**BISA 2019**:

**Panel: Mobility, Aesthetics and Questions of Relationality in International Relations:** **Dr Laurie Benson, SOAS, and Dr Leonie Ansems de Vries, KCL**.

**Dr Lola Frost**. Visiting Research Fellow, War Studies, Kings College London.

**Abstract:**

***An ethics of difference: from de-territorialising the sublime to contesting drone warfare?***

In the context of exploring questions of aesthetics and relationality this paper will explore how an ethics of difference informs art practices, art activism and postcolonial and IR theory. In the first instance this paper will briefly consider how the sublime in art might be understood as an aesthetically mediated practicing of an ethics of difference, and secondly, how its lived relational modalities have been taken up by artists, research activists and IR scholars.

With reference to Dr Elke Schwarz’ book *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent technologies,* which delivers a defence of a relational ethics of difference and a critique of the effects of technological mastery in contemporary asymmetrical drone warfare, this paper explores the value of an ethics of difference across a field shaped by art, art activism and IR theory. It does so in the interests of identifying how an ethics of difference constrains territorialising legacies and hierarchies, and shapes co-constitutive practices for witnessing and ameliorating the ethical failures of asymmetrical (drone) warfare and conflict.

**Dr Lola Frost**

**Abstract: *An ethics of difference: from de-territorialising the sublime in art to contesting drone warfare?***

The question that motivates this paper is what ethical commonalities might inform an inter-disciplinary conversation between artists, art/research activists, postcolonial and IR scholars?

In addressing that question, this paper proposes that an ethics of difference[[1]](#endnote-1) is a key component of art and art activist practices and IR and postcolonial research. In the first instance, this paper will consider how sublime experience in art involves a disaggregating grammar that unsettles cognitive mastery, and is as such, a performance of an ethics of difference that constrains the power-kits of knowledge and representation.

Dr Elke Schwarz’ book *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies* is a defence of a relational ethics of difference and a critique of the effects of technological mastery in contemporary asymmetrical warfare. I develop her insights by briefly considering how a relational ethics of difference animates the work of IR scholars, art activists and artists grappling with the problems of refugees, migrants, prisoners and of post-conflict reconstruction.

In this presentation I proceed from the assumption that the sublime in art delivers an ethics of difference by mobilising an unrepresentable gap between aesthetic experience and our attempts to understand or represent such experience.

Not all sublime art practices can sustain that unrepresentable gap. For example, this painting, *The Oxbow*, by Thomas Cole endorses those territorialising values that informed the ‘civilising’ ethics of colonial practices, which coincided with the displacement (and extermination) of indigenous populations and the appropriation of the natural environment to an idealising gaze.

My painting titled *Taking Risks* figures a strange and unsettling ‘vagina head’ or substitute-self, looking into a void. Here the viewer struggles with a matrix of unsecured differences which disrupts the usual distinctions that keep the viewing subject and the landscape, inside and outside, body and landscape, in their proper place. Such feminist disruption, or de-territorialisation, delivers a riposte to those sublime landscape paintings, like Cole’s, in which colonial and territorialising ambitions have been recirculated.

On a different tack, Baden Pailthorpe’s sublime video artwork titled *MQ9 Reaper 1: So that others might not die.* 2014, is a critique of drone warfare. (Vimeo: Pailthorpe: mq9 reaper 1)

In this performance we are swept into an affectively complex visual experience of dislocation and misrecognition, even as such sublime excess is stabilised by two alienating narratives that set the scene for an affective experience that oscillates between vertiginous speed and eerie stillness, delivering an oblique but subversive reading of the discourses of drone warfare, which in this case is also coloured by ethical considerations of the biopolitics of technological control, the injustice of asymmetrical drone warfare and the lack of human interaction.

Both these artworks, I suggest, deny the viewer any stable purchase on meaning. In so doing, they invite viewers into an agonistic interpretive process, in which the interplay of multiple differences constrains our more usual purposive power/knowledge desires for, and practices of, cognitive control or representational certainty. This, I suggest, is an aesthetically mediated practicing of an ethics of difference.

Elke Schwarz’s book *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies* takes issue with those contemporary ethical analyses in IR which associate ethics with a set of rules or abstractions, or as a form of applied ethics. Instead, this book argues for an interactive and dynamic set of ethical responses that take diversity, contingency and mutually constitutive encounters as core ethical values. This book challenges the managerial ethics of biopolitics: understood as an embodied and political nexus constituted by the practices and values of control, rational instrumentality, securitisation and surveillance.

Schwarz’ book suggests that how we think about ethics today, is itself imbued with that hegemonic discourse of techno-rationality, at odds with that rich and diverse matrix, I here refer to an ethics of difference.

Such an ethics of difference, I understand to be an elaboration of those core ethical values of freedom and diversity, which in turn informs the values of mutual co-constitution and difference. These ethical values also leave an indelible mark on those multiple politics, disciplines and practices that shape both art and the international order.

An ethics of difference, valued in liberal and democratic societies, is often overwhelmed or displaced by ‘neo-liberal’ ethics which might be characterised as a mix of self-interested motivations coloured by commitments to sameness, utility, risk-management, securitisation, commodification and the preservation of hierarchies and privileges. Such ethical justifications are also being played out in the libertarian sentiments of the far right, as exemplified in tensions exacerbated by Brexit and Trump on the issue of migration and refugees.

Here the refugee, migrant or ‘foreigner’, carries the stigma of otherness, which then becomes an excuse for sustaining settled hierarchies, privileges, boundaries and the repression of difference.

IR scholars, activists, curators and artists, grapple with such ethical failings. For example, Dr Rebekka Friedman’s (War Studies, King’s College London), *Hidden Voices* project addresses the post-conflict experiences of Tamil populations in Sri Lanka. A key component of this post-conflict art activist project has been the production a film which not only documents this transformative process but also invites audiences elsewhere to witness what has happened.

Such a co-relational research/activist sensibility is implicit in Dr Leonie Ansems de Vries’ project*, Migrant Voices* which sought to bridge the power-knowledge divide between the social science researcher and asylum seeker via a photographic programme which offered those migrants living in London, dislocated and dispossessed by their refugee status, some form of aesthetic agency.

Similarly, artist Edmund Clark who, as the Artist-in-Residence at the HMS Grendon Prison - a therapeutic prison for male sex offenders, productively engaged these prisoners in an arts project and exhibition, with the general public, at this prison at the end of 2018. In conjunction with this artist’s residency, Clark also produced a body of work titled *In Place of Hate* at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, that presents these criminals in their bleak prison environment, as vulnerable subjects. Images like *My Shadow’s Reflection* are a meditation on the plants and spaces of this prison and of blurred images of prisoners and the artist, all of which deconstruct the usual imaging methods for representing prisoners, artists and prison environments.

Briefly stated, a burgeoning and interdisciplinary field of artists, art activists, postcolonial, IR and post conflict scholars, takes an ethics of difference as a starting point for witnessing, ameliorating and criticising the ethical fallout and failings of war and conflict, and for developing new co-constitutive practices that side-step established hierarchies and power relations.

In conclusion, in this paper I have argued that aesthetic experience per se, is not necessarily a condition for the realisation of an ethics of difference. Such an ethics of difference may be realised via those disaggregating and anti-representational aesthetic performances that we call ‘sublime’ in art. An ethics of difference is also of course expressed in art that is not sublime, via a variety of relational, and aesthetic, modalities, which I have not explored in this paper.

Yet it is the lived relational modality of an ethics of difference that is more commonly approached in IR and art activist research. This too, I understand to be a performative modality that operates between the lived experience of those who have been traumatised by injustice, war or social inequalities and those publics and art/social science activists who witness, critique, or attempt to ameliorate such injury.

Such ethical constraints and critiques which productively inform our human co-constitution, are at risk in the contemporary and globalising world, which is also shaped by the ethical agendas and applications of big data, technology, artificial intelligence, securitisation; and the miseries of commodification, misogynist, homophobic and racist backlashes, and asymmetrical warfare.

In the face of these challenges, many of us, including artists, scholars, art activists and curators are insisting on the life enhancing commitments of an ethics of difference, irrespective of which modality or method it makes claims to. Indeed, this paper is an effort to identify some of its shared commitments in an emerging interdisciplinary field of art practice, curating, war and conflict studies, whilst acknowledging our methodological differences.

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1. The ethics of difference I have in mind here are informed by those key values of liberty and diversity, and which have been theorised within a post-Kantian field of post structural philosophy, including the ideas of Schiller, Nietzsche, Irigaray, Kristeva, Deleuze and Ranciere. For Nietzsche and Schiller, morality or ethics in art is the performance of the life affirming difference of aesthetic free play. For Irigaray, an ethics of sexual difference valorises those relational and co-constitutive encounters through which the repressions of gendered sexual difference might be transformed. Kristeva’s neologism *Herethics*, makes claims on an ethics of difference that has been repressed by the phallogocentric symbolic order. Deleuze advocates an active, plural and processual ethics of becoming, not shaped by purposiveness, sameness or identity. For Bleiker, and Ranciere, the ethics of aesthetic practices are performances which constrain and the power/knowledge effects of purposive reason. I elaborate on some of these insights throughout this paper, which is also indebted to Lechner’s and Frost’s arguments that ethics is a constitutive feature of all practices, whose constraints are implicitly understood by the participants of those practices. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)