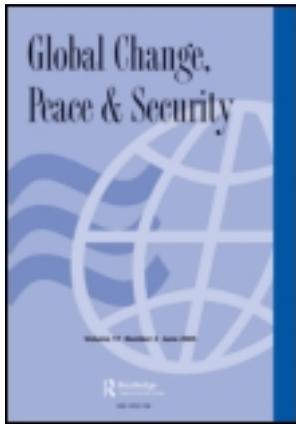


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Publisher: Routledge

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Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cpar20>

Aesthetics and world politics

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Version of record first published: 22 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: N. A.J. Taylor (2010): Aesthetics and world politics, *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 22:3, 391-392

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2010.510275>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Aesthetics and world politics, by Roland Bleiker, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 272 pp., US\$85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4039-9575-9

A common problem with an aesthetic approach to the study of international relations is neatly expressed in the history of a single photograph. Commissioned by the British to document the ‘reality’ of the Crimean War, one of Robert Fenton’s most lasting images is that of spent cannonballs, strewn along a road. Yet in fact, as art historian Ulrich Keller argues nearly 150 years later (*The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War*, New York, Routledge, 2001), the photograph entitled *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* was staged; Fenton is known to have taken a second shot of precisely the same scene, albeit with piles of cannonballs clustered by the roadside, and the road cleared. As Keller argues, the cannonballs were either carefully placed on the road to give an immediacy to Fenton’s image that it would otherwise have lacked, or Fenton took a second exposure after the cannonballs were removed so that his cart could continue on just behind the battle. Roland Bleiker’s *Aesthetics and World Politics* invites us to risk a more ambitious reading.

Aesthetic politics – of which there is a small, but growing, number of proponents – acknowledges that any representation of ‘reality’ is necessarily altered by the way in which it is presented. There are two implications for understanding Fenton’s *Valley*. First, Fenton’s subjective decision to photograph the valley from the road, rather than at a distance from it, compromises his status as an objective witness. And, second, any image, regardless of how faithfully captured, will be viewed and interpreted in various ways. There is, therefore, an inevitable ‘gap’ between the ‘reality’ Fenton sought to present and the ‘representation’ he achieves in the photograph.

According to Bleiker, it is how the gap between reality and representation is treated that gives aesthetic sources the potential to enhance our understanding of world politics. Whilst scholars of international relations pursue a mimetic representation of reality, aesthetic politics brings a reflective understanding to its many conflicts and dilemmas by presenting itself as a form of representation. Here ‘aesthetics’ refers to the insights and understandings about events and their human impact that the full range of arts – from photographs, music, paintings, film, literature, architecture, poetry – engender. In this way, Bleiker seeks to ‘reclaim the political value of the aesthetic, not to replace social science, but to broaden our abilities to comprehend and deal with the key dilemmas of world politics’ (p. 14).

Thus the greatest contribution might come not as we might expect from politically committed art, but from less conscious representations. Relying heavily on literature and poetry, Bleiker reasons that an aesthetic reading may provide insights regarding how events in world politics are ‘internalised in our minds, our habits and our collective political consciousness’ (p. 8). Art introduces creativity and imagination, and thus ‘challenges the modern tendency to reduce the political to the rational’ (p. 11). I tend to agree with Bleiker that aesthetic politics has the capacity to recast social science as a form of interpretation so that the accepted conventions and approaches are recognized as shaping our understanding of world politics. For instance, the dominance of the English language in International Relations, some have

argued, constructs an ethnocentric world far simpler than the one its students might seek to address.

Indeed any attempt to introduce the aesthetic into International Relations must necessarily substantiate its critical departure from the dominant realist position, which Bleiker argues has become so entrenched as to present subjective positions as facts, and empirical data as independent evidence. In this way, the author's values and assumptions are either ignored or seen as unproblematic to the task at hand. Indeed, by painting the world in new and alternative ways, the intellectual hegemony realism shares with liberalism in policy discourse will be challenged, if not through the acquisition of knowledge itself, then by breaking the 'language of habit' (p. 11) which clouds our ability to see the subjectivity of how we represent. However, even scholars such as John Ruggie and Alexander Wendt, who assert that reality is socially constructed, resist turning to aesthetic sources for guidance and inspiration. Acceptance of aesthetic sources is therefore limited to those who accept that its usefulness comes not from any construction of the real, but from challenging what these theories have come to accept as fact.

Aesthetics and World Politics demonstrates its usefulness most effectively when reflecting on the particular security challenges that were posed by the 11 September 2001 attacks. In so far as the targets were aesthetic symbols – the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House – the means and method of attack further questioned the social scientific conceptualisation of world events. The events of 11 September call for an aesthetic engagement simply because 9/11, whilst having real consequences, involved and evoked an emotional response from the political community. Critics might reasonably argue that art has little relevance for the military policy required to address global terrorism, and that drawing on the aesthetic necessitates a choice regarding the types and forms that are called upon. Here Bleiker suggests that more work needs to be done, both in developing the number of empirical studies as well as in building a more ordered sub-community of International Relations scholars committed to exploring aesthetic politics.

Even Bleiker, however, cannot avoid the irony of an 'aesthetically inspired author' (p. 186) arguing that the current problems of world politics are 'too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence to understand and deal with them' (p. 1), and yet then writing a book in the language of the academy. This results, at times, in his book reading like a needlessly tentative and apologetic critique. Bleiker must now employ these ideas where they might be most effective: with a more general audience that views world events through reading newspapers and watching television and by engaging with works of art and song lyrics.

And whilst Bleiker's thesis is not altogether innovative – for instance, in 1997 the war artist George Gittoes was awarded the Member of the Order of Australia for 'services to the arts and international relations', and in 2003 Picasso's horrific statement of war, *Guernica*, which hangs just outside the entrance to the United Nations Security Council, was covered as US Secretary of State Colin Powell pleaded for support for the war against Iraq – he does present a coherent and sustained argument in support of the aesthetic insight in international politics. To my mind, this reaffirms the notion that Fenton's image can be useful, not as conclusive evidence of what 'really' happened during the Crimean War, but as an aesthetic object and a document of how one photographer chose to represent it. That is, after all, what Fenton was employed to do.

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Walk with us and listen: political reconciliation in Africa, by Charles Villa-Vicencio, Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 2009, 248 pp., US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-58901-572-2

Once the killing has finished, when the guns have gone quiet and the machetes or the *pangas* have been turned into proverbial ploughshares, after the political compromises have been bought, and once the peacekeepers have gone, what does it mean to achieve political reconciliation? Does it mean that a deeply divided society returns to how things were 'before'? No, that is impossible – 'before' is where the horror started. The dead are still dead, the dismembered remain to remind and accuse us, and the causes of the strife and conflict are as present as ever.

Or is the solution an embrace of formal mechanisms of justice, of institutionalised retribution? Trials, public shaming and punishments meted out to those few who are caught and can be successfully prosecuted? Surely such a strictly legal path would exclude too much, too many would remain unpunished, too many injustices would go unavenged. And how can punitive measures on their own, without something more, be constructive and facilitate a sustainable future, one shared equally by victims and perpetrators?

There are no easy answers to these questions. In *Walk with Us and Listen*, Charles Villa-Vicencio does not pretend to know how these problems can be solved. Instead, he educates the reader about the complexity of transitional justice and political reconciliation. The author is well qualified to do this: he was the executive director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town from 2000 to 2007, and before that he was the national research director of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This pioneering body was chaired by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu (who contributes a thoughtful foreword to this book), and was an attempt to begin the process of healing that country's apartheid outrages. *Walk with Us and Listen* is a reflection on the TRC process, but goes beyond South Africa to consider the insights and lessons from other post-conflict African societies as well.

This book cautions against the arrogance of extrapolating so-called 'reconciliation best practice' from isolated contexts and applying them in different situations. It warns that the short-term seductiveness of punitive justice is spurious, and comes at the cost of a sustainable reconciliation in many different situations. The International Criminal Court (ICC) in particular should not be viewed as a panacea to be called upon in all instances; deeper social reflection and real political reconciliation should not be confused with rather restrictive and culturally specific notions of justice. Reconciliation is a process rather than a happy, tidy end result, and national conversations are required about the true meaning of forgiveness, atonement and a shared humanity. Such discourses cannot be imposed by any elite – legal or otherwise.

Walk with Us and Listen is organised into eight chapters: an introduction problematises the key concepts and issues, and is followed by three chapters that address peace-building and negotiation practices within an African context. The final five chapters address issues of transitional justice and political reconciliation in a more specific way, moving from the South African experience of its TRC to identifying the utility of traditional African reconciliation practices. The final chapter seeks to distil glimmers of an evolving consensus by synthesising cross-cultural experiences and lessons regarding reconciliation. Some of these insights include: that reconciliation does not necessarily involve forgiveness, but that it does interrupt established patterns of events; the importance of timing interventions, and of breaking silences about the past; that reconciliation requires an acknowledgement of the truth, of memory, and how these are used to recast notions of a shared future. Furthermore, and specifically aimed at those who are interested in the mechanisms for governing political reconciliation globally, the book demonstrates the imperative of greater transparency and debate concerning the priorities of the ICC, the role of the international community in national reconciliation projects, the

need for the ICC and national courts to cooperate, and a more circumspect analysis of the context within which international law is applied.

Ultimately, *Walk with Us and Listen* provides valuable insights into different views regarding notions of natural law and universal justice. The book challenges readers to consider a genuine conversation between rich and poor countries about decades and even centuries of structural violence. The shame and indignity of colonialism dehumanised the colonised and well as the colonisers, and there are important global conversations to be had if a wider reconciliation and a common humanity are to be found. Such a transformation would be a true 'theological moment', to use Max Horkheimer's phrase.

This is a thoughtful book that should appeal to scholars and practitioners alike. It is not a book only about Africa, and thus belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in the complexities and challenges of post-conflict societies.

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Private security contractors and new wars: risk, law and ethics, by Kateri Carmola. London and New York, Routledge, 2010, 189 pp., US\$140 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-77171-9

This book looks at the thorny issue of private military and security companies and their increasing role in war zones and high-risk areas. It can better be described as a collection of elucidating essays on the increasing privatisation of security, and the relationship between risk, law and ethics and private security contractors. Indirectly, the book also points out the global shifts, and transformations in the character of warfare, that make possible a conception of 'security as a commodity' with consequences for the business, governmental and humanitarian sectors.

The book starts by looking at the global conditions in which the existence of private military and security companies (or PMSCs as they are referred to by the author) was made possible. In doing so, the author carries out a historically based analysis of the phenomenon of security contractors, the changes to the armed forces of states, as well as the global and political circumstances that have allowed the consolidation of PMSCs. The analysis is, unsurprisingly, Western-biased (especially from a US and UK perspective), and adopts a systematic approach to understanding the background and context of the rise of PMSCs and the particular purpose they serve in modern warfare.

The book then moves on to a discussion of how PMSCs relate to today's risk society and international legal and normative frameworks. Each of these is treated in different chapters, allowing for an insightful examination that appropriately situates each discussion in the relevant academic framework. This includes an illuminating explanation of the complex relationship between PMSCs, risk, and government's aversion to troop casualties; an illustrative account of the legal vacuum that surrounds PMSC operations; and an elucidating discussion on the issue of PMSCs, ethics and morality.

The book attempts to demystify PMSCs, at times appearing to take a sympathetic view of their place in today's war zones and high-risk areas. But this in fact serves to deepen the analysis and provide a rather comprehensive picture that certainly contributes to understanding

this phenomenon and how to deal with it. And it does so in an overall balanced and fair manner. Moreover, Carmola places the debate about the legal and ethical aspects of PMSCs into a broader discussion about how risk and security conceptions have evolved. The unavoidable (and uncomfortable) conclusion of her approach is that PMSCs are here to stay and actually play a bigger role than critics would like to admit – myself included. This said, the author recognises the problems that arise with PMSCs and points to possible courses of action especially in terms of resolving the problematic legal status that governs these kind of contractor.

Carmola's argument is well informed, nuanced and, ultimately, convincing. The book ends with an assertive conclusion that would certainly lead advocates of PMSCs to think twice about the implications of the commodification of security. This is a must-read for policy-makers, would-be recruiters and Security Studies scholars.

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