

Forum: The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory

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**Belfrage and Gammon**

**Corresponding author:**

Earl Gammon, Department of International Relations, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Arts B376, Falmer, BN1 9QN, UK

Email: [e.gammon@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:e.gammon@sussex.ac.uk)

# Aesthetic International Political Economy

**Claes Belfrage**

University of Liverpool, UK

**Earl Gammon**

University of Sussex, UK

## Introduction

Though aesthetics is commonly understood as the reflection on art, and especially beauty, it is a broader concern, captured by the term's etymology in the Greek 'aisthesis', referring to perception and sense impressions. Aesthetics, though, is not simply a passive process, of how the outer world strikes the mind, but an interactive one, which, through our selective attention, we attenuate the complexities of reality. Aesthetics is about the formation of the objects that constitute our social milieu, those we invest in to give rhythm, order and unity to our lives. Aesthetics is also, vitally, about the formation of the self, about how we constitute ourselves as objects in relation to the world.

Within International Political Economy (IPE), aesthetics casts a radically altered view on the complex interplay of wealth and power. Employing an aesthetic approach to IPE, the prevailing representations of states and markets become less solid and enduring. The performative dimensions of institutions and their contingent material instantiations belie the solvency of representations we commonly employ to map the social world; in fact, our modes of analysis are revealed as complicit in the aesthetics of the very subject we purport to understand. An aesthetic approach is reflexive of its role in reifying institutions and modes of comportment, and aware of the mutability of prevailing aesthetic regimes.

The first call for an aesthetic approach to IPE was made in 2001 by Amin and Palan,<sup>1</sup> contemporaneously with Roland Bleiker's<sup>2</sup> discussion of an aesthetic turn in international political theory. In their formulation of a 'non-rationalist' IPE, Amin and Palan characterise IPE in the main as 'rationalist', associated with a range of different traditions such as rationalism, the scientific method in the social sciences, methodological individualism and empiricism. Ultimately, rationalist IPE follows a 'hygienic procedure for consciousness'.<sup>3</sup> This method filters out the affective substance of consciousness, and in the process 'anestheticises' analysis in IPE. It constructs the existence of a logical order that can be measured and regularised without concern for how consciousness can be shaped by strategies intended to alter sense-perception. In response, Amin and Palan called for an approach incorporating theories of the subject, subjectivity, desire and aesthetics into its frame.<sup>4</sup>

Though employing distinct terminology, Bleiker's efforts corresponded with Amin and Palan's. Within IR, he argued for moving beyond predominant mimetic forms of representation, that is, forms of representation aiming to realistically capture world politics 'as-it-really-is'. As a mimetic approach, rationalist IR searches 'for rational foundations and certainty in a world of turmoil and constant flux'.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, he argued for an aesthetic approach that assumes a 'gap' between representation and the represented. Like Amin and Palan's critique of the hygienic procedures of rationalist approaches, Bleiker saw mimetic representation as attempting to abrogate the gap and to foreclose social reality.

Following these interventions, approaches that could be classified as aesthetic began emerging. Feminist IPE began advancing beyond the treatment of gender as an empirical category, that is, studying how men and women are differently affected by, and differently affect, political economy. Gender started to be conceived as a governing code pervading language and shaping how we think.<sup>6</sup> It became increasingly recognised that masculinity and femininity are integral to political economy. With the onset of the global financial crisis, interest in aesthetics gained further traction. Representations of finance played a significant role both in financialisation and its crisis. The rupture

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<sup>1</sup> Ash Amin and Ronen Palan, 'Towards a Non-rationalist International Political Economy', *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 559–77.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 509–33.

<sup>3</sup> Amin and Palan, 'Towards a Non-rationalist International Political Economy', 563.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 567.

<sup>5</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn', 516.

<sup>6</sup> V. Spike Peterson, 'How (The Meaning of) Gender Matters in Political Economy', in *Key Debates in New Political Economy*, ed. Anthony Payne (London: Routledge, 2006).

in aesthetics, in which financial calculations had become instrumental, helped elucidate this non-rational dimension. Financial aesthetics extended the self for so many individuals, the basis upon which self-solvency was attained. The subprime crisis violently destabilised the sublime individuality to which many aspired, making it as much a crisis of aesthetics as one about miscalibration and mispricing.

We here advocate aesthetic IPE, bringing Bleiker's and Amin and Palan's contributions into conversation to highlight how it should be distinguished from 'anaesthetic' IPE. We attempt to give greater substance to aesthetic, non-rationalist, approaches to IPE. We interrogate prevailing and seemingly anaesthetic approaches to the field, bringing into relief the problematic, ultimately aesthetic, regimes that they support. We look at the different strands of aesthetic IPE currently developing, in particular Foucauldian and Benjaminian inspired approaches. Finally, we outline key areas of future research for aesthetic IPE.

## Out of the Backwater of Anaesthetic IPE

In calling for a non-rationalist IPE, Amin and Palan were unsatisfied not only with mainstream approaches based on essentialist social ontologies that reified states and markets, but also critical approaches, which themselves shared in a view of the world as fundamentally rationally ordered. Despite critical scholarship's efforts to study capitalism's systemic dynamics (e.g. World Systems Analysis) and the state-market mutuality (e.g. Marxism), it still tends to essentialise boundaries and to focus on a seemingly mechanical conception of (dis)equilibrium between the economic and political in explaining discontinuity and change.<sup>7</sup> Non-rationalist IPE affords no analytical priority to economic 'laws'.

Non-rationalist IPE is transdisciplinary. Reaching out to other social sciences, arts and humanities, it incorporates theories of the subject, subjectivity, desire and aesthetics. It insists on the historical situatedness and transitoriness of the system of states, and is inherently attentive to 'practices, beliefs, discourses and contradictions of evolving authority conflicts'.<sup>8</sup> Non-rationalist IPE, they maintain, should be careful not to totalise, being attentive to the construction, maintenance and contestation of humanly shaped order. It is in this spirit that concern with aesthetics has emerged in IPE during the last 15 years.

Aesthetic IPE challenges the rationality postulate so dominant in economics, and reproduced within much of mainstream IPE. Ideas of economic rationality, of *Homo Economicus*, themselves represent an aesthetic of selfhood, reified through repetition in material practices. Rationalist IPE, inspired by the microeconomic neo-classical tradition in economics, is premised on a set of axioms

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<sup>7</sup> Amin and Palan, 'Towards a Non-rationalist International Political Economy', 567.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.

(market rationality, equilibrium, separation of economic and political, etc.), which justifies capitalism and obscures its unequal effects within a social whole.<sup>9</sup> Aesthetic IPE, in contrast, recognises embodied psycho-social dynamics in the enactment of the economy, of the way sense perceptions are shaped to meet narcissistic demands, demands for self-coherency and stability in our milieu, for psychological repose. From this vantage point, economic practices, our engagement in rituals of exchange and production, are less about fulfilling instrumental rationalities and utilitarian considerations. Such behaviours are understood as aesthetic renditions that help buttress the self from incessant threats of dissolution. From this aesthetic perspective, rationalist IPE can be seen as anaestheticised, as it neglects variation in existing modes of sense-perception, and disregards its own specific rhythms, processes and dynamics. Anxiety and trauma do not feature; just memory-less, calculated desire. The sensuous complexity of lived life is effectively sterilised. As such, IPE becomes detached from the microfoundations of capitalism it purports to engage.

This tendency can also be identified in work that appreciates the political economy of culture. This work often slots the aesthetic into a rationalist framing. For example, we see work highlighting the significance of the construction of bourgeois tastes and artefacts for the functioning of specific markets.<sup>10</sup> Though grasping such constructions is important in IPE, it gives a superficial ‘flavour’ of aesthetics’ role within the economic sphere. Such work does not respond to Amin and Palan’s call because it treats aesthetics as yet another ‘idea’ in the shaping of markets; it is concerned with the ‘cultural politics of price, preference and taste formation’ in the re- and dis-embedding of markets.<sup>11</sup> Its objective is not to explore ‘the social and moral content of economy itself’, the manner in which ‘morality, faith, power, and emotion, the distinctive qualities of human association, are interiorized into the logic of the economy’.<sup>12</sup> Excluding the aesthetic, often an unconscious elision, paradoxically reinforces prevailing aesthetics (neoliberalism) of economic conduct (financialisation), forged in sentimentality and sensibility. It grasps constructions of taste as strategies to appeal to a narrow rationality. This neglect of the economy’s aesthetics marginalises how the capitalist economy

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Susan Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display’, *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (1995): 434–67.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Colin Hay, ‘Globalisation and the Institutional Re-embedding of Markets: The Political Economy of Price Formation in the Bordeaux En Primeur Market’, *New Political Economy* 12, no. 2 (2007): 185–209; ‘The Political Economy of Price and Status Formation in the Bordeaux en Primeur Market: the Role of Wine Critics as Rating Agencies’, *Socio-Economic Review* 8, no. 2 (2010): 685–707.

<sup>11</sup> Hay, ‘Globalisation and the Institutional Re-embedding of Markets’, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

becomes comprehensible, operational and legitimate to its participants.<sup>13</sup> As Konings argues, while deconstructing the rationale of the cultural politics of price, it tends to reproduce the economisation of, indeed it fetishises, the social, a tendency which it actually sets out to overcome.

In critical IPE, inattentiveness to aesthetics, inadvertently, contributes to stultifying economic imagination; it tends to reproduce a particular sense-perception trained to capture only that which it is acculturated to sense. By eschewing aesthetics, critical IPE misses an important opportunity to conceive of modes for contesting oppressive social relations; it struggles to project alternative economic imaginaries partly because it is not sufficiently engaged in the aestheticisation of its analyses. As Belfrage argues, at an historical juncture where economic imagination is so needed, IPE must reflect on *how* it illuminates processes of reification to devise strategies for resisting them.<sup>14</sup> Addressing this inertia, while being conscious of and cautious about the corruptibility of efforts to aestheticise alternative imaginaries may offer possibilities for the construction of alternative politics.

## Two Strands of Thought

Studies of aesthetics in IPE broadly faithful to Amin and Palan's conception of non-rationalist IPE gained momentum with the global financial crisis.<sup>15</sup> The task that this literature sets itself is to understand aesthetics' role in capitalist reproduction on a wider scale, of the interface of different aesthetic cultures, of the permutations of transnationalising aesthetics, such as that of neoliberalism and as practiced in processes of financialisation. It commonly asks: what role has aesthetics played in the acceleration and reproduction of neoliberal financialisation? In this endeavour of aesthetic IPE, we see two different but compatible strands taking shape. One is Foucauldian-influenced, taking its cue from the political philosopher's later work on governmentality. The other is broadly historical materialist, frequently inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Foucault in Susan Buck-Morss, 'Envisioning Capital'.

<sup>14</sup> Claes Belfrage, 'For a Critical Engagement with Aesthetics in IPE: Revitalizing Economic Imagination in Times of Crisis', *International Politics* 49, no. 2 (2012): 154–76.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; Matt Davies, 'The Aesthetics of the Financial Crisis', *Alternatives* 37, no. 4 (2012): 317–30.; Marieke de Goede, *Virtue, Fortune and Faith: a Genealogy of Finance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Earl Gammon, 'Affect and the Rise of the Self-Regulating Market', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 251–78; Earl Gammon and Ronen Palan, 'Libidinal International Political Economy', in *International Political Economy and Poststructural Politics*, ed. Marieke De Goede (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism*; Amin Samman, Nathan Coombs, and Angus Cameron, 'For a Post-disciplinary Study of Finance and Society', *Finance and Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1–5.

Foucault's conception of governmentality, addressing the means through which individuals and collectives become self-governing, and how this links to the governing of others, implicates aesthetics. The analysis of the conduct of conducts, which elucidates the micro-physics of power that bridge the workings of large institutions and individual bodies, requires the appreciation of aesthetics as technologies of governance. It is not simply that aesthetic regimes interpellate subjects, beguiling them with object arrangements that channel their desires, but that individuals use aesthetics as technologies of the self. Investing in aesthetics is a means of transforming oneself. The participation in aesthetic rituals allows individuals to perform operations on their bodies and souls, helping them transform themselves to 'attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.'<sup>16</sup>

Aesthetic investment often goes far beyond compliance for the sake of narrowly defined self-interest. Mimetic comportment of norms such as those of prudence, punctuality and industriousness often cannot be explained in terms of deferred gratification, gratification that never comes, but in the attainment of the sense of perfection and purity, of narcissistic fulfilment. This narcissistic fulfilment is not to be understood as satiating some felicific calculus, but as a defensive and compensatory reaction to potential threats of self-dissolution. Such aesthetic dynamics are captured in Weber's conception of the protestant ethic, where success in worldly pursuits assuages anxieties of one's place in God's cosmic plan. Following the financial crisis, Konings argues that popular adherence to an aesthetic of austerity nourishes desires for self-coherency, what he refers to as 'redemptive austerity'.<sup>17</sup> Foucauldian approaches to aesthetic IPE thus emphasise the normative content of the economy.

The objective of self-coherency, a form of redemption, is an emancipatory ambition of the Benjaminist strand of aesthetic IPE. This historical materialist strand is concerned with the acculturation of the senses to historically specific instantiations of capitalist (post)modernity as well as sources of resistance to such acculturation.<sup>18</sup> Of critical interest are strategies of aestheticisation, understood as devising and deploying sensory technologies and spaces, intended to instrumentalise

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Konings, *Emotional Logic of Capitalism*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Belfrage, 'Towards a Benjaminist Political Economy', in *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change*, ed. Anca Pusca (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Claes Belfrage 'Facing Up to Financialisation and the Aesthetic Economy: High Time for Aesthetics in International Political Economy', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14, no. 3 (2011): 383–91; Belfrage, 'For a Critical Engagement with Aesthetics in IPE'; Davies, 'The Aesthetics of the Financial Crisis'.

modes of sense-perception and consciousness to create reifying aesthetics ripe for exploitation in a phantasmagorical world of commodities. Benjaminist IPE explores the social dynamics of reification, the strategies of aestheticisation, including the aesthetic labour and sensory technologies employed in including, representing and excluding particular objects. It brushes against the grain of capitalist (post)modern time, unearthing the layering of historically specific strategies of aestheticisation. As part of its redemptive endeavour, Benjaminist IPE is also concerned with strategies of deviation from and resistance to reification.<sup>19</sup> While sharing an ethical concern with the Foucauldian strand, Benjaminist IPE prioritises the social dimension of aesthetic production.

## Aesthetic IPE – A Research Agenda

We wish to highlight five areas that we think aesthetic IPE should explore in greater depth.

Firstly, a greater dialogue could prove useful between Foucauldian and (broadly) historical materialist approaches to aesthetics in IPE, which have differentially rendered neglected aspects of the world economy. As shown by a number of thinkers in the last two decades, Foucauldian analyses can complement historical materialism and vice versa. If Benjaminist IPE describes the aesthetic dimension of social relations of capitalist production, Foucault's notion of governmentality with its mechanisms of disciplinary power can give us a more fine-grained notion of the articulation of (moral) power within this system. The work of Walter Benjamin himself could help us to bridge these approaches by sensitising us to the impact of new technologies on the structure of consciousness, including, their effect on moral (or aesthetic) taste, on sensibilities and feelings, on perception, altogether 'the very structuration of being'.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, much meta-theoretical work is required to bring about greater complementarity between these different elements. For example, how can Benjamin's and Foucault's underlying interest in psychoanalysis be rendered compatible in our pursuit of understanding economic aesthetics? Indeed, connecting the broadly social with the moral offers potential insights into the possibility of emancipatory aesthetics that better meet demands for self-coherency and are more socially sustainable than each strand can provide individually. It could also offer a better understanding of the structural contexts in which emancipatory aesthetics are feasible.

Secondly, although the existing literature has variously sought an understanding of aesthetics' role in capitalist reproduction, this endeavour should be widened and deepened. This effort should involve elucidating the interface between different aesthetic cultures, of the

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October* 62 (1992): 3–41; Renate Holub, *Antonio Gramsci: Beyond Marxism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992); Belfrage, 'For a Critical Engagement with Aesthetics'.

<sup>20</sup> Holub, *Antonio Gramsci*: 89.

permutations of transnationalising aesthetics, such as that of neoliberalism. For example, we look to the work of Aihwa Ong, whose ethnographic perspective reveals distinctive milieus of labour and life, as neoliberalism produces hybrid and situated aesthetic constellations.<sup>21</sup>

Crosscutting its variegated manifestations, though, we see common elements of an aesthetic of neoliberal selfhood. We understand neoliberalism as a series of technologies of governance that engineer competition and consumption through individuation and responsabilisation. It is not just state retrenchment and market rule, as often characterised. Fostered by these technologies, but also reinforcing them, is a selfhood that is virtual and transactional. The site of identity foreclosure is a disembodied profile, a bricolage of discrete, measureable experiences supporting narratives of self-madness, success, authenticity and sovereign individuality. The aesthetics guiding the assemblage of the self facilitate novel forms of accumulation in a post-Fordist era; the rendition of the self through the consumption of experiences, increasingly eclipsing the consumption of goods, serves to assuage anxieties and paranoia induced by neoliberal technologies.

So too, capitalist aesthetics need to be explored at different scales and interscalarly, such as between households, corporations and governments, as well as the technologies employed in their interactions. That which is being obscured by hegemonic modes of representation should be highlighted. Here, we must pay attention to the aesthetics left out in representations of finance, for instance labour.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, we need to pay attention to the strategies and technologies of incorporating, interpellating and intensifying the aesthetics and affectivities of increasingly computational subjects. As Belfrage highlights in his study of Swedish public pension reform, the government developed a strategy of normalising portfolio investment practices by enabling and then exploiting existing risk preferences, ultimately aesthetics, amongst pension savers. In its promotion of the financial subject, the government created a system that places pension savers in an endless gambit of speculation on each others' greed, fears and anxieties.<sup>23</sup> The study of such strategies must go hand-in-hand with the deeper consideration of the software (or code) deployed to enable, but also to capture, commodify and exploit, the processual subjectivity expressed in streams, or flows of information, emerging under what could be labelled cognitive capitalism.<sup>24</sup> As Arvidsson argues, social media, in his example Facebook, provides the space within which our aesthetics and

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<sup>21</sup> Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Davies, 'The Aesthetics of the Financial Crisis'.

<sup>23</sup> Claes Belfrage, 'Towards "Universal Financialisation" in Sweden?', *Contemporary Politics* 14, no. 3 (2008): 277–96.

<sup>24</sup> cf. David M. Berry, *The Philosophy of Software: Code and Mediation in the Digital Age* (London: Palgrave, 2011).



affectivity, or as he calls this ‘lived intangibles’, cannot only be expressed, but also subsumed, commodified and valued, providing a way to give universal value to [and thus reifying] the lived excess of the global multitude while abstracting from its lived practice’<sup>25</sup>. Online social platforms, however, also provide the spaces for expressing the lived experience of financialised capitalism,<sup>26</sup> which includes the gendered particularities of the social reproductive space of the household.<sup>27</sup>

Exploring the depth of capitalist reproduction also entails understanding the affective economy, in which individuals and social groups negotiate their impermanent identities, the means through which they pursue psychological repose. Drawing on depth psychology can help conceptualise how the aesthetic realm intermeshes with the intra-psychical economy of individuals and the inter-psychical economy of groups. Instructive are attempts to map a libidinal political economy, highlighting the aggression and anxiety that are sublimated in ostensibly rational hedonic action.<sup>28</sup> Such approaches help in comprehending the unconscious dynamics that fuel the reproduction of particular aesthetic regimes. Understanding aesthetic, affective economies can help explicate the persistence of neoliberal governance, despite the fact that it accentuates vulnerable subjectivities.

Thirdly, aesthetic IPE should focus on how repressive apparatuses are involved in the justification and reproduction of particular economic aesthetics. This must include the techniques with which alternative economic aesthetics are marginalised and repressed. Aesthetic IPE should here aim at contributing to the discovery of new or hidden lines of sense-perception. Such work could take inspiration from authors like James Scott and Susan Buck-Morss in their efforts to illuminate the visual techniques through which economy and society are made legible and legitimate, including the metrics and representations of the economy underpinning these visualisations.<sup>29</sup> Such efforts must heed the ways repressive apparatuses operate in civil society, turning their abstracting representations and projections into complex reality.

Fourthly, methodologically, understanding economic aesthetics requires fine-grained analysis of strategies of aestheticisation and the technologies that are designed and deployed by aesthetic

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<sup>25</sup> Adam Arvidsson, ‘Facebook and Finance: On the Social Logic of the Derivative’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 6 (2016): 3–23, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Liam Stanley, “‘We’re Reaping What We Sowed’”: Everyday Crisis Narratives and Acquiescence to the Age of Austerity’, *New Political Economy* 19, no. 6 (2014): 895–917.

<sup>27</sup> Johnna Montgomerie and Daniela Tepe-Belfrage, ‘Caring for Debts: How the Household Economy Exposes the Limits of Financialisation’, *Critical Sociology*, published OnlineFirst, November 7, 2016, doi: 10.1177/0896920516664962.

<sup>28</sup> Gammon and Palan, ‘Libidinal International Political Economy’.

<sup>29</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998); Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital’.

labour to shape them. It demands tools for grasping the affective structures that these strategies and technologies target, including how these structures shape our responses (resonance, resistance, etc.). This requires ways to map how structures relate to capitalist modernity more broadly. This should be incorporated into a flexible methodological procedure that enables a movement from the analysis of the concrete, often microgranular, and complex of aesthetic experience to abstract, macroscopic structural analysis and back. Again, inspiration could be drawn, albeit not uncritically, from the ethnological approach of Foucault,<sup>30</sup> the materialist anthropology of Benjamin<sup>31</sup> and the dialectical method of Marx.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, aesthetic IPE should seek to rupture dominant economic aesthetics. Dominant representations of the economy are aesthetically minimalist. These derivations from neo-classical economics obscure more than they illustrate.<sup>33</sup> Aesthetic IPE should not only represent the world market to give a stronger sense of the social whole, but should also promote alternative modes of representation that allow for critical reappropriations of the popular economic imaginary.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The aesthetic turn, 15 years on, has yet to challenge the sway of mimetic representation within IPE. Though the global financial crisis emboldened numerous scholars in contesting mainstream perspectives on the operation of states and markets, anaesthetic IPE remains unflinching. In part, this owes to the dejection of crisis itself, provoking flights toward mesmerising aesthetics. This was evidenced with the performance of ‘crisis resolution’, which allured the public and practitioners alike with an aesthetics of expertise that reinforced rationalist conceptions of the market. Prevailing aesthetic regimes explain much about the reproduction of neoliberal order and rapid return to business as usual, though the recent indignation with expertise in relation to Brexit perhaps indicates an emerging counter-aesthetics.

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<sup>30</sup> Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (London: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Rob Beamish, *Marx, Method and the Division of Labour* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Buck-Morss, ‘Envisioning Capital’.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (London: MIT Press, 2002), 97.

Bringing into conversation the calls from Bleiker<sup>35</sup> and Amin and Palan,<sup>36</sup> we see the task of aesthetic IPE as illuminating aesthetics' role in capitalist reproduction on a broader scale, at the interface of different aesthetic cultures, and the permutations of transnationalising aesthetics. It implies analysing embodied, psycho-social dynamics in the enactment of the economy, of the way sense perceptions are shaped to meet narcissistic demands, to provide a sense of inner wholeness and identity foreclosure, and stave off self-fragmentation. Advancing beyond mechanistic conceptions of economy, appreciating its aesthetic, affective dimensions must imply empirical analyses at multiple scales, and involves consideration of the social relations of production and the repressive apparatuses involved in moulding aesthetics. The result is a critical science that places *homo aestheticus*, with its unruly tendencies, exploitable desire for psychical repose and strategies of aestheticisation, at the heart of analysis. It also offers potential insights into the possibility of emancipatory aesthetics that better meet demands for self-coherency and are more socially sustainable. Such demands also pose questions about the structural contexts in which such emancipatory aesthetics can be developed.

An aesthetic IPE is not simply about building a better analytical mousetrap, but entails critical reflection on its own aesthetic of knowledge production. A key limitation of contemporary critical scholarship is that it remains ensconced in an aesthetic that significantly curtails its wider social engagement, and that leaves it inaccessible to a broader public. IPE will need not only to turn its analytic lens onto popular aesthetics, but also needs to be reflexive of its own non-rational attachments and complicity in a vicarious aesthetic.

The growing suspicion of economics' new clothes, of the rejection of the staid curriculum taught in universities, is one opening for an aesthetic IPE. Capitalising on the moment requires overcoming IPE's seduction by the very body of knowledge it seeks to subvert. It entails demystifying the aesthetic rituals that animate our own participation in the prevailing political economic order's oppressive logics.

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<sup>35</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn'.

<sup>36</sup> Amin and Palan, 'Towards a Non-rationalist International Political Economy'.