

# Images Out-Loud: A Visual Approach Challenging the Securitization of Migration

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SAMANTHA MARCUS, APR 8 2017

While there is a great deal of literature on the general field of migration, refugees and the media; there is surprisingly little on why the relationship functions as it has in the twenty-first century. Much of the existing literature fails to address this important nexus, instead honing in on the experiential aspects of refugee-hood, the economic impact of migration on states, or how migration is increasingly being seen as a threat to the survival of States. Some work in the field of international relations has focused in on the psychological aspects of migration, such as John Dovidio and Victoria M. Esses' 2001 study on adding psychology in policy to aid immigrants' assimilation into host nations (Dovidio and Esses, 2001). Furthermore, psychology has been applied to studies predicting host nation receptiveness towards immigrants, utilizing social dominance orientation and examining attitudes (Cohrs and Stelzl, 2010). However, while the literature of international relations is beginning to appreciate the critical role of psychological factors in the realm of migration, more can be done. Some scholars have focused on the importance of considering the role of perception, attitudes and bias, in the role of fear and security surrounding migration (Esses, Medianu and Lawson, 2013; Marsella, 2012; Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008).

The 'migrant issue' in international relations is not a new phenomenon, as the study of migrants, immigration and refugees has a long history in the field (Loescher and Monahan, 1989). However, the rhetorical shift in discussing migrants and refugees in human terms has been abandoned, the result of changing language game from elites *securitizing* the topic; framing the refugee question as an existential threat to their communities. As Peoples and Vaughn-Williams note, the traditional threats to states were that of war or invasion; in the post Cold War era moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the threat of total war has dissipated, instead replaced by a threat of change and Others (Peoples and Vaughn-Williams, 2010; Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998).

Securitization literature on migration is broad, encompassing economic factors, societal threat and insecurity. Curiously absent is the consideration of the relationship between what refugees' experience, how their stories are conveyed visually and how in turn certain images 'speak' to audiences. Images have incredible power. A photograph can be material and meaningless, yet, depending on the content illustrated in the frame, the object can be rich in meaning and evoke emotional response. Research into the power of images in securitizing refugees requires legitimacy, which can be found in an examination of existing critical security literature. Springing from the foundational work of the Copenhagen and Paris Schools, the field is ripe for the addition of the psychological turn in conceptualizing securitization. While several studies have examined what is lost in focusing solely on the illocutionary aspects of 'speaking security', there is room for broadening the study further to examine why exactly certain images speak louder than others (Williams, 2003).

In my review, I will draw on different literatures of critical security studies, migration studies and psychology to illustrate my proposal. The role of perception, visuals and their impact on empathy is unexplored in the context of migration today. I propose that looking to the science behind perception; why certain images are more effective in eliciting public responses in the greater securitization process. Such a study can potentially explain the disparity in reactions to media coverage of the Migration Crisis of 2013 and 2016, and why certain securitizing speech acts are accepted or rejected.

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## Critical Security Studies and the Migrant-Refugee Question

As international relations scholars have plainly stated, the question of refugees is 'everywhere' (Loescher and Monahan, 1989). The status of migrants and refugees plagues all states in the modern state system; however, the discourse regarding them has been securitized in the last half century to elevate the everyday existence of foreign migrants from typical to representing existential threat to society. The question of refugees is incredibly important; regardless of rhetoric, they are still human beings. The situation of refugees today can be understood through the critical security (CS) concept of securitization. Bigo situates the securitization turn in international relations as beginning in the final decade of the twentieth century, questioning why the unassuming image of the migrant acquired the connotations of a security threat in the last twenty years (Bigo, 2002). *Security* is an essentially contested concept. Yet, the word 'security' carries more weight than as a simple noun indicating a 'concept'.

Migration in base simplicity can be understood as a concept "interpreted" as a security issue (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 1998). Securitization occurs in elevating the realm of everyday occurrence to existential threat through verbal invocation, as a result there is a significant literary store centered on the transformation of migrant to immigrant via *securitization*.

'Security' can be unpacked to contain a framework of meanings and uses, as a heuristic device capable of grouping interactions to that of a thick signifier which informs how images are evoked as a result of speaking the word 'security' (Huysmans, 1998, 228). Several key theorists on CS studies draw attention to the role of threat, specifying that the attribution is a product of social construction whereby in order to properly understand why the object has been securitized, one must look at the way threat is produced (Krause, 1998, Balzacq et al. 2010). The Copenhagen and Paris Schools have led the way in producing literature that approaches critical security studies from the perspective of securitization. Broadening the security agenda, Barry Buzan (1991) expanded the realm of threat to security from the traditional sector of military force to include military, environmental, economic, political and societal avenues of threat; placing the individual as the 'referent object' of security that might be threatened. As states in the global era are at risk from 'interdependent' sources of insecurity, anything or one can be securitized to represent a threat (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998; Bigo, 2002, Huysmans, 2000, 2002). Contrary to focusing on the intentions behind the utilization of power, the Paris School scholars center on *speech acts*, engaging with the practices and contexts that create and limit politics (Balzacq 2005, Bigo 2000).

A *speech act* is a specific type of securitization, a reciprocal interaction between a political actor and the public agent. The political actor raises the referent object (migrant, refugee, etc., that which is being discussed) from the everyday to existential threat requiring new policy via linguistic framing, whereby 'saying' something 'itself is the act' (Waever, 1995, 55; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998, 25, 31-33). Whether the speech is successful in transforming the perception of a migrant as human to that of serious harm is also dependent on audience acceptance (Buzan et al, 1998, 25). The Copenhagen and Paris Schools of CS are founded in this understanding of securitization; but why do audiences accept these speech acts, and what of other forms of communication beyond verbal utterances?

The discussion of securitization as a process has primarily focused on the linguistic and discursive elements; the illocutionary acts taking priority at the expense of the perlocutionary and accessory effects of security utterances (Austin, 1962, 95, Balzacq, 2005, Donnelly, 2013, 50). Generally, the works on securitization focus on the invocation of threat through verbal acts; however, a critique can be raised that this specific approach to securitization as a means toward developing a new analytical understanding of security misses entire securitizing actions that occur silently, or perhaps in observable forms.

Connecting securitization theory more explicitly to the matter of migrants, States fear neighbors more than objects in the distance. Migrants and refugees can be observed as an alien presence in States, disrupting ethnic and cultural homogeneity, and thus easier identified as potential objects of threat dependent on the narratives produced by the political elite (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998; Huysmans, 2000). Critics of this turn have discussed the securitization of migrants at the agent level, specifically delving into the discourse of agents in politics, government and bureaucracies (Bigo, 2002; Balzacq, 2005). The Paris School scholars further mention the various intertextual

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means by which actors securitize agents, however, missing the opportunity to link the speech acts power to the nonverbal communications further used in securitization.

However, this formulation of securitization is not accepted without hesitation by all CS scholars. Christina Boswells' (2007) study challenges the Copenhagen and Paris School interpretation of CS theory; that securitizing the referent object of discussion results in attributing terrorism and terrorist acts to a change of migrants to securitized immigrants in Europe. To illustrate her argument, Boswell examines the contradictory domestic migration policy in Spain following the Madrid 2004 terrorist attacks. Rather than actively linking the bombings with Moroccan *sin papeles* in Spain, a growing migrant population, the domestic policy that followed the attacks included migration policy around the labour market and economic health of the country (Boswell, 2007). Traditional CS theory would have predicted or attributed raising the threat of immigrants to the Spanish people as the resulting policy, yet the Spanish Government did not invoke a speech act. Boswell's study concludes in asking scholars to look further into the cognitive factors of policy ascription, rather than accepting the rapid identification of Others as threat as the basis of critical security understandings.

Grouping security and migration in tandem is not a natural combination, as the combination of the two is an actively constructed relationship, structured for a political use (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2000, 2006). Why audiences accept this combination is of particular interest, as the existing literature fails to delve into this question; instead perceiving the audience as reactive rather than an active participant in the securitization process (Balzacq, 2005, 2015; Balzacq et al., 2010; Bigo, 2000, 2002; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998; Gale, 2004; Huysmans, 1998, 2000, 2006; Krause, 1998; Peoples and Vaughn-Williams, 2010; Waever, 1995).

## A Place for Psychology

Linking migration and security has been discussed as an active, constructed process, a tool of framing policy logics for political purpose. The literature of international relations has begun to appreciate this important practice beyond the CS realm, acknowledging the psychological variables that are active in the securitization process.

The psychology applied to this specific area of international relations has been limited in scope. Social psychology can be applied in examining the narrative accounts of refugee-hood, behavioral accounts have centered on the trauma of refugee circumstances (Gale, 2004; Stein, 1986). Circling back to securitization, the study can benefit significantly from the application of psychological analysis.

The key importance of language in policy distributed by government offices in 2001 during federal elections in Australia defined refugees in contradictory terms for political gain, fulfilling the requirement of security narratives activated for political gain (Gale, 2004; Bigo, 2002). How open societies are to supporting and integrating immigrants is shaped by past experiences, or in psychological terms, past perceptions of the immigrant (Dovidio and Esses, 2001). From a CS perspective, utility maximizing political elites capitalize on heuristic biases against migrants, securitizing immigrants as threats to their communities when facing economic and political changes (Buzan, 1991; Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002, Boswell, 2007). While this effect can be observed in shaping individuals in host nations response to immigrants, there has been little study of the role of psychology in effectively framing immigrants as the objects of harm.

The question of whether political discourse shapes popular opinion has been explored through studies looking at both real and psychological threat (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay, 2008; Gale, 2004). The role of media has a functional role in activating subliminally held attitudes and perceptions against immigration, where evoking the issue of immigration can elicit emotional reactions that alter behavior and policy (Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008, Kinder and Sanders, 1996). Multiple historical contexts exist wherein nationalism and politics of fear have moved populaces to embrace securitizing speech acts, where politicians utilize obvious scapegoat targets of immigrants in discursive Othering to strengthen a tested national identity (Gale, 2004). Esses, Medianu and Lawson (2013) focus on the counter-productive nature of negative perceptions fostered by national medias and politicians. These narratives which frame refugees as 'enemies at the gate', implicitly strip them of their humanity (securitizing migration), ultimately undermining greater international movements for human rights (Esses, Medianu and Lawson,

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2013).

Why societies fall victim to immoral securitizing moves by political elites can potentially be understood in examining the psychology of beliefs and attitudes. Beliefs can be understood as containing multiple connotations, but reducible to a general understanding that belief can refer to 'inner states and outer realities' which are shaped by the 'role of emotion in sensible thought' (Jervis, 2006, 642). There is a structural character of beliefs, which are inextricably linked to attitudes; where attitudes can be predicted from deeply held beliefs (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Attitudes can be strongly ascribed, observed in individuals to be resistant to change and embedded in the schema of individuals. Attitudes are structured perspectives, which develop off initial evaluation (receiving input of internal phenomena) and observable as well with other attitudes formed in separate contexts, where attitudes are affective; shaped by feelings, moods, emotions experienced in relation to a referent object (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008). Responding to these evaluations can be open or concealed, regardless, the result is a behavioral tendency that guides future interactions with the object.

Group priming of attitudes can have an affect on perceptions or biases, and are capable of motivating changes in opinion and consequent behavior (Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Feelings such as anxiety, negative enmity or fear can also be effective in conditioning attitudes (Brader, Valentino and Suhay, 2008; Cohrs and Stelzl, 2010). Beyond attitudes, the understanding of immigration calls for adjusting the level of analysis to understand why individuals, accept securitizing moves. Key to the psychology of attitudes is an understanding of how people perceive what is presented, harking back to the question of how these perceptions inform societies acceptance of *speech acts*?

The apex in levels of analysis in understanding international relations can be seen in examining the role of individual actors. Here, an individual is understood in ones' conception of self; the beliefs which inform a person's understanding of who they are as an individual (Markus 1977, cited Sutton and Douglas, 2013, 53). The combination of multiple conceptions of 'self' form the individual as a whole, comprised and validated in their *self-schemas* (Markus 1977). Once an established self-schema is in place, it is possible to look at social comparison theories in which individuals compare themselves to an identifiably different, externally validating Other (such as Cognitive Dissonance Theory, for more see Festinger 1954; Wills 1981, cited in Sutton and Douglas, 2013). In order to perceive an Other, one must actively seek a conscious object; giving *attention* to a secondary object (Mack et al., 2002).

Diving deeper into the social psychology of attention, it is impossible to neglect that individuals are limited information processors (LIP), dependent on heuristics and biases to understand the extensive amount of information encountered (Cottam, 1985; see Miller, 1956; Taylor, 1981, cited in Oakes and Turner, 1990). Humans are 'cognitive misers' as a result of our reduced or limited capacity to input, asses and store stimuli as information; relying on heuristics or stereotypes to perceive more efficiently (Miller, 1956; Taylor, 1981; Oakes and Turner, 1990; von Helmholtz, 1850). If we embrace cognitive limitations as a cause of motivated biases and heuristics, understanding the cognitive processes that form percepts can inform international relations issues in identifying the means by which information is stored and shape future experiences. Threat is dependent on perception of danger, by individuals or societies (Goldgeier, 1997; Balzacq, 2005; Bigo, 2000, 2002; Buzan, 1991; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998). Applied to securitization theory, understanding the cognitive processes that codes stored information by LIP can have a significant role in developing our understanding of the field. While cognitive and social psychologists differ in ontological goals, both contend that the human mind is limited in its ability to accept stimuli and develop shortcuts, or heuristics, to compensate for reduced processing ability.

Returning to the question of CS, what is missing in the existing literature on the securitization of refugees is where the persuasion of the audience to the existential threat is explained. Perception is central to assessing this quandary.

## Contributions from the Psychology of Perception to Securitization 2.0: The Visual Turn

Whilst the Copenhagen School has widely been heralded as widening the agenda for security studies, it neglects non-traditional communication mediums other than the *speech acts* that serve as the basis of the theory (Waever, 1995;

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Williams, 2003; Dauber, 2001). As communication is widely occurring in non-traditional forms, such as telecommunication, internet based communication and graphic iterations, the definition of communication should be expanded to include the 'production', 'transmission' and reception of visuals (Williams, 2003, 512). *Speech acts* are a performative process, symbolic in meaning. The symbolism is both heard (audibly) in the discourse of actors, yet the Copenhagen School fails to address the visual symbolism that accompanies the securitizing speech act (Bigo, 2002; Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998). Williams notes that understanding the linkages between institutions and the rendering of securitized agents is impossible without addressing the speech acts of enacting security in conjunction with the visual images that accompany them (Williams, 2003).

Borrowing from Williams (2003) call to expand the Copenhagen view of *speech acts*, I suggest that psychology can enhance the study of images of refugees 'speaking' where critical security academics leave the discussion.

The forefather of perception, Hermann von Helmholtz's (1850) theory of visual perceptions is that of unconscious inferences; perception and understanding is inferred from fragmentary data from retinal vision, gaining meaning through inductive inferences to attribute meaning to the sensed signals (Gregory, 1997).

Images serve as repositories of information. Images can be described in multi-variant form; viewing images involves accessing remembered, or prior learned knowledge (Anderson and Bower, 1972, von Helmholtz 1850, Gregory 1997). Constructing a perception from these images requires memory, visual information processing involves the storage of such perceptions and images that are analyzed when recalled (Kaufman, 1974; Neisser, 1967). When an image remains in one's 'mind's eye', the image can be considered what Neisser classed as a *visual icon* (1967). The action and associated sensations of *seeing* evoke the previously seen *visual icons* which inform how we process the live spectacle (Gregory, 1997; von Helmholtz, 1866; Kaufman, 1974).

*Attention* is a key aspect of memory and visual recall. In paying attention to an image or object, one will recall the *visual icon* stored more vividly; versus a peripheral glance at an object and partially storing the image. Kaufman (1974) classes attention in this schema as a filtering function, an aspect in perception that is key to memory. Borrowing from Hochberg's proposal that listening is an active engagement, vision and 'object significance' is an engaged activity whereby percepts are only stored when the goal of storage is actively selected by the user (Hochberg, 1970; Gibson, 1966). This concept is key to understanding the danger of securitizing images or conceptions of refugees; if one has a neutral understanding of refugees, then applying to stimuli which codes their existence as dangerous changes the nature of the stored perception which can endanger their social security. Understanding how the informational percepts are stored and accessed can inform critiques on the existing securitization process proposed by the Copenhagen School at present.

The discussion of what is seen, be they images or objects, is an entirely separate conversation that encompasses the fundamental issues that arise in attempting to create a concrete definition of what an object is or is not (see Cavanagh, 2011). Combining the stored meaning of images with a visual icon at hand is an example of psychologists' conception of constructivist theory of perception (Epstein, 1982). Much like the Copenhagen School of critical securities conception of the world being the object of co-constitutive and active social construction, in this schema of psychology perceptions are seen as the output of multiple sensory inputs (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1998; Wendt, 1992; Epstein, 1982). Classifying and sorting stored information is key to perception, the question of whether perception is immediate or the result of interactive processes has been greatly studied in the field of psychology (Epstein, 1982; Gregory, 1997).

The constructions of seeing the arrangement of humans on a raft as refugees, or 'a set of dots as a familiar letter' are both the processes of visual cognition (Cavanagh, 2011, 1538). Selecting the information associated with an image is the result of the visual recall theorized by early cognitive psychologists (Neisser, 1979; Kosslyn, 1975; Gibson, 1966; von Helmholtz 1866; Gregory, 1997). Verbal and visual recall can occur in two forms, either retrieval or recognition processes; the key difference tested in Anderson and Bower's study questioned the hypothesis whether perception function in free retrieval of stimuli, or if the object is selected and then subconsciously tested via recognition to an item the subject wishes to perceive (Anderson and Bower, 1972; Kintsch, 1970).

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As vision occupies 30-40% of the prime cortical of the brain, cognitive psychologists can state that the image processing functions of the brain are highly advanced, capable of duplication in different regions of the brain (such as the ventral cortex, lateral occipital complex, extrastriate body area, prefrontal cortex, etc.) (Cavanagh, 2011; Grossman and Blake, 2002). This advanced processing alludes to multiple avenues of potential means of testing hypotheses of the perceptual process of securitization of images, and how the information is received and stored.

What comes to fore in recall from images in pictorial form are processed images, not a live relay. This separate image comes from 'the mind's eye', a separate form of processing which looks for patterns and relationships linking within present patterns in the relayed image (Kosslyn, 1975, 342). The coded information (i.e. data, images, words) is stored, and when recalled in *seeing* images, the perception of what is seen is informed by the prior data and associations with the initial storage of data.

## Where Does This Leave Us (and Where Can We Go Next)?

William's 2003 assessment of the Copenhagen School agenda offers a key examination of the foundations of securitization theory, picking out key limitations of the linguistic centric theory and identifying a way forward with the inclusion of images. The Copenhagen School focuses too heavily on the linguistic and rhetorical nature of security, at the expense of narrowing conceptions of where and what can constitute security. What is it that moves an audience to recognize actors as invoking a *speech act*? How can images, repositories of information, enhance our understanding of who is securitized? The work of psychology of perception and visual icons can inform our understanding of these processes, and requires further attention in future studies.

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