

The State of the Sublime: Aesthetic Protocols and Global Security

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Jonathan Luke Austin 
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Anna Leander

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Switzerland

Abstract

Security politics is everywhere, its tendrils entangled with every aspect of life. Nonetheless, this hyper-securitised status quo has not interrupted the flow of everyday life, nor the circulation of people, goods, or ideas. For the privileged of the world, a paradox has emerged: war, terrorism, ecological disaster, pandemics, and many other ‘monstrous’ forms of insecurity are now experienced as mundane and manageable phenomena in spite of the exceptional political measures, and more generalised affective states of fear and anxiety, that they have proliferated. How has this occurred? This article argues that aesthetic processes and politics are fundamental to the maintenance of this paradox. To do so, we draw on Bruno Latour’s concept of ‘transfrayeurs’ (trans-fears) to understand how modes of aesthetic design are deployed to simultaneously locate sublime imaginaries of insecurity in our midst while also allowing us to live with, accept, and forget their presence. More specifically, we suggest that trans-fearing is achieved through ‘aesthetic protocols’ that specify principles for designing material, affective, and discursive forms into our lives in ways that allow for the careful ‘calibration’ of how we (unequally) experience a hierarchised, depoliticised, and militarised ‘state of the sublime’ within global security politics.

Keywords

security, aesthetics, New Materialism, International Political Design, affect

Corresponding author:

Jonathan Luke Austin, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, DK-1353 Copenhagen K, København, 1017, Denmark.

Email: jonathanlukeAustin@gmail.com

L'État du sublime : protocoles esthétiques et sécurité mondiale

Résumé

Les politiques de sécurité sont partout, leurs tentacules s'immiscant dans tous les aspects de nos vies. Ce statu quo hyper-sécurisé n'interrompt pas pour autant le flot de la vie quotidienne, ni la circulation des personnes, des biens ou des idées. Pour les privilégiés de ce monde, un paradoxe est alors apparu : la guerre, le terrorisme, les catastrophes écologiques, les pandémies et bien d'autres formes « monstrueuses » d'insécurité sont désormais perçus comme des phénomènes ordinaires et contrôlables, en dépit des mesures politiques exceptionnelles et des états affectifs plus généralisés de peur et d'anxiété qu'ils génèrent. Comment cela est-il arrivé ? Cet article soutient que les processus esthétiques et la politique sont fondamentaux dans le maintien de ce paradoxe. Pour le démontrer, nous nous appuyons sur le concept de « transfrayeurs » de Bruno Latour afin de comprendre comment des modes de conception esthétique sont déployés dans le but de localiser les sublimes imaginaires d'insécurité qui nous habitent tout en nous permettant de vivre avec, d'accepter et d'oublier leur présence. De manière plus concrète, nous suggérons que la transfrayeur est réalisée à travers des « protocoles esthétiques » qui énoncent des principes pour concevoir des formes matérielles, affectives et discursives dans nos vies, de manière à permettre le « calibrage » consciencieux de la façon dont nous vivons (inégalement) un « état du sublime » hiérarchisé, dépolitisé et militarisé dans les politiques de sécurité.

Mots-clés

politique matérielle, résonance affective, conception politique internationale

El Estado de lo sublime: Protocolos estéticos y seguridad global

Resumen

La política de seguridad está en todas partes; sus tentáculos abarcan todos los aspectos de la vida. Aun así, este statu quo hiperseguritizado no ha interrumpido el flujo de la vida cotidiana, ni la circulación de personas, bienes e ideas. Para los privilegiados del mundo emerge una paradoja: la guerra, el terrorismo, la catástrofe ecológica, las pandemias y muchas otras formas «monstruosas» de inseguridad son experimentadas en la actualidad como fenómenos mundanos y manejables, a pesar de las medidas políticas excepcionales y de la proliferación generalizada de estados afectivos de miedo y ansiedad. ¿Cómo ha ocurrido esto? Este artículo argumenta que las políticas y los procesos estéticos son fundamentales para el mantenimiento de esta paradoja. Para ello, nos basamos en el concepto de «transfrayeurs» (trans-miedos), de Bruno Latour, para entender cómo se despliegan los diferentes modos de diseño estético a fin de ubicar simultáneamente imaginarios sublimes de inseguridad entre nosotros, al tiempo que se nos permite convivir, aceptar y olvidar su presencia. Más específicamente, sugerimos que el transmiedo se logra a través de «protocolos estéticos» que especifican principios para el diseño de formas materiales, afectivas y discursivas en nuestras vidas que permitan «calibrar» cuidadosamente cómo experimentamos (de manera desigual) un «estado de lo sublime» jerarquizado, despolitizado y militarizado, dentro de la política de seguridad global.

Palabras clave

política material, resonancia afectiva, diseño político internacional



Figure 1. The Broken Chair, Daniel Berset, Place des Nations, Geneva. CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0, Mike Edwards, 2008.

The home of the United Nations in Geneva (UNOG) sits before a large open courtyard. Towards its edge lies a wooden chair that towers 12 metres tall. But what strikes the visitor about this chair is not its size. No, what is arresting is that the chair's fourth leg has been blown into a stump of charred splinters. The *Broken Chair*, see figure 1, was designed by artist Daniel Berset to protest the civilian consequences of war and was built so tall in order to be 'visible from the Palace of Nations' where diplomats deliberate. Berset wanted his work to stress the mutilating consequences of global insecurity in a way that did not provoke a 'turning away' of our gaze. He explains that 'we are bombarded with images of violence that confront us full-on. After the initial emotional shock,

we shield ourselves and we forget.’¹ This well-known numbing effect of seeing violence² required a recognition that ‘there is nothing more powerful in art than the anecdotal.’³ The employment of the everyday object of the chair, its leg blown away, achieves the ‘*suggestion of violence*’ so as to allow us to reflect on its broader meanings. Simply:

The Broken Chair was a *questioning though not choking evocation* of these weapons’ many victims, and it would later embody the necessary vigilance of. . . citizens and civil society organizations, so that States deliver on the commitments they made.⁴

In this article, we explore how global security imaginaries are articulated and diffused in ways that are ‘questioning’ but not ‘choking.’ However, in contrast to the example of the Broken Chair, our focus is on the ways this is achieved in order to further *deepen* the prevalence of security practice globally, rather than evoking deliberation over its consequences. In doing so, we are interested in the politics of living with the deeply disturbing (and now permanent) spectre of war, terrorism, pervasive surveillance, and beyond. Specifically, we explore the ways this spectre has come to permeate everyday life without nonetheless paralysing it through exceptional measures that would interrupt the circulations (of goods, persons, ideas, etc.) that are crucial to contemporary politics, economics, and life. Our interest is in how that politics is inscribed into everyday life through a series of practices that aesthetically permeate and organise the spatial and phenomenal experience of the world in ways that both actively suggest and evoke the spectre of insecurity but that do not choke life with apprehension or fear. More precisely, we explore how security threats, risks, or dangers are ‘*trans-feared*’ through a series of what we term ‘aesthetic protocols’ that work to calibrate the affective intensity of what are often articulated as ‘sublime’ forms of violence and insecurity.

Our starting point for that engagement is the claim that security politics has generated a *generalised* ‘state of the sublime’ in which risk, violence, and danger have been located ever more deeply and diffusely across everyday life. This state of the sublime redefines the quality of politics and is ever-increasingly playing into, and typically reinforcing, intersectional hierarchies that connect class, gender, and race. Indeed, one core concern of our discussion is how sublime security imaginaries and efforts to *trans-fear* them are marked by situated contextual variations that are typically inflected by local and global inequalities. This state of the sublime operates differently in Bogota and Geneva. It affects Swiss citizens and Colombian refugees in radically different ways. For many people in Catatumbo, Colombia, violence and security is a naked and exposed experience that generates paralysing and blocking consequences for those who are poor, indigenous, black, women, or for those who queer categories of belonging. By contrast, Danish or Swiss citizens experience this state of the sublime as a spectral or haunting non-presence that is actively managed and trans-feared through the practices we describe.

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1. See <https://tinyurl.com/y632u55t> (our translation).
 2. For a discussion see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Rosetta Books, 2005).
 3. See <https://tinyurl.com/y632u55t> (our translation).
 4. See <https://tinyurl.com/y3wcm5bj>.

This disjuncture fosters dispositions of irresponsibility and inaction that sabotage initiatives to disturb, deflect, or disrupt violence and its underlying practices.

The primary aim of this article is to do the conceptual work necessary to grasp and grapple with the processes that sustain and perpetuate this politics and so to encourage the ‘perspectival agility’ necessary to do so.⁵ As such, we devote most of our space to developing our own conceptualisation of the state of the sublime, in conversation with others, and two further concepts that might help grapple with its political operations – ‘transfrayeurs’ and ‘aesthetic protocols’ – in a manner that also acknowledges their ‘polyvalent signatures’ or, put differently, their contextual and malleable nature.⁶ In doing so, our goal is to show how transfrayeurs and aesthetic protocols help us denote and study how the sublime becomes a (non-) disturbing, (non-) presence through locally realised material-aesthetic regimes that enable or disable the circulation of life. To do so, we mobilise a heterogeneous range of examples of mundane and commercialised everyday security practices that illustrate the necessarily contextually situated and shifting significance of concepts that act as ‘moving targets’ which ‘act in concert’ rather than existing as fixed and isolated placeholders.⁷

We situate this argument in a tradition exploring security politics aesthetically, which we build on and elaborate in three main directions.⁸ First, we expand upon the existing literature within critical security studies that explores aesthetics as a source of information about something else, and so typically sees its contours as a useful heuristic device for accessing a specific part of politics. This includes, for example, the ways in which aesthetics provides ‘insight into the complex emotional factors that are triggered by the sublime.’⁹ While such deployments of aesthetics are helpful and important, in this article, we follow those who shift the emphasis towards the political work the aesthetic itself does. More than simply a heuristic device, aesthetics also generates the affects, moods, or atmospheres of politics.¹⁰ It can act as an ‘umbrella term’ directing attention to ‘affect and its interlacing with sense perception and bodily dispensation.’¹¹ Second, we seek to move beyond the existing focus of the literature on the explicitly ‘political’ aesthetics of art, cartoons, films, memorials, sonic regimes, online videos, and beyond. Such work has led to fruitful discussions about the manipulation of aesthetics and affect, such as

5. This is an expression developed by Stoler drawing on Foucault’s idea of ‘mobile thought.’ See Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 25.

6. *Ibid.*, 20.

7. To borrow formulations used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991), 18.

8. For overviews see Roland Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018); Aida Hozic, ‘Introduction: The Aesthetic Turn at 15 (Legacies, Limits and Prospects)’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017): 201-205.

9. Roland Bleiker and Martin Leet, ‘From the Sublime to the Subliminal,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): 724.

10. William Callahan, ‘The Politics of Walls: Barriers, Flows, and the Sublime,’ *Review of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 456–81.

11. Ben Highmore, ‘Bitter after Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,’ in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 127.

Weitzel's study of the ways in which the Israeli armed forces manipulate the sonic as a core part of their strategy.¹² While acknowledging the significance of this work, we seek to shift the emphasis towards a focus on the ostensibly unintentionally and unnoticed political, apolitical or depoliticising aesthetic regimes that are "benignly" woven into our lives' by mundane, yet pervasive, and mostly commercial designs.¹³

Third, we extend existing work that focuses on the politics of the sublime. That literature typically describes how the awe and disarray generated by sublime phenomena gains political significance because it operates as an 'aesthetic break' or 'disruption of usual sensemaking.' For example, Shapiro follows Lyotard's understanding of the sublime as breaking the 'betrothal of nature and mind' operated by beauty in order to suggest that sublime experiences generated by catastrophic events open 'sense-making possibilities' to a 'process of negotiations' and so to a redistribution of the sensible.¹⁴ Elsewhere, he describes the 'pluralistic implications' of the sublime: the diversity of the processes restoring the 'mind-nature marriage' of the beautiful 'temporarily annulled in the encounter with the sublime' undermine any singular, universal, or hegemonic politics.¹⁵ Likewise, Weber takes interest the 'second movement in the Kantian sublime: the movement from rupture to a restoration of order and of closure.'¹⁶ In arguments like these, the sublime remains outside (normal) political processes. It triggers and opens them. It sets them in motion. By contrast, we seek to locate the sublime as a continuous and internal element that is integral to security politics.

To achieve this, we emphasise the significance of another aspect of Lyotard's argument about the sublime for politics, namely his claim about the shift in the relationship between the sublime and art. From something outside and beyond an art centred on beauty, Lyotard notes that the sublime gradually became something 'inside' and at the defining core of an 'avant garde' art in search of novel aesthetic experiences and which nurtured an expanding art market. With this, Lyotard claimed, the sublime followed the move of aesthetics more broadly from the realm of "great" philosophical thought' to a kind of 'micrology.'¹⁷ We suggest that an analogous focus on the 'micrology' of the aesthetics of security politics may be helpful for understanding a world where 'the Kantian problematic of the Sublime has become inescapable.'¹⁸ It is also politically crucial. It directs attention to the import of engaging the politics of the sublime even when it is a background hum modulated in mundane, commercial, objects, constructions, and designs. In our view, the political sublime deserves engagement also when it does not paralyse, arrest, or choke life, or perhaps precisely when it does not. Simply put, we

12. Michelle Weitzel, 'Engineering Affect,' *Middle East Law and Governance* 11 no. 2 (2019): 203-43.

13. Mark Lacy, 'Designer Security,' *Security Dialogue* 39, no. 2 (2008): 333.

14. Michael J. Shapiro, *The Political Sublime* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 169.

15. Michael J. Shapiro, 'The Sublime Today,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): 667.

16. Cynthia Weber, 'An Aesthetics of Fear: the 7/7 London Bombings, the Sublime, and wereno-tafraid. Com,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): 683-711.

17. Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde,' *Paragraph* 6, no. 1 (1985): 14.

18. Kevin Grove and David Chandler, 'Introduction: Resilience and the Anthropocene: The Stakes of "Renaturalising" Politics,' *Resilience* 5, no. 2 (2017): 80.

articulate a politics of the sublime that does not disrupt normality but instead is located inescapable at its core. An everyday state of the sublime.

This article now proceeds in four main parts. We begin by unpacking the idea of a 'state of the sublime' in which the dissolution of neatly identifiable security subjects has generated fear, anxiety, and exceptional practices that would seem to risk paralysing life. Where sublime experiences are pervasive, the orderliness of life should be disrupted. That this manifestly¹⁹ does not happen, we then proceed to suggest is due to the work of the aesthetic and affective agencies embedded in what Latour calls *transfrayeurs* or *trans-fears*.²⁰ *Transfrayeurs* denote a set of aesthetic practices that hide insecurity in plain sight. They have a global aesthetic politics that sustains both continued global flows, circulations, and commercial logics, as well as the proliferation of a multitude of insecurity practices. Third, we then conceptually unpack what we term a series of 'aesthetic protocols' that specify the operations of *transfrayeurs*, underpinning their capacity to assuage our fears of the state of the sublime. Finally, we empirically demonstrate our conceptual argument by focusing on three aesthetic protocols (those we term *objective-amalgamation*, *quasi-permeability* and *juxtapositional-enrolling*) and their operations in the real world of security politics. By way of conclusion, we return to the political consequences of the relationship between the state of the sublime, processes of trans-fearing, and the aestheticisation of security practice. In particular, we underscore that this politics perpetuates a hyper-securitisation of life, an obfuscation of the hierarchal politics entailed, and an illusion of political innocence and irresponsibility that justifies passivity rather than political action.

The State of the Sublime

Traditionally, discussions of the representational content of security or (much less frequently) its aesthetic components have focused on the visible. Thus, Andersen et al discuss how military and concentration camps build up 'aesthetic regimes' that 'work to form a common sense of the visual.'²¹ For them, this includes – for example – a focus on the frequently colour-coded and otherwise aesthetically differentiated uniforms of prisons, soldiers, and other (in)security personnel. However, such obvious designators of insecurity are increasingly disappearing from public view.²² Today, public space and even war zones are frequently 'secured' by undercover or plain-clothes police, paramilitaries, and contractors, as well as a panoply of more-or-less invisible

19. Pace Mark B. Salter, 'Securitization and Desecuritization: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority,' *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 4 (2008): 321–49; Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

20. *Sur le culte des dieux faitiches Bruno Latour* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 110.

21. Rune S. Andersen, Juha A. Vuori, and Xavier Guillaume, 'Chromatology of Security,' *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 5 (2015): 440–57.

22. Peter Chambers and Tom Andrews, 'Never Mind the Bollards: The Politics of Policing Car Attacks through the Securitisation of Crowded Urban Places,' *Environment and Planning D* 37, no. 6 (2019): 1025–44; Jon Coaffee, Paul O'Hare, and Marian Hawkesworth, 'The Visibility of (In)Security: The Aesthetics of Planning Urban Defences Against Terrorism,' *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 4–5 (2009): 489–511.

technological fixes (automated facial recognition, algorithmic threat detection, ePassport systems, etc.). In this process, the continued tendency to securitise social life goes on with a simultaneous focus on its being aesthetically designed in less affectively choking ways. Security is nowadays defined by a dialectic between ‘hardening’ (against attack) and ‘softening’ (the aesthetics of that hardening). It seems that this ‘softening’ aesthetic helps ensure that the securitisation of the physical, imaginary and socio-political spaces we all inhabit is something ‘everyone can agree on.’²³

Why is security practice being aestheticised in these ways? Answering this question requires exploring a disjuncture between widely articulated understandings of admissible subjects or sites of security and the far broader actual (‘real’) set of subjects or sites in which its politics and practices are found. A longstanding example of this disjuncture is violence directed against women. Such violence has always been at odds with established understandings of admissible security subjects and, as such, its politics has been defined by silence rather than speech.²⁴ Still today, violence against women is a remarkably under-securitised phenomenon. Notably, the reverse is sometimes not true: when women become active agents of violence in ways that transgress this silenced positionality, they are often hyper-securitised as ‘monstrous’ or ‘pathological’ subjects because traditional gender roles proscribe their acting as agents of security or violence.²⁵ Such an instinct to vilify any transgression of the norms underlying security politics reflects Canguilhem’s words that:

The existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order. . . the monster is not only a living being of reduced value, it is a living being whose value is to be a counterpoint. . . [the monster reveals the] precariousness of the stability to which life has habituated us.²⁶

Monsters stalk nightmares because they undermine our ability to understand, to perceive, and to master the world. Indeed, in the immediate post-9/11 period, a ‘gothic narrative’ emerged within European and North American politics.²⁷ While security practitioners did make early attempts to designate Al-Qaeda as a traditional security threat, often drawing on civilisational analogies similar to those used to securitise the USSR, the possibility to neatly designate an enemy was rapidly foreclosed.²⁸ Instead, terrorism became

23. Chambers and Andrews, ‘Never Mind the Bollards,’ 1030.

24. Lene Hansen, ‘The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 285–306; Jane Parpart, ‘Gender, Violence and Human Security,’ *Gender & Development* 22, no. 3 (2014): 589–92; Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Feminist Violence and the In/Securing of Women and Feminism,’ *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security* (London: Routledge, 2018).

25. Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

26. Georges Canguilhem, ‘Monstrosity and the Monstrous,’ *Diogenes* 10, no. 40 (1962): 27.

27. Richard Devetak, ‘The Gothic Scene of International Relations,’ *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 4 (2005): 621–43.

28. Austin, Jonathan Luke. ‘We have Never been Civilized: Torture and the Materiality of World Political Binaries,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2017): 49–73.

defined in monstrous (rather than rational, strategic, etc.) terms.²⁹ Political leaders evoked images of ‘monsters and ghosts. . . [within an atmosphere of] fear and anxiety’ where terror was presented as ‘a pervasive tormentor of the senses’ beyond any rational explanation.³⁰ This has only continued as the rise of ‘home-grown’ terrorist attacks has blurred the capacity to designate delineable enemies, especially as the ideologies justifying those attacks proliferate from religious, through nationalist and white supremacist discourses, and towards eco-fascism. Likewise, the deeper enmeshing of security politics within immigration and refugee policies, diffuse technological infrastructures, climate change, and beyond, has further dissolved the possibility of neatly designating security threats to be (rationally-functionally) tackled.

In short, security politics now regularly shapeshifts at an accelerating rate, losing any sense of specificity or limit. While one of the political advantages of the term security originally seemed to rest in its capacity to encompass a far wider variety of phenomena than that of defence, this uncontrolled spread of its politics to near enough *any* subject or phenomena poses real problems. The basic issue here is the frequent human inclination to ‘turn away from horrible, monstrous things.’³¹ When security politics cannot designate a fixed object to orient its activities, it would seem to become harder and harder to turn away and bracket those monsters. Discourses of insecurity become all-pervasive, conjuring the image of a society inhabited by innumerable monstrous figures. Put differently, security becomes not only pervasive but also radically sublime.

The sublime ‘is related to feelings of agitation, fear and awe, even to violence and terror.’³² Classically, it referred to the affective qualities of nature – the mountains, the sea – and its capacity to ‘exceed’ human comprehension or control. Sublime objects or phenomena are ‘often so overwhelming. . . that [they defy] our capacity for rational understanding. . . triggering a range of powerful emotions.’³³ The resulting suspension of comprehension (and so of the ability to represent) has turned the sublime into something that can be situated *both* as the limit to what is knowable and representable *and* – as the German idealist tradition would have it – as the supreme way of knowing, given its surpassing of that limit. For the latter, the sublime transcends the usual aporias of knowledge, bridging the chasm between noumena and phenomena.³⁴ For the former, it confronts us with ‘the threat of nothing further happening’ as we remain suspended; paralysed by contradictory emotions. Prisoners of the sublime. This is the specific ‘terror’ Burke (at least according to Lyotard) associated with the sublime.³⁵ This ambivalence of the

29. Peter Chambers, ‘Abu Musab Al Zarqawi: The Making and Unmaking of an American Monster (in Baghdad),’ *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37, no. 1 (2012): 30–51.

30. Devetak, ‘The Gothic Scene,’ 621.

31. *Ibid.*, 624.

32. Roland Bleiker and Martin Leet, ‘From the Sublime to the Subliminal,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): 725.

33. *Ibid.*, 714.

34. Thanks to one reviewer for insisting we explicitly include this point. See also Dikeç Mustafa, Politics is Sublime, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 2 (2012): 262–79.

35. Lyotard, ‘The Sublime and the avant garde,’ 10. In Burke’s vocabulary, terror is ‘an entirely spiritual passion’ experienced by body and soul with respect to the ‘privations’ associated with pain and impending death and this so Lyotard, includes the terror of a suspension in a state of the sublime where nothing happens.

sublime appears particularly salient for the politics of contemporary security, especially given that sublime objects are never radically separate from human experience. We live by the mountains and the sea and, of course, in renditions of the technological sublime, our feelings of disarray are intensified by the fact that we are the creators of these objects.³⁶ Because of this, ‘easy assumptions about the nature of reality and received distinctions between right and wrong, civilized and barbaric, nature and artifice, reason and imagination, are disrupted and rendered ambiguous by these strange, unclassifiable presences.’³⁷ Today, the embedding of threat both within and beyond everyday life follows a similar sublime logic: that which must be secured against are a host of ‘unclassifiable presences’ that are simultaneously part of everyday life and our experiences but also radically beyond it.

It is the everyday affective qualities of sublime experience and their potentially paralyzing and terrorising implications that most concern us in this discussion. To some degree, security politics has always relied on conjuring the sublime to justify its existence. Fear and the feeling that we ourselves cannot address that fear lies at the heart of insecurity politics and its power. More strongly, sublime experiences can also be attractive ones that move people towards the necessity of security politics.³⁸ However, it is important to note that the sublime always emerges in gradations of intensity. Contemplating a desert can be a sublime affective experience but not one that occasions such awe and horror as being tossed about on a boat in a storm. In our view, security politics equally works to carefully ‘calibrate the public’s anxiety’ by maintaining the ‘questioning’ quality of the sublime experience of insecurity without the risk of it ‘choking’ our worlds.³⁹ But the problem here is clear. As security politics has developed a life of its own and so come to generate ever more imaginative threat scenarios (and solutions), we have moved towards a more-or-less permanent state of exception. If insecurity is everywhere, measures securing life should be everywhere. Affectively, we would suggest that this amounts to the simultaneous emergence of an equally pervasive presence of sublime imaginaries: a generalised and growing ‘state of the sublime.’

This may choke life. A world of constant threat, to return to Canguilhem ‘calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order.’ However attractive a certain awareness of the sublime in the world may sometimes be, life cannot be engulfed by and suspended in that attraction. This tension generates a variety of contradictory processes and responses. For example, the absence of a fixed subject of security may be encouraging nativist-populist political sentiments in which *any* outsider (whether defined racially, culturally,

36. Mark Hansen, ‘“Not Thus, after All, Would Life Be Given”: Technesis, Technology, and the Parody of Romantic Poetics in *Frankenstein*,’ *Studies in Romanticism* 36, no. 4 (1997): 575–609.

37. Bleiker and Leet, ‘From the Sublime to the Subliminal,’ 725.

38. See Tom Cochrane, ‘The Emotional Experience of the Sublime,’ *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42, no. 2 2012: 125–48. Connected specifically to security politics, discussions of popular culture grasp at this attraction we feel to insecurity and its danger. See inter alia Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Security Compositions,’ *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 3 (2019): 249–73 and Elspeth Van Veen, ‘Secrecy’s Subjects: Special Operators in the US Shadow War,’ *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 3 (2019).

39. Brian Massumi, ‘Fear (The Spectrum Said),’ *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13, no. 1 (2005): 33.

politically, etc.) is radically excluded. Such sentiments challenge the globalised logistics of the contemporary political economy that rest on the constant circulation of people, goods, and services across borders. Alternatively, and inversely, security politics may lose its purchase entirely as people are dulled into simply accepting the presence of threat. For some, this is the sublime experience at its fullest extent. As Schopenhauer put it:

We feel ourselves reduced to nothing, feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient appearances of the will, *like drops in the ocean, fading away, melting into nothing*.⁴⁰

The state of the sublime risks generating a nihilistic disregard that impedes the very logic of security politics, undermining faith in the capacity of the state or any other entity to address danger. Insecurity may become naturalised to the extent that the politics of combatting it becomes as laughable as that of fighting a hurricane. Thus, in Terry Gilliam's dystopian film *Brazil*, diners at restaurants or shoppers in department stores simply continue their meals or retail therapy while bombs detonate around them. Today, that fictional scenario is bleeding into everyday life as political violence becomes a meme-ified object of irony and irrelevance, and protest groups challenge security measures of all kinds. Or, in the modern literature of the Middle East, where these concerns are acutely real, writers like Hassan Blasim or Ahmed Saadawi suffuse their work with a mix of satire, sarcasm, and nihilism. Insecurity becomes so ever-present that the idea of its escape increasingly disappears. As Blasim writes:

Violence. . . is like a nightmare. It's real and not real at the same time. Like when you experience pain in your body – when the pain disappears, and with time, your memory about the pain fades. So it's real and not real. I want to talk about reality in Iraq. But as I write I think, I can't talk about this just with reality because pain is not real sometimes. It's like surrealism. This comes partly from what I feel around it – I feel like it's not real.⁴¹

When life becomes 'a chain of painful and peculiar nightmares,' the perception that security politics and its practitioners may provide protection against those nightmares may come unstuck.⁴²

Finally, this state of the sublime risks upending traditional global political hierarchies in ways that are socially and politically unpalatable for, in particular, European and North American states. To a significant degree, the self-image of those states has been situated in opposition to their colonial-era acts of conquest. Filtered through racial, cultural, and civilisational paradigms, the desire has been to maintain Europe and North America as sites of order, safety, and progress in contrast to a supposedly disordered, violent, and backwards set of Others.⁴³ In these imaginaries, concrete blast barriers are acceptable in

40. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 230.

41. Hassan Blasim, Jonathan Wright, and Vicki Heath, 'An Interview with Hassan Blasim,' *Thresholds* (2013).

42. *Ibid.*

43. See John M. Hobson, 'The Twin Self-Delusions of IR: Why "Hierarchy" and Not "Anarchy" is the Core Concept of IR,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 42, no. 3 (2014): 557-75.

Baghdad, but not in London. But as insecurity politics becomes omnipresent, such a self-image is harder to maintain. A collective affective anxiety over a perceived relative decline in the supposed superiority of these political spaces thus risks emerging, something perhaps manifest in shifts to (far) right-wing politics, openly racist discourse, geopolitical manoeuvring, and more. Indeed, this issue reflects the fact that the majority of efforts made to aestheticise security practice in the ways we will describe later have emerged within European and North American states that possess both the necessary material wealth to engage in these practices and a colonially inflected desire to distinguish themselves from a multitude of supposed Others.

The Proliferation of *Transfrayeurs*

How are the risks posed by the state of the sublime calibrated, moderated, and defused? This is the question that the remainder of this essay addresses. To begin answering, we draw first on Bruno Latour's concept of *transfrayeurs* (trans-fears). *Transfrayeurs* are (aesthetic) practices that divert or redirect our attention away from the affective risks posed by the state of the sublime, but which simultaneously and paradoxically enshrine the permanency of its monstrous imaginaries and their politics.⁴⁴ Consider a first example. After a 2017 terrorist attack in Melbourne, Australia, officials installed concrete bollards across public spaces. Public reaction immediately protested their harsh distortion of the everyday (commercial) aesthetics of Melbourne's Central Business District. Quickly artists thus came to paint and graffiti the bollards and wrap them in multi-coloured fabrics. One Melbourne-based branding agency encapsulates the rationale:

As one of the world's most liveable cities, the cement bollards are an unsightly addition to our urban landscape and are also a stark reminder of our vulnerability, so it has been refreshing to see the way the power of street art has been our best response. . . Melbournians are embracing the boll-art with most people encouraging artists to 'pimp' them all. . . [in order] to take the sting out of the serious reason for their presence.⁴⁵

Aesthetic practices like these serve as *transfrayeurs* by taking 'the sting out' of insecurity practice. They work as a kind of affective harm reduction directing our attention away from the harsh reality of insecurity practice. Speaking with Latour, they work as a form of 'healing' because:

To heal amounts to causing a fear that came out of nowhere to pass, to go elsewhere, anywhere, but especially to keep it from stopping: from attaching itself to the patient; from mistaking him for another and carrying him away. . . To do that one must use trickery. . . The fear must be tricked, at the price of complicated negotiations that are accounted for in terms borrowed from transactions, negotiations, or exchanges. Let us use the word *charm* instead, returning to the original meaning our language has lost.⁴⁶

44. Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

45. See <https://tinyurl.com/yc497h5m>.

46. Latour, *On the Modern Cult*, 52, emphasis added.

As this suggests, *trans-fearing* is distinct from psychoanalytical descriptions of the transference of fears onto arbitrarily represented ‘foreign’ objects (migrants, terrorists, etc.) that are marginalised or excluded to sublimate our fears. Instead, a rather different process is at work in which the goal is to distract from a fear such that it does not affectively overwhelm a particular subject and paralyse her with sublime imaginaries but also and simultaneously to ensure that these threats still circulate and continue to (politically) exist: to keep moving (or prevent ‘stopping’) the threat in question.

In one way, *transfrayeurs* thus conceptually denote the practices, artefacts, and politics that undergird what the literature on resilience refers to as a ‘therapeutic infrastructure’ designed to distract from a state of pervasive insecurity.⁴⁷ Trickery and charm are central to such a process of distraction, as Latour underscores. Melbourne’s boll-art charmed the city into living with insecurity; and tricked it into naturalising the presence of the threats the bollards protect from as a presence in the city’s everyday life. As such, while these practices promise to protect us from insecurity, they also perpetuate awareness of risks or threats. The Melbourne boll-art recalls the need for bollards *and* normalises their presence and so the threats that make them necessary. It does so not because it argues or reasons about (in-)security in the city, or about the measures taken to diminish it. Instead, it shifts the mood and atmosphere connected to the bollards. It connects affectively to the thoughts, emotions, and bodies that it ‘draws in’ to a proposition, action, or feeling.⁴⁸ In all this, fears are not so much sublimated as obfuscated; relegated to a twilight presence of sorts. These fears become a background hum to the everyday, omnipresent but also unnoticed. As such, *transfrayerus* do not limit or lead away from the state of the sublime *per se*. On the contrary. They gently work to trick or charm our fears, shielding us from the sublime’s potentially affectively choking implications while *simultaneously* ensuring the continuity of the state of the sublime: through these acts of careful calibration, its presence is paradoxically enshrined and further diffused across socio-political space.

The emphasis on art in this opening example makes the central role of aesthetics in the charm and trickery characteristic of *transfrayeurs* easy to recognise. However, aesthetics and affective efficacy do not depend on art or artists. Even the most banal object has a form, material, colour, durability and location in space, thus possessing an aesthetics and so an ability to resonate affectively. Analogously, all security measures, including banal objects and mundane practices, have aesthetic qualities and affective resonances. What is specific to *transfrayeurs* is not that they possess an aesthetics or generate affective resonances *per se* but – rather – the quality of this aesthetics and its resonance. Specifically, it is their ability to distract from the disturbing implications of locating insecurity aesthetically and affectively at the core of the everyday. Their muffling of disturbing or dissonant voices that question the sense of security practices and their supposed threats mutes critique of the state of the sublime, shielding it from contestation and enabling its consolidation.

47. Mark Duffield, ‘Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry,’ *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 5 (2012): 487.

48. Austin, ‘Security Compositions.’

The normalisation of the state of the sublime has occurred alongside a rapid proliferation of these *transfrayeurs*, far beyond the simple example of Melbourne's *boll-art*. Importantly, it is not necessary to interpret this proliferation in a straightforwardly functionalist manner.⁴⁹ Instead, the processes establishing this relationship have been rather more anarchic and diffuse: driven through a series of little practices or micrologies (to return to Lyotard). At the core of these little practices are the pressing questions facing those who provide security. This ranges from the officials, professionals and experts in defence ministries, to local police officers, but also includes Central Security Officers at banks, the security managers of shipping companies sailing through the Malacca, humanitarian organisations operating refugee camps in Northern Kenya, or researchers planning fieldwork. They all face urgent questions about how to ensure that the security measures they are working with are effective but at the same time permissive for different purposes. They have to provide security and recall its centrality without hampering 'the assets' they are securing or allowing fear to paralyse them. They are in effect searching for and developing security measures that operate as *transfrayeurs*.

Supporting these actors is a vast market where specialised consultants and companies compete to propose expertise. They advertise, adjust, repurpose, and develop security 'solutions.' To do so, they deploy atmospheres and affective resonances both to develop solutions and to advertise them.⁵⁰ Notably, the continuing expansion of this commercialised space attracts a rapidly expanding range of entrepreneurial innovation. The merging of security and neo-liberal capitalism generates an 'exceptional creativity' that steadily expands the range of imaginable and – more importantly – available (to those who can afford them) security measures.⁵¹ This process does not explicitly articulate its intent to develop *transfrayeurs*, nor is that its only consequence. Nonetheless, this exceptional creativity feeds the accelerating proliferation of *transfrayeurs*, reshaping the practices and values of security and generating what Coccia might term an 'objectified morality' for security.⁵²

Put differently, 'the shameful moment when computer science, marketing, design, advertising, and all the disciplines of communication seized hold of the word concept itself and said: "we are the creative ones"' that Gilles Deleuze once feared in general terms has long since passed in security.⁵³ The 'commodity cacophony of capitalism' is 'configuring' new hypersecured 'worlds.'⁵⁴ A state of the sublime underpinned by a

49. Lacy, 'Designer Security,' 333.

50. For discussions see Roger Stahl, 'Dispatches from the Militainment Empire,' in: *Media Imperialism: Continuity and Change*, eds. O. Boyd-Barrett and T. Mirrlees (Lanham, MA: Rowmann & Littlefield, 2019), 147–59; and Jonathan Luke Austin and Anna Leander 'Escape, Erase, Entangle: Three Aesthetic Regimes Re-Composing the Californian Ideology', in *Sensing Collectives – Aesthetic and Political Practices Intertwined*, eds. J.-P. Voß, N. Rigamonti, M. Suarez, and J. Watson (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2022).

51. Anna Leander, 'Militarization Matters: Rhetorical Resonances and Market Militarism,' *Critical Military Studies* 14. (DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2022.2081300)

52. Emanuele Coccia, *Goods* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 30.

53. Deleuze Gilles, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 10.

54. Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008), 39.

bewildering range of *transfrayeurs* that prevent the dissolution of the subject of security from suspending life in a paralysing standstill. Perhaps even more significantly, the exceptional creativity of this cacophony ensures a steady broadening of the range and forms of *transfrayeurs* available for sale and deployment. More than simply underpinning the state of the sublime, the proliferation of *transfrayeurs* is extending it through innovation and mundane marketing. Rather than through spectacular events, the sublime spreads in quotidian, capillary, and commercial micro-processes: Lyotard's view that 'there is something sublime in the capitalist economy' pertains not only to the art market he discussed but also to security politics.⁵⁵

Our emphasis here on cacophonous and capillary processes underscores that the proliferation of *transfrayeurs* is neither neat nor homogenous. Quite the opposite. These dynamic and shifting processes of proliferation are spurred precisely by innovations extending the range of their forms and the contexts they can connect to. The exceptional character of security lends force to their commercial diffusion across contexts. The proliferation of *transfrayeurs* depends on differentiation, multiplication, and the ability to adjust to the situated and situational. Yet, and at the same, across their diversity *transfrayerus* have common, general, characteristics. They both recall and enshrine the sublime and provide a route away from the prison of its stifling consequences. This raises the question of how these general forms are constructed such that they partially connect to the micro-political and situated operations of *transfrayeurs*. To approach an answer, we now turn to the notion of 'aesthetic protocols' as a means for understanding the local/global micrology of trans-fearing.

Aesthetic Protocols

We use the term aesthetic protocols to refer to little situated aesthetic practices that serve as the building blocks of general (global) aesthetic forms. Consider fashion. If the clothes we wear express a broad aesthetic (bourgeois, bohemian, punk, sporting, etc.), then this is realised only through small, specific, and banal modifications to clothing style. Elizabeth Wilson thus describes how a new 'regime of masculine dress' emerged in the 18th century due to the rise of the 'dandy' and the aesthetic 'protocols' invented therein, most prominently that of the modern suit.⁵⁶ Drawing on Simmel, she notes that 'fashionable dressing sought to extend the 'force field' of the individual's personal aura, making it wider and more striking; fashion as an adjunct to power.'⁵⁷ Following this, what is key is the ways in which general aesthetic forms possessing social resonance (the 'dandy') are built-up through little situated protocols (types of clothing) that though they, in and of themselves, might not immediately seem aesthetic in their resonances, can certainly be shown to communicate the everyday tonalities of a particular aesthetic. In this process, we can thus see how protocols operating at the most mundane of levels (the clothes we wear) can contain broader global aesthetic affects, extending individual (*viz* fashion) or collective social power and influence.

55. Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde,' 16.

56. Elizabeth Wilson, 'A Note on Glamour,' *Fashion Theory* 11, no. 1 (2007): 97.

57. *Ibid*, 98.

Generically, a protocol is a set of procedures, rules, or ways of ordering. They are thus often associated with technical realms such as medicine, diplomacy, or international law. But they are also related to contexts where there are no pyramidal or centralised mechanisms of governance, such as contemporary information systems, including the internet.⁵⁸ Protocols are arguably ‘the technology of organization and control operating in distributed networks.’⁵⁹ Since the politics associated with the state of the sublime, and the political work of *transfrayeurs*, is also diffuse, decentralised, and partially connected there is good reason to think about its organisation through the concept of (aesthetic) protocols. To do so, we can begin with the work of Liz Kotz who has shown how protocols operate in the aesthetic realm more generally.⁶⁰ For her, aesthetic protocols refer to the parts making up a ‘template or notational system – be it musical scores, fabrication instructions, architectural diagrams, or schematic representations.’ As she continues, the relationship:

Between a notational system and a realization is not one of representation or reproduction but of *specification*: the template, schema, or score is usually not considered the locus of the ‘work,’ but merely a tool to produce it: and while the ‘work’ must conform to certain specifications or configurations, its production necessarily differs in each realization.⁶¹

This relationship between aesthetic *specification* and *realisation* is helpful for conceptualising the place of aesthetic protocols in the security realm. Aesthetic protocols do not contain the ‘locus’ of security politics but they do make that locus possible, giving it its tone, tenor, or style, and, most importantly, they help produce forms of resonance that situate its politics in the everyday. They are the ‘wrappers’ that dress up – as it were – the state of the sublime we have traced and allow control to be exerted over the otherwise friction-heavy, underdetermined, disordering, and ‘heterogenous material milieu’ that it evokes.⁶² Put differently, aesthetic protocols provide general specifications that are realised in innumerable ways, in little objects. These objects *do* possess a (realised, situated, contextual) aesthetic value but it is through their partial connections to (specified, general) aesthetic forms that their broader political significance finally comes to light. For our purposes, we are interested in protocols that specify *transfrayeurs* which work to aesthetically modulate the affective intensity of the state of the sublime in our everyday lives. Accessing them requires paying attention both to specified and realised *transfrayeurs*. As such, this task can only be achieved through the observation of aesthetic protocols and their associated *transfrayeurs* in action. Naturally, fully fleshing out such a study of the security/design practices through which aesthetic protocols are specified, realised, and partially connected globally is an impossible task.

We thus limit our ambition below to sketching the contours of three particularly common and salient aesthetic protocols that we term *objective-amalgamation*, *quasi-permeability*, and *juxtapositional-enrollment*. Each of these protocols modulates the extent to

58. Galloway, *Protocol*, 7.

59. *Ibid*, 317.

60. Kotz, ‘Language Between Performance and Photography.’

61. *Ibid*, 14–15.

62. Galloway, *Protocol*, 841.

which we (consciously or not) dwell on the supposed presence of pervasive insecurity across society in different ways. To explore them, we focus on contexts where their implementation has been especially comprehensive and effective: Western European states and the United States. The capacity for such states to protect the sensibilities of (some of) their citizens stems – as discussed above – from global inequalities in wealth and geopolitical power, inflected through racial, civilisational, and colonial legacies. Elsewhere in the world, the sublime consequences of violence and security are often nakedly exposed, and life can fall into paralysis, in large part because of those legacies and the continued neo-imperial and neoliberal predations of the Global North. In what follows, we are therefore essentially analysing the aesthetic construction of a form of (false) political innocence in which the powerful of world politics have masked the consequences of their own brutal political projects.

Importantly, this limitation in our analysis does not mean that the aesthetic protocols we explore are not relevant beyond Europe and North America. On the contrary. The *transfrayeurs* generated through these protocols seem deliberately designed to make affective distancing, dissociation, and disengagement from global entanglements of power, security, and violence possible. The result is a perpetuation of violence elsewhere through these aesthetic processes. Understanding the design of *transfrayeurs* is thus crucial for appreciating the interdependencies and political exploitations that mediate the relationships between places where they modulate the state of the sublime and where they do not. Equally, we will seek to emphasise below the non-homogenous experience of these aesthetic protocols even within North American and European states where subaltern individuals and communities are frequently *not* affectively protected or ‘soothed’ by the presence of specific *transfrayeurs*. Instead, the presence of *transfrayeurs* frequently intensifies insecurity and fear for these groups, foregrounding internal differentiation in the politics of the state of the sublime. To put it simply: this micrology of the aesthetic management of security politics is neither universal nor homogenous but marked throughout by power, inequality, and intersecting forms of violence.

Objective-Amalgamation

The first aesthetic protocol we explore merges security features (and politics) into mundane objects dispersed across space. We refer to this as objective-amalgamation. Let us explain. Most studies of the materiality of security are focused on objects specifically designed to secure other objects (e.g., walls, surveillance devices, etc.). These objects *do* have an aesthetic, traditionally a militarised one that is (in most cases) characterised by its temporary and single-use character (the goal of military action having once been to eventually ‘win’). Manifestations of such an aesthetic include crude concrete and steel checkpoints and barriers, looming watch-towers, and armed troops. Notably, even where a declared state of emergency was temporally elongated (e.g., the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland, the occupation of Afghanistan) such an aesthetic was usually retained long-term. By contrast, today such materialisations of insecurity are being designed as permanent features of the social landscape by functionally ‘amalgamating’ particular security features with other objects that are not usually associated with security. Simply: security is now being baked-into everyday things.



Figure 2. Protective barriers amalgamated into plant pots.

Credit: Tymetal.

An example: Figure 2 depicts a series of over-sized plant pots designed to serve as barriers to hostile vehicles or persons (by being constructed from concrete or steel), while also aesthetically blending-in to the environment and/or even augmenting or improving its everyday aesthetic. One company constructing such barriers describes them as:

allowing security measures to be hidden in plain sight, meaning your development can be made safe without having a detrimental effect on the aesthetic qualities of the space.⁶³

In cases like these, objects designed for urban beautification are amalgamated with objects designed for security. Now, urban planning is the most obvious example of objective-amalgamation, emerging early in the last few decades of the securitisation of public space. Since then, the logic has dramatically expanded. Watches and phones are designed as multi-sensorial security tracking devices.⁶⁴ So is furniture. Figure 3 depicts a gun safe concealed as a coffee table (yours for \$945) made by *Liberty Home Concealment* that also offers clocks, flags, and mirrors – ‘the options are limitless’.⁶⁵ The design of these

63. See <https://tinyurl.com/2p8ak9tj>.

64. Anna Leander, ‘Sticky Politics: Composing Security by Advertising Tracking Devices,’ *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 3: 322–44.

65. See <https://tinyurl.com/y4tmfcj3>.



Figure 3. Gun safe amalgamated into a coffee table.

Credit: Liberty Home Concealment.

objects is not just intended to obfuscate their security function from possible threats (as would be the case with hidden surveillance cameras or stealth fighters) or for reasons of governmental secrecy but also to obscure their presence from those they purport to protect. They become *transfrayeurs*: they help us avoid our gaze fixing *permanently* on any sign indexical to permanent fear or threat, and the affective qualities of the state of the sublime that these risk evoking, while also – nonetheless – affirming and making ‘real’ the presence of those threats. Take the words of Ruth Reed, former President of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) discussing the design of interventions like these:

Architects and other designers are now being required to take into consideration counter-terrorism measures when designing public access buildings and public open spaces. This extends the requirement from high-risk targets to the wider environment and with it the need to deliver *good design that creates a sense of security without a siege mentality*. It is important that our built environment continues to reflect that we are an open and inclusive society and that in interpreting these new requirements *our buildings do not convey that we are driven by security measures*.⁶⁶

Reed’s desire is *not* to render insecurity invisible. Instead, the task is to build up (in) security through a discrete aesthetics that allows people to ‘see’ security (and so feel simultaneously safe and unsafe) but not to dwell on it too much: to keep moving and embrace it. Design, Reed argues should ‘incorporate counter-terrorism measures’ in a

66. See <https://tinyurl.com/y4y4qkmr>.

‘proportionate way.’⁶⁷ We see here how the state of the sublime is maintained even as its presence is limited. A ‘sense of security’ is required because it is desired that insecurity is presented as all-pervasive, vis-à-vis both ‘high-risk targets’ and the ‘wider environment.’ At the same time, a ‘siege mentality’ must be avoided to prevent the state of the sublime from becoming overwhelming. This reality reflects multiple aspects of the sublime experience. As discussed above, one key component of the sublime experience can sometimes be an attraction to that which seems to exceed our comprehension. The sublime is not always something we wish to avoid: it may be a source of knowledge or simple fascination and fantasy. Part of the political attraction to conjuring sublime security imaginaries is no doubt related to that capacity. But the challenge, we would maintain, is designing a kind of carefully calibrated balance between an attraction to the sublime, its potential political utility (for some), and the risks of paralysis it poses. With Spivak, the sublime:

Has been forever marked by Kant. It names a structure: the thing is too big for me to grasp; I am scared; Reason kicks in by the mind’s immune system and shows me, by implication, that the big thing is mindless, ‘stupid’ in the sense in which a stone is stupid, or the body is (*OED* sense 2). I call the big mindless thing ‘sublime.’⁶⁸

What we are describing echoes this idiosyncratic reading. The balancing act *transfrayeurs* perform recognises that ‘the sublime is mindless’ and so we must ‘bring it under *something like* control.’⁶⁹ This is especially crucial when we consider how the state of the sublime might undermine the more prosaic and functional logics through which contemporary power operates. For example, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) generalises the aesthetic principle glossed here to the design of space broadly. It has produced guidebooks focused on ‘site and urban design for security’ that stress the need for ‘aesthetic continuity along streets’ that provides ‘perimeter security in a manner that *does not impede the city’s commerce and vitality*.’⁷⁰ The goal is to maintain a commercial regime in which economic circulation is privileged and the hope is that aesthetics can assist in achieving this through mundane objects that simultaneously securitise *and* desecuritize. The ambivalence generated by amalgamating security and mundane everyday objects such as bollards and other ‘security elements’ along streets, in other words, allows us to transfer the fears they would otherwise elicit. While aware of their security functions, their aesthetics helps distract our immediate attention away from their implications. They allow the world to keep moving along. They allow us to see the sublime as childish: Spivak’s ‘big mindless thing.’ At least for now.

Crucially, the world that objective-amalgamation keeps moving is not a singular, egalitarian or universal one. As we discussed above, aesthetic forms are always contextually situated. Consider again the example of the place of the modern suit in fashion. The

67. <https://tinyurl.com/y4fdscy7>.

68. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Terror: A Speech After 9–11,’ *Boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (2004): 94.

69. *Ibid.*, 94.

70. FEMA, (2007) *Site and Urban Design for Security—Guidance against Potential Terrorist Attacks*. FEMA 430. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y2z9k76a>, 1-34.

power of the suit to ‘extend the “force field” of the individual’s personal aura’⁷¹ is fundamentally dependent on an inequality in its accessibility. Suits are expensive. They are historically associated with white, male, and European socio-cultural norms. As such, they are intensely gendered, raced, and class-orientated aesthetic protocols. The same is true of modes of objective-amalgamation. Architectural objects like this coffee table make smoother only a particular (consumerist) way of life, necessarily excluding others in much the same way as defensive architectures exclude the homeless. Equally importantly, their trans-fearing qualities apply principally only to those seen as politically innocent by dint of their ethnic, racial, religious, class-based, and other positions of relative privilege. The coffee table enshrines a culture where guns are pointed and used against intruding – usually racialised and poor – others. Thus, for those who face discrimination for being associated with particular security threats due to their (usually) minority status, *transfrayeurs* may actually intensify feelings of insecurity as the most prominent source of (physical, political, etc.) danger for those individuals and groups are often security practitioners themselves and their practices. *Transfrayeurs* that make the power of those practitioners opaquer may often simply intensify the state of the sublime in cases like these. Equally, the very presence of *transfrayeurs* seems likely to serve to further invisibilise this inequality and work – at a structural level – to stymie the possibility of emancipatory change.

Quasi-Permeability

A second equally common and pervasive aesthetic protocol – quasi-permeability – achieves similar effects to that of objective-amalgamation but does so by making it possible to explicitly ‘see through’ the security features designed into our environments. Take the example of the proposed border wall on the US/Mexico frontier, something Donald Trump once hoped would be ‘beautiful.’ The designs for the wall that have been produced are notable for seeking to re-design a centuries old security device in strikingly non-obtrusive ways. Many of the designs proposed, for example, incorporate some form of transparency and/or camouflage with the natural environment. One design, proposed by *Concrete Contractors Interstate*, incorporates a ‘polished wall with natural colors to create an aesthetically pleasing barrier’ that blends into the desert environment (see Figure 4). Its ‘iCON Wall design uses a precast method that . . . features recycled glass to make walls more artistic.’⁷² The ambition is to impose as little disturbance to the view on the landscape as possible while still clearly retaining a (political) borderscape. Likewise:

WTC Construction of St. Andrews, Texas, designed. . . a wall that uses a precast concrete system to mimic desert surroundings. . . ‘The Rammed Earth design will provide a beautiful structure that will reflect the beauty of the border lands.’⁷³

71. Wilson, ‘A Note on Glamour,’ 98.

72. J. Jarvie, ‘Trump Promised a Border Wall. Now These Texans Worry They Will Lose Their Land,’ *The San Diego Union Tribune*, 4 July 2017.

73. David Grossman, ‘Trump’s Wall Proposals Include Solar Panels and Nuclear Waste?’, *Popular Mechanics*, 4 May 2017.



Figure 4. Former President Donald J. Trump visits prototype designs for a border wall, including two with 'sand'-coloured schemes designed to blend into the desert environment. Credit: Public Domain.

This emphasis on a 'beautiful' structure reflecting the stunning borderlands and on producing a barrier that blends into the environment is especially interesting. Few would instinctively associate the designs seen in Figure 4 with beauty. Indeed, it seems instead that the term beauty is being used to refer to an unobtrusive aesthetics that blends-in to the environment. The desired aesthetic is one of *normality*, as was true also for the plant pots and coffee table we used to illustrate objective-amalgamation: there is similar desire for 'aesthetic continuity' with what (is imagined to have) existed before insecurity and violence arrived. Notably, the concept of beauty has been historically (albeit with much controversy) counterposed to that of the sublime. For Burke, the beautiful was balanced and smooth. Above all, beauty is that which is *not* 'related to feelings of agitation, fear and awe. . . violence and terror.' It is something comprehensible within the world. To return to Canguilhem, beauty has often been seen as the manifestation of 'life's capacity to teach us order.' It is perhaps for this reason that security practitioners often describe their aesthetic protocols as working to increase the beauty of the landscape, the city, or the digital world. It is not simply that such protocols avoid the blunt of ugliness of traditional security practice but that they also lend a sense of order, comprehensibility, or smoothness to the state of the sublime. As such, while those who design, build, and advertise such *transfrayeurs* may sell them as beautification, those who live with them are likely to experience them as a banal yet ordered background texture to their lives.

In short, quasi-permeability blends supposed threats with everyday environments. This contrasts markedly with a more classical aesthetic associated with security walls or barriers that seeks to ensure they stand decisively apart from the normal. Advertises for

protective barriers around bases or compounds in conflict zones, for example, usually emphasise the visible deterrence effect of the materials used. Likewise, the Israeli ‘security barrier against terrorism’ is designed to be impenetrable, non-transparent, and deterring, producing a ‘bureaucratic aesthetics of division’ and ‘occupation of the senses.’⁷⁴ While such an exceptionalist aesthetics squarely imposes threat, danger, and insecurity, designs for the US border wall background it, even as it recalls exceptional politics. At least for its domestic (white US citizens) audience, its aesthetics balances a political desire to secure against migrants with the need to allow the world to continue to flow as normal. The same is true for the Israeli ‘security barrier.’ Its harsh aesthetics of separation is visible, by and large, only to Palestinians, with Israelis travelling freely across specially constructed highways from which the wall is mostly invisible (through the strategic placement of trees, overpasses, etc.).

This returns us to the inequality at the heart of *transfrayeurs*. The normality they seek to evoke is experienced as such only by certain political audiences while a hyper-secured state of the sublime is preserved for migrants from Latin America, Palestinians living under occupation, or marginalised groups everywhere. Simply put: *transfrayeurs* always discriminate. Even more alarmingly, they make that discrimination less perceptible. Indeed, consider drones. While much has been written about the effects of these technologies in transforming warfare, they also exert trans-fearing powers by allowing security practice to proceed ‘cleanly’ from above, without bodily presence, all the while being valorised and sanctified across popular culture.⁷⁵ Drones are perhaps the pinnacle of quasi-permeability for allowing unfettered global movement while also threatening to eliminate it *for certain classes of individuals* at any moment. As Srishti Malaviya has eloquently described:

Regardless of whether they are eventually killed or spared, the sheer act of . . . [the drone’s] sustained surveillance from the skies – of a number of eyes watching life unfold in its intimacy, without being seen. . . is already a negation of that essential movement that creates bodies and worlds out of relations.⁷⁶

The bodies and worlds observed by drones experience them as acute constraints on movement and relational entanglement. Indeed, for those subalterns excluded from the world secured by drones, these objects are abjectly ghostly, monstrous, suffocating, and sublime. Elsewhere, however, drones are largely forgotten about and seen as greatly preferable to other forms of securing global space: they are discrete, forgettable, and quasi-permeable. Again, *transfrayeurs* are always addressed to multiple audiences and their effects are thus always contextually dependent.

74. Don Handelman, ‘Folding and Enfolding Walls,’ *Social Analysis* 54, no. 2 (2010): 60–79; Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, ‘The Occupation of the Senses,’ *The British Journal of Criminology* 57, no. 6 (2017): 1279–300.

75. As one reviewer noted, popular culture also calibrates sublime experience. Films depicting warfare or pandemics, represent *real* activities and so spread discourses of insecurity but also make them bearable: experienced safely at home.

76. Srishti Malaviya, ‘Movement and Relations in Drone Warfare,’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49, no. 1 (2020): 103.



Figure 5. COVID-19 Traffic light filtering device at a supermarket in Geneva, Switzerland.
Credit: Jonathan Luke Austin.

Designs employing *quasi-permeability* are particularly well suited in the context of threats conceived as distributed, ill-defined, omnipresent, and located ‘within.’ However, the use of this protocol extends beyond the high-political deployment of such imaginaries to combat ‘terrorism’ via drones or other military tools. Indeed, consider COVID-19. The pandemic’s onset saw a proliferation of security devices in public spaces that both provided a sense of security *and* avoided blocking the circulatory dynamics of everyday life (or global infrastructures). For instance, Figure 5 depicts an electronic ‘traffic light’ system for entering a supermarket in Geneva, Switzerland, designed to automate the process of limiting the number of customers allowed in at any one time. The aesthetics of the device are familiar. It de-escalates the threat (in this case of a pathogen) by attaching the need for securitisation (and the limits imposed therein) to an aesthetic more commonly associated with road traffic safety. But more than this, the device does not block or obstruct space. It does not threaten. It is unobtrusive. We can see around and walk beyond it. While it is an exceptional measure reminding us of the threat posed by an uncontrollable virus, the device allows us to relegate that fact to our peripheral vision.

We can see and move beyond it into our consumer universe. When we return home, our screens will continue feeding us the latest death count caused by the invisible pathogen. But *transfrayeurs* like these allow us nonetheless to move about and retain normality as we gather essentials for our next lockdown menu, while forgetting about the unequal access to such menus and – more fundamentally – to care, vaccines and health.

Despite their seeming insignificance, little stop/go signs at supermarkets are intimately connected to the state of the sublime in security politics. Though lacking personification, the COVID-19 pandemic manifested itself as the logical conclusion that other security threats only hinted at: global paralysis. To return to Spivak:

The most powerful concept-metaphor for the pandemic as well as the virus which is its primum mobile is the Kantian sublime, both dynamic—the virus’s terrifying image of movement, much bigger than human society, and mathematical—reduced everywhere to statistics. The human being fears the sublime, which belongs to nature—unlike bacteria, the virus does not live inside the human body in an amphibolic way. But then, surreptitiously, *because we know how to save ourselves*, we get the sense that that terrifying thing has no mind, whereas we, as human beings, have the moral will.⁷⁷

The pandemic began with an exceptional aesthetics: we would declare war on the virus. But as time went on, the more subtle aesthetic logics we are tracing here melded that exceptionalism with the quotidian. We’ll live with it. Our lives might become more-or-less quasi-permeable, but ‘we know how to save ourselves.’ Again, *transfrayeurs* both recall the diffuse security threats in our midst *and* assure us that life can go on. The contradiction between liberty, rights, and empowerment, on the one hand, and security, on the other, is manageable. COVID-19 might be the most real, genuinely sublimely overwhelming security threat that has emerged in recent history. Aesthetic protocols keep things moving anyhow. We can rest both easy and uneasy, without contradiction in the current order. Particularly as the protocol distracts and disconnects from the excluded and marginalised by the COVID-19 shopping order, as much as from those blocked by security walls. As Spivak finishes her words, less reassuringly: ‘the moral will should lead to the golden rule – treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. This does not emerge in the current context.’⁷⁸

Juxtapositional-Enrolling

If *objective-amalgamation* and *quasi-permeability* work to normalise the presence of threats in ways that allow us to distract ourselves from their presence, what we term *juxtapositional-enrolling* focuses more clearly on guiding audiences towards a continued awareness of the presence of insecurity in a manner that naturalises those threats while also counter-posing them to an imaginary of continued ‘normality’. Consider a recent Swedish Armed Forces advertising campaign, described as follows:

77. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘The Left Reflects on the Global Pandemic and Speaks to Transform!’, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (2020): 482.

78. *Ibid.*



Figure 6. A billboard forming part of the campaign ‘We let Sweden be at peace’ in the Stockholm metro.

Credit: Volt, Sweden; Swedish Armed Forces.

The boring and beautiful everyday life. That’s what The Swedish Armed Forces fight for – around the clock, all year, everywhere. That’s the focus in their latest campaign. Visuals from the everyday life of the citizens are mixed with regular workdays for the people within the force. They all tie together with the line *We let Sweden be in peace*, so that your life can continue as usual.

The campaign involved a range of print advertisements and videos. The images depict ordinary scenes – swimming pools, barbecues – juxtaposed with smaller images of military activities (military divers, fighter planes) or just the campaign slogan: *We let Sweden be at peace* (see Figure 6). The campaign is devoid of any Hollywoodesque aestheticisation of military action. Representations of specific enemy or particular threats are absent. Instead, the campaign normalises the exceptional, inviting viewers to actively embrace the omnipresence of the Armed Forces in their lives as the condition for living their peaceful, normal, and beautifully boring lives. The logic is straightforward: one must embrace the omnipresence of security so as to ensure ‘your life can continue as usual.’

Importantly, such an invitation to normalise the exceptional and naturalise security arrangements by treating them as nonintrusive is connected to the view that the state of the sublime is inevitable to contemporary life. Such views are pervasive particularly in relation to environmental threats, which are perceived as requiring a focus on ‘the conditions of possibility for harm rather than on direct causes of harm.’⁷⁹ Since those conditions are embedded in everyday practices, the exceptional moves into the everyday, and

79. Olaf Corry, ‘Securitisation and “Riskification,”’ *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (2011): 40 (2) 256.

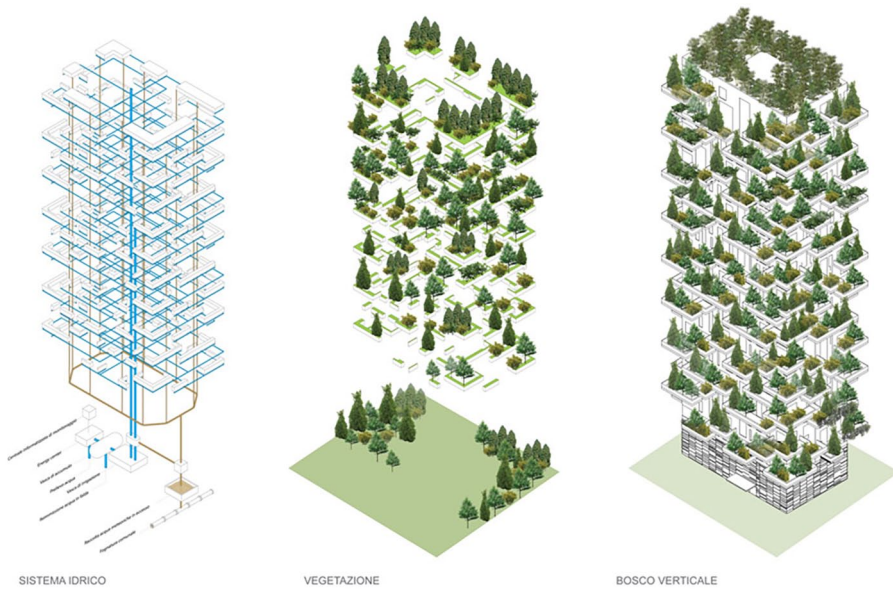


Figure 7. Architectural schematic of the *Bosco Verticale* structure in Milan, Italy. CC-BY-2.0, Author: Forgemind ArchiMedia.

the emphasis in awareness-raising shifts to enrolling people into realising they must make changes in their own lives. For example, a plethora of self-help books now exist that devolve responsibility for securing a sustainable world onto the quotidian. With covers that juxtapose the planetary sublime with toothbrushes, coffee-mugs, shoes and lemon-wedges, they advertise themselves with slogans such as *70 things you can concretely do to save the world* and *222 lifehacks for a better world*. The proposed strategies include greening inner cities through rooftop gardening projects, or even making the active choice of opting for living in a ‘green flat’ such as the *Bosco Verticale* structure in Milan (Figure 7). This emphasis on juxtaposing and enrolling also pervades digital space. A stark example is the Israeli Defence Forces’ campaigns to alert Israeli citizens and Jews abroad to the centrality of social media for national defence by juxtaposing fears of terrorism with mundane social media practices. The Israeli Defence Force enrolls *all* its allies as digital forensics experts and tethers ‘suspicion to the image’ with defending national security.⁸⁰

Juxtapositional-enrolling makes the state of the sublime liveable, at least for some. While it recalls the sublime more directly than the two aesthetic protocols discussed above, it also offers an escape from it. Normalisation and banalisation, achieved through representations centred on an everyday that can – must – continue even

80. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein, *Digital Militarism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

alongside sublime imaginaries, makes it possible to repress and forget the implications of the sublime and so to live with them. By connecting the state of the sublime to everyday routines involving shopping, gardening, social media, swimming, playing football or grilling in the park, this aesthetic helps to transfer our fears. However, these processes of normalisation and banalisation also durably inscribes those fears within our daily life. More than this, the presence of the Swedish Armed Forces, Israeli forensic expertise, and books against climate change enshrine a hierarchy of valuing and ordering that marginalises non-Swedes, Palestinians, and the poor who have no part in green and healthy lifestyles or rooftop gardening. Somewhat paradoxically, enrolling everyday practices and devolving responsibility for the exceptional diffuses and enshrines the state of the sublime. While anchoring the sublime ever more deeply in contemporary life, the banality of the quotidian also defuses it. This paradox is not unique to juxtapositional-enrolling, even if it is more visible therein. Objective-amalgamation and quasi-permeability have similarly paradoxical effects. Their work as *transfrayeurs* making the state of the sublime liveable also ensures that it can be perpetuated, diffused, and deepened. Aesthetic protocols feed a security politics that ‘generates the preconditions for its own self-expansion.’⁸¹ Albeit with an inverse political purpose to Berset’s *Broken Chair* in Geneva, *transfrayeurs* operate with a symmetrical aesthetic purpose: generating a constantly *questioning but not choking* security politics.

The Politics of Sublimation

What are the political implications of this micrology of the state of the sublime? To conclude, we wish to foreground four especially salient suggestions. First, one possible end-state of the state of the sublime is society’s totalising enclosure. A politics resting on the rejection of all that comes from outside: whether people (migrants, refugees), goods, or ideas. *Transfrayeurs* guard against such a totalising enclosure. They distract from, look beyond and actively integrate the sublime into the everyday. Harold Lasswell anticipated such a politics in 1941 when suggesting that though enclosed ‘garrison states’ might be emerging, they were likely to be ‘far less rigid than the military states of antiquity.’⁸² Instead, certain ‘specialists in violence’ would enrol engineers and scientists to expand ‘the technical potentialities of modern civilization within the general framework of the garrison state.’⁸³ To scientists and engineers, our argument suggests, we should add the artists, designers, commercial advertisers, and others who allow society to continue in spite of dangers, risks, and threats (real or imagined). The *transfrayeurs* they design and disseminate work to extend and deepen the state of the sublime and the hyper-militarisation/securityisation of everyday life.

Second, the visible presence or absence of security has long served as a marker for power-inflected social differentiations. Globally, these differentiations emerged in the

81. Chambers and Andrews, ‘Never Mind the Bollards,’ 1031.

82. Harold D. Lasswell, ‘The Garrison State,’ *The American Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 4 (1941): 466.

83. *Ibid.*, 466.

history of Euro-American military, political, and cultural conquest that continues to structure inter-state relations, something that produces:

The cross-cultural syndrome in which the “Third World,” as the site of the “raw” material that is “monstrosity,” is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle, entertainment, and spiritual enrichment for the “First World.” < . . . > Locked behind the bars of our television screens, we become repelled by what is happening “over there.”⁸⁴

The possibility of being ‘repelled by what is happening “over there”’ is aesthetically mediated. Representations of a monstrous other are counterposed to an ordered, normal, and gleaming self. This requires a great deal of silencing and exclusion, a longstanding historical process in which particular states of insecurity (gendered, ethnic, religious) are left unacknowledged, actively hidden, and perpetuated. The aesthetic protocols we have discussed reinforce such dynamics. Blending beauty into mundane security objects such as coffee tables distracts attention from supposed sublime threats but also perpetuates raced, gendered, and classed structures of subjugation globally. Permeable barriers at the border and stop-go signs regulating shopping allow us to forget those who are excluded from, or directly threatened by, the national security state and its consumerist universes: enshrining their exclusion. The little routines through which we can ‘save the world’ from climate crisis affirm *and* occlude the exception – global environmental catastrophe – we face.

Third, aesthetic protocols justify judgement and hierarchy. They affirm, naturalise, and may even *generate* particular threats, most usually those that have been constructed through historically-embedded structures of patriarchal, colonial, imperial, racial, and capitalist domination. Equally, they forestall deliberation over the reasons why some might explicitly deviate from or reject these protocols. Aside from pragmatic reasons (a lack of financial resources or technological expertise), this diverts attention away from critical voices who might not yet be seduced by the aesthetic fixes that perpetuate the state of the sublime. It also prevents critique of the fact that the *trans-fearing* at work in one place is often dependent on its non-operation elsewhere. Above all, since aesthetic protocols work affectively and synaesthetically – through resonance as much as reason – the judgements and hierarchies they produce are reinforced in ways that are neither articulated nor argued: leaving them beyond easy critique. In so doing, they push the hyper-militarisation and securitisation of everyday life beyond the boundaries of conventional political argument or debate.

Fourth and most disturbingly, the aesthetic protocols we have just discussed nurture a desire for political innocence that blocks political intervention, conventional or otherwise. By transferring fears – distracting attention, helping look beyond and trivialising – they facilitate a lack of engagement with the state of the sublime by making it possible to ignore the social and political conditions that drive security politics. While the aesthetic protocols we have traced responsabilise at an individual level, at the broader level, their effect is conservative and depoliticising. Indeed, *transfrayeurs* represent an

84. Rey Chow, ‘Violence in the Other Country,’ in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 84.

infantile politics of monsters under the bed, a politics of something that is real but *not really real*. A politics employing the same strategies that children use to quell their fears of hidden demons: decorating bedrooms with lights, patterns, and toys, or possibly calling on parents to remove them. It is the politics of Baldwin's White America writ large. As he wrote to his nephew, when 'this innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. . . it is the innocence which constitutes the crime.' The trouble is that innocence is comfortable and morally clean. Responsibility by contrast is discomfiting and dirty.⁸⁵

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ORCID iD

Jonathan Luke Austin  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8045-2143>

Author biographies

Jonathan Luke Austin is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Copenhagen. Austin's research is focused around the ontologies of political violence, the relationships between technology, design theory and world politics, the political status of aesthetics, and the contemporary state of scientific critique. His work can be explored at www.jonathanlukeaustin.com.

Anna Leander is Professor of International Relations at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and at the Institute of International Relations –PUC, Rio de Janeiro. She has worked extensively with practice theoretical approaches to International Relations and the politics of commercialising military and security matters. Her current research focuses on the material politics of commercial security technologies and more specifically on the aesthetic and affective dimensions of this politics.

85. Jonathan Luke Austin and Anna Leander, 'Designing-With/In World Politics: Manifestos for an International Political Design,' *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences*, 2, no.1 (2021): 83–154.