

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Security compositions

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Abstract

This article argues that security politics is constituted through the ways in which its contours are ‘made sensible’ (perceivable to our senses) through material, aesthetic, or affective mechanisms. To make this argument, the article introduces the theoretical scaffolding for what it terms a compositional ontology. A compositional approach to security identifies, theorises, and studies the perceptual base of security politics in order to ask how – say – the sight of a single photograph, sound of a security announcement, or smell of tear gas, can frequently be the direct (efficient) cause of international security policy, discourse, and decision. To theorise the deep political impact of such fleeting moments of local sensory experience, the article lays out a compositional ontology comprised of a synthesis of poststructuralist and new-realist philosophy, as well as the empirical sensibilities of pragmatist sociology. Combined with a focus on sensibility, it is shown that these approaches can produce an ontology of security that more effectively explains contingency, fluidity, and change in world politics. Having laid out the theoretical frame for a compositional ontology, the article discusses its political and methodological implications, suggesting it demands that security studies shift towards a more postcritical, experimental, and collaborative ethos.

Keywords: Composition; Security Studies; Aesthetics; Materiality; Sensibility; Post-Critique

Introduction

The world is not a reflection but a continuous composition.¹

This article introduces a compositional ontology to security studies. Composition, it suggests, can serve as a novel ontological perspective through which to understand how the conditions of possibility for security or insecurity emerge, assemble, and find collective coherence: security compositions describe the global ordering of security. Of course, at first glance, the term composition will likely seem rather odd. Colloquially, most associate composition with art and literature, not social science. However, the use of the concept is far broader than the artistic or literary.² Composition has deep roots in literary and art theory, as well as musicology, but also in Spinozist philosophy, (autonomist) Marxist thought, Deleuzian philosophy, science studies, and beyond.³ In all these cases, composition is used to foreground the key role of ‘sensibility’ in social phenomena. The idea therein is a basic one. Something that is composed is most usually

¹Nigel Thrift, ‘Performance and ...’, *Environment and Planning A*, 35 (2003), p. 2021.

²David Foster, ‘What are we talking about when we talk about composition?’, *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 8:1–2 (1988), p. 40.

³See, among others, Miriam Tola, ‘Composing with Gaia: Isabelle Stengers and the feminist politics of the Earth’, *PhoenEx*, 11:1 (2016), p. 14; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988); Bruno Latour, ‘An attempt at a “compositionist manifesto”’, *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), pp. 471–90; Matthew S. May, ‘Spinoza and class struggle’, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6:2 (2009); Ignacio Farias, ‘Assemblages without systems: From the problem of fit to the problem of composition’, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 7:2 (2017), pp. 186–91; Matteo Pasquinelli,

also something that will be perceived or sensed by an audience in ways that produce meaning. Theories of composition thus suggest that understanding how or why society embraces or rejects particular social actions or political discourses requires that we always take into account the ways in which those actions or discourses are ‘made sensible’ (that is, perceivable to our senses) through material, aesthetic, or other means.

To simplify, exploring what I will term the composition of security is about asking a set of seemingly basic questions. How do people viscerally, sensually, and/or corporeally experience international security? As they move about the streets, watch television screens, participate in protests, or legislate in parliaments? How does the everyday sight of a photograph, sound of an airport security announcement, or smell of tear gas in the air constitute the base of security sensemaking? How, in short, do little moments of local sensory experience connect to the broader composition of global security politics? And what are the implications of those sensory encounters? All these questions ask how individuals respond to fluctuations in the vibrant ebb and flow of everyday life that produce innumerable little aesthetic and material encounters. They also imply that what we term ‘security’ is not only a discourse, manipulated for political interests, but also something grounded in everyday experience. In doing so, questions like these reflect the basic fact that ‘one always makes something with something’.⁴ As a physical object, a painting is composed (made) with daubs of ink. Security is similarly composed – this article suggests – through little moments of sensibility. Ultimately, speaking of security compositions is thus about working to identify the perceptual base of security politics.

Let me give an opening example. In 2015, a three-year-old boy named Aylan Kurdi drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as he and his family fled the Syrian civil war. Most of us know about Kurdi because of one photo of his lifeless body lying on the shore of a Turkish beach. Once circulated, that photo worked to stir a global reaction of horror against a human catastrophe that been raging for four years. Although countless other little children had been killed and photographed during the war, Kurdi’s death resonated far more widely, changing perceptions of Europe and North America’s role in the suffering produced by the conflict. After his death, Kurdi’s aunt wrote that ‘something about *that* picture’ was unusual. As she described it, ‘God put the light on that picture [in order] to wake up the world.’⁵ That specific picture, rather than any of the thousands of others that exist, seemed to change something for a brief moment. But why? What was intrinsic to that picture? How did its composition – as a photograph, as a symbol – work in turn to recompose global security politics? How did it ‘make sensible’ something about the broader contours of security politics to those who saw it flash across their screens or printed in their newspapers?

Answering questions like these is crucial to understanding security politics today and requires a specifically compositional ontology that focuses on how the world is, or is not, made sensible at particular times and in particular settings. Why? Because as we have progressed into the new millennium, security politics has become increasingly aestheticised, material-technologically mediated, and sociopolitically dominated by affect and emotion.⁶ These facts have augmented the influence of photos like that of Kurdi, potentially positively. But they have also produced a

⁴To anticipate and accelerate: Italian Operaismo and reading Marx’s notion of the organic composition of capital’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 26:2 (3 April 2014), pp. 178–92, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2014.888833>}.

⁵Felix Guattari, ‘On contemporary art’, in Eric Alliez and Andrew Goffey (eds), *The Guattari Effect* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 45.

⁶See {<https://tinyurl.com/y6b9486d>}.

⁶See, among others, Nigel Thrift, ‘Lifeworld Inc – and what to do about it’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29 (2011), pp. 5–26; Claudia Aradau, Tobias Blanke, and Giles Greenway, ‘Acts of digital parasitism: Hacking, humanitarian apps and platformisation’, *New Media & Society* (10 June 2019), 1461444819852589, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819852589>}; James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* (Pluto Press, 2018); Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

set of now ubiquitous neologisms that hint at the darker role of these developments: post-truth, fake news, the new right, deep fakes, alternative facts, etc. All these terms reflect a growing fragmentation in what we might term the ‘conditions of sensibility’ that human beings innately inhabit. Perhaps largely due to the digitisation of society and rise of the technology industry, differently situated social demographics are now more strikingly than ever before subject to different material, aesthetic, and affective stimuli. People see, feel, and hear about the world in a more radically heterogeneous set of ways than ever before. While some see photos of dead refugees, others see only unedited photos of ISIS beheadings, often on the same media platform. And the consequences of this disjuncture in the conditions of sensibility for security politics do not seem positive. In recent years, global politics has witnessed a return to political strongmen wielding authoritarian power, a growing tide of nativist sentiment and domestic policies, a proliferation of the wildest of conspiracy theories, and much more.

Understanding both the good and bad of the ways in which the world’s material, aesthetic, technological, and affective composition is accelerating at an unprecedented rate is thus central to the proposed promise of a compositional ontology. Unpacking these processes is, indeed, at the heart of each of the articles that make up this Special Issue of *European Journal of International Security*, each of which explores the conditions of sensibility underlying security politics through a set of empirical cases. In this article, I develop the aforementioned compositional ontology with the goal of setting out a broader framework within which those more empirically focused inquiries can sit. Core to that ontology is the principle that security operates through ‘material-aesthetic’ encounters. Rather than privileging a semiotic understanding of security practice, in which meaning is made through the relations between different humans, sign-systems (that is, language), or humans and material things (as in material-semiotics), a material-aesthetic approach argues that particular objects in the world (whether human or not) have aesthetic, affective, and material qualities that are the *genesis* of the relations that semiotics later explores. In order to understand how particular discourses emerge within security politics it is therefore necessary, in the argument I put forward, to take a step backwards in order to see the conditions of sensibility that undergird their emergence and power.

Developing a compositional ontology is important for two main reasons. First, and as the opening section of this article will explore, security studies is currently ill-equipped to deal with the broad political, social, and analytical issues that questions of sensibility raise. As I will show, this is particularly the case due to a set of problems facing the core theoretical approach generally used to inquire into questions of affect and sensibility within the field. That approach, largely derived from poststructuralist philosophy and/or relational sociology, currently lacks an ontological basis for understanding sensibility. Secondly, developing a compositional ontology also has the potential to provide the ‘connective tissue’ that might draw into alignment the collective insights of numerous potentially more radical approaches to understanding (in)security that nonetheless presently lack a shared or unifying ontological framework. This includes, most prominently, the aesthetic, everyday, visual, narrative, practice and posthuman turns in security studies, as well as literatures dealing with emotions and affect in security dynamics, and the growing use of Science and Technology Studies (STS) across IR.⁷ Each of these fields of study has radically expanded our understanding of global security dynamics in different directions but each also either lacks or relies on a relatively unsatisfactory ontological understanding of how the, for example, affective or aesthetic come to matter and make change. To some degree, the

⁷See, among others, Roland Bleiker, ‘The aesthetic turn in international political theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30 (2001); Nick Vaughan-Williams and Daniel Stevens, ‘Vernacular theories of everyday (in)security: the disruptive potential of non-elite knowledge’, *Security Dialogue*, 47:1 (2015), pp. 40–58; Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘Narrative and the possibilities for scholarship’, *International Political Sociology*, 12 (2018), pp. 125–38; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR* (London: Routledge, 2012); Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

goal of this article and Special Issue is thus a synthetic one: it does not claim to provide a novel theory of any particular aspect of global security per se. Rather, it hopes to show that it is possible to expand the importance of these already existing approaches by uniting them within a broad, grand,⁸ or deep⁹ ontological conceptualisation of how security politics operates through sensibility.

This discussion now proceeds in three main parts. I begin by schematising the currently dominant ontological perspectives drawn on within security studies. These are laid out as focusing on either: (1) the *organising* of (in)security based on relatively structural, humanist, and/or materialist conditions (namely realism); (2) the *constructing* of (in)security as relationally built up by more or less coherent or clashing ideological formations (namely constructivism); and/or (3) the *assembling* of (in)security through a more radically relational ontology that privileges the emergence of assemblages or actor-networks (namely poststructuralism or relational sociology). After affirming the especial promise of the *assembling* ontology of security dynamics I thereafter nonetheless note that it has serious shortcomings in its present articulation within IR and security studies, shortcomings that prevent an appreciation of the role of sensibility. On that basis, I then suggest we understand insecurity through the *composing* of its dynamics and set the scene for the main argument to come. The second section lays out in full the compositional approach at the heart of this Special Issue, describing its links to poststructuralist philosophy, new realist sociologies, and beyond. Fleshing out this argument, I then move to discussing how the *everyday*, the *material-aesthetic*, and the *affective* are core to understanding security compositions. The third section of the article then explores how a compositional ontology deals with questions of power and politics, stressing in particular its more 'postcritical' orientation to these questions. I conclude by discussing the implications of a compositional approach for the vocation of security studies, describing how it might alter traditional conceptualisations of the purpose of academic inquiry.

Ontologies of security

Security studies now has a long history.¹⁰ Nonetheless, at an abstract level, relatively few ontological frameworks for understanding its operations remain prominent. In order to situate the compositional approach laid out here, I will now briefly schematise these ontologies and how composition fits within them. The ontologies laid out are termed the *organising*, *constructing*, and *assembling* logics of security. Before getting there, it is important to first note, however, that I am not specifically referring here to any particular 'grand theory' of world politics (broadly conceived) but, rather, to a set of dominant 'deep theoretical'¹¹ perspectives on which ontological units are most relevant to studying security and, more importantly, how these units interact. This may be the figure of the acting human subject as an enclosed (individualist) unit rationally organising other objects, the ideological 'unconsciousness' of particular human societies forcing human desires, the material props on which the social operates and which demand particular responses to the threats they might pose, and beyond. Each of these schematisations is deliberately abstract and it is thus crucial to stress that very few theories of security proper will fit neatly within their frame lines.

The first and longest-standing ontology of security can be termed the *organising* logic. Here, security dynamics are generally read in more-or-less intentionalist terms and analysed through the interests or desires of states or other large political collectivities. To simplify, this is most

⁸John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'Leaving theory behind: Why simplistic hypothesis testing is bad for International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 427–57.

⁹Felix Berenskotter, 'Deep theorizing in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:4 (2018), pp. 814–40.

¹⁰For an exhaustive history, see Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹Berenskotter, 'Deep theorizing in International Relations'.

commonly the realist view of security. From this perspective, the dynamics of security politics are governed by one or more of the following factors: (1) human nature and the limits it sets on action; (2) the more-or-less rational acting human subject constrained by those natural limits but otherwise actively pursuing her (usually material) interests; and (3) the structural whole that these elements are said to produce. Taken together, the organising ontology foregrounds the idea that security dynamics are ordered by intentional decisions made by humans, albeit decisions that are constrained by 'natural' (material) factors. The organising ontology thus tends towards an individualist-humanist analysis that sees security politics as a kind of strategy game in which the goal is to, yes, 'organise' the world and its politics in the most individually or collectively advantageous manner.

Over time, the organising ontology has been challenged across IR by a focus on the intersubjective *constructing* of social meaning and its (free or forced) production of consent or dissent to particular practices. The greatest contribution of this alternative ontology rests on the contingency it has introduced to world political dynamics. In Wendt's famous formulation, 'anarchy' can be governed through different cultural logics: Hobbesian, Lockean, or Kantian.¹² Displacing notions of fixed human nature, (in)security dynamics are seen as being ordered by ideational factors that are not so much intentionally 'organised' by lone agents or the collectivities they comprise but, rather, negotiated (or argued over) ideationally until some measure of coherence is achieved. Notably, however, *most* constructing ontologies are set up such that they both extend beyond *and* couple with organising logics where appropriate. For example, Securitisation Theory evolved as broadly constructivist in form, incorporating both Austin's performativity theory and Derrida's poststructuralism.¹³ However, this was blended with a decisionist approach in which human agents directly organise (in)security dynamics through their use of speech acts.¹⁴ Put differently, most moderate forms of the constructing ontology have always also tended to privilege the place of powerful objects – leaders or states – as working within ideational constraints but also directly organising with or against those constraints.¹⁵

The third dominant ontology employed within security studies can be termed the *assembling* logic. Most variants of this ontology have their roots in either poststructuralist (particularly Deleuzian or Foucauldian) variants of critical theory and/or relatively more mainstream attempts to distil the sociological theories of figures like Anthony Giddens or Charles Tilly into 'processual-relationist' readings of world politics.¹⁶ By now, the approach has more-or-less coalesced into a focus on either 'assemblages' or 'networks' as the relevant constituent units for exploring world politics.¹⁷ At its core, the assembling ontology embraces a form of relationism

¹²Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹³Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

¹⁴Jonathan Luke Austin and Philippe Beaulieu-Brossard, '(De)securitisation dilemmas: Theorising the simultaneous enaction of securitisation and desecuritisation', *Review of International Studies*, 44:2 (2018), pp. 301–23, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000511>}; Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

¹⁵Jeff Huysmans, 'The jargon of exception: On Schmitt, Agamben and the absence of political society', *International Political Sociology*, 2:2 (2008), pp. 165–83; Stefano Guzzini, *Power, Realism and Constructivism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁶See, among others, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Reclaiming the social: Relationalism in anglophone international studies', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (15 March 2019), pp. 1–19, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1567460>}; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations before states: Substance, process and the study of world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1 September 1999), pp. 291–332, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005003002>}; James Der Derian, *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (London: Lexington, 1989).

¹⁷See, among others, Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams, 'Security beyond the state: Global security assemblages in international politics', *International Political Sociology*, 3 (2009), pp. 1–17; Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (London: Blackwell, 2005); Andrew Barry, 'The translation zone: Between actor-network theory and International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 413–29; Jacqueline Best et al., 'IPS Forum contributions: Actor-network theory and international relationality', *International*

in which human beings, material objects, and other phenomena are seen as mutually co-constituting social and political worlds in complex ways.¹⁸ To some degree, the approach can be seen as an attempt to move beyond the material/ideational divide that remains rhetorically constitutive of earlier realist vs constructivist debates through a distinct ontological perspective on the constitution of (social) life. In this respect, the assembling ontology is a posthuman approach that refuses to privilege human beings as uniquely autonomous or intentional ontological units, instead stressing the co-imbrication of human praxis with numerous other relationally constituted factors (that is, praxis, materiality, affect, etc.).¹⁹

A schematic comparison of the three ontologies just sketched can now be seen in Table 1. However, what is telling about the use of these ontologies when they are employed in concrete empirical analysis is that they are almost always cross-fertilised in order to produce a convincing social analysis. For example, realists long ago noted that certain analytical inadequacies within its more bluntly materialist variants demanded that the approach gradually integrate distinctly social variables into its accounting in ways that, indeed, foreshadowed the eventual rise of constructivist thought.²⁰ Likewise, constructivist thought tends to rely on a rather organised and rationalistic image of norm entrepreneurs as working to diffuse new commitments in ways that seem to undermine its broader sociological commitments.²¹ Finally, proponents of the assembling ontology have also tended towards such efforts at hybridisation. Drawing broadly on an assembling ontology to describe what she terms the ‘horrors of global politics’, for example, Debbie Lisle nonetheless goes on to stress that those horrors are actively ‘produced by the brokers of global power’²² who work to coordinate, organise, and in this case perpetuate the dominance of particular power networks.

To be clear, the common effort to hybridise otherwise distinct ontologies of security is often fruitful. It is also often politically and analytically necessary. Moreover, it is clear that the hybridisation of the organising and constructing logics is not especially problematical from either perspective for one simple reason. A majority of the variants of both the constructing and organising logics are substantialist ontologies.²³ Substantialist ontologies suggest that ‘the ontological primitives of [social] analysis are “things” or “entities” ... [that] exist before interaction’.²⁴ If we set aside the more radical variants of the organising ontology, which might suggest – for example – that human nature is biologically fixed (Morgenthau), then both the organising and constructing logics minimally accept that human beings are the core substantialist unit of politics. While most constructing logics do not accept that human beings and their societies possess innate traits (that is, that there is *a* human nature) they do accept that a particular set of human capacities are ontologically core to understanding (world) politics: reflexivity,

Political Sociology, 7:3 (2013), pp. 332–49; Annemarie Mol, ‘Actor-network theory: Sensitive terms and enduring tensions’, *Kölner Zeitschrift Für Soziologie Und Sozialpsychologie*, 50:1 (2011), pp. 253–69.

¹⁸Richard Coyne, ‘The net effect: Design, the Rhizome, and complex philosophy’, *Futures*, 40 (2008), pp. 552–61; John Phillips, ‘Agencement/assemblage’, *Theory, Culture, & Society*, 23:2–3 (2006), pp. 108–09.

¹⁹Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010).

²⁰Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing international politics’, *International Security*, 20:1 (1995), pp. 71–81, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.2307/2539217>}; Daniel Deudney, ‘Dividing realism: Structural realism versus security materialism on nuclear security and proliferation’, *Security Studies*, 2:3–4 (1 June 1993), pp. 5–36, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419309347518>}.

²¹Kathryn Sikkink and Margaret E. Keck, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²²Debbie Lisle, ‘Waiting for international political sociology: a field guide to living in-between’, *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (2017), p. 427.

²³Specific variants of constructivist thought within IR may not be substantialist in form, though most modern variants likely are. For discussions, see Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²⁴Jackson and Nexon, ‘Relations before states’, p. 291.

Table 1. Ontologies of security.

	Units	Post/Human	Schools	Power	Politics
Organising	Decision(s), Material(s), Nature(s).	Humanist	Realism; Liberalism; Behaviouralism.	Materially-based and structurally-defined.	Realpolitik
Constructing	Idea(s), Relation(s), Negotiation(s).	Humanist	Constructivism; Liberalism; English School; Practice Theory.	Ideationally-based, intersubjectively defined, actualised organisationally.	Liberal-Democratic
Assembling	Relation(s), Network(s), Assemblage(s).	Post-Humanist	Post-Structuralism; Practice-Theory; Relational Sociology.	Relationally-based, activated asubjectively, systemic-wide.	Critical
Composing	Affect(s), Aesthetic(s) Symbiosis(es)	Post-Humanist	Poststructuralism; Post-Critique; Pragmatist Sociology.	Resonance-based, relationally activated, always in relative flux.	Post-Critical

intersubjectivity, intentionality, etc. In consequence, rarely is the hybridisation of organising and constructing ontologies internally contradictory *per se*.

By contrast, the core framework of the assembling ontology is conceptually incompatible with that of the organising or constructing ontologies. Most variants of the assembly logic reject the perceived naturalism of substantialism outright, including attributing any unique status to human beings. As we have seen, however, the use of the assembling ontology *in practice* nonetheless generally involves a hybridisation with substantialist ontologies. Until now, this analytical move has been necessary due to two core problems with the form of relationism embraced by the assembling ontology. As Graham Harman puts them:

First, relationism does injustice to the future of an actor, by not explaining how it can change. Second, relationism does injustice to the present of an actor, by not allowing it to be real outside the alliances that articulate it.²⁵

Consider the example of transnational networks of insecurity.²⁶ Core to exploring the emergence of this phenomenon is asking why these networks of insecurity professionals originally emerged and gained importance over and beyond nationally based security networks: what was it that caused earlier national networks of, for example, police, military, and intelligence organisations to transform (themselves)? It has become increasingly clear that the assembling ontology cannot presently answer these questions adequately. The reason is simple, if ironic. Original articulations of relationist theory (especially within IR) were designed to overcome the perceived staticity of substantialist ontologies (of which the organising and constructing logics are several variants), which led to a difficulty explaining social change, flux, and transformation. However, by stressing instead the relational constitution of entities (that is, claiming that the properties of humans,

²⁵Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), p. 129.

²⁶Didier Bigo, *Illiberal Practices of Liberal Regimes: The (In)Security Games* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2006).

geographical features, etc. depend on the relations they have with other objects) and theoretically 'hollowing out' any substantial qualities from these entities, the self-same problem emerges for relationism: explaining change. If entities are defined by their relations then how can those relations change? What would drive such a change if not the substantial desires of particular acting human subjects? Speaking of assemblages or actor-networks alone, without supplementing these concepts with organising or constructing ontologies, seems to risk creating the impression that politics is trapped within an unchangeable set of relational structures encompassing every aspect of our lives.²⁷ Within this view it is very difficult to answer questions such as those posed by Bruno Latour as follows:

Why do fierce armies disappear in a week? Why do whole empires like the Soviet one vanish in a few months? Why do companies who cover the whole world go bankrupt after their next quarterly report? Why is it that quite citizens turn into revolutionary crowds?²⁸

The most logically consistent answer to questions like these from within the assembling ontology has been a focus on *process* that suggests change to be a relatively slow matter of historical shifts in relations governed by exogenous changes (that is, historical institutionalism or evolutionary theory). Alternatively, as we have said, the assembling logic has also answered these questions by implicitly or explicitly hybridising its ontology with substantialist logics. In this move, the assembling logic analyses the 'status quo' (present) of global security politics through relational concepts but then moves to incorporating substantialist human attributes (somebody must be a 'global broker' producing those relations, to return to the example of Lisle's discussion of the 'horrors of global politics') in order to explain changes in security politics. The result is the paradoxical and most usually contradictory embrace of a fluid, non-linear, and innately complex ontology (assembly) with a comparatively static, coherent, and humanist system of ordering (organisation). The goal of this article is to move beyond this contradictory hybridisation of the assembling ontology, which otherwise remains one of the most novel and potentially important perspectives on security politics. To do so, the following section introduces a fourth ontological framework for security studies, termed a compositional ontology, that I suggest can augment assembly-based approaches by providing a more convincing and yet non-substantialist understanding of how security politics changes and transforms itself.

Security compositions

What's a security composition? To answer this question, develop the ontological framework that undergirds the notion, and begin to explain the concept's importance for the study of international security, I want to first turn back to the realist school of security studies. Realists broadly argue that 'material forces ... determine international life'.²⁹ In doing so, they provide an explanation for why particular human interests (in realism's classical variant) or rational-strategic decisions (in its neo-variant) are made and sometimes come to clash. Factors including exogenous technological developments, human nature, territorial control, scarce resource availability, and so on, are all posited to act as a certain 'base' on which power politics emerges and fluctuates over time. And these are factors, realism tells us, that human society has 'little ability to escape'.³⁰ While these realist precepts have been extensively criticised for their privileging of a quite strong form of substantialism, it is clear that such 'first principles' for social inquiry are necessary for the development of any more complex understanding of society. Indeed, despite the comparative simplicity of the first principles of realism, it is telling from the diversity of the realist literature's

²⁷Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Illinois: Open Court, 2002).

²⁸Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 245.

²⁹Wendt, 'Constructing international politics', p. 81.

³⁰Deudney, 'Dividing realism', p. 14.

findings (findings that are, indeed, often mutually contradictory) that the material forces it speaks of are somehow ‘indeterminately determinant.’³¹ While realists generally causally trace back particular social events to material forces and suggest those forces ‘determined’ the events in question, the diversity of the possible outcomes posited demonstrates that even this apparently more ‘objectivist’ reading of international security is relatively indeterminate when used in practice. In this respect, the material forces described by realism might better be considered as being a type of what Bruno Latour terms ‘plasma’. Latour writes that:

No understanding of the social can be provided if you don’t turn your attention to another range of unformatted phenomena I call this background plasma, namely that which is not yet formatted, not yet measured, not yet socialized, not yet engaged in metrological chains, and not yet covered, surveyed, mobilized, or subjectified.³²

For realists, this plasma is represented by the technologies, territories, resources, and so on, glossed earlier. These factors make certain ‘understanding[s] of the social’ possible within realism’s broader set of ontological commitments by providing a base or background from which complex social events unfold. What I want to suggest to begin this discussion is that the assembling ontology, especially within security studies, presently lacks such a base of plasma on which to ground its network or assemblage-structured reading of international security. The ‘relations’ at the heart of the assembling logic cannot provide such a base unless, as discussed earlier, we accept a relatively static (that is, only processual or evolutionary) vision of security politics. The lack of this base is likely related to the unwillingness of assembling ontologies to explicitly subscribe to any form of substantialist theorising that would risk accepting or assuming (as in the case of realism) that ‘objective’ (that is, non-social, non-relational) factors structure social life in ways that we have ‘little ability to escape’.³³ Nonetheless, until network or assembly-based ontologies are able to identify such an ontological base on which to afterwards build relational understandings of security politics, it will remain necessary to hybridise these ontologies with organising or constructing-based logics that already work to violate this desire for a non-substantialist analysis. The challenge faced in augmenting the scope and potential analytical (as well as political) value of assembling ontologies across security studies thus rests, I want to now suggest, on developing a non-substantialist ontological ‘base’ on which to ground its theories.

Composition, as an ontology, can provide such a base. In fact, the necessity of combining an assembling logic with an understanding of composition has long been recognised by texts core to assembling ontologies. For example, Deleuze and Guattari are clear throughout their work that the assemblages they theorise are *not* assembled or constructed by human beings or any other active agent. This goes against the grain of most work within security studies which couples the noun ‘assemblage’ with the verb ‘to assemble’ in order to discuss the assembling or reassembling of expertise, justice, war, etc.³⁴ This usage is problematic, again, for implying the existence

³¹The diversity of these findings is most obviously evident in the numerous different names that realism has been given over time, each of which designate distinct analytical findings. These include, for example, realism, classical realism, neo-realism, structural realism, neoclassical realism, offensive realism, liberal realism, subaltern realism, etc.

³²Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp. 243–4.

³³Deudney, ‘Dividing realism’, p. 14.

³⁴See, for example, Anna Leander and Ole Wæver, *Assembling Exclusive Expertise: Knowledge, Ignorance and Conflict Resolution in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2018); Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans, ‘Assembling credibility: Knowledge, method and critique in times of “post-truth”’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019); Claudia Aradau, ‘Assembling (non)knowledge: Security, law, and surveillance in a digital world’, *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (1 December 2017), pp. 327–42, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olx019>}; Bruno Magalhães, ‘The politics of credibility: Assembling decisions on asylum applications in Brazil’, *International Political Sociology*, 10:2 (1 June 2016), pp. 133–49, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw005>}; Louise Bengtsson, Stefan Borg, and Mark Rhinard, ‘Assembling

of an active agent working to organise or construct a particular social system. Against such a view, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari always insist that understanding social life ‘is not a question of organization but of composition’.³⁵ By composition they mean the ways in which two or more objects become ‘compounded’ to produce a hybrid object of one kind or another. It is not enough, from their perspective, for two objects to simply be ‘related’ to one another through a network or any other means. A relation can be built, forced, or organised between any two objects but that relation only gains social meaning or has social effects when those objects combine to producing something novel. This process of compounding relationally linked objects is at the core of what I call security compositions here.

To clarify Deleuze and Guattari’s abstract philosophy, we can turn instead to the concept of symbiosis. Graham Harman discusses how the biological notion of symbiosis is premised on the emergence of a relation or connection between two objects that leads to ‘the full-blown transformation of one or both entities’.³⁶ Expanding this metaphor to the social world, he continues by noting that just as the ‘gradual shaping of the gene pool through natural selection is a less important evolutionary force than the watershed symbioses of distinct organisms’ so ‘key moments in human life rarely result from introspective brooding ... [but] happen most often through symbiosis with a person, a profession, a city’.³⁷ Symbiosis is the capacity of two (or more) objects to become mutually beneficial to one another and so to ‘desire’ (in some sense) that they become structurally related.³⁸ This view is important because it allows us to focus on a ‘special type of relation that changes the reality of one of its *relata*’.³⁹ While it might be possible to map (*pace* Actor-Network Theory) the existence of any particular object back to its relations with thousands of other objects, it is these symbiotic relations that make change.⁴⁰ The relations of a network or assemblage that actually matter are again then, from this perspective, those that produce ‘new compound objects’.⁴¹

Let me give an example. There was a time when the capacities of civilian airliners to cause mass death and destruction were not yet known. Security protocols at airports were comparatively simple, air travel was not securitised as we know it now. Airliners possessed only a relatively predictable set of properties: flight, freight transport, uncomfortable seating, the possibility of accidental (but luckily mostly quite avoidable) fatal crashes, etc. However, civilian airliners also possessed a hidden capacity to act as a weapon. Manuel DeLanda describes the difference here – between manifest ‘properties’ and hidden ‘capacities’ – through analogy to the object of the knife.⁴² Properties are things that are intrinsically realised by objects: a knife may be sharp or blunt and thus possesses that property. By contrast, ‘there is, on the other hand, the capacity of the knife to cut things ... [but this] capacity to cut may never be actual if the knife is never used ... a capacity may remain only potential if it is never actually exercised’.⁴³ For the knife to realise its capacity to cut it must symbiotically compound with a human being, in most cases, whose presence allows for that property to be realised. Colloquially and linguistically, this is obvious: the gun becomes a weapon through a ‘gun-man’ hybrid who together have the

European health security: Epidemic intelligence and the hunt for cross-border health threats’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:2 (1 April 2019), pp. 115–30, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010618813063>}.

³⁵Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 255.

³⁶Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2018), pp. 111–12.

³⁷Graham Harman, *Immaterialism* (London: Polity, 2016), p. 45.

³⁸Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Myra J. Hird, ‘Indifferent globality: Gaia, symbiosis and “other worldliness”’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27:2–3 (2010), pp. 54–72.

³⁹Harman, *Immaterialism*, p. 49.

⁴⁰Thomas Lemke, ‘Materialism without matter: the recurrence of subjectivism in object-oriented ontology’, *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 18:2 (4 May 2017), pp. 133–52, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2017.1373686>}.

⁴¹Harman, *Immaterialism*, p. 17.

⁴²Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 4.

⁴³*Ibid.*

potential to symbiotically compose violence.⁴⁴ In the case of aircraft, of course, it was a more complex composition of knives (or, rather, box cutters), aircraft, and men that realised a novel capacity latent within the object of the airport: mass death and destruction.

A security composition is, then, a moment of symbiotic combination or compounding in which relationally linked objects become, quite literally, more than the sum of their parts. The question that follows is how this occurs. To begin getting there, we can hypothesise that if the kinds of symbiotic composition we are speaking about are social (rather than simply biological) then some kind of special ‘magnetic attraction’ must be involved that draws two or more objects into composition. Such a moment of attraction is captured in Harmut Rosa’s discussion of the concept of resonance.⁴⁵ Rosa postulates that meaningful social relations are driven not through reason (that is, strategic or reflexive introspection) but, instead, a search for resonant relationships that allow for mutually beneficial (symbiotic) forms of being in the world. These resonant relations are not focused on deriving instrumental gain, or a simple desire for survival but, instead, on aesthetics, emotion, and affect. In this, the concept of resonance goes beyond the usual social scientific preoccupation with human reason, reflexivity, or cognition by bringing into play ‘sensation, perception, affectation, without reference to a determinate subject ... or to a fixed object’.⁴⁶ It is these factors, more than the rational deliberation, that gain what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge call a type of ‘sensual credibility’.⁴⁷

Another example: is it reasoned reflection among electorates that has led to the election of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, or Boris Johnson? Are nativist policies based on rational choices, on the part of either the leaders or the populations concerned? From a compositional perspective, the answers to these questions are no. Instead, these phenomena must be understood through a term like resonance that is able to capture how groups with apparently contradictory interests (for example, working-class voters and a multimillionaire president) are able to come to form mutually symbiotic relations through emotional, affective, and aesthetic processes. What matters in cases like these is not any substantialist attributes these groups might possess but, instead, the possibilities of each group to resonate with one another in ways that draw them together and, eventually, produce novel social compositions. Resonance, then, is core to producing the symbiotic processes at the heart of security compositions. But how is resonance produced, more specifically? To answer that question, I will now move to describing how it is a combination of: (1) the everyday; (2) the material-aesthetic; and (3) the affective that produces resonance in differing settings. Each of these aspects will be shown to be linked to sensibility – to what we experience in very embodied and non-reasoned terms in the world – and to have the potential to be conceptualised as a kind of ‘material-aesthetic’ ontological base through which change and flux in security politics can be understood. These are the ‘plasma’ that the compositional ontology I am developing can provide to augment and expand the scope of assembling logics.

Everyday encounters

To begin seeing how security politics is composed through resonance and symbiosis we need to study those processes in the empirical realm where they occur. Doing so requires moving to the local and everyday spaces where sensibility is most common. Let me start with a first example. In his *Notes on Police Assessment of Moral Character*, Harvey Sacks describes the following incident:

⁴⁴See, among others, Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Harman, *Tool-Being*.

⁴⁵Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz: eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016).

⁴⁶Keith Ansell-Pearson and Keith Ansell Pearson, *Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

⁴⁷Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 43.

Coming to a street intersection, the officers observed a man crossing the intersection who did not appear to know where he was going. The officers alighted from the car, questioned this man, and searched him. He provided the police with full credentials and indicated that this was the first occasion on which he had ever been questioned by a police officer. His answers satisfied the officers that this man was quite 'legitimate'. They thanked him for his cooperation and sent him on his way.⁴⁸

For Sacks, this vignette serves to elucidate how police officers adjudicate the security or insecurity of particular neighbourhoods or persons based on an 'incongruity procedure' in which the everyday is expected to sit firmly within a 'normal ecology' of events.⁴⁹ Like the man stopped on the street, those who appear 'outside' such a normal ecology (that is, are not sure where they are going, are a racial minority, etc.) are to be investigated. Importantly, ethnomethodologists like Sacks reveal how the exact impulse to carry out procedures like these are produced 'autochthonously' (that is, the impulse occurs in the moment, rather than being pre-planned) based on 'sensing' something amiss. Indeed, these little moments of apparently inconsequential sensibility are core to the dynamics of security politics within a compositional ontology.⁵⁰ It is seeing different skin colours, sensing the smell of burning, or hearing the sudden sound of explosions that ultimately produces moments of potential resonance with relevance to security and insecurity politics.

The everyday is thus the genesis of security compositions.⁵¹ We see, smell, touch, and hear in the everyday and so it is naturally within this domain that a broader ecology of sensibility emerges with the potential to affect how we perceive, act upon, and feel about the world. Roland Bleiker (this Special Issue) thus describes how his experience working in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was marked by an ecology of masculinity and otherness.⁵² Through his use of photographic materials, we gain an insight into this process. First: bodies. Or, rather, male bodies. Then, guns. Uniforms. Framed portraits. And so on. It was that litany which makes up the ecology of the DMZ that composed Bleiker as a person and which – through visual mediation (see the discussion below) – has composed a certain global discourse around North Korea. Each of these elements produced a certain resonance with his past and present experiences, as well as those of many others, so as to symbiotically build up the DMZ as the 'most dangerous place' on earth. Likewise, Elspeth Van Veen (this Special Issue), describes how 'national and transnational interplays of secrecy-security are premised on every day and sometimes intimate experiences of the secret' including the shoulder patches of special force soldiers, memoirs, and innocuous walls surrounding buildings.⁵³ Each of these objects inject what is *discursively* presented as exceptional, dangerous, or risky (insecurity) into the everyday lives of us all: making it a *practically* 'felt' object of our lives.

The importance of the everyday thus lies in its status as a site of sensible encounters. It is within the human, non-human, and infrastructural ecology of our everyday lives that particular 'sensual' encounters between objects first become possible. Without this level of social reality, (in

⁴⁸Harvey Sacks, 'Notes on police assessment of moral character', in David Sudnow (ed.), *Studies in Social Interaction* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), pp. 280–93.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰See Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 'Vernacular theories of everyday (in)security'.

⁵¹For other discussions of the everyday in IR, see, among others, Michele Acuto, 'Everyday International Relations: Garbage, grand designs, and mundane matters', *International Political Sociology*, 8:4 (2014), pp. 345–62; Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Xavier Guillaume, 'Resistance and the international: the challenge of the everyday', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 459–62.

⁵²Roland Bleiker, 'Visual autoethnography and international security: Insights from the Korean DMZ', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue.

⁵³Elspeth Van Veen, 'Secrecy's subjects: Special operators in the US shadow war', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue.

security would, as an object, be literally unthinkable: something outside the realm of sensibility and hence cognition. Crucially, however, the encounters, resonances, and symbioses of the everyday are also always in flux. For example, Nick Vaughan-Williams and Daniel Stevens recount one British focus group respondent describing his experiences after the 7/7 terrorist attack in London as follows:

I remember after 7/7 I didn't panic, but I looked at people getting on the train with backpacks, and you think, God, those poor people did exactly what I am doing. You know what they saw. They didn't know they had a bomb in their backpack, and you stood next to them, you wouldn't know ...⁵⁴

Just as in Sacks's earlier account, this description demonstrates how everyday ecologies of sensibility are central to how we come to think about the world. These everyday ecologies and the ways we move about them are 'the conditions of sensibility' underlying security politics. Unless we are able to sense, in one way or another, a particular object with resonance to the phenomenon of insecurity, we do not feel and thereafter mostly do not think about that phenomenon. In the case described by Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, the 'terror threat' engulfing London was escalated through constant sensible reminders to its presence: trains, backpacks, announcements, etc. In this example, of course, it is also clear that these conditions of sensibility are continually recomposed over time in ways that see once innocuous objects like backpacks suddenly gain resonance as markers of threat, symbiotically bound up into discourses of insecurity. Let's stay with the backpack. The rise of this object as a weapon involved a moment of symbiotic 'compounding' of multiple objects (a man, explosives, and a backpack). We can only speculate on how this first occurred. Perhaps it happened in a series of rundown flats in Leeds, England, where a group of militants began looking to what surrounded them in their everyday lives for a symbiotic 'ally' that could allow their plans to proceed, eventually settling on those backpacks. While this is just speculation, it is notable that banal objects generally play an outsized role in composing security politics.⁵⁵ Backpacks, water bottles, box cutters, knives, shoes, hair bleach, and nail polish remover. All these little everyday objects have been central to what we call terrorism. This is the case, perhaps, because such objects are consistently 'ready-to-hand' as we move about the world.⁵⁶ They are objects we encounter through our senses on a daily basis given their banal and ubiquitous presence in what Michael J. Shapiro (this Special Issue) calls the 'event spaces' of our lives.⁵⁷

Beginning to think about the emergence of security compositions at an empirical level demands we start at these everyday levels of sensibility. Most of us, most of the time do not think of our security or insecurity constantly. But we do often feel it. Thus why those who saw backpacks in 2005 in London felt threatened. They just sensed it. Recognising this fact is ultimately about accepting that 'meaning is not in the head, but in the world'.⁵⁸ Our encounters with the world as an object that forces itself sensibly upon us produce particular kinds of meaning, thought, and discourse within our heads. Put differently: sensing makes the world. The things we sense are intensely productive of meaning and predefine what we can later 'make sense of' in a more cognitive fashion. The seemingly banal and unimportant (for security) setting of the

⁵⁴Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 'Vernacular theories of everyday (in)security'.

⁵⁵For examples and discussions, see Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alena Drieschova, 'Track-change diplomacy: Technology, affordances, and the practice of international negotiations', *International Studies Quarterly* (2009), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz030>} accessed 26 July 2019; Jonathan Luke Austin, 'Torture and the material-semiotic networks of violence across borders', *International Political Sociology*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 3–21; Acuto, 'Everyday International Relations'.

⁵⁶Harman, *Tool-Being*.

⁵⁷Michael J. Shapiro, 'Architecture as event space: Violence, securitisation, and resistance', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue.

⁵⁸Maurizio Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 61.

everyday is thus central to the compositional ontology being outlined here. Everyday, embodied, life is the main setting in which encounters with sensibility occur. This is not to say that the everyday is everything. Indeed, Rita Felski has criticised the focus on the everyday (as it has risen across the social sciences) for producing a ‘world leached of transcendence’.⁵⁹ She notes how the turn to the everyday is generally ‘deployed by intellectuals to describe a non-intellectual relationship to the world’ rather than the realm of actually worldly production.⁶⁰ Much of this tendency relates to a desire to distinguish the everyday from ‘the exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed’ that, much as in the organisational ontology, is situated ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ the everyday.⁶¹ A compositional ontology does not embrace this view. Instead, the everyday I am referring here to the plane on which *all* sociality is composed, including grand battles and deeds and which is – in fact – infused with meaning, affectivity, and aesthetics. As Anna Leander (this Special Issue) writes, it is the ‘very ordinary aspect’ of security (technologies, in her case) that lie at the base of what is thought of as being ‘transcendent’ or beyond the everyday.⁶² Paradoxically, the everyday also produces that which exceeds it. But how? To make itself felt, the everyday is also the site of a set of further compositional tools, the most important of which we now move to discussing: the material-aesthetic.

Material-aesthetic resonance

Understanding how our encounters with everyday objects of sensibility produce resonance and symbiosis now requires we turn to the qualities those objects possess. As an umbrella term, I categorise these qualities as material-aesthetic. The material side of this term refers to all concrete objects in the social world, including human beings and their bodies, and is intended to capture the ways in which sensibility always begins⁶³ to operate through an engagement with very solid (material) objects and not through abstract reflection or ideas. The second half of the term effectively substitutes the usual social scientific focus on semiotics (meaning-making) with aesthetics. Aesthetics is meant here in a very broad sense and as a proxy for the qualities that can produce resonance when they are encountered. It should be noted that in privileging aesthetics I am not downplaying the importance of semiotics but instead attempting to theorise aesthetic forms of resonance as emerging prior to reasoned consideration and, in doing so, suggesting that aesthetic forms of sensible experience are what eventually makes semiotic forms of reasoning possible. Before getting there, however, I want to start with the question of materiality and by giving an example.

In one of the classic experiments of Gestalt psychology, Karl Duncker presented a set of subjects with a candle, a box of thumbtacks, and a book of matches. He asked those participating in the experiment to find a way to stick the candle to the wall in such a way that the wax of the candle did not drip onto the floor.⁶⁴ During the experiment, the research subjects generally tried to pin the candle to the wall using the thumbtacks or stick it to the wall by melting a little of the wax. Surprisingly from an outside perspective, the participants did not think about using the box containing the thumbtacks as a candleholder. Duncker termed this lack of cognitive flexibility *functional fixity* to refer to the ways in which human beings tend to be fixated on the usual

⁵⁹Rita Felski, ‘The invention of everyday life’, *New Formations*, 39 (1999), p. 16.

⁶⁰Ibid.; see also Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

⁶¹Felski, ‘The invention of everyday life’, p. 17.

⁶²Anna Leander, ‘Sticky security: the collages of tracking device advertising’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue.

⁶³While it might be argued that sensibility also occurs in non-conscious and non-physical realms, such as dreams, it would generally be accepted that the images, stimuli, or thoughts that come to mind in these realms are post hoc representations of things that have been sensed in the material world at a previous time. The exception, not discussed here, would be the proposition that religious or spiritual states also engage in forms of sensibility.

⁶⁴Karl Duncker, ‘On problem-solving’, *Psychological Monographs*, 58:5 (1945).

function of an object (that is, the box holds the thumbtacks, not the candle). This experiment reflects the fact that because material tools and technologies are so central to our everyday lives, they tend to be especially 'sedimented' in the symbioses they enter into with human beings. Chairs are for sitting. Beds are for sleeping. Plates are for eating. Guns are for shooting. Prisons are for prisoners. *Et cetera*.

Shapiro demonstrates the effects of this human closure to the multiple potentials of the material in realms much more closely related to security studies.⁶⁵ Beginning with Bernard Tschumi's dictum that there is 'no architecture without violence', he traces out how (material) architectural forms create 'event spaces' that prompt specific forms of human action. In doing so, Shapiro indicates the centrality of materiality in composing our everyday interactions with the world. What is especially telling in Shapiro's discussion is his focus on the mundane: the event spaces he describes are everyday spaces. There is nothing exceptional about them. Indeed, the everyday is thoroughly material: our lives, politics, and societies depend on that fact.⁶⁶ The first aspect of the material-aesthetic base at the heart of the compositional ontology is founded on recognising this fact: we are nothing without the material world and, more than this, that these material objects force us to do certain things given our constant sensing of their presence.⁶⁷ Indeed, as philosophy has long recognised, the rise of human society has been premised on our status as 'tool-beings' who merge with material things to augment our capacity to act.⁶⁸ Functional fixity, as described by Duncker, is a simple empirical representation of the fact that we have long since symbiotically compounded with these objects.

But there is more at play here. Echoing Duncker, Shapiro also recognises that material structures always have hidden properties or capacities that extend beyond expected scripts for action. Shapiro thus notes how the event spaces he described are always undergoing continuous 'dynamic transformations' or, we might say, recompositions of human practices, politics, and agency.⁶⁹ This includes the way the structure of a building creates opportunities not only for habitation but also murder, burglary, and more. Indeed, in the case of burglaries, criminals note how they are 'attracted' to particular material structures (homes, businesses, etc.) over others due to their architectural form: some event spaces resonate more with their desires than others.⁷⁰ In cases like these, objects become functionally *de-fixed* in often surprising ways: they lose their normal connection to only one particular use-case and gain new possibilities. For example, the development of the concentration camp has famously been traced back to the prior invention of barbed wire to enclose cattle and other livestock.⁷¹ Likewise, Jarius Grove describes this process at work at length *vis-à-vis* the 'world' of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).⁷² Asking what an IED 'is', he writes that:

The unsatisfying answer is that an IED is an assemblage of things, but what those things are is difficult to say. It could be fertilizer, palm oil, a wooden box, homemade chemicals, a forgotten land mine mated with a cell phone, strung-together bits of old copper wire, a nine-volt battery, or a dead goat stuffed with artillery shells rigged to set off a daisy chain of other

⁶⁵Shapiro, 'Architecture as event space', this Special Issue.

⁶⁶S. S. Strumm and Bruno Latour, 'Redefining the social link: From baboons to humans', *Social Science Information*, 26:4 (1987), pp. 783–802; Bruno Latour and S. C. Strum, 'Human social origins: Oh please, tell us another story', *Journal of Social Biology*, 9 (1986), pp. 169–87.

⁶⁷Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁶⁸Richard Sennet, *The Craftsman* (London: Yale University Press, 2008); Harman, *Tool-Being*; Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁶⁹Shapiro, 'Architecture as event space', this Special Issue.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Reviel Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Benjamin Meiches, 'A political ecology of the camp', *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 476–92.

⁷²Jarius Grove, 'An insurgency of things: Foray into the world of Improvised Explosive Devices', *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (December 1, 2016), pp. 332–51, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw018>}.

explosives buried in the road. The problem is that an IED is a real thing that has changed the course of two major wars, but it is not one or any particular thing.⁷³

The assemblage ‘answer’ mentioned by Grove here is the basic proposition that the IED is formed through the relations between the various things he describes: the IED is a simple network connecting different objects. This answer is unsatisfying for two reasons. First, because it produces few insights into how the many banal material things that make up IEDs coalesced together and found different purposes (that is, became functionally de-fixed) without retreating into organisational ontologies privileging human intentionality (the militant made the IED, purposefully thus). Second, the answer is unsatisfying because it does not describe the IED as a ‘real thing’ (only a collection of other objects) that has been produced through a series of symbiotic ‘mergings’ of previously discrete objects. Against this view, Grove writes that IEDs exemplify ‘a strange irreductionist situation in which an object is reducible neither to its parts nor to its whole’.⁷⁴ In his view, the IED is composed through the unpredictable emergence of a set of ‘connections between a disconnected or disinterested groups of objects, including the detritus of globalization such as broken garage door openers, old artillery shells, bits of wire, and half-dead batteries’ that in turn drew on ‘material and affective resources, postcolonial injustice ... nationalist identification, or just rage’ to symbiotically amplify themselves into something novel in ways that – in turn – recomposed and forced the hands of particular human beings.⁷⁵ As Rocco Bellanova and Gloria González Fuster (this Special Issue) write, the process here is perhaps one of composing through the ‘composting’ of objects in which a litany of generic things become ‘used, declared wasted, recycled and put to a novel use’ in ways that transform their capacities.⁷⁶

With these examples in mind, we can now say that the importance of materiality to security compositions is twofold. First, the ubiquity of our sensible relationship with the material world fixes and routinises certain functions. Material objects are everyday and ready-to-hand: they encourage actions actively in ways that can provoke habit and repetition. Secondly, and conversely, the material world always has the possibility to surprise when it is composted, circulated, or mixed with the flow of the everyday. Taken alone, the ‘material’ is thus important due to the ways in which it possesses a kind of ‘ergonomic’ or ‘functional’ resonance based on the use-value it has for humans.⁷⁷ Material objects produce resonance in their capacities to merge with and combine with the human body, augmenting our own being in the world and making particular human desires or needs possible. As Elaine Scarry writes:

It is only when the body is comfortable, when it has ceased to be an obsessive object of perception and concern, that consciousness develops other objects, that for any individual the external world ... comes into being and begins to grow. Both in the details of its outer structure and in its furniture (from ‘furnir’ meaning ‘to further’ or ‘to forward’; to project oneself outward) the room accommodates and thereby eliminates from human attention the human body: the simple triad of floor, chair, and bed (or simpler still, floor, stool, and mat) makes spatially and therefore steadily visible the collection of postures and positions the body moves in and out of, objectifies the three locations within the body that most frequently hold the body’s weight, objectifies its need continually to shift within itself the locus of

⁷³Ibid., p. 333.

⁷⁴Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013), p. 44.

⁷⁵Grove, ‘An insurgency of things’, p. 348.

⁷⁶Rocco Bellanova and Gloria González Fuster, ‘Composting and computing: On digital security compositions’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue.

⁷⁷Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Towards an international political ergonomics’, *European Journal of International Relations* (forthcoming).

its weight, objectifies, finally, its need to become wholly forgetful of its weight, to move weightlessly into a larger mindfulness.⁷⁸

In this basic example, material objects are shown to possess a kind of ergonomic or functional resonance due to the ways in which they allow us to 'forget' our bodies. Given most human societies cannot function as they presently do without chairs, desks, beds, hammers, knives, saws, etc., the material world necessarily becomes inseparable from the human world: symbiotically intertwined with our being in the world at every imaginable level. The ergonomic resonance I am describing thus rests on a kind of mutual dependence that exists between the human and the material. When it comes more specifically to security, the same process is described by Leander in her discussion of corporate attempts to design tracking devices in ways that will allow them to seamlessly meld with our own bodies, carrying out their securitising processes without interrupting (and from their view, in fact, augmenting) our daily lives. From this example, it also becomes clear that our use of the term 'material' here is not referring to any supposedly exclusively non-human realm. Instead, the body is also recognised as a material thing, which also both fixes and routinises certain functions and can cause vast surprises. The body as an object, for example, routinises racial or gendered discrimination globally, while also being a site of consistent contestation, change, and flux.⁷⁹

Focusing on the material alone, however, is not enough. While we can tease out what I've called a kind of functional or ergonomic resonance through a focus on the material, it is also important to recognise that material things are never mere technical objects. Instead, the material (and much more) is always inseparable from the aesthetic (hence the material-aesthetic base of security compositions).⁸⁰ By aesthetics I am not referring here to a formalist understanding focused on art, beauty, or taste. Instead, I am speaking more broadly to 'a mode of experience that rests on the directness and immediacy of sensuous perception'.⁸¹ From this view aesthetics is about sensibility very broadly and so 'nothing in the world is excluded' from the aesthetic (if it can be sensed).⁸² Aesthetics represents a distinct mode of experience to that implicitly gestured towards by semiotics (that is, the production of more-or-less logical forms of meaning through the relations between different signs) and one that is more obviously related (than ergonomics) to the types of resonance I have said are at the heart of security compositions. Instead of producing meaning through sign relations, aesthetics produces meaning (or emotion, action, etc.) largely through the affective states that it can produce within human beings, states that in turn have the potential to develop into forms of resonance.

Crucially important to appreciating the role of aesthetics in composing security politics is the fact that the kind of aesthetic qualities that gain resonance among audiences are always unpredictable. Speaking about the artistic field, for example, Felix Guattari wrote that:

The artist may be induced to refashion an entire piece of work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, a petty incident which suddenly deflects the project from its initial trajectory, diverting it from what may well have been a clearly formulated vision of its eventual shape.⁸³

It is impossible to say *in advance* what particular aesthetic qualities will produce forms of social and political resonance, whether we are speaking of art or security politics. Precisely what will

⁷⁸Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 39.

⁷⁹Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁸⁰Boris Groys, *In the Flow* (London: Verso, 2016).

⁸¹Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint, 2010), p. 195.

⁸²Ibid., p. 46.

⁸³Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (New Jersey: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 140.

'move' an audience or 'enrol' them into a particular affective state is always unpredictable.⁸⁴ For example, Leander describes how commercial advertising practices in the security realm are 'ultimately open-ended' and have 'no end or a final form'.⁸⁵ Instead, a 'perpetual "sign-war"' is ongoing in which security practitioners are attempting to develop an 'imaginative' aesthetic that might resonate with the needs of their prospective clients. Leander therefore describes how the images produced in these campaigns are designed to 'enrol the viewers and visitors, appealing to their imaginaries' by asking 'open questions' and leaving it 'up to the viewers to imagine' how the security technologies being developed will answer these questions. This example demonstrates how, just as in the artistic field, security politics also involves processes that imbue a particular object with what Walter Benjamin called an aesthetic 'aura' (mood, atmosphere) that can work to enrol the spectator or user through the resonance it may hold.⁸⁶ Producing an aesthetic that holds such resonance for its audience is not usually a rational or reasoned process. Rather, it more often occurs spontaneously, with continuous iteration and improvisation, and seeming mystery or intuition. Artists know this. Hence the constant backwards and forwards, erasures and paintings over: aesthetics is composed, not organised.

Of course, the idea that banal objects like commercial security advertisements possess an aesthetic aura is not a common one. In fact, it is directly contradicted by most philosophical and/or political studies of the aesthetic. Generally, when faced with global insecurities and political predations, the intellectual desire has been to preserve the aesthetic as a 'pure' realm. It was thus that Theodor Adorno – disillusioned by the ease with which the social sciences and philosophy were co-opted by and/or collaborated with fascism – designated the aesthetic as a separate and special realm, less easily co-opted by political contingency.⁸⁷ This was likewise true of Walter Benjamin and most other postwar European philosophers.⁸⁸ As Felski writes, the hope has been that separating aesthetics from the everyday will 'remove it at least temporarily, from the pragmatic needs and demands of the quotidian' and so prevent its potentially dangerous co-option.⁸⁹ This is especially evident in the continued privileging of what are deemed 'higher' modes of aesthetic activity – classical music, mimetic forms of painting, etc. – as compared to the artistic endeavours that individuals like Adorno would deem vulgar, crass, or even dangerous: jazz music, photography, cinema, and so on.⁹⁰

The irony of the separation of the aesthetic from the everyday and hence security politics is, however, that aesthetics has always been central to security politics. It has been noted, for example, that German fascism was a fundamentally aesthetic phenomenon: the artworks and architectures produced during that era were not mere 'illustrations' of fascist ideology but, instead, 'constitutive factors in the social culture of fascism'.⁹¹ Against Adorno, it was not only the philosophical or social scientific that was co-opted in this era, but also the aesthetic. And there are many more contemporary examples. Manni Crone, for example, has shown how recruits to Islamic militant groups like ISIS are enrolled through a set of 'aesthetic assemblages' in which computer games, short films, and artworks are mobilised to produce resonances that recompose the political views of these subjects.⁹² In another article, I have shown a similar process at work in

⁸⁴See Leander, 'Sticky security', this Special Issue.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Groys, *In the Flow*.

⁸⁷Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007); Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005).

⁸⁸James Hellings, *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁸⁹Felski, 'The invention of everyday life', p. 17.

⁹⁰Robert W. Witkin, 'Why did Adorno "hate" jazz?', *Sociological Theory*, 18:1 (1 March 2000), pp. 145–70, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00092>.

⁹¹Ulrich Schmid, 'Style versus ideology: Towards a conceptualisation of fascist aesthetics', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1 (1 June 2005), p. 128, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760500110247>.

⁹²Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Manni Crone, 'Religion and violence: Governing Muslim militancy through aesthetic assemblages', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:1 (2014), pp. 291–307.

the mobilisation of perpetrators of torture who can be seen as being ‘attracted’ to practices of extreme violence through the aesthetic form of sporting rituals, cinematic experience, and the performing arts.⁹³ Examples like these all demonstrate that security politics is composed not only through the strategic, rational, or technical considerations of security professionals but also through the material-aesthetic base described.

Having situated the everyday as the central site of our sensible engagement with the world, as well as explored the materiality of that process, we must thus add to this the fact that the aesthetics of the everyday material world are also central. The kind of aesthetics at play in security compositions are certainly not of the ‘pure’ kind imagined by Adorno, which tend to follow formalised, traditional, and ‘organised’ sets of rules. Instead, the security compositions in question here are more akin to the improvised forms of expression found in jazz music, photography, or experimental cinema. Everyday material-aesthetic processes are improvised, fluctuating, and non-linear. As Van Veeren describes, security politics entails individuals being ‘enrolled or hailed into subject positions’ that draw on an eclectic mix of aesthetic objects whose form and interrelations are fundamentally improvised.⁹⁴ Moreover, this process of being hailed, enrolled, or indeed composed by the material-aesthetic qualities of the world appears to be rapidly accelerating as new modes of material-aesthetic circulation emerge. This can be seen most evidently in the ways in which new media technologies are bringing into contact previously distant objects, human beings, and ideas.⁹⁵ We are today being rapidly composed and recomposed on a daily base through the flux of our material-aesthetic encounters with the world. And the final question, of course, thus remains: what does that process of continuous flux and contingency mean for understanding human being itself?

Posthuman affects

Security compositions are moments of symbiosis in which two or more objects (human, non-human, or otherwise) compound together to produce something different. These symbioses occur at the level of the everyday, where sensibility is most intense, and are driven by the resonances that the material-aesthetic qualities of objects produce. Read in reverse, what I have argued here is thus that those material-aesthetic properties of objects represent a non-substantialist ‘base’ through which different security compositions emerge and sometimes transform. This material-aesthetic base is non-substantialist in that neither the aesthetic nor the material qualities described are ‘objective’ in any way. They are not ‘essences’ or ‘ontological primitives’ that exist prior to interaction. Instead, the material-aesthetic base I am describing emerges only through our sensible encounters with the everyday, where different objects come ‘into contact’ and have the *potential* to find points of symbiotic resonance with one another. Put differently, the randomness of the encounters that the everyday produces ensures that our relational (as in the assembling ontology) embedding in the world is never a static or fixed affair. Moments of symbiotic resonance, driven by that material-aesthetic base, always have the potential to change the structure of those relations.

But what then of the position of individual humans and the societies they comprise within this novel compositional ontology? The implication of the argument as it had developed so far is that

⁹³Austin, ‘Torture and the material-semiotic networks of violence across borders’; Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘We have never been civilized: Torture and the materiality of world political binaries’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:1 (2017), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115616466>}; Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Posthumanism and perpetrators’, in Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (eds), *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies* (London: Routledge, 2019); Jonathan Luke Austin and Riccardo Bocco, ‘Becoming a torturer: Towards a global ergonomics of care’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 98:903 (December 2016), pp. 859–88, available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383117000261>}.

⁹⁴Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’, this Special Issue.

⁹⁵Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

human beings do not *first* ‘make sense of’ the world in a cognitive or reflexive manner but – instead – that moments of sensibility predefine and determine what it is possible to ‘make sense of’. In this view, ‘on the path which leads to that which is being thought, all begins with sensibility’⁹⁶ and so ‘meaning is not in the head, but in the world’.⁹⁷ Indeed, a material-aesthetic compositional perspective brings this reality to the fore. From the compositional perspective, each of the everyday material-aesthetic encounters of the world produce ‘an interlocking of relations for each body, and from one body to another ... [which] constitutes the “form” of social life in ways that undermine traditional conceptualizations of agency, choice, and responsibility.’⁹⁸ Those ‘interlocking moments’ directly and indirectly compose human actions, desires, and plans affectively, rather than intentionally or deliberately: what we do is ‘determined by the affectations that come from the objects’ (human or not) who surround and become-symbiotic with us.⁹⁹ A compositional perspective is therefore ultimately ‘unconcerned with the maintenance of stable individuality’.¹⁰⁰ Strictly speaking, the posthuman nature of this compositional ontology (as well, in fact, of the assembling ontology) means that humans cannot be conceptualised as separate entities with a privileged analytical and political place in our analysis.

Humans are everyday, aesthetic, and material, objects constituted through their symbioses with other humans and non-humans. We do not exist alone. Instead, it is only ‘from the active, productive, and continual weaving of the multiplicity of bits and pieces that we emerge’ and so ‘the “I”, the bounded subject, stands after these compositions as a mythical unity’.¹⁰¹ For example, Van Veeren lays out how Special Operations Forces (SOF) are imagined as ‘supersoldiers’ composed through ‘a compelling mix of physical and technological know-how’ in ways that present their subjectivities as, quite literally, ‘beyond’ humanity as we usually know it.¹⁰² Likewise, Rune Saugmann (this Special Issue), discusses how ‘vision’ as an originally human or at least animalistic concept is increasingly being recomposed through the presence of machine learning techniques in ways that blur what it means to be human.¹⁰³ Crucially, he also notes that this process is specifically symbiotic in form given that while machines can ‘view images of oysters, herring, lobster’ they do so ‘without experiencing the stirring of appetite’ *until* those visions combine with the capacities of human beings.¹⁰⁴ In this view, the human is not being ‘erased’ from reality but, instead, has come to symbiotically mesh with the technological. In Bellanova’s and González Fuster’s terms, composition is thus about stressing a radical ‘togetherness’ that sees composition as ‘an eminently political and unstable activity of becoming ... By attending to togetherness, we can explore security practice as if it were not a matter of clear-cut assemblages, but rather a constant, composite and non-linear attempt to “make something with something”’.¹⁰⁵ In this process, ‘subjectivity becomes constructed in a multileveled field and the individuated self is a priori collective and plural’.¹⁰⁶ What we have traditionally thought of as the human thus becomes ‘a thing

⁹⁶Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 144.

⁹⁷Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism*, p. 61.

⁹⁸Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Renee Jackson and Suzanne McCullah, ‘Developing aesthetic-empathy’, *Canadian Review of Art Education* (2015), p. 211.

¹⁰¹Paul Harrison, ‘Making sense: Embodiment and the sensibilities of the everyday’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18 (2000), p. 502.

¹⁰²Van Veeren, ‘Secrecy’s subjects’.

¹⁰³Rune Saugmann, ‘Military technovision: Technologies between visual ambiguity and the desire for security facts’, *European Journal of International Security*, 4:3 (2019), this Special Issue. See also Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁴Saugmann, ‘Military technovision’, this Special Issue.

¹⁰⁵Bellanova and González Fuster, ‘Composting and computing’, this Special Issue

¹⁰⁶Inna Semetsky, *The Edusemiotics of Images: Essays on the Art~Science of Tarot* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), p. 18.

among things'¹⁰⁷ that is equally material and equally aesthetic at its 'base' as everything else in the world. Analysing what the 'human' is thus entails only tracing the material-aesthetic encounters that allow him/her to compose with other things. We are, to be blunt, nothing special. The final element of the compositional ontology developed here thus rests in recognising the contingency of what it means to be 'human' in/on the world: it is a maximisation of the posthuman philosophies that have become increasingly prominent across the social sciences. Understanding human beings in this way does not mean abandoning politics, as we will see below, but it does mean abandoning the effort to assume that the actions, desires, or emotions of human beings are stable and reflective of a somehow purely human-social sphere. Instead, all that comes to matter is appreciating what the specific material-aesthetic forms of any particular human body are and 'how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects'.¹⁰⁸

Power, post-critique, and composition

I began this discussion by asking how the composition of one photograph of a dead refugee on a beach could work to recompose global security politics. We can now broach an answer. Press photographs circulate through the everyday. They appear on newspapers, televisions, computer screens, and beyond. We are flooded by these images and they define what we think about (in) the world. Despite or perhaps because of their ubiquity, however, the political effects of photographs have always been ambiguous, especially when it comes to violence.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, as Bleiker notes, photographs always have the *potential* to stand as 'tools to re-view, re-evaluate and re-imagine the world'. What counts in making that process possible, at one level, is the various elements of the composition.¹¹⁰ The photograph we are thinking about, of little Alan Kurdi, has an unusual aesthetic. It is not spectacular in form: it is not 'aestheticized'. There is no iconography per se: just gently rolling waves and a little body in a red shirt. The image echoes, somehow, the girl who appears in a red coat in the otherwise monochrome *Schindler's List*. Perhaps its aesthetic thus 'echoed' to an unusual degree, enrolling an otherwise alienated Euro-American audience back to something that once directly affected them. Moreover, the image is devoid of all the orientalist clichés of what conflict in the Middle East means. It has a 'real' aesthetic. Finally, it is crucial that the image in question was mobile: its materiality was extended through the vast sociotechnical webs of contemporary society, flitting through social media networks and gaining a viral quality that resonated with greater and greater numbers of people. A photograph can change the politics of (in)security, then, when it exists in everyday modes of circulation, augmented by contemporary technological flows, and is captured with an ineffable aesthetic that 'does something to us' given its internal composition: resonates with us, symbiotically changes us and the world.

Even so, and however much that one photo of suffering might have changed security politics for a little while, its long-term effects appear to have been more limited. The bombs over Syria keep falling. The refugees keep drowning. The borders keep closing. All of that reflects what has been absent from this discussion so far: the question of power. But such a question cannot be ignored. Questions of (in)security are those that most who study them believe should be 'solved' in one way or another.¹¹¹ They are not speculative questions. They are concrete matters of life, death, and suffering. The continued reliance within security studies on organisational or constructing ontologies is thus not only an analytical preference but also a political matter. If we

¹⁰⁷Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 163.

¹⁰⁸Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 257.

¹⁰⁹Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005).

¹¹⁰Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory'.

¹¹¹Peter Burgess, 'The insecurity of critique', *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019).

think of security as being organised ‘from above’ (by leaders, states, etc.) or as being constructed collectively (through ideas, society, etc.) then it is possible to imagine change if these human factors can be transformed. If we can make leaders ‘better’ people or collectively construct ‘better’ intersubjective ideologies then – perhaps – the logic goes, the more brutal consequences of global insecurity can be redressed. What then of the compositional ontology laid out here? What are its political stakes? While composition lays out an ontology that can augment assembling logics through its introduction of a non-substantialist base that opens up the possibility of contingency and change, it is clear that the kinds of change that I have discussed above are unpredictable and uncontrollable. These are not the kind of changes or transformations that are easily harnessed and directed by human desire. By ‘cutting of the head’ of the organising ontology, a compositional approach refuses to accept there is any one ‘source’ or ‘centre’ of power whose targeting will resolve our ailments. It makes the world messy. In doing so, however, it also erases the possibility of a singular outside challenger to power. Both despots and revolutionaries disappear.

Is there then no escape from security politics? Is a compositional approach simply a rearticulation of rather traditional empiricist modes of sociological analysis that seek an internalist reading of society but offer no route away?¹¹² To begin answering this question, we can note that none of the articles that make up this Special Issue of the *European Journal of International Security* ignore questions of power. On the contrary, Leander’s discussion focuses on how the compositional emergence of security politics can lead to unequal and often dangerous power relations becoming ‘stickier’ and/or ‘deeper’ in their hold over society. Shapiro demonstrates how the material aspects of security compositions likewise embed their logics into our everyday lives in seemingly inescapable ways. Bleiker stresses how his own self-composition with the Korean DMZ was laced with power: defining a masculine and militarist logic within him that at the time was beyond his capacity to question: he ‘noticed everything except the absence of women’. He noticed everything, put differently, that the logic of power desired he would notice and nothing that it did not (patriarchy). Van Veeren explores how the material-aesthetic construction of secrecy embeds the growing scope of the military-industrial complex. Finally, both Saugmann, and Bellanova and González Fuster, describe how security politics is being recomposed through the rise of algorithmic and big data-driven modes of governance that appear to be sedimenting rather than questioning the status quo. All of these discussions thus demonstrate how a compositional ontology unpacks previously understudied modes (symbiosis, resonance, etc.) through which power relations are extended over time.

Despite questions of power being central to a compositional ontology, the descriptions it offers are not parsimonious ones. Understanding the place of power through the concept of composition requires we ‘start with the concrete practices’ of the world political before ever raising the possibility of any ‘universal’ element being present.¹¹³ The result is that no *easy* political path towards social and political change (however conceived) is possible. Instead, the compositional ontology more modestly provides ‘innovative angles of vision’ that might ‘provoke critical thinking rather than offering definitive knowledge judgements’.¹¹⁴ While this view might be dispiriting given the stakes of security politics today, I also want to stress that such a moment of ontological experimentation might be crucial to finding paths away from some of the negative consequences of insecurity as it is experienced at present. As mentioned in the introduction, security politics appears to be becoming increasingly aestheticised, material-technologically mediated, and socio-politically dominated by affect and emotion. The conditions of sensibility that I have described as core to a compositional ontology are currently undergoing radical shifts. Today, the realm of the

¹¹²Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Praktiken und diskurse: eine sozialtheoretische und methodologische relation’, in Herbert Kalthoff, Stefan Hirschauer, and Gesa Lindemann (eds), *Theoretische Empirie. Zur Relevanz Qualitativer Forschung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008), pp. 188–209.

¹¹³Shapiro, ‘Architecture as event space’, this Special Issue.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

everyday is as likely to include scrolling down a Facebook or Twitter feed as it is a stroll down a city street. These changes in how we sense the world are also changing the configuration of the security dilemmas the world faces. Working to deal with this flood of material, aesthetic, and affective influences on security politics is thus among the most crucial of analytical and political tasks facing security studies today.

Analytically, I hope to have shown how a compositional ontology can aid in that task. Politically, the theory of security compositions demands the development of quite different strategies of intervention, strategies that move away from the still dominant idea that knowledge produced ‘from the outside’ of (security) politics is the most effective mode of political intervention. The politics implied by a compositional ontology is instead one ‘based on using whatever materials are available in the social milieu to formulate new relations, forms of self-organization and embodiments of the radical imagination’.¹¹⁵ Achieving changes that might counter existing structures of power requires working to materially-aesthetically (re)compose the world *on its own terms*. It means actively accepting the ‘concrete practices’ of the world, their non-coherence, and their complexity, in order to imagine potentially ‘operative’ (*workable*) modes of intervention.¹¹⁶ In this, it requires what Leander terms the embrace of ‘collaborationist’ strategies.¹¹⁷ For Leander, understanding the resonance rather than reason-based nature of security politics ‘opens ways for engaging with’ (in)security politics precisely because of its privileging of contingency and distancing of itself from human autonomy.¹¹⁸ As she continues, ‘in the tensions between the pieces of the ... collage’ of (in)security politics we can find ‘scope for politics: focusing on the composing of the collages ... leaves an awareness of the spaces in-between and hence for the openness of any collage and composition’.¹¹⁹ Actively leveraging those spaces in between, however, demands that social scientists collaborate with, become closer to, and refuse the temptation of retaining scholarly distance from their objects of study. As Bellanova and González Fuster write, the challenge here is to ‘compose with’ rather than against the world by ‘staying with the trouble[s]’ we face.¹²⁰ This involves accepting that any progressive politics necessarily implies actively collaborating with what are otherwise uncomfortable ‘companions’ who we often would rather did not exist.¹²¹ It means finding ways to symbiotically *compose with* and hence possibly change these figures.¹²²

Such a politics of *composing with* the world, of course, sits in strong opposition to ‘critique’ or ‘criticality’ as it is usually considered. As Felski writes, critique has traditionally operated *rhetorically* – from Kant onwards – through a certain hermeneutics of suspicion that denaturalises extant phenomena, ‘debunks’ truths, and produces knowledge ‘on the attack’.¹²³ From a compositional perspective, critique of this kind is problematical. It is too exclusionary in its politics and too easily seduced by the notion of ascertaining a final ‘truth’ that would liberate us from (in)security. Instead, a compositional ontology is ultimately postcritical in its political commitments.¹²⁴ At the core of such a postcritical social science involves changing the nature and style of intellectual

¹¹⁵Stephen Shukaitis, ‘Dancing amidst the flames: Imagination and self-organization in a minor key’, *Organization*, 15:5 (2008), p. 744.

¹¹⁶Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967).

¹¹⁷Leander, ‘Sticky security’, this Special Issue.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰Bellanova and González Fuster, ‘Composting and computing’, this Special Issue. See also Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (New York: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹²¹Jonathan Luke Austin, Rocco Bellanova, and Mareile Kaufmann, ‘Doing and mediating critique: an invitation to practice companionship’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019).

¹²²Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘A parasitic critique for International Relations’, *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019), available at: {<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly032>}.

¹²³Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Austin, Bellanova, and Kaufmann, ‘Doing and mediating critique’; Austin, ‘A parasitic critique for International Relations’.

¹²⁴Jonathan Luke Austin, ‘Critique and post-critique’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:3S (2019).

work. Specifically, it becomes necessary to think of our own intellectual productions as being compositions in and of themselves, compositions that are written with particular audiences in mind. For too long, a postcritical perspective suggests, social scientists have addressed their work ‘to colleagues who are “keeping vigil” over a bounded intellectual field with set rules and modes of accumulating social capital.’¹²⁵ Instead of this guarded separation of social science from politics, Vinciane Despret suggests that we reconfigure intellectual work such that it becomes a ‘place of exhibition’ rather than closed field of practice.¹²⁶ In doing this, we would be forced to consider the stylistic, aesthetic, and compositional aspects of our work until:

Eventually, researchers would explore new questions that would have no meaning other than to be welcomed by those to whom the propositions are made. Each experiment, then, would become a true performance and would require tact, imagination, consideration, and attention.¹²⁷

The goal of intellectual work from this perspective shifts to considering how our own compositions have the potential to gain resonance and symbiosis with those of the social world more broadly. Crucially, this does not mean only seeking policy relevance in the traditional sense of seeking ‘knowledge transfer’ from academia to policy, professional, or activist spheres (though this will remain important). Instead, it refers to the idea that scholarly writing and research must begin to radically alter its aesthetic-material practices. In this regard, it is significant that each of the articles that make up this Special Issue are thus also subversions of traditional modes of writing about security politics. They compose their analyses differently. Leander advocates for an approach that ‘insists on the combinatorial, accidental and emerging qualities of compositions – their “mess”, “partial connections”, and “emergence”’.¹²⁸ In doing so, she thus works through a method of ‘excess’ combining ethnographic fieldwork, collages from the art world, and more to present her argument. This collage-esque approach is echoed in Shapiro’s embrace of a non-linear approach to academic writing that does not logically produce a ‘rhetorical argument from topic to topic’ but instead works in a ‘cumulative way’ such that ‘at certain points ... [the reader] becomes aware of a thickening texture’.¹²⁹ This effort at literary montage produces a story that builds modes of resonance within its audience by encouraging a sensual engagement that performs and exhibits his argument aesthetically.

Saugmann and Van Veen, meanwhile, compose their own readings of contemporary security practice by drawing our attention to the little ‘bits and pieces of detritus’ that security politics leaves ‘in the public space’.¹³⁰ Rather than composing their analysis through reference to ‘higher’ theoretical propositions or, in fact, refraining from analysis all together by insisting that the ‘secrets’ of security are hidden deep from view, they ‘compose-with’ their objects of analysis by considering their everyday and aesthetic manifestations. Finally, Bellanova and González Fuster, as well as Bleiker, interweave their accounts with narrative approaches.¹³¹ For Bleiker, this involves reflecting on that fact that it was ‘the confrontation with visual evidence that, for me, made me realise most acutely how my own positionality reflected political dynamics that were so naturalised for me’.¹³² For Bellanova and González Fuster, a narrative engagement with Ryoji Ikeda’s art installations provides a constant grounding of their argument in the

¹²⁵Vinciane Despret, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 156.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

¹²⁸Leander, ‘Sticky security’, this Special Issue.

¹²⁹Shapiro, ‘Architecture as event space’, this Special Issue.

¹³⁰Saugmann, ‘Military technovision’, this Special Issue.

¹³¹Ravecca and Dauphinee, ‘Narrative and the possibilities for scholarship’.

¹³²Bleiker, ‘Visual autoethnography and international security’, this Special Issue.

lived realities of our aesthetic enmeshing in data-driven modes of governance.¹³³ Without exception, all of the articles presented here thus work to surprise us by extending beyond traditional academic expectations of engagement with its objects. With Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee, the importance of this is that:

There is no knowledge production without surprise ... to be surprised is ... to be intellectually humbled, to lose one's authority, to loosen one's postured of control over meaning. Surprise, then, may be an opportunity for change.¹³⁴

Thinking of ourselves as composing, rather than 'writing up' or 'reporting on', our social scientific contributions is thus about 'undisciplining our own understanding' of the world in ways that surprise both ourselves and others. With the goal, perhaps, of composing global security in quite different ways one day.

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¹³³Bellanova and González Fuster, 'Composting and computing', this Special Issue.

¹³⁴Ravecca and Dauphinee, 'Narrative and the possibilities for scholarship', p. 135.