
Introduction

The field of International Relations often regards powerful nation-states as rather stagnant entities, robust in their ability to maintain authority and relative control over time and space. This is not without good reason, of course, as these actors possess an enormous ability to influence others in international politics and, more pressingly, deploy a substantial amount of organized violence. This static assumption is usually understood with reference to their material or strategic position in the global order, and their decline is brought about by challenges from other actors, through free riding or through force (Kennedy 1987; Gilpin 1981). To this end, the fields of international relations and international history have helpfully established the manner in which international actors can challenge those in authority through “balancing” behavior (Spykman 1942; Waltz 1979; Walt 1987). These challenges do, however, take substantial periods of time—decades, even centuries—to emerge. Further, if the material and strategic capabilities of states constitute the “power” that serves to deter would-be challengers, why do the most powerful states or ideologies appear to be so routinely challenged? Why do these actors perceive their supremacy to be under constant challenge? Why do they appear to be so caught up with their self-image? How does power in this way facilitate its own challenges?

There is another type of insecurity that the powerful in international politics face—an aesthetic insecurity over appearances. This insecurity is more frequent, localized, and public. These instances where centralized bodies of power, including nation-states, react to aesthetically problematic representations have been underanalyzed by IR scholars. While they do not lead to substantial shifts in global distributions of power, this book advances the claim that these moments of aesthetic insecurity are

still worthy of study, if we understand these reactions to be a logical tendency of power itself. In doing so, the book posits the possibility that processes other than state-based balancing can manipulate centralized bodies of power, stimulating them into new modes of behavior. Because these bodies brand themselves aesthetically and because their citizens or group members draw intrinsic psychological, rhythmic, and imaginative satisfaction from such constructions, they can be manipulated through what is advanced in this book as *counterpower*, moments when those aesthetic visions are challenged or ruptured. Though examples are drawn from the aesthetically created Self of U.S. power for illustration, the broader implication of the argument is that all bodies of centralized power can be countered aesthetically or ontologically insecuritized through counterpower. In a nutshell, I argue in this book that centralized power, including but not limited to national power, recognizes its own ability to self-create; that the aesthetic construction of this ontology is engaged by collective bodies of citizens; and that when such a construction is de-aestheticized, these bodies react in quick and sometimes problematically violent ways.

To position this argument, let me clarify a couple of preliminary issues. First, what is meant here by the “Self” of power and nations? The term may seem a bit jarring to readers unfamiliar with the debates over the notion of a “Self” of groups or nation-states. My previous work (Steele 2008a) and the debates that in part inspired it¹ grappled with the problems and benefits of ascribing the human Self and its biological, psychological, and sociological drives to corporate actors such as the nation-state. These meditations have hardly resolved this debate, and the current book will do no better in satisfying those skeptics who find it analytically problematic to ascribe individual Selves to the nation-state or other corporate bodies. Nevertheless, we can recognize colloquially how we talk everyday about corporate actors as if they are people, as in “France *recognized* the Armenian genocide,” “Did you see what Israel is *doing* in Gaza?” or “Apple *introduced* a new iPod today!”² This does not assume that they are “real” people by any means, but as corporate actors, they engage in *practices* that are real and observable, and these practices occur in what one scholar terms “contested zones of ongoing debate [rather] than physical spaces” (Jackson 2004: 285). Sometimes we go a

1. See special issue, *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004).

2. Alexander Wendt (2005) has made this point more forcefully than I ever could, in his response to Peter Lomas’s (2005) critique of state personhood.

bit further, ascribing a motive to these actors, again as if they are individuals, as in “France did this because it has a large Armenian population,” “Israel is trying to get Hamas to stop launching rockets” (or “Israel is trying to demonstrate force to Iran”), or “Apple is trying to corner the market.”

In this book, I continue to maintain, as others have (Lang 2002), that because state agents “narrate” about the nation-state, they create potential Selves that that nation-state seeks to realize through its policies. Yet in contrast to my previous work, the current investigation, rather than engaging in the methodologically problematic posture of ascribing a human motive or intent to a corporate Self, identifies a particular *practice or activity* of individual self-creation at the level of centralized bodies of power, which includes not only nation-states but other organizations as well. Instead of engaging in the more difficult task of ascribing motives to a “Self” of nations or other groups relevant to international politics, then, I seek to understand how the activity of aesthetic self-creation, if it obtains in international politics, makes possible certain processes and outcomes that require explanation.

A second preliminary issue is to tackle what exactly is meant by an *aesthetic* practice. I discuss why this move is appropriate in international relations later in this introduction, but for now, let us start with how the aesthetic functions for the individual. We use aesthetics ourselves to be more attractive to others through style—we pay attention to forms of hygiene; we exercise; we self-monitor the way we talk, dress, and “act.” We may engage in these practices or activities because they open up strategic possibilities for us—we want others to “like” us, we might want someone to hire us, we want to get a raise, we want others to be happy, and so on. But these practices also generate a sense of self-worth—in creating ourselves, our perceived Selves create us. This fashioning of ourselves as aesthetic beings is something we can admire on our own *in addition to* the function it serves in forcing others to see us differently. It is this practice of self-creation as it works back upon the individual that I ascribe to bodies of power. The insecurity arises because the purchase of aesthetics is to make objects *appear differently* than they otherwise were. The term we use for cosmetics—*makeup*—captures this quite nicely. When we are stripped of these aesthetics, we are vulnerable—not only to others, but also to how we see ourselves. This occurs for most of us first thing in the morning, so we avoid the mirror until the moment when we can begin refashioning ourselves for the day ahead.

Individuals, when aggregated into groups, also seek out this process

of aesthetic creation. Corporations, for instance, stay edgy by updating their logos to keep their “brands” fresh. They adjust their marketing slogans and acquire different celebrity spokespeople, for the nature of celebrity itself is momentary. The definition of *aesthetics* as a noun is suitable here: “a philosophical theory or idea of what is aesthetically valid at a given time and place.”³ Here, aesthetics refer to a contextualized study of the “moment” in which this creation takes place. The activity of creation is never fixed and is subject to constant updating. The point is not that a corporation is a living, breathing “Self” like an individual human being is but that it engages in a similar practice of aesthetic self-creation. The corporation creates a “brand” that is more than just the products it provides to a consumer.

When we get to international politics—where organized violence is still considered to be a legitimate practice—we can identify particularly unique manifestations of this practice of self-creation and the mode in which aesthetics intersects with power. Nations may acquire power for a variety of purposes, but when it is used and exercised, the full contours of the national Self become apparent (Niebuhr 1932: 96). Yet when we analyze aesthetic construction in corporate actors—and all that construction makes possible—we are focusing on how the individuals who form such an organization participate in the creation of the *corporate* self. More than the material basis of power, the aesthetics of power is made possible by the psychological and emotional connections that humans have toward a corporate body of power.

The aesthetic functions here as it does for the individual, it creates the Self *other than it may be*, a construction perpetually contingent on the moment and always subject to a process that might reveal it to be something else. This does not mean that there is a “core” Self of national or group power that can ever be realized—in fact, the urgency behind perpetual creation indicates that there may never be a core or timeless Self that can be accessed. In other words, there is never a once and *true* Self that emerges in this process, because self-creation is an activity that engages a Self that is always ambiguous. Aesthetics attend to this constant flux of the Self and the insecurity that emerges from its centrifugal tendencies. In an age of instantaneous and continuous global and publicized communication, there is no privacy for re-creation. Instead, in con-

3. <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=aesthetic>, emphasis added.

trast to the individual who does so in their own home before the day begins, the Self of such organized bodies re-creates out in the open.

This understanding of the intersection between aesthetics and power assumes, then, that any power that appears to us in the form of “self-certainty, self-aggrandizement, and crusad[ing],” as one vibrant account describes the contemporary U.S. Self (Tjalve 2008: 2), is a power that poses as confident. When power manufactures the aesthetic, it in turn belies a sense of security and certainty. Just like the process of aesthetic self-creation the individual engages in, the aesthetics of power is manifested not just in images but also in styles of discourse.

These aesthetics can be challenged through what I designate as *counterpower*, those moments when the aesthetic creation of the Self is challenged, forcing power to re-act rather forcefully and quickly. Return again to the individual—when our aesthetic integrity is disrupted, we sense an intense need to re-act, to *move* away from that previous depiction of our Self. If there were such a thing for individuals as a true Self to lock into, we would never feel the need to refashion who we are; we would just “be ourselves.” But of course this is not possible, and if this process of aesthetic insecurity operates in international politics, then regardless of how certain or assured powerful nation-states seem to us, no matter what type of facade—or “face”—they advance, they do so to cover up a particular form of vulnerability that can be manipulated. In short, this book investigates how power uses aesthetics to “make up” for an inherent insecurity—an insecurity that can only be observed when such aesthetics are deconstructed.

The Purchase of Aesthetics and Power in International Relations

Why has the field of International Relations not fully explored this possibility? The lacuna is due in part to the field’s more pressing preoccupation in recent years with power balancing. Following the Cold War, while many theorists predicted a challenge to U.S. hegemony, scholars struggled over the manner in which such a challenge would materialize. This concern with systemic power consumed much scholarship, even though, as this book suggests, aesthetic power was operating—and being insecuritized—in our plain view the whole time.

Take, for instance, the debates that occurred in the 1990s over the preponderance of American power and the manner in which the inter-

national community would come to terms with this imbalance. There were, generally, three camps that industriously confronted the issue. Neorealists such as John Mearsheimer (1990) saw an unstable international system that would attempt to balance against U.S. preponderance, and Kenneth Waltz (1993) wrote about an “emerging structure of international politics” after the Cold War thawed, drafting several scenarios where various blocs would emerge to counterbalance the United States. Christopher Layne was a bit more precise, asserting the unipolar moment to be “just that, a geopolitical interlude that will give way to multipolarity by 2000–2010” (1993:7).

A second group, also realists but ones of the neoclassical variety, saw a stability and durability of the unipolar world. William Wohlforth (1999) was one of several scholars who made this argument (see also Mastanduno 1997), pointing to the historically unique amount of asymmetric power that the United States possessed compared to other hegemonic examples and asserting that emerging powers would more likely trigger regional power-balancing dynamics before they would attain the status of a systemic rival. Thus, U.S. hegemony would remain the order of the day. A third group agreed with the second about the durability of U.S. hegemony but took a different approach to explain why this was so. Their answer was that U.S. hegemony was a benign presence—the character of U.S. hegemony as liberal, open, and institutional made it less threatening to other potential rivals (Ikenberry 1999). This reasoning was reinforced by the intrinsic nature of U.S. politics—a legitimate or benign democratic identity that helped cultivate and also allow for a transatlantic “security community” (Risse 1996; Barnett and Adler 1998).

Alas, after the 1990s ended, no balancing had occurred. The iconic publication that represented the scholarly “age of impatience” with this result was G. John Ikenberry’s *America Unrivaled* (2002). Ikenberry introduced his volume’s purpose as seeking to answer the question, “why, despite the widening power gulf between the United States and other major states, has a counterbalancing reaction not yet taken place?” (2002: 3). Literature emerging over recent years takes U.S. hegemony as a social fact but recasts it, even reconceptualizes it altogether, in terms of imperial structures (see Nexon and Wright 2007). This has come coupled with a set of studies that have reviewed how empires end, investigating where and when they become vulnerable (Spruyt 2005; Cooley 2005). The interest in balancing or the lack thereof continues to this day, as Randall Schweller’s theory of underbalancing in *Unanswered Threats* attests. Schweller’s study revealed that such underbalancing was more

common than previously thought and could be explained by reference to domestic politics.⁴

Despite the seeming lack of an emerging “balance” to the United States at the systemic level, these debates have nevertheless been productive in delineating not only the distribution and flow of power at the international level but also how the meaning of such power can be transformed in international politics through institutions and discourse, as well as the manner in which *legitimacy* influences power’s maintenance.⁵ Yet centralized bodies of power respond to more than overall systemic distributions. If we shift our focus from the expansive terrain of empires and systemic power distributions to the ambiguous space of the aesthetic Self, we can find more observable phenomena that might prove just as worthy of study. If we shift our temporal lens from the decay or erosion of power in the decades and years toward days or moments, we can observe important vulnerabilities. To do this, we must appropriate the problem of power as a form of a transgression, a formation by the Self of its own limits, limits that are never realized until they are crossed.

I thus propose to add one further kernel of thought for theorists concerned about power and the vulnerabilities that it produces: when power is internalized within or melded to the Self of a centralized body (whether that is an individual, a group or organization, a nation-state or a hegemon, or even an informal empire), this internalization produces its own logic of insecurity that cannot be fully captured by external sources of threat. This insecurity is self-generating, bringing to bear a seemingly imperceptible force that nevertheless is far more prevalent than international relations scholars have acknowledged. Since at least John Herz’s (1950) seminal essay on the topic, which has been recently thoroughly updated and extended by Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler (2008), the self-defeating logic of seeking infinite security writ large has been a central “dilemma” studied in international relations. Even more recent work has engaged the problematic but nevertheless real emotional processes (such as fear) that are embedded in this dilemma and in politics more generally (see Robin 2004). However, the internal vulner-

4. See also the continued interest of some scholars, such as Brooks and Wohlforth (2005), in this puzzle.

5. “The legitimacy of imperial rule matters a great deal for its persistence. As a form of hierarchical organization, empires need to convince significant actors that the benefits of continued imperial rule outweigh the costs of domination. In doing so, they make resistance less likely and thereby secure continued imperial control” (Nexon and Wright 2007: 264).

abilities that arise when the Self of a nation-state becomes aesthetically enamored with power have not been fully explored. In contrast to James C. Scott's argument about the "weapons of the weak" (1985), then, this book is about the "weakness of projected strength," or, more precisely, the vulnerabilities that arise from the aesthetic certitudes that color the image of power. Whereas in Scott's account, the resistance is localized, subterranean, and calculated, counterpower is publicized, in-the-open, explicit, and spontaneous.

Aesthetics, Power, and IR

What explains the move to *aesthetics* and power? The relationship between aesthetics and international relations became an increasingly vibrant prospective field for analysis, so that by the beginning of this decade, an article by Roland Bleiker (2001) could center on the "aesthetic turn in international political theory." Yet five years later, in another special issue of the critical IR theory journal *Millennium*, Gerald Holden noted that the field of aesthetic IR, while moving from critical IR theory outlets toward "a wider range of journals" (2006: 795), had also "been in existence for the best part of ten years, and those now joining the debate are not venturing onto *terra incognita*" (802). One of the problems, in Holden's view, was the work conducted by "literary" IR scholars who "used" literature to "bolster normative views they already hold about world politics" (794). Among Holden's many observations was how aesthetic "IRists" had tended to act as if they were engaging aesthetic subjects marginalized by mainstream IR theorists. On the contrary, Holden suggests, "many of the classical realists which had been targeted critically by aesthetic IRists in fact contained aesthetic expositions in their theories, which could be examined in a complementary fashion in further investigations" (802–3). Whether we accept Holden's view that aesthetic IR theory up until 2006 (at least) has been largely "preaching to the choir," my exposition of aesthetics and power (inevitably, in some respects) incorporates insights from several classical realist scholars, including Hans Morgenthau, George Liska, Arnold Wolfers, John Herz, and Reinholt Niebuhr.⁶

In addition to probing these theoretical intersections, the move to

6. Considering the role that prestige has played in classical realist formulations of power (see Markey 1999; Löwenheim 2003: 25–27), the use of these theorists to build an aesthetic understanding of power is hardly surprising.

aesthetics can be justified by reference to three further functions or purposes. First, a social scientific set of functions are served in that while the aesthetic is abstract and ambiguous in formation (necessarily so, as I point out), it nonetheless has an impact on the security practices of nation-states and on all movements of power in a broader sense. This book is written within the general tradition of critical security studies, and it draws on some giants of critical philosophy and social theory, but it does so in order to uncover a mechanism (aesthetic insecurity) that to date has not been comprehensively advanced. More broadly, while this book may be considered a critique of existing accounts in IR theory that posit how power is challenged, it is not a deconstruction of those accounts. I do not argue, in some fantastical way, that the material and strategic elements of violent power do not exist “in reality,” nor is it my point to dispense with those accounts. Rather, this book argues that alongside these accounts, many of which are discussed in chapters 1 and 5 of the book, should be added an aesthetic account of insecurity.

These aesthetics are hardly purely “cosmetic,” however. The idealized beauty of a centralized body of power, when compromised, can produce intense emotional and traumatic ruptures—ruptures that powerful actors seek to rectify by reacting in sometimes violent ways. This aesthetic layer is more than just the “style” or strut of power, then; it is, rather, the springboard that allows power to deploy its material and strategic resources in global politics. So while my study is critical in its reformulation of certain concepts used in IR theory (such as power and security), it is conventional in that it seeks to uncover what has become a largely unproblematised and common pattern of power’s operation. In short, there is most likely an intuitive sense, by practitioners and theorists alike, that aesthetics intersect with power at all levels of human interaction. This study attempts to expound this intuition with careful analysis. There is an analytical interest in studying the aesthetic of the Self on its own accord—the aesthetic as an end ideal. At some point in time, certain nation-states accustomed to crafting their power to meet security threats shifted toward a more basic sensual celebration of the style and physique necessary for and found within *movement*. This leads to the romanticizing of the Self and thus to an idealized Self with much built-in vulnerability. This book is thus an investigation into the way in which the aesthetics of power lead to insecurity. It is a book that seeks to identify an aesthetics of insecurity.

If there is a social scientific purpose served in constructing the aesthetic layer of power, there is also a similar purpose served in under-

standing the processes or forms through which such power is challenged—what I term *counterpower*. This is also a “real” phenomenon in that we can recognize those moments when the aesthetic Self or subjectivity of power is ruptured or even unfastened. Thus, this book seeks to conceptualize and demarcate three particular categories of counterpower, termed hereafter as *reflexive and flattery discourse*, *parrhesia*, and *self-interrogative imaging*. To this end, I draw on a variety of philosophers (such as the late work of Michel Foucault) and, in a more limited sense, groups of social theorists, to articulate the basis for aesthetic power and counterpower. To understand counterpower, this book complements and critiques existing analyses of the resistance to power.

The second class of purchase for this book is derived from recent events and scholarly debates regarding the seemingly sophisticated and reasonable relationship between democratic publics and war. I reference here the research statistically suggesting that while they may be more likely to win wars (Reiter and Stam 2002; Bennett and Stam 1998), democracies are inherently vulnerable to protracted and drawn-out wars because the public, which presumably “calls the shots” in a democracy, removes its support (Gartner 1997). Further, “while autocrats can repress this dissent, democrats are forced to respond to it or face being replaced” (Filson and Werner 2004: 298). Others have pointed out how the free press of Western democracies allows hostile groups such as al-Qaeda an effective medium through which to manipulate public opinion. One scholar titles this a “virtual war,” one where the public opinion of democracies can be manipulated and undermined, while insurgent enemies “have time on their hands and they will use this time against the West in the true tradition of Mao’s protracted warfare” (M. J. Williams 2007: 274). While the purpose of these various arguments is quite different, of course, neoconservative writers have made the case (but in more ideological tones) that internal dissent makes a democracy inherently weak and that terrorists not only exploit this but know this to be the case and thus organize their strategies around this central assumption of “democratic weakness.”⁷ Yet this investigation compels us to equally notice how democracies, because their citizens perceive an ability to help in the fashioning of the national Selves, may also be unique in their vitalist tendency to overreact when the national Self appears to be in jeopardy. Such a primed posture makes these democracies vulnerable a priori, be-

7. A good example is James Arlandson, “The Logic of Weakness,” *American Thinker*, June 2004, http://www.americanthinker.com/2004/06/the_logic_of_weakness.html.

fore a threat even emerges. This book helps us reformulate how overreactions are fueled not only by the material challenge al-Qaeda presents to U.S. sovereignty (in terms of its ability to use violence within the latter's borders) but also by its ability to manipulate U.S. power's aesthetic facade. The vulnerability of vitalism is addressed in chapter 1, and the counterpower possibilities of al-Qaeda are examined more directly in chapter 3.

The third purpose of this book is normative. Attached to an understanding of the vulnerabilities of bravado, strut, toughness, and physique is the side effect that those who seek security for national communities through such an ethos are instead putting those communities in a problematic position. Such emphasis brings little of the security it is at least *stated* to offer. The reader of the following pages will quickly notice that most of my empirical illustrations come from the U.S. foreign policies of the George W. Bush administration, yet I do not see aesthetic moves beginning (or ending) with that administration. This normative purpose requires us instead to "read ahead," as such aesthetics have not magically dissolved with the exiting of George W. Bush from the American political landscape. Spatially, the work on the Self of power requires a lot of effort, and such aesthetic construction of U.S. power has been made possible through resources provided by a wide variety of actors, including academic intellectuals, members of the U.S. congress, social organizations, bloggers, and other so-called journalists. The aesthetics are fueled by advances in technology that also spring forth their own categories of counterpower. Thus, in order to investigate U.S. power's aesthetic construction, such an inquiry requires us to visit a multitude of sites of aesthetic stimulation, including the processes of knowledge construction in the rise and fall of paradigms and American generations (chap. 1), discursive fields of contestation (chap. 2), the relationship between the academy and U.S. power (chap. 3), and the ambiguous mission statements U.S. soldiers find themselves pursuing (chap. 4). It is not limited to the present and future—such aesthetics in the form of the enamored relationship between Americans and U.S. power have been around at least since the middle of the Cold War, according to Andrew Bacevich (2005), and, depending on which classical realist thinker one consults (see Niebuhr 1932: 98–103), probably since at least the late 1890s and the Spanish-American War.

Further, while I do not think this book is specifically crafted in a way that will be digestible to what might neutrally be titled the "military establishment," I am quite confident that the (post)modern American mil-

itary will recognize as obvious my arguments about the impact of aesthetic insecurity as it appears in the form of the case illustrations used especially in chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this book. Thus, the lessons of ambiguity in warfare and the temptation to right an aesthetic appearance of a wrong may serve as pragmatic warnings about the mission of the U.S. soldier. Most vividly, the argument that power operates in “the dark” through ambiguous operational objectives and that such operation inevitably entails costs, found especially in chapter 5, implores the military to redefine its relationship to the battlefield and its enemy.

Finally, this investigation also should give ethical pause to policymakers who use what can only be described as trite, even cute, but irrevocably *vague* slogans when justifying the use of lethal force in the name of the so-called national interest. Such slogans have permeated the U.S. cultural and political landscape over the past eight years: where a war, like a sporting event, could be “lost,” a withdrawal from a battlefield was titled “defeat and retreat” or a policy of “cut and run” that showed a lack of “fortitude” or “will.” The absurdity of it all reached a new plateau in 2008—when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that a *timetable* or timelines for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq would be “dangerous” but that the “strategic goals of having time *horizons*” should be sought.⁸ Nevertheless, the move toward such seemingly semantic distinctions indicates, however, the *aesthetics* of such terms themselves as used by those who execute security policies, as well as the symbolic and strategic purchase such aesthetics can have in international relations. The analysis in this book suggests, in various ways, that abstract words help veil the operation of power with aesthetic content, but they also create, eventually, further vulnerabilities.⁹

Let me end this section of the introduction by stating the purposes this book *does not* serve. First, I wrote it not in the name of clarifying the ambiguities of power or as a polemic against power writ large but, instead, taking the ambiguities of aesthetic power as functional entities, to delineate what effects followed from them and what practices such ambiguity made possible. It is not a book, then, that seeks to propose an alternative “plan” to save the world from its own demise. As I mention in

8. This was stated in a 19 July 2008 interview of Admiral Michael Mullen on *Fox News Sunday* (available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,386843,00.html>).

9. I am reminded here of words used by Kerouac’s *On the Road* character Carlo Marx, in his advice to his fellow beatniks about the dangers they were ignoring as they embarked on their cross-country trip: “The days of wrath are yet to come. The balloon won’t sustain you much longer. And not only that, but it’s an abstract balloon” (2007: 121).

this book’s conclusion, I find such problem-solving and progressive moves to be an increasingly problematic style of writing that was all the rage for a previous generation of IR scholars. But it is not my style—for this book falls far short of providing an alternative order or even ethos that leads us to a more just and equitable account of human relations. I remain, instead, firmly resolved that the ethos of the Self that produces aesthetic creativity and transgression also contains built-in quandaries that emerge when the Self wanders into dark areas of operation. Our only resolution is to wipe the canvas of the Self clean, revealing it, so that an insecuritized U.S. power is forced out of the darkness in which it has so problematically operated over recent years, if not decades. For even if no pause by power results from the recognition of the aesthetics of insecurity—for it is not in the nature of those who celebrate movement and action to pause for anything—there will be costs. Aesthetic transgressions are a fact of power’s operation, whether policymakers recognize it too late or not.

The Study of Aesthetic Insecurity, Power, and Counterpower

While the full contours of what I mean by the terms *security*, *insecurity*, *power*, and *counterpower* will be developed in chapters 1 and 2, I here briefly sketch what they mean, for the reader’s convenience, in order to demonstrate how the field of IR already contains the theoretical tools to study this important topic. Security, as several scholars have identified, is an essentially contested concept, or ECC (Smith 1999: 106; Fierke 2007: 34–51). Fierke defines an ECC as a concept that “generates debates that cannot be resolved by reference to empirical evidence because the concept contains a clear ideological or moral element and defies precise, generally accepted definition” (2007: 34). The field of critical security studies has advanced the case that narrow definitions of security—for example, the defining of security in military terms versus other forms (environmental, health, or identity)—are a political position. The what of security is also contested alongside the who of security. Are we dealing with humans (Hampson 2002), society (Buzan 1993; Wæver 1993), the nation-state, a region (Buzan and Wæver 2003: ch. 3), or the broader global context?

Even the most preponderant conceptualization of security has been a site of definitional frustration. Wolfers (1952) claimed that national security as a “political formula” had been invoked quite consistently but was in danger of losing “any precise meaning at all” (481). This book in

no way resolves the issue of conceptualizing security and insecurity, of course. Indeed, while I sympathize with Wolfers's frustration at the use of the term *national security* "without specification," as it "leaves room for more confusion than sound political counsel or scientific usage can afford" (1952: 483), I instead assert that *power is made possible and exists through the ambiguous space*. Such ambiguity is destroyed in the moment when the idealized "narrow cause of the national self" (*ibid.*, 482) is revealed. The archaic definition of aesthetics—"the study of the nature of sensation"—is quite telling here.¹⁰ As it more resembles an art than a science, security perhaps can be just as easily understood using aesthetics—the "feeling" one gets from a work of art, for example, is like "security," necessarily ambiguous and individualized but also a basis for action. When idealized beauty is compromised, insecurity follows. Since idealizations are by their very nature unattainable, this means that insecurity is quite common.

Yet Wolfers does provide two useful reference points. First, he notes that "security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked" (1952: 485). Remarkably, this conceptualization of security as the absence of threats to values remains a largely viable one in the field of critical security studies (see Fierke 2007: 14). We can modify this position slightly when we recognize how the aesthetics of the Self is a value on its own and consider which effects this makes possible. Second, Wolfers also identified a disproportion between power and security, where "some weak and exposed nations consider themselves more secure today than does the United States" (1952: 485 n. 4). In a like fashion, I investigate in this book why the United States would act so quickly—and, at times, comprehensively—against instances of aesthetic challenge. Instead of acquiring a sense of increased safety and physical security, the case illustrations demonstrate how increases in power lead to an inflated sense of Self manifested through an addiction to motion. Such senses and addictions cannot be sustained without periodic ruptures. This is what security as an "absence" implies.

What is meant by power? This book understands power in a multifaceted manner. As counseled by a recent expository on the subject (Barnett and Duval 2005), it sees power not only as the ability of A to get B to do what it otherwise would not (Dahl 1957: 202–3) but also in terms of

10. <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=aesthetic>. I am indebted to Jon Carlson for this insight.

a centralized body's internal capacity to perceive its ability to operate upon its own self-image, as well as influence others and determine outcomes. This process is attended to through both the acquisition of materials and their diffusion into an ontology of the Self. For instance, the voluminous mainstream literature in security studies assumes that for nation-states, material and strategic power helps to ensure survival (Waltz 1979: 126–27). Yet as power is acquired (presumably for this purpose), it becomes part of the routines of the nation-state's existence. Groups seek to acquire more power than is necessary, so that power becomes an end itself (Niebuhr 1932; Mearsheimer 2001; Schweller 1994). Power here is about more than ensuring physical survival—it can constitute the identity of the actors that have acquired it.¹¹ Such power may serve as a basis for influence exerted over Others, but it is also vitally important for the ontological security of the Self, the securing of self-identity through time.

I began this argument in my previous book, stating the following when discussing how physical capabilities influence an agent's sense of freedom and thus also paradoxically increase levels of agentic anxiety:

More capably “powerful” states are somewhat imprisoned by their ability to influence more outcomes in international politics, and in this sense these capabilities, rather than allowing these states more freedom to act (as their acquisition is intended to accomplish) [instead] compromise this sense of “freedom.” (2008a: 69)

At that time, using Giddensian sociology, my position was that all social agents, including states, sought out continuity for their actions—social routines that provided meaning and simplified chaotic life so that it became tolerable. Yet it is in seeking out this continuity that anxiety emerges (*ibid.*, 48). In that book, I advanced the argument, albeit minimally, that this greater “freedom of choice” makes the more powerful incredibly anxious and therefore vulnerable to manipulation. One is reminded of Orwell’s (1962: 95–96) sahib when he turns “tyrant,” as recorded by James Scott.

It is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow posing dummy . . . For it is a condition of his rule that he shall spend

11. Diplomatic and military historian Andrew Bacevich avers, in the opening page of his recent book *The New American Militarism*, that “the global military supremacy that the United States presently enjoys—and is bent on perpetuating—*has become central to our national identity*” (2005: 1, emphasis added). I discuss Bacevich’s study in more detail in chapter 5.

his life trying to impress the “natives” . . . He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it . . . A sahib [hegemon] has got to act like a sahib [hegemon]; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. (Scott 1990: 11)

This conceptualization of power is productive (Barnett and Duval 2005) in that it exists and permeates through a field of operations. Such a conceptualization presumes constraints, of course, because power can become centralized into certain bodies, but it also presumes a freedom within this field: “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (Foucault 1980: 119). Further, as I discuss in more detail in chapter 1, Foucault saw this field of relations as “mobile, reversible, and unstable” (1989: 441). While freedom helps bring about these relations, it also entails self-defeating effects as well. Or, as Andrew Bacevich (2007) suggests in his most recent work, freedom allows for power to find its limits; it produces possibilities but also crisis.

I am hardly the first IR scholar to recognize the inherent vulnerability of ontological power. Jutta Weldes has most persuasively argued, along similar lines, that because U.S. leaders—in general and, in her specific study, during the Cuban Missile Crisis—feared “appearing weak,” U.S. identity was constructed “not only in opposition to the external other of secretive and aggressive totalitarians but in opposition as well to an internal feminine Other defined as weak, soft, complacent and self-indulgent.” This produced “for the United States a pervasive and inescapable credibility problem” in which U.S. leadership “demanded continual demonstration” (Weldes 1999: 46). In an attempt to “project strength,” these leadership narratives instead generated perpetual insecurity.

We can locate even more resources for excavating the intersections between aesthetics, security, and power within the broader traditions of feminist IR theory. Feminist IR has provided us a very expansive analytical terrain to examine power, positing, like Foucault, that power manifests in a field of relations and relationships. These relations occur in a multitude of spheres—from the family and household to society to the binary constructions created by scholars. Wherever these relations occur, they rationalize, or make normal, forms of public behavior (masculine) and relegate other behaviors (feminine) to particular private spheres. For decades now, feminist scholars have demonstrated an “interest in the uses and consequences of power,” uses and consequences that include

the way in which gender roles are constructed (Enloe 2007: 100). Feminist analysis provides a template for how we might go about uncovering the implicit forms that power might take, and it furthermore asks us to reflect on how power operates even through our own “knowledge claims” (Ackerly and True 2008: 694). There are four sets of additional insights that prove instructional for a critical investigation into aesthetics and power.

First and foremost, feminist theorists outside of the field of international relations have demonstrated the disciplinary implications of notions of beauty and aesthetics. Naomi Wolf’s 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth*, is arguably the most well-known argument in this vein. Even though women had made inroads into professional, civil, and political spheres throughout the twentieth century, masculinized notions of how women should look continue to play a particularly nefarious form of social control. Although it may not be characterized as such, this particular work by Wolf views gendered forms of discipline in postmodern terms in many ways. For instance, take Wolf’s assertion that certain “fictions” of gendered relations “transformed themselves” during this period and that because the “women’s movement had successfully taken apart most other necessary fictions of femininity, all the work of social control once spread out over the whole network of these fictions had to be reassigned to the only strand left intact [the image of female beauty], which action consequently strengthened it a hundredfold” (1991: 16). What Wolf shows is that the myth of female beauty appropriates an ideal that perpetuates female insecurity. Yet in the foreword written for the 2002 reissue of the book, Wolf also discusses the possibility of a male beauty myth emerging, where “men of all ages, economic backgrounds, and sexual orientations are more worried . . . than they were just ten years ago” (2002: 8).

Moving to gender analysis in IR theory, we find several more important insights. The binaries exposed by feminist analysis (strong/weak, rational/emotional, public/private), constructed markers that have “serve[d] to empower the masculine over the feminine” (Tickner and Sjoberg 2006: 191), demonstrate how masculine identity exists in a relational form to femininity. What this means is that “powerful” masculine behavior, such as the emphasis on narratives of “strength and will” found in U.S. foreign policy crises (Weldes 1999), depends on an internal feminine other, which must be constructed as “weak” and submissive. Again the relational context of gender produces particular roles for organized bodies of power, including nation-states. It does not matter whether these roles are actually embodied, in total by “individual men and

women,” but rather that these are “ideal types” (Tickner and Sjoberg 2006: 186). As I discuss in this book, aesthetic identity itself embodies an ideal—a cosmetic notion of how a subject wishes to look. As these idealizations operate at the level of organized power, and as notions of masculinity can satisfy notions of aesthetic representation, aesthetic power can be said to be inherently related to and even vulnerable to the representations of it by counterpower. For instance, the notion that power’s authority stems from its apparent orderly, rational, and confident posture (a posture associated with masculine notions of behavior) can instead be represented as anything but in a counterpower event. The highly emotionalized nature of aesthetic power—discussed in chapter 1—can also be thought of as the highly emotionalized substance of the masculine subject. Counterpower thus challenges the arbitrariness of the supposedly “natural” gendered role distinctions.

In a related vein, feminist analysis has also uncovered how the meanings of gendered roles are not constant through time but must be “produced and reproduced through symbolic and cultural practices.” This is not so far removed from the “aesthetic representation” of power that I explicate in this book—and this will become especially clear in chapter 1, where I outline several of the “strata” of an aesthetic subjectivity of power, one that, like the meanings of gender and masculinity, draw on a variety of “cultural artefacts” (Hutchings 2008: 101). Such power gains its purchase only when it is in operation—its “physique” becomes most impressive when exercised. In this sense, feminist analysis has demonstrated how the state itself can be problematized as a masculinized social construction, one that is also dependent on the reproduction of particular cultural practices (Peterson 1992), which can serve to “justify” the hierarchical nature of nation-states vis-à-vis other social groups or associations. This position delineating how cultural representations create meanings for action is one I obviously share by writing a book on aesthetic power.

Finally, in a manner that intersects with the thrust of the analysis delineated in chapter 3, on academic-intellectual parrhesia, feminist analyses have proposed more careful attention to making power as “the researcher’s subject, and not the researcher power’s agent” (Ackerly and True 2008: 699). Feminist analysis, by excavating how particular concepts that permeate the field of IR (the state, foreign policy, identity, etc.) are gendered, due largely to the historical predominance of men in the field during the twentieth century, ask us to be particularly attune to

how we as scholars are implicated in the field of power relations we study.

The one slight departure I take here with feminist analysis, both as it stands in social theory and as it has been utilized in IR, is that the masculinized itself is inherently insecure—that, furthermore, the expectations for particular performances required by masculine aesthetic subjectivity lead to, even themselves necessitate, actions that are physically, ontologically, and emotionally costly. Having to “live up” (or down) to this hegemonic masculinized ideal type (indexed by the “male beauty myth” that Wolf posits is now with us) creates fragility for the masculine subject.

More conventional studies, I think, intuit the possibility of perpetual expansion leading to increased levels of security, even if they delineate such insecurity produced by economic, geographic, or military conditions. Paul Kennedy’s (1987) well-known theory of imperial overstretch asserted that the expenses of economic and military preponderance eventually outstrip the benefits great powers accrue during their “rise” to power. More recently, John Mueller (2005: 209–10) posited that imperial expansion generates its own insecurity and decline. Mueller writes about how Soviet communism “eventually collapsed of its own weight and lack of appeal and of the failure of its misguided, even romantic, worldview.” Conventional accounts of imperial expansion recognize how such extension is “more the result of pressures in the periphery that lead to *unintended, unanticipated* political developments that generate reactions that pull great powers more deeply into the politics of other polities” (Nexon and Wright 2007: 267, emphasis added; see also Macdonald 2004: 9). Yet while these accounts largely draw on the material strain that maintaining a great power or imperial global position entails, they still recognize that the *ambitions* of great powers outrun their capabilities, creating these unintended consequences for decline. In other words, while these studies provide very detailed scope conditions through which (in their case) imperial or great power collapses, we might think of these unanticipated developments in another way—as power’s exposed spaces. The more deeply extended (spatially, aesthetically, and/or ideologically) power becomes, the more vulnerable it is to such micro-pressure. As a result, there are opportunities for positioning counter-power within these conventional understandings.

Because counterpower is a micropressure, an unlimited event that can happen at any time and from any direction, it cannot be predicted and therefore preempted. Counterpower is “unbearably light, in that it

is always possible,” and “it is [therefore] unlimited” (Simons 1995: 82).¹² At any time, a challenge to aesthetic power can serve to stimulate it to engage and work upon its own sense of aesthetic integrity.

Why term this “counterpower” and not a rival form of power in and of itself? Surely actions or techniques that force a centralized body of power to *seemingly* do what it otherwise would not or act in a way it otherwise would not act constitutes power as well. While I articulate counterpower more elaborately in the following chapters, there are two immediate points in using the term *counterpower*. First, counterpower is not necessarily forcing a targeted power to do what it otherwise would not, in the sense that the coercion here originates instead through movement away from a previously delegitimized Self. Second, counterpower, understood in a microsense, is displayed as moments, styles, words, or images. These manifestations are infinitely small and light—they do not contain the material or strategic force necessary to maintain influence over a body, nation, group, or organization over time. Counterpower cannot itself distribute resources, taxonomize actors and actions, synthesize, coordinate, or routinize. Such displays derive their influence, alternatively, from the power that they engage. In this book, such power is American. But it is my assumption that counterpower can engage other forms of aesthetic power because, again, the process of aesthetic self-creation is nearly ubiquitous. In other words, while certain organizations are more inoculated than others from counterpower, all (individuals, groups, states, and transnational actors) contain an aesthetic subjectivity that can be disturbed by counterpower. The overturning of any of these groups, however, must come from another contending power (nation-state, world state, etc.), not from the counterpower challenge itself. That said, in conjunction with a series of power challenges, counterpower may serve to help unravel the Self of a power, which can be manifested in both productive and debilitating ways.

A final preliminary issue to consider is *where* this process occurs. Aesthetic insecurity in centralized bodies of national power occurs among and through several levels. On one level, it is, of course, the individual who is insecuritized, whose imagination is disrupted by the de-aesthetized image that counterpower helps bring about. On another, it is the *ontology* of power itself that is disrupted. Here, the idea that power can

12. It is not clear whether Simons intends for this to be a play off the Milan Kundera novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), although for those who have read this work, there are some parallels between Kundera’s Nietzschean-inspired novel and the vulnerability of a power that searches for an aesthetic integrity that is never there.

get “others to do what they otherwise would not”—that it, in a sense, has *control*, or, more precisely, the ability to organize and then synchronize the Self’s operations—is troubled. The disruption here occurs over how power sees itself, how it wishes to be seen by others, and the techniques it uses to re-create these scenes. This confidence in the ontology of power is, while not shattered, nonetheless disturbed in moments of counterpower. Thus, security-seeking behavior following a counter-power engagement is understood no longer (as it is in Wolfers) as the *retention* of values but, rather, as the attempt to recover an aesthetic integrity that was *perceived lost*. As the empirical illustrations reveal, such an aesthetic totality of power most likely never existed to begin with but was idealized. Precisely because it was idealized, even romanticized, rather than objectively realized, the centralized body of power was set up for this rupture long before it occurred. By seeking out aesthetic integrity, power facilitates its own vulnerability.

The Plan of the Book

The argument of this book is developed through two analytical chapters (chaps. 1 and 5) and several chapters (chaps. 2–4) that illustrate specific forms of counterpower. Chapter 1 builds the core concepts of the aesthetics of power and counterpower. It conceives of aesthetic “power” as composed of several strata—what I term the *psychological*, the *rhythmic*, and the *imaginative*. Both the classical realists of the twentieth century and recent post-structuralist work provide helpful building blocks to this argument. Aesthetic power and its vulnerability can also somewhat be understood with reference to the emphasis on action found in the vitalist philosophy of Carl Schmitt, and it finds further expression through the embrace of motion and strength found in the work of one of the founding fathers of the American neoconservative movement, Norman Podhoretz. Yet while this emphasis on the decision in vitalism has the stated intention of creating a more secure environment for the Self, it instead leads to pockets of vulnerability that arise because the aesthetic of power that had been operating “in the dark” is revealed in decisive action. My argument draws on several theoretical inspirations, including the aesthetic perspective provided by John Dewey, the recent engagement of aesthetics in the field of IR theory, and its main theoretical resource in the form of Foucault’s aesthetics. Chapter 1 also introduces the “generational” analysis of the aesthetic images of power (especially U.S. power) and draws on various streams of such inquiry as located, for

example, in the work of Kuhn on the cycles of scientific revolutions. This overview of generational analysis reveals how the production of knowledge itself is embedded with generational conflict and that shifts in this production are also impacted by aesthetics. Generational analysis also shows how technology not only (re)fuels generational imaginations of aesthetic power but also serves as one more avenue through which counterpower can dislodge power.

The next three chapters outline practices of counterpower as seen through a variety of case illustrations. Chapter 2 develops two levels of what I call *reflexive discourse*, the dialogue of one actor that insecuritizes a materially powerful target into acting according to the latter's sense of aesthetic integrity and self-identity. These two levels are influenced, in turn, by two accounts of social theory. Level 1 explicates how the ontological security of a powerful actor is challenged by reflexive discourse and that this can be understood using some insights from Giddensian sociology. Level 2 explicates how reflexive discourse includes elements of what Foucault titles "flattery"—tactics I discuss as "bundling" and "self-flagellation." Chapter 2 uses certain comments made by Jan Egeland during the context of the 2004 Asian Tsunami and the U.S. reaction to those comments to illustrate these two levels of reflexive discourse. Yet while flattery can have productive effects, in that it can help assuage the damaged ego of a powerful actor (as it did in the case of the United States following Egeland's initial "stingy" comment), flattery can also be what Foucault calls a "mendacious discourse" that *artificially* inflates the "Self" of the target. Chapter 2 proceeds through a brief illustration of flattery's "mendacity" in the form of the dialogue that members of the Iraqi National Congress used to convince the United States to act on its behalf leading up to the Iraq invasion of 2003.

Just as an aesthetic Self can be constructed via a "mendacious discourse," so, too, can it be broken down and stripped of its artifice through truth-telling. Such frankness is captured by the concept of parrhesia, the counterpower practice developed in chapter 3. The chapter begins by exploring Foucault's development of parrhesia and outlines the general contours of truth-telling in politics and the study of politics. It then analyzes some general conditions that constrain truth-telling in politics. The chapter then specifies two possible exercises of modern-day parrhesia—cynic parrhesia (as used, for instance, by transnational terrorist organizations) and academic-intellectual parrhesia. Cynic parrhesia is understood with reference to Osama bin Laden's 2004 address to the United States in the days immediately preceding that year's presidential election. Aca-

demic-intellectual parrhesia is examined through the case illustrations of the U.S. academy's participation in or against the construction of U.S. national security narratives during World War I, the Vietnam War, and the recent Iraq conflict. These illustrations explicate the "seductive" qualities of power that serve to inhibit intellectual parrhesia.

The final configuration of counterpower explored in this book is titled "self-interrogative imaging," which refers to the distribution of unfavorable images that represent (and re-present) the state being targeted. Chapter 4 explores the role of images in constructing, deconstructing, and de-aestheticizing the U.S. Self, as examined through the case illustrations of the My Lai massacre (1968), the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon (1975), and the more recent U.S. War on Terror. The latter cases analyze the images emanating from the contractors killed in Fallujah in April 2004 and the photographs depicting the torture of detainees that occurred at Abu Ghraib prison.

Chapter 5 takes stock of these illustrative insights, situates them with existing accounts of power, and briefly overviews how power has been configured in several categories of IR analysis. The chapter helps explicate the spatial and temporal frame of counterpower by casting it as a form of transgression, a recognition of the limit of the Self only when it has been crossed. Transgressional counterpower is contrasted with several "transcendental" and "transitional" accounts of power. The chapter addresses how a "transgressional" approach to power can contrast with but can also complement transcendental and transitional approaches to power.

The concluding chapter begins with an analytical defense for counterpower, with some propositions on how counterpower can be broadened in future studies. While the examples drawn throughout the book's case illustrations stem from U.S. national and international experience, the wider implication is that all bodies of centralized power—individual, substate, state, transnational, suprastate, transeconomic, and so forth—construct their own aesthetic bases for legitimacy and can therefore be challenged by counterpower. Counterpower admittedly rests on some ethically contentious positions. The "art of uncertainty" that is at the heart of counterpower analysis can be seen as a full-frontal assault on principles of order, continuity, and stability—principles that were part of the Hobbesian epistemological project (Williams 2004). Thus, the final sections of the book advance an ethos that may minimize the aesthetic vulnerability of power. This stems from Foucault's observation that the Self of the individual can be created as a harmonious ethical subject—

and thus that power, even narcissistic power, can still explore a “style” that seeks to minimize interference into the lives of others. One of these readjustments, the championing of restraint, is presented with reference to a diverse body of philosophers and theorists, from certain Stoics to twentieth-century classical realists. It argues for what I title *acupunctural formations*, a form of productive but localized human relations that can exist within the field of power relations. Acupunctural formations and the principle of restraint both reject the notion of comprehensive solutions. Instead, the ethos sketched in the conclusion seeks out pockets of freedom within a pervasive global field of power relations, pockets that may or may not be emulated more expansively.