes the point that the large and successful Nigerian film industry mobilises a persistent aesthetic that is “loud, violent, excessive, nothing is said, everything shouted”.28 Two features of this exhibition invite the viewer to go beyond the colonial and primitivist discourses sketched above: firstly, the sensationalist, loud and excessive properties of these photographs operate as a parody of primitivism, and secondly the exhibition supplement offers a key to rethinking how the depiction of such violent excess is not the enactment of the spectacularisation of otherness, but its deconstruction. This photograph titled Princess Adoabi mobilises aspects of the aesthetic regime in so far as sensation and spectacle render thought strange to itself, but such strangeness is offset by the conceptual manoeuvres we are required to make in thinking through the critical postcolonial politics of this work.

By contrast, Marcus Coates’ video titled The Plover’s Wing: The Mayor of Holon 2009, included in the Altermodern Exhibition at Tate Britain curated by Nicholas Bourriaud, puts the aesthetic regime under pressure.29 It does so by engaging aesthetic strategies associated with rendering thought strange to itself, but also renders them inauthentic. This artwork records an interaction between the Israeli Mayor of Holon, in his office with his female translator, and the artist dressed up as a shaman (wearing a stuffed badger on his head and with a stuffed rabbit peeping out of his jacket). The interview starts with the artist asking the mayor if he has any problems. The mayor replies that he does have difficulties with some unruly youths in his city. In diagnosing a “solution” to these difficulties Coates performs himself like an animal, where he shivers and squeaks in what seems to be a trance. Having emerged from it he then recounts his “shamanistic” insights by drawing an analogy between the antics of the plover he “saw” in his trance, which involved pretending to have broken wing when confronted by danger, and all defensive


techniques which mobilise victimhood as a reason for offence. The muted responses of the mayor and his translator register that this moral allegory about inappropriate defensive techniques has hit the mark.

We might note that this work refuses any aesthetic indeterminacy and remains a perfectly communicable and educative exercise. In other words, even if this work invites reflection via the aesthetic categories of allegory and shamanistic performance, it also does not function as a vehicle for making thought foreign to itself because it renders those categories inauthentic and entirely known. Furthermore, in so far as this work engages a postcolonial politics by obliquely addressing the failings of the Israeli government, it also fails to provoke critical thinking and tolerance for differences. For despite its allegorical complexity one could argue that it registers an unreflective binary where the Mayor of Holon and his translator are unwittingly folded into a narrative which makes them signs of an oppressive regime, against which the viewer is invited to imagine his or her moral superiority.

This work does not render thought strange to itself, and could thus be understood as a successful critique of the hegemonic forces of the aesthetic regime. For others, the rather crude binary it sets up between the “guilty” mayor and his assistant and the “virtuous” spectator registers a shallow and perhaps “politically correct” politics. These differences are, however, all registered at the level of reflection and eschew the tension that characterises the gap that exists between aesthetic processes and experiences and reflective judgements. Coates’ artwork, like political and social theory, is fully knowable. In this work, reflection and interpretation cannot register the dissensual politics of the aesthetic regime because, unlike the art works discussed above, in The Plover’s Wing, thought has not been made strange to itself.

In a similar vein, Kendell Geers’ work titled A Guest + A Host = A Ghost exhibited at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London in January 2010 challenges the assumptions of the aesthetic regime in so far as this installation of meaningless letter-like forms arranged as cut-outs over a reflective mirror is both an event where thought has been made strange to itself and a deconstruction of that presumption. This glossy but dadaesque work does register the indeterminacy of aesthetic sensation, which in turn provokes cognition and interpretation. But the “nonsense” of this work only makes sense if one understands this work as a critique of the aesthetic regime in which thought is made strange to itself. Such critical conceptualisation is typically postmodern, and, like The Plover’s Wing, is designed to put the normal protocols of aesthetic regime in crisis, even as it also ironically makes use of this practice.

This discussion of art has made the point that there is a global politics at work within the aesthetic regime, between those who conform to the protocols of this regime by making thought strange by staging a gap between sense and cognition, and for those who play at doing so but also resist or critique that aesthetic requirement. This is, of course, an old in-house art politics, one which fuelled the antagonisms between modernism and postmodernism. For some the now global reach of this regime signals the establishment of a worldwide discourse in which the rationalising and instrumental values of modernity are put under pressure, whilst others might see this as the global dispersal of metropolitan and liberal values.

If this discussion of these postcolonial and postmodern artworks has drawn out themes and ideas relevant to the study and practice of IR and global politics, it has also consistently approached these works in terms of their ability or refusal to make thought strange to itself. Such image analysis may not be entirely different to the kinds of analyses that scholars of the aesthetic turn in IR bring to their interpretations of aesthetic and artistic objects and practices. Yet the novel feature of my analysis is that I have been insisting that artworks with commitments to the aesthetic regime are not fully captured by the interpretive analyses we bring to them because at some level each image uniquely has an aesthetic dimension which makes thought strange to itself. To insist on this separation is to acknowledge a politics that operates between those objects and practices which make thought strange to itself and our powerful and political, and indeed also academic, expectations, to understand, codify, apply or interpret. This difficult and political distinction is at times overlooked by theorists who might conceive of art as an opportunity to mobilise or interrogate political issues that belong to non-aesthetic practices and discourses. Such assumptions are not necessarily the property of theorists of the aesthetic turn in IR, but of all those who presume that politics applies only to those categories we can name, understand and argue about. The great insight that Rancière make available to us is that even those objects and practices which make thought strange to itself, and which are available only as aesthetic experience, are also political.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this article I have argued that the aesthetic regime has a core identity which mobilises a double politics. Firstly, its multiple and complex aesthetic affects and disruptive manoeuvres render thought foreign to itself, and secondly where such aesthetic experience becomes an opportunity for reflection, interpretation and education. This second and reflective moment is usually considered to be the site for politics and hence the enactment of themes relevant to IR, but following Rancière, I have argued that the disruptions of aesthetic experience which render thought strange to itself are themselves political.

The aesthetic regime, like all regimes, is a space of regulation and of resistance. It operates in competition with other discourses and includes all those who participate in the production and dissemination of its protocols. Yet this regime is also structured by the division of labour. Artists committed to it spend a lot of time, energy and political expertise on perfecting techniques for making thought foreign to itself. In this paper I have identified how some postcolonial artists do so through aesthetic categories we identify as sublime, abject, beautiful, sensational or indeterminate, and how selected postmodern artists refuse such aesthetic categories in the interests of degrading or deconstructing aesthetic feeling. Any theorist who succeeded in doing so would no longer be called a theorist, but would become an artist! However, the substantive tension explored in this paper has been the political differences that exist between dissensual and performative aesthetic practices and reflective and interpretive practices. In making a separation between the disruptive politics of aesthetic objects and practices, and a politics of interpretation (in which we might be invited to think, for example, how films like Dirty Pretty Things produces a “subject-in-disarray”, or how the photograph titled Princess Adoabi
reconfigures colonial prejudices), I have highlighted the tension that exists between
the immersions of aesthetic experience and the abstractions\textsuperscript{31} of reflective under-
standing and interpretation. This tension, which is constitutive of aesthetic experi-
ence, is often inflected in ways that privilege cognitive understanding, perhaps
because our core values and indeed also our academic expectations are so
embedded in the positivities of unambiguous thought. What is at stake here is
what we configure as political. I have argued that the negativities of aesthetic
disruption are political and that they exist in political relation to the positivities
of reflection and understanding, a tension that needs to be borne in mind so that we
might avoid overwhelming a politics of affect with one based on cognition.

It is also necessary to point out that all those who engage with the aesthetic
regime, including theorists of the aesthetic turn in IR, have a role to play in reflect-
ing upon and disseminating the political effects of aesthetic practices and the
social and political insights embedded in artworks. Such reflection might reveal
how artistic and aesthetic methods, tropes and insights shed very pertinent
light on the predicaments of global politics and the values embedded in the pol-
itical languages we use. These reflective and political practices may have enabled
scholars of the aesthetic turn in IR to resist an internal field dominated by realist
and liberal political ideas and re-articulate an academic field attentive to multiple
political interests and techniques.

I end with some reflections on the role of the aesthetic regime in global politics.
Rancière claims that the aesthetic regime is simply to be associated with an epoch
in which artistic products are inhabited by thought becoming foreign to itself. We
might, however, understand that the aesthetic regime is also an anarchic and glo-
balising practice in which thought and that which makes thought strange to itself
are held in tension. The success of this global practice (one like, for example, the
two anarchic social and global practices, the society of sovereign states and global
civil society, which promote tolerance and diversity)\textsuperscript{32} is perhaps due to its
capacity to subvert the regulating, instrumental and rationalising assumptions
of a liberal order committed to tolerance and diversity. I suggest that the global
reach of this aesthetic practice is structured by those global practices with commit-
ments to a liberal, rights-based and regulatory order, even if the aesthetic regime
exists in an agonistic and subversive relation to those hegemonic values. The sub-
versive commitments of this global practice are already evident in the postcolonial
works under discussion in this paper, even if it remains an open question whether
those postmodern works which do not sustain the gap between sense and concep-
tualisation subvert anything other than the protocols of the aesthetic regime.

My contribution here has been to register a politics of aesthetics, one that hovers
between sensation and cognition, and to mark the differences that exist between the
aesthetic regime (whose aesthetic objects and practices make thought strange to
itself even as we are provoked to think about the consequences or conditions of
that strangeness) and the aesthetic turn in IR, understood as a reflective and inter-
pretive practice which addresses the relation between aesthetic and artistic pro-
ducts and international political theory.

\textsuperscript{31} In comparing the paintings of Cy Twombly and the writings of Kenneth Waltz, Christine Sylvester
makes a similar point in her paper titled “Art, Abstraction, and International Relations”, \textit{Millen-

\textsuperscript{32} Mervyn Frost makes this case in his book \textit{Global Ethics: Anarchy, Freedom and International Relations}