
Art After 9/11

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This article examines ways in which art can help broaden understandings of contemporary security challenges, especially in view of the limits of conventional forms of strategic and policy analysis. The article focuses especially on responses to 9/11 in literature, the visual arts, architecture, and music, and considers some epistemological questions about the status of art as a way of knowing political events, like those of 9/11, that escape state-based forms of security analysis. **KEYWORDS:** security, art, emotion, representation, understanding

The aim of this article is to show how art can shed new and revealing light on contemporary security problems. In doing so, the article addresses a fundamental paradox that became apparent with 9/11—the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon of September 11, 2001. While security threats are becoming increasingly complex and transnational, our means of understanding and responding to them have remained largely unchanged. They are still based primarily on strategic expertise and corresponding militaristic and statecentric ways of articulating defense policy.

Military defense will undoubtedly remain a crucial element of security policy, but the problem of terrorism is far too complex and far too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence and creativity to understand and deal with it. This is particularly the case because the potential use of weapons of mass destruction amplifies the dangers of terrorist threats.¹ One of the key intellectual and political challenges today thus consists of legitimizing a greater variety of approaches to and insights into the phenomenon of terrorism.

Art has the potential to contribute to this broadening process. It can help us deal with dimensions of security challenges that cannot

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easily be understood through conventional forms of policy analysis. The article draws attention to this potential by examining some of the artistic reactions to 9/11. The ensuing endeavor lays no claim to comprehensiveness, for surveying the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity that followed those tragic events would be doomed from the start. The objective, then, is limited to two specific tasks:

1. To draw upon a few selected examples, stemming from literature, visual art, architecture, and music, in order to demonstrate the relevance of art to the process of coming to terms with 9/11
2. To engage some of the more fundamental epistemological puzzles that are entailed in understanding the links between art and politics. Can fiction, for instance, express certain aspects of terrorism better than a straightforward factual account? Can we see things through visual art that we cannot express through textual analyses? Can music make us hear something that we cannot see? If aesthetic engagements are indeed qualitatively different from others, what is the exact political content and significance of this difference? How can the respective insights be translated back into language-based expressions without losing the essence of what they capture?

The article begins by stressing that 9/11 did not constitute simply a breach of security, as it is generally understood: a violation of national sovereignty, a failure of the state's intelligence apparatus, and a shattering of a deep-seated sense of domestic security in the United States. The terrorist attack also, and perhaps more importantly, precipitated a breach of understanding. Prevalent faculties, including reason, were simply incapable of grasping the event in its totality. Policy analyses in particular were unable to capture and deal with the emotional side of the events—a shortcoming that explains the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity in the months following the attacks.

Artistic engagements, the article argues, have the potential to capture and communicate a range of crucial but often neglected emotional issues. Prevailing scholarly analyses and policy approaches to global security certainly pay no attention to the role of emotions, even though terrorism is a highly emotional issue. Various recent studies in philosophy, aesthetics, and ethics have shown how emotions are not just subjective and irrational reactions but do in fact contain insights that can be as revealing and as important as conventional knowledge forms, such as those emanating from social-scientific inquiries. This is why our knowledge of global security threats, and our practical

abilities to counter them, would greatly improve if we found ways of legitimizing both emotional knowledge and a range of alternative, artistic ways of expressing them.

9/11: From a Breach of Security to a Breach of Understanding

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, undoubtedly mark a key turning point in international politics. The death toll alone would not necessarily render the event so central, for many other recent conflicts, from Bosnia to Rwanda, produced far more casualties. The 2001 9/11 is significant because it fundamentally questioned the prevailing sense of security and the political structures that had been established to provide it. Or so at least argue most scholarly commentators. They stress that the attacks were directed not just at physical targets but at representations of power. No building symbolized the neoliberal economic world order better than the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and no building symbolizes the military might of the United States better than the Pentagon. The White House, the target for a failed third attack, would have been the perfect representation of political power.

The shock experience of 9/11 was thus linked to a fundamental breach of security, for security had come to be associated with the integrity and sovereignty of the nation-state. There is a well-established body of literature that examines the relationship between states as security machines and states as war machines. The most influential perspectives on foreign policy, those shaped by realist ideas, stress the need for states to protect peace and order at the domestic level by promoting policies that maximize the state's military capacity and, so it is assumed, its external security. That this very practice only increases everyone else's insecurity is evident, not least through extensive realist attempts to theorize the respective dilemmas.²

But 9/11 represents a different type of threat, one that cannot easily be anticipated, nor prevented, through prevailing state-based structures of security. The danger did not emanate from another state but from a nonstate actor, and one that cannot even be precisely defined and located. The conflict was not launched with conventional military equipment but with simple and unanticipated means. The attack itself took place in surprise, revealing a fundamental weakness in the state's intelligence apparatus. The attack was also asymmetric, insofar as it did not actual involve opposing forces. And, finally, the attack was not directed at a battlefield or a military target—it struck at the very heart of political, economic

and civilian life. As a result, it shattered both a deeply seated sense of domestic security and the integrity of the sovereign state.³

But the significance of 9/11 goes beyond a mere breach of state-based security, which is dramatic but can still be understood through existing conceptual means. The terrorist attacks also engendered a more fundamental breach in human understanding, which remains largely ignored by security experts. The 9/11 event displays all the features that Susan Neiman identifies as key elements of major turning points: moments in history when certain events defy “human capacities for understanding” and trigger a “collapse of the most basic trust in the world.”⁴

Aesthetic insights into 9/11 have the potential to identify and shed light on this fundamental breach of understanding. It is no coincidence that one of the most remarkable but often overlooked reactions to the terrorist attacks is the astonishing outpouring of artistic creativity. Countless artists around the world have tried to deal with both the nature of the tragic event and its implications for the future. They painted and filmed, they wrote poems and novels, they composed and performed music. This wave of aesthetic creativity may be comparable to the reactions Immanuel Kant described when faced with a powerful object, such as a storm or erupting volcano. The prevalent faculties, including reason, are confronted with their limit, for they are unable to grasp the event in its totality.⁵ The result is incomprehension, pain, and fear, which express the gap between what was experienced and what can actually be apprehended by existing conceptual and descriptive means. This is particularly the case for survivors of major traumas, who tend to find that there are no words to convey what happened.⁶ And even people who are affected only indirectly by the events can feel distressed by their inability to comprehend them through existing conceptual means.

Artistic representations may capture certain emotional dimensions that remain out of reach for prevalent forms of communication and analyses. They are an essential element of how the tragic events are viewed, interpreted, and remembered. But while offering insight into the nature and meaning of terrorism, these aesthetic reactions have had no influence on the making of security policy, which continues to be dominated by prevalent techno-strategic assessments of threats. Although presented as “new ways of thinking and new ways of fighting,”⁷ the US response is above all characterized by a strong desire to return to the reassuring familiarity of dualistic thinking patterns that dominated foreign policy during the Cold War. Once again the world is divided into “good” and “evil,” and once again military means occupy the key, if not the only role in protecting the former against the latter. This has the

unwelcome effect of representing the wars of response—Afghanistan and Iraq—as moral crusades, obscuring a deeper understanding and threatening to evoke the atavistic logic of religious war. Such an approach may make sense in the context of the shock that followed the events of 9/11, but it creates more difficulties than it solves. The rhetoric of “evil madmen,” one commentator stresses, “advances neither understanding of [terrorist] horror nor, for that matter, the capacity to combat or prevent it.”⁸ Even high-ranking military commanders now question the usefulness of the wars of response, admitting that “defeating terrorism is more difficult and far-reaching than we have assumed.”⁹

The tendency to resort to old thinking patterns in times of crises is as entrenched in international relations scholarship as it is in the domain of policymaking. Most approaches to the study of world politics remain dominated by social-scientific principles. This is even the case with many authors who seek to open up new perspectives. Alexander Wendt, for instance, one of the leading constructivist contributors to scholarly debates, stresses that “poetry, literature and other humanistic disciplines are not designed to explain global war or Third World poverty, and as such if we want to solve those problems our best hope, slim as it maybe, is social science.”¹⁰ The resulting tendency to marginalize alternative insights, such as those emanating from aesthetic sources, is particularly prevalent in the specific domain of security studies. The exclusive reliance on social science marks even those approaches that seek a broadening of the security agenda, such as advocates of human security, who urge policymakers to view security beyond the conventional military-based defense of the state and its territory.¹¹

Forays into alternative sources of insight remain rare and unsystematic. Walter Laqueur is one of the exceptions. In an influential book on terrorism he laments that “literature as a source for the study of terrorism is still virtually *terra incognita*.”¹² But while acknowledging the potential contribution of fiction and devoting a chapter to it, Laqueur’s research remains limited to retracing the “motives, thoughts and actions” of terrorists through literary texts. He does not engage the extent to which aesthetic insights may offer us a qualitatively different understanding of the more fundamental aspects of terrorism, including its nature, impact, and the policy responses it triggers. A few excellent recent texts pursue these issues further, but they are either limited to specific topics, such as music or visual art, or do not address the problem of terrorism in particular.¹³

While major crises initially tend to reinforce old thinking and behavioral patterns, they also allow societies to challenge and overcome entrenched habits, thereby creating the foundations for a new

and perhaps more peaceful future. Major traumas have, indeed, always played a central role in redefining political communities.¹⁴ Questioning the key assumptions that guide security thinking should therefore be an essential element of coming to terms with 9/11. And it should entail fundamental discussions about the nature and meaning of security in a rapidly changing world—discussions that include the use of a range of hitherto neglected sources of insight, such as aesthetic ones. The latter are essential not least because aesthetic factors have made 9/11 into a major global event in the first place. What haunted the world more than anything were the images and sounds of the crumbling twin towers, of human suffering and death, being instantaneously and repeatedly televised around the world.¹⁵

Questioning Representation

A series of aesthetic questions thus needs to be posed with regard to 9/11. These questions revolve to a large extent about the issue of representation, about how one can understand major political events in a way that does justice to both their complexities and the need to find adequate ways of responding politically. I now raise some of these questions by focusing on four specific aesthetic domains: literature, visual art, architecture, and music. My ambition is not to map how artists in these aesthetic fields have engaged 9/11. There have been far too many artistic engagements to even attempt a comprehensive survey, at least in an article-length exposé. I am merely showing how paying attention to artistic activities allows us to pose questions that are central for the study of security and international relations in general.

The potential and problems of literature's contribution to the study of political phenomena is well illustrated through a recent book by the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy. Entitled *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* the book engages the regional political context of the US invasion of Afghanistan, which was the initial military response to 9/11. Lévy examines the death of Daniel Pearl, a US journalist who, in early 2002, was kidnapped in Karachi and then decapitated. The latter act was captured on video and linked with a range of political demands. Lévy's book, which became a best seller both in Europe and North America, mixes investigative journalism with fiction, a style he calls *romanquête*. Since many facts regarding the case are not known, Lévy simply uses his literary imagination to provide a coherent narrative. The later includes speculation about events and motives and about Pearl's emotional response to being captured and tortured.¹⁶

Whether or not Lévy's book constitutes literature is an open question. Clear is, however, that it has caused a great deal of controversy. One prominent commentator, writing for the *New York Review of Books*, dismissed Lévy's research as "amateurish," drawing attention to his "shaky" knowledge of South Asian geography, his "deep ignorance" of the corresponding political situation, and his stereotypical representation of "fanatical Orientals."¹⁷ This comes in the wake of years of critique by prominent philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze or Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who accused Lévy of gross factual errors and intellectual mediocrity.¹⁸

Levy's latest best seller may well be "ill-informed and simplistic," as the New York commentator stresses, but it also triggered a number of more generic, more fundamental controversies, which are well worth investigating. They have to do with the author's stylistic transgressions—with his attempt to blur journalistic inquiry and fictional creativity. Many reviewers were far more disturbed by these transgressions than by Lévy's lack of investigative competence and literary flair. They worry primarily about "a more unsettling doubt raised by the fusion of genres,"¹⁹ about occasions when the author "distorts his evidence and actually invents the truth."²⁰

What are the exact political and ethical dangers of crossing factual and fictional accounts? Can literature, as Proust once claimed, provide certain insight into human beings and their emotions that other accounts fail to capture?²¹ Can literature's appeal to the imagination generate political and social change in a way that prose accounts could not?²² Or is not today's opposition between "fact and fancy" a historical product, replacing earlier intellectual traditions that provided space for a range of different truth claims, including those "that could be presented to the reader only by means of fictional techniques of representation"?²³

Needless to say, an article-length survey cannot spell out the exact policy relevance of literary readings of 9/11. But the potential of such engagements can nevertheless be identified. Fictional accounts of terrorist movements, for instance, may offer insight into the psychological, political, and cultural motives and methods that underlie them. They may capture emotional dimensions that a purely analytical account cannot represent. A policy that takes such insights into account would be better attuned than an approach that simply labels terrorism as "evil" and thus impossible to understand in rational terms. Concrete benefits from aesthetic insight may range from improving the ability to anticipate the timing and nature of terrorist attacks to a fine-tuning of preventive means, such as targeted development assistance or the promotion of cultural tolerance.

A focus on visual art highlights similar and similarly difficult questions. There have been an unusually high number of painters,

from leading artists to amateurs, seeking to deal with various aspects of 9/11. The diversity of websites devoted to representing these activities is in itself astonishing. Various internet-based projects, such as the “WHY Project,” the “ARTproject,” “Rhizome,” or “Arts Healing America,” display literally thousands of art works that deal with the terrorist attack and its aftermath. They stress the importance of art in the process of “coming to terms with what has happened,”²⁴ in the “healing, recovery and rebuilding of self and community.”²⁵ They seek to “function as a dialogue for those who wish to communicate through images.”²⁶ They want to “open up avenues of discussion and expression . . . through cultural intervention.”²⁷ Such artistic and cultural engagements are not limited to local people, reacting directly to the events in New York. One of the most prominent websites, the WHY Project, was established on the day of the attacks. It featured instructions in several languages, inviting artists around the world to submit their work as part of a collective effort to address the aftermath of the events.²⁸

Many visual artists throughout the world did, indeed, feel the need to deal with the event in the medium they know best. One example is the indigenous Australian painter Gordon Bennett. As an extended aesthetic dialogue with the African American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bennett produced a series of paintings that dealt directly with the events of 9/11.²⁹ On some level, the paintings are relatively figurative, with tumbling buildings, airplanes, flames, and suffering people clearly visible. But they also represent the events in ways that place emphasis not on external appearances but on the emotional reaction to them. Can such artistic engagements provide insight that language-based accounts cannot? If so, what is their exact content and can they be translated back into language-based representations and brought to bear upon the formulation of security policy?

Public Debates About the Aesthetic Reconstruction of Ground Zero

Some of these difficult questions also entered debates about the rebuilding of Ground Zero, the space in New York where the twin towers of the World Trade Center used to stand. Consider, for instance, the work of Daniel Libeskind, who has chief responsibility for overseeing the rebuilding process, and a range of other architects and artists, such as Michael Arad, whose design was chosen for the memorial at Ground Zero. Debates about the highly symbolic

rebuilding process led to heated disagreements, both between the architects involved and among the public at large. The very existence of these debates demonstrates that architecture has the potential to generate discussion about political and moral issues. "Architecture is communication," Libeskind argues;³⁰ it is "poetry in stone and in light and in gravity."³¹ And he goes on to stress that "contrary to public opinion the flesh of architecture is not cladding, insulation and structure, but the substance of the individual in society in history."³²

Structural elements did, however, generate considerable tension. This was the case, for instance, with disagreements about the so-called Freedom Tower, the centerpiece of the rebuilding process. Libeskind's master plan foresaw a building with a slanting roof that holds a spire, in all reaching up to 1,776 feet, symbolizing the year of the Declaration of Independence. David Childs, the architect chosen by the developer, planned a much more massive structure with a facade that is twisted as it rises. A compromise between these two architectural approaches produced a hybrid-design that retains elements of Child's basic structural ideas while adding Libeskind's notion of an asymmetrical summit and a symbolic height of 1,776 feet.³³ The latter would make it, when completed in 2008, the world's tallest building,, thus symbolizing, in the words of New York State's governor, George Pataki, that "the world of freedom will always triumph over terror."³⁴

Debates over the memorial at Ground Zero offer particularly revealing glimpses into the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The purpose of the memorial is to commemorate the 2,982 lives lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center. A thirteen-member jury was set up to oversee the selection process. Rather than being made up of politicians, the jury consisted mostly of people from the arts and cultural professions, including Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam War Memorial, and Vatan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation.

The main aim of the jury was to "find a design that will begin to repair both the wounded cityscape and our wounded souls, to provide a place for the contemplation for both loss and new life."³⁵ Besides this broad goal there were very few official rules, but they included that the memorial "make visible the footprints of the original World Trade Center towers" and that it "recognize each individual who was a victim of the attacks."³⁶

After examining a total of 5,201 submissions, in November 2003 the jury announced eight finalists. The designs were far more abstract and minimalist than, say, Bennett's figurative rendering of

the event. In some sense they continued a tradition of abstract memorialization that was initiated twenty years earlier by Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial. "Everywhere abstraction and minimalism became the unavoidable language of the monument," stressed one commentator. "We have become uncomfortable with the idea of literal representation when we make monuments."³⁷ Arad's design reflected a very conscious aesthetic choice made by the jury.³⁸ "We resisted the idea of the literal," said one of the jurors. The basic idea was to choose a memorial that could provide a living memory by allowing "for the change of seasons, passage of years and evolution over time."³⁹

The initial public reaction was rather negative. A survey conducted by the Municipal Art Society found that the most frequent criticism of the designs, including the subsequent winner, were "too cold, bleak and angular."⁴⁰ A leading New York architect spoke of "a public-relations disaster."⁴¹ One commentator aptly summarized these critical voices by stressing the designs were too remote and sanitized to "capture the destruction and injustice" of the event, to "speak of the cruelty and the horror, of the vulnerability and desperation, of the valor and sacrifice." To remember what "really happened" on September 11, he stressed, one must be more figurative; we need monuments that "capture the drama, images that haunt us and objects that carry the scars of their survival."⁴² Others strongly defended the choice of finalists, stressing that they "make the strongest possible case for simplicity as the most suitable aesthetic for ground zero."⁴³

The eventual winner of the competition, Michael Arad's memorial "Reflecting Absence," perfectly captures these aesthetic tensions. Revised in collaboration with the Peter Walker, a prominent landscape architect, Arad's memorial consists of an open plaza with pine trees. In the middle of the plaza, and submerged thirty feet below street level, are a pair of enormous reflective pools, marking the space where the twin towers used to stand. These "voids can be read as containers of loss, being close-by yet inaccessible," Arad stresses. He describes the descent into the memorial as follows:

This descent removes [visitors] from the sights and sounds of the city and immerses them into a cool darkness. As they gradually proceed, step by step, the sound of water falling grows louder, and more daylight filters in from below. At the bottom of their descent, they find themselves behind a thin curtain of water, staring out at an enormous pool that flows endlessly towards a central void that remains empty.⁴⁴

Disputes arose about several aspects of the design, including the manner in which the dead are individually remembered. Arad's original design foresaw that the two central and massive pools be surrounded by a ribbon of names that indicated the victims of the attack. Key was that the names appear in no discernible order, so that they "reflect the haphazard brutality of the death."⁴⁵ But many relatives of victims found the plan "too impersonal and generic," demanding a more specific acknowledgement. Some went as far as threatening to remove the name of their relatives from the memorial in case they are listed together with civilians.⁴⁶ As a compromise, the revised version of Arad's and Walker's memorial designated individual shields for the names of police officers, firefighters, and other officials.⁴⁷

How can such memorial and architectural features, and the discussions about them, contribute to our memory of 9/11? Can artistic representation express forms of memory that the more linear representations of verbal narrative cannot?⁴⁸ Prevalent political reactions to 9/11, for instance, generated a patriotic movement that led to a considerable amount of cultural and racial stereotyping, particularly vis-à-vis people of Arabic origin. Aesthetic representations of traumas, such as memorials, are much less linked to cultural values or boundaries of sovereignty. They thus contain the potential to offer sources that could be used to rearticulate notions of community and security in a transnational and culturally sensitive way.

Politics Between Text and Music

Now a radical change of scenery: from the hard bricks of architecture to the soft rhythm of musical tunes. But the change is not as abrupt as it seems, for music does, in many ways, epitomize the questions and dilemmas entailed in aesthetic engagement with politics.

Music, at least in its "pure" instrumental form, does not seem to represent anything outside itself—certainly no concrete and straightforward political message. But musical activities are among the most widespread and intensive engagements with 9/11. The domain of popular music alone has produced countless songs about the event. Some musicians are explicitly political. DJ Shadow, for instance, composed a song that is highly critical of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. His rationale for doing so is that "artists, be they painters, actors, writers or musicians, have a responsibility to reflect and interpret the world around them." Or, expressed in the lyrics accompanying his music:

I was born with the voice of a riot, a storm lightening the function, the form, far from the norm. . . . I'm back in the cipher my foes and friends, with a verse and a pen against a line I won't toe or defend.⁴⁹

Other musicians focus less on the explicitly political and more on the purely emotional sides of coming to terms with 9/11. Look, for instance, at an album by Bruce Springsteen, which contains songs such as "My City of Ruins" and "Into the Fire." The latter spoke of how

I need you near, but love and duty called you someplace higher, somewhere up the stairs, into the fire.⁵⁰

Some commentators endow Springsteen's music with central importance, elevating it to a semiofficial "requiem for those who perished in the sudden inferno, and those who died trying to save them."⁵¹ Others see it above all as a patriotic celebration of New York's heroic firefighters⁵² or critique him for not mentioning anything about the state of the country or, for that matter, the far more problematic war of response.⁵³

Entering these debates is not my task. I am interested in the more generic relationship between music, text, and politics. The independence of musical content from the lyrics that may accompany them becomes evident if one examines an earlier song by Bruce Springsteen. The title track of his 1984 album *Born in the USA* is often cited as the most misinterpreted song in the history of rock music. But a closer look reveals less of a misinterpretation than an inherent tension between text and music. The textual message Springsteen wanted to communicate was one of protest. It was meant to critique how US society treated its working-class veterans from the Vietnam War. Two representative stanzas from the song:

Got in a little hometown jam
So they put a rifle in my hand
Sent me off to a foreign land
To go and kill the yellow man
Born in the USA. . . .

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary
Out by the gas fires of the refinery
I'm ten years burning down the road
Nowhere to run ain't got nowhere to go
Born in the USA. . . .⁵⁴

While designed as protest against US society, “Born in the USA” had mostly the opposite effect. It became a widely recognized and uncritically employed hymn for the celebration of patriotic pride and duty. “Born in the USA” was even used as a theme song in Ronald Reagan’s republican presidential campaign in 1984. George Will, a conservative columnist, perfectly captured the logic of this appropriation:

I have not got a clue about Springsteen’s politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts while he sings songs about hard times. He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful, affirmation: “Born in the USA!”⁵⁵

Springsteen is said to have been horrified by this political appropriation of his music. But the “death” of a musician is as prominent a theme as the much-discussed death of an author. Once composed, a piece of music takes on its own life, independently of the intention its creator bestowed upon it. The political nature of a song thus has as much to do with the musical content as with the lyrics that accompany it. Eliminate the text of Springsteen’s song for a moment, or assume a listener who does not understand English, and the appropriation of “Born in the USA” suddenly looks far less surprising. One commentator hits the nail on its head:

If you set your troubled examination of Vietnam’s after-effect to the sort of declamatory fanfare last heard when an all-conquering Caesar returned to Rome, bellow it in a voice that suggests you are about to leap offstage and punch a communist, then package it in a sleeve featuring the Stars and Stripes and a pair of Levi’s, it’s no good getting huffy when people seize the wrong end of the stick.⁵⁶

“Born in the USA” shows how the sound of music itself can carry a message, either in the absence of words or in combination (or contraction) with them. From a political point of view this may well be the most significant aspect of music. A move from popular music back to theoretical debates can help to clarify the issue.

Music and Emotional Knowledge

The role of emotional insights into 9/11 illustrates how even purely instrument music may contain political content—and thus the potential to add to our understanding of security issues. Prevalent

scholarship on international relations pays no attention to emotions, which are considered purely subjective and irrational, involving neither thought nor meaningful knowledge. This is in many ways paradoxical, for terrorism is a highly emotional phenomena. The motives and means of terrorists are usually presented in emotional terms, as “fanatical,” “irrational,” or simply “evil.” Reactions to terrorist attacks are equally emotional. They involve dealing with the memory of death, suffering, and trauma, leading to emotional calls for political action, often involving feelings of retribution that go far beyond the mere need to provide security. Political leaders do not shy away from drawing upon emotional appeals, such as nationalist rhetoric, to win support for their positions.

And yet, the actual policy analyses of terrorist threats are advanced in a highly detached and rationalized manner.⁵⁷ The very presentation of contemporary warfare, from sanitized video-images of satellite-guided missiles to the abstract language of defense experts (exemplified through terms like *collateral damage* and *clean bombs*) not only eliminates suffering from our purview, but also fails to take into account emotional issues when assessing threats and formulating policy.

Although unacknowledged by experts in security studies, there is an extensive body of literature that deals with emotional insight. Martha Nussbaum’s impressive study on the topic is particularly significant here since she demonstrates that emotions do not just highlight our vulnerability toward events that lie outside of control, such as terrorist attacks. They are also important forms of knowledge and evaluative thought. Literature, music, and other works of art offer possibilities to express these emotional insights in ways that cannot easily be achieved through conventional accounts of events. This is why, Nussbaum stresses, emotional intelligence and aesthetic ways of representing them should be accepted, alongside more conventional sources, as legitimate elements in the formulation of ethical and political judgment.⁵⁸

Drawing attention to music’s ability to capture emotional insight is not to draw a stark line between emotion and reason. The latter can, in fact, be seen as a form of sensibility itself, even in its instrumental form. Perhaps the sanitized discourse of defense policy is a form of rationalized fear. The aesthetic, in turn, could thus be seen as offering an alternative response, a creative enchantment that takes its place in a broad spectrum of different forms of reasons.⁵⁹

Be that as it may, music exemplifies the potential and limit of gaining emotional insights into political puzzles. Music is not based on the idea of representing a specific object in the political world. But music does, at the same time, relate to aspects outside itself, to

a state of mind, an attitude, a feeling, or an emotion.⁶⁰ Music is unique in a variety of ways, including its performative and rhythmic nature and the fact that it can be perceived simultaneously from all directions, which is not the case with visual or textual sources.⁶¹ These are some of the reasons why several writers and philosophers, including Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, believed that music is particularly suited to express emotions, that the effects of music are more immanent and profound than those emanating from other arts, for “these speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence.”⁶²

Can music thus offer insight that other forms of knowledge cannot? Mahler, for instance, was only interested in composing music about experiences that cannot be expressed in words.⁶³ As with other aesthetic insight, the challenge here consists of locating the precise political content and communicating it in nonmusical terms. Prevalent linguistic conventions are inadequate to capture musical knowledge. Consider, for instance, how I reluctantly but, for lack of alternatives, inevitably had to refer to musical *insight*, or to the possibility of music *illuminating* political phenomena. Both of these terms are inherently visual, reflecting a deep-seated assumption that our ideal experience, as Nussbaum stresses, “must be a visual experience, that its illumination must be accounted for in terms of the eye.”⁶⁴

But to communicate aural experiences through visual metaphors is problematic. To express musical experiences appropriately one would need to replace *insight* and *illuminating* with *inhearing* or additives such as *musicate* or *aurate*.⁶⁵ Some languages are already better equipped for such sensitivities than is English. For Aboriginal people in the western desert of Australia, for instance, “the metaphor for thought and memory is the ear.”⁶⁶ But even if equipped with more appropriate metaphorical tools, language would still not be able to capture the unique representational style of music, or, rather, music’s refusal to engage in representation at all. “Music has to be listened to and nothing can replace this experience,” Gordon Graha has pointed out.⁶⁷

The Challenge to Appreciate Artistic Knowledge on Its Own Terms

The main methodological challenge consists of legitimizing musical and other artistic insights on their own terms, rather than through the conceptual framework of social scientific conventions. But how is one to legitimize approaches to knowledge and evidence that

contradict many established principles that guide international relations scholarship? And how can one communicate aesthetic insights in ways that retain their uniqueness and integrity? Knowledge that is communicated through artistic and philosophical insights cannot always be verified, as Gadamer stresses, by methodological means proper to science. Indeed, the significance of aesthetic knowledge is located precisely in the fact that it “cannot be attained in any other way.”⁶⁸

I do not pretend to offer answers to these difficult questions here. Debates about them go back at least to Kant. By examining how the beautiful and the sublime generate an inherent tension (rather than a smooth link) between imagination and reason, Kant sought to find ways for allowing each faculty to cultivate its unique insights and passions.⁶⁹ Many contemporary commentators are more pessimistic than Kant, at least about the practical possibilities of conveying clear emotional issues through music. Gordon Graham, for instance, admits that music is an unusually powerful means for expressing emotions. But he is very skeptical about music’s possibility to say anything concrete, or at least anything that goes beyond very broad sensations, such as sadness or happiness. Graham thus believes that “very few other states or conditions can be ascribed to music without a measure of absurdity creeping into the discussion.”⁷⁰

Reading concrete emotional messages into (or out of) music is, indeed, a difficult, perhaps even an inherently problematic, endeavor. But it is not quite as impossible as Graham holds. Nussbaum’s study shows why. While acknowledging the difficulty of describing connections between music and our emotional life, Nussbaum stresses that part of this difficulty has less to do with music and more with our lack of conceptual insight into the issue of emotions in general.⁷¹ Reaching a systematic understanding of the importance of emotional insight is thus central. And so is the need to recognize the limits of what can be conveyed through music. Nussbaum, for instance, admits that music cannot communicate clear and authentic emotional messages. Any persuasive account of the emotional content of music, she argues, is intrinsically linked to the experiences of listeners.⁷² This, in turn, requires recognizing that the links between music and emotions are culturally specific. Indian or Japanese music, Nussbaum argues, is not immediately accessible to the untrained Western ear. This is why an appreciation of music, as well as of its emotional content, requires a certain level of “education and attunement.”⁷³

Music in this sense is a form of representation, even though it does not represent anything outside of itself. Its attempt to capture

and express emotions may well be broader and less demarcated, but in other ways it is not much different than language. Both mediums, language and music, cannot capture the world as it is. Whenever we use language to convey meaning, we say as much about our values and prejudices, which are embedded in specific linguistic structures and cultural norms, as we say about the actual objects and phenomena we seek to describe. Nussbaum thus stresses that

Music is another form of symbolic representation. It is not language, but it need not cede all complexity, all sophistication in expression, to language. So it is not obvious why we think that there is a greater problem about expressing an emotion's content musically than about expressing it linguistically. We think this way because we live in a culture that is verbally adept but (on the whole) relatively unsophisticated musically.⁷⁴

In a highly insightful and inspiring dialogue about music, society and politics, Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said stress a similar point. They lament the increasingly marginalized role that music plays in society and ascribe this marginalization to the larger modern process of splitting up life and knowledge into ever more specialized subfields. The ensuing practices have led to impressive advances of knowledge, but they have come at a price. Music, for instance, is now treated as separate not only from politics but also from the other arts. Most people today no longer receive a basic education in music. But precisely such an education would be necessary, as Nussbaum already stressed, to appreciate the various dimensions of music, including its intertwinement with politics and society.⁷⁵ Without that knowledge, music is simply dismissed as irrelevant to the political, even though the careful and informed listening necessary to correct that image requires no more and no less education than, say, the specialized skills necessary to read a defense studies manual. The result is that we know more and more about increasingly specialized topics, but hardly ever explore the promising linkages between them.

Barenboim and Said advance a passionate claim for making music more central again to societal and cultural life, and thus to politics, too. They draw attention to the benefits that could emerge from such a renewed appreciation and reintegration of music. They themselves did so in a very practical way by bringing together a group of young Israeli and Arab musicians in the German cultural center of Weimar. Named after Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan*, the project used music as a way of promoting cross-cultural communication, understanding, and tolerance.⁷⁶ Although pre-dating

the events of September 11, this musical dialogue represented precisely the type of cultural engagement that many critics find missing in the official policy response to the terrorist attacks.⁷⁷

Said stressed the need for a “common discourse,” a type of broad understanding of society that replaces the current specialization of knowledge, where only a few fellow experts are still capable of communicating with each other. For Said, the danger of this tendency was that we no longer take on the most challenging problems, for the fragmentation of knowledge and its corresponding institutionalization makes it easy to avoid responsibility for decisions regarding the overall direction of society.⁷⁸

Barenboim, likewise, has stressed that music is “one of the best ways to learn about human nature.” Learning here means far more than the mere accumulation of knowledge. It means retaining the ability to question some of the problematic assumptions that are often taken for granted, even though they cause a great deal of conflict in the world. The elevation of realist power politics to a virtually unchallenged mantra of foreign policy behavior is case in point. The key political challenge, then, consist of searching for new perspectives (that is, listening capabilities), rather than new facts. This challenge is perfectly expressed by Barenboim, who wants to make listeners forget what they know, so that they can experience the world anew and thus open up to possibilities that are foreclosed by intellectual and practical conventions that are so entrenched that they are uncritically accepted as common sense.⁷⁹

Music may well be better suited for this task than many other forms of expression, for, as Nussbaum stresses, “it is not the language of habit.”⁸⁰ It may thus be able to offer us a fundamentally different take on some of the key political challenges, thereby opening up possibilities that stay foreclosed within conventional policy deliberations.

* * *

Artistic insights are not necessarily better or more authentic than prevalent interpretations of security dilemmas. They certainly do not replace the need for technical expertise and social-scientific inquires into security dilemmas. But aesthetic insights offer the opportunity to reach a broader understanding of the emergence, meaning, and significance of key political challenges, such as global terrorism. By generating new insights, art demonstrates what Ekkehart Krippendorff once stressed: that politics is far too important a domain to leave to politicians, or to political scientists, for that matter.⁸¹ While writers, painters, musicians, and philosophers, such as

Barenboim, Said, and Nussbaum, have long made this point, international-relations scholarship has so far paid far too little attention to knowledge that can emerge from drawing upon alternative sources, including aesthetic ones.

It is reasonable to assume that art can provide only limited or no input on purely technical and strategic issues, such as decisions with regard to weapons systems or strategic deployment of troops. But security policy is, and always has been, about far more than military policy. Although presented as a pragmatic response to external threats, security is just as much about defining the values and boundaries of political communities, about separating a safe inside from a threatening outside. It is about sustaining national identity and legitimizing the use of violence for political purposes.⁸² In short, security is about the political imaginary as much as it is about facing threats. And it is in this realm that art can become politically relevant: It can contribute to discussions about the nature of threats and their impact on political communities, about the memory of trauma and its shaping of future policies, about the fundamental definition of security and the ensuing relationship between inside and outside. Doing so entails expanding the definition and task of security beyond an assessment of threats and the search for an appropriate strategic response to them.

Art can show that security is as much about the search for political visions and the need to adjust our intellectual and policy attitudes to changing circumstances. This is particularly crucial since processes of globalization are gradually eroding the boundaries of the sovereign state, which continues to be the key reference point for prevailing practices of national security. It is in this sense that art can contribute significantly to our effort to understand security not only as a protection of the state apparatus but also as a much wider political project that seeks to provide stability, subsistence, dignity, basic human rights, and freedom from fear.

Notes

This article is part of a larger, ongoing project about the relevance of aesthetic insights to global security issues. In that sense it is more of an attempt to map out the terrain ahead than it is an effort to advance and defend particularly arguments. I am grateful to Stephen Chan, Alex Danchev, Toby Ganley, Ian Hunter, Emma Hutchison, Brian Martin, Martin Leet, and Oliver Richmond for comments on an earlier draft. Some of the explorations on music have emerged from my essay "Of Things We Hear but Cannot See: Musical Explorations of International Politics," in M. I. Franklin, ed., *Shake, Rattle, and Rap: On Music, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

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