

Monica Ingber
Keele University

Aesthetics and World Politics

Roland Bleiker; Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies; United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan; 2009; 271 pp.; £ 57.50; ISBN 978-1-4039-9575-9

What does aesthetic insight provide to the study and understanding of global politics? In his work, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Roland Bleiker makes the case that aesthetics – be they literary, poetic, musical, or visual – can help provide certain insights into world politics that conventional social scientific modes of inquiry are unable to account for. One of the core problematics that Bleiker reveals is the lack of attention given to the dimension of representation within social science. While acknowledging instances where literature has been drawn upon, or where scholarly research has been likened to an art form itself, it is argued that aesthetic inquiries into world politics have played almost no role in the study of international relations since aesthetic sources are unable to stand-up to the standards of scientific inquiry. *Aesthetics and World Politics*, however, presents its readers with one of the first full-length texts that deals specifically with the pertinence of aesthetic inquiry to global politics.

Through a review of the literature using aesthetic inquiry into global politics, Bleiker draws attention to what he has aptly termed the ‘aesthetic turn in world politics’. The ‘aesthetic turn’ is premised on the differentiation between aesthetic methods of scholarship and the mimetic approach to world politics which has thus far dominated international relations scholarship. Where the mimetic approach attempts to represent politics as realistically as possible, aesthetic approaches assume the presence of a gap between the form of representation and what is represented. The gap between representation and what is represented serves as the very location of politics (p.19). This is what makes aesthetic insight so pertinent to the study of global politics. By recognizing the space of politics, aesthetic insight enables us to consider other aspects of politics that are otherwise relegated to the periphery or which remain hidden from sight.

One of the more important aspects of global politics that mimetic approaches have not been equipped to deal with is ‘feeling’ and its impact on policy-making decisions. Bleiker notes that representation is always an act of power, which is at its peak when its subjective origins and values are disguised (p. 24). In effect, it is argued that the transformation of subjective interpretations to the level of objectivity removes the individual from politics by occluding feeling and relegating representation to the realm of reason and logos. This is the power of mimesis – reason and logos deny the presence of feeling by enabling the construction of a stable world picture in which events are recounted by scientific facts. For instance, Bleiker gives the example of how we discuss the ‘outbreak’ of the First World War as if events somehow just spontaneously happened instead of being orchestrated by human beings (pg. 37). It is through the language of fact and reason that we are able to avoid responsibility. Aesthetic approaches to global politics mount a challenge against this type of avoidance. Krippendorff has noted this by arguing that artists were able to recognize and communicate that the First World War was a civilizational crisis whose causes ran deeper than conventional socio-political analysis allowed; instead of focusing on war as a systematic inevitability, artists focused on the fate of individuals. Dix, for example, painted soldiers living and dying in trenches. National identity was not highlighted given that the wounded or dead were neither French, English, nor German – they were simply wounded or dead (p. 37). Through examples such as these, Bleiker is able to make the case that art gives us a different form of representation and abstraction, thus drawing our attention to the human side of war. This allows us to move past state-centric discourses that justify the use of violence in both foreign and domestic policy since it enables us to remember that soldiers are also human.

Bleiker furthers his case by dividing the remaining chapters of his text into case study examples surrounding poetry. While acknowledging that poetry is but one of many aesthetic mediums (pg.84), he makes the case that although poetry is seen by many as an archaic and obscure aesthetic activity, and despite the general characterization of the contemporary world as a 'visual age', the centrality of the visual has not been superseded by the role played by language (pg. 85). In this sense, while visual images confront us with sublime experience and represent to us the feelings that language cannot adequately express, it is language that we need in order to make sense of world in which we live (p. 85). In short, Bleiker makes the case that language is an integral part of power relations and of global politics in order for his readers to see the link between language and the use of poetry as an aesthetic medium for understanding world politics. Here, Bleiker demonstrates the power of metaphor in this endeavour. Metaphor produces poetic images instead of objective description – this is why it is often characterized as the 'business of poets'. Metaphor, however, also relies on tropes to re-describe reality. Bleiker uses 'metaphor' in a broad sense: it is a "trope that capture's the gap between a world's established place and its temporary appropriation" (pg. 89). The use of metaphor in the theory and practice of world politics is far-reaching and in order to highlight this, Bleiker challenges his readers to consider a key metaphor of Cold War politics: the idea of 'balance of power'. It is around this metaphor that the Western World structured its defense against the threat of communism. At the height of the Cold War, the 'balance of power' metaphor was not seen as a metaphor, but as a strategic reality. Other options available to policy-makers were obscured by the fact that decision-making processes were based on Cold War thinking patterns that presented their representations of world politics as real (p.91). In this respect, Bleiker demonstrates that a poem helps us to review metaphors that we no longer recognize as metaphors through its stylistic refusal to accept what is (p.93) Throughout the remainder of his text, Bleiker reveals a series of writers who have been able to mount a challenge against political mimesis: Paul Celan, the Prenzlauer Berg writers, Pablo Neruda, Anna Akhmatova, and Ko Un. Through his investigation of the work of these writers, Bleiker is able to demonstrate quite successfully the value of aesthetic challenges to mimetic representations and their impact and potential impact with regards to policy and decision-making processes.

Bleiker concludes his book by acknowledging the work of Gerard Holden, who has raised a number of objections to his work on aesthetics. This provides the readers with some alternative viewpoints about the usefulness and place of aesthetic engagement to the study of world politics and helps to lend credence to Bleiker's own observations. Overall, *Aesthetics and World Politics* is a text that is not only accessible to readers outside of academia, but is also a useful contribution to the methodological and theoretical study of social science in general and global politics in particular.