

The Power of Images in Global Politics

Written by Roland Bleiker

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ROLAND BLEIKER, MAR 8 2018

We live in a visual age. Images shape international events and our understandings of them. Photographs, cinema and television influence how we view and approach phenomena as diverse as war, humanitarian disasters, protest movements, financial crises and election campaigns. The dynamics of visual politics go well beyond traditional media outlets. Digital media, from Twitter to Instagram, play an increasingly important role across the political spectrum, from terrorist recruitment drives to social justice campaigns. Fashion and videogames are frequently derived from and enact the militarised world we live in. Drones, satellites, and surveillance cameras profile terrorist suspects and identify military targets. Images surround everything we do. This omnipresence of images is political and has changed fundamentally how we live and interact in today's world.

More and more scholars have started to examine the power of images in global politics. Over the past six years I have had the privilege of working with 51 of them. The result of our collaboration is a volume on Visual Global Politics that has come out in March 2018. We address a broad range of political themes, from colonialism, diplomacy and peace to rape, religion and protest. Visual themes are just as broad and include not only two dimensional images, as highlighted above, but also three-dimensional visual artefacts and performances, such as border installations, churches, national monuments and parades.

My aim in this article is to outline some of the key themes that our collaboration has brought to the fore. There is no way I can possibly do so in a comprehensive way. I will inevitably have to forgo a range of important topics, such as the role of icons and emotions or the persistent challenge to understand the impact of images. Given the brevity of this piece I will refrain from mentioning the specific work of my collaborators or the numerous other scholars who have made significant contributions to visual politics. Readers who wish to explore these authors and sources and the associated complexities will find them in the book's introduction and its 51 chapters. Those who wish to take a quick glance can find it in this short video here.

The Visual Turn in Global Politics

It has become common to speak of a visual turn in the study of global politics: the recognition that images and visual artefacts play an increasingly crucial role in depicting and shaping the world we live in.

Our understanding of terrorism, for instance, is inevitably intertwined with how images dramatically represent the events in question, how these images circulate world-wide, and how politicians and the public respond to these visual impressions. Take the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. There is no way to understand the origin, nature and impact of the event without understanding the role of images. The attack was designed for visual impact. Images circulated instantly around the globe, giving audiences a sense of how shocking and terrible the event was. Many of these emotional images not only shaped subsequent public debates and policy responses, including the war on terror, but also remain engrained in our collective consciousness.

The Power of Images in Global Politics

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Images are of course *new*, nor have they replaced words as the main means of communication. Images and visual artefacts have been around from the beginning of time. The visual has always been part of life. Images were produced not only to capture key aspects of human existence, but also to communicate these aspects to others. Examples range from prehistoric cave paintings that document hunting practices to Renaissance works of art. Some of these images and cultural artefacts we still see today and they continue to influence our perception and understanding of the world.

But, there are two ways in which the politics of images has changed fundamentally.

First is the speed at which images circulate and the reach they have. Not that long ago, during the time of the Vietnam War, it would have taken days if not weeks for a photograph taken in the war zone to reach the front-page of, say, the *New York Times*. In today's digital world, a photograph or a video can reach audiences world-wide immediately after it has been taken. Media networks can now make a local event almost instantaneously global, whether it is a terrorist attack, a protest march, an election campaign rally or any other political phenomena.

Second is what one could call the democratisation of visual politics. It used to be that very few actors – states or global media networks – had access to images and the power to distribute them to a global audience. Today, everyone can take a photograph with a smartphone, upload it on social media and circulate it immediately with a potential world-wide reach. Any individual or small group, no matter what their location or political intent, can potentially produce and circulate images that, in today's new media language, go viral. The result is an unprecedented visualisation of both our private lives and our political landscape: a visual communication revolution that has shaken the foundations and hierarchies of established media networks. We see a dismantling of the division between broadcaster and viewer, producer and consumer.

The Challenge of Understanding the Politics of Images

Images work at numerous overlapping levels: across national boundaries and between physical and psychological worlds. They come in complex and wide varieties: as photographs or films, as comics or videogames. Things get even more complex when we think of three-dimensional visual artefacts, such as architecture, military uniforms or monuments.

But no matter how diverse and complex visual images and artefacts are, they all have one thing in common: they work differently than words. That is their very nature. They are non-verbal and often ambiguous and infused with emotions. This is also the key challenge we observers and scholars face: how to translate the politics of images into words while doing justice to the unique nature and political significance of visuality.

Photographs offer a good illustration of the issues at stake. They appear to communicate clearly and truth-fully, yet they deceive us. They seem to give us a glimpse of the real. They provide us with the seductive belief that what we see in a photograph is an authentic representation of the world: a slice of life that reveals exactly what was happening at a particular moment. The illusion of authenticity also masks the political values that such photographic representations embody. The assumption that photographs are neutral, value free and evidential, is reinforced because photography captures faces and events in memorable ways.

It is precisely the illusion of authenticity that makes photographs such powerful tools to convey the meaning of political events to distant audiences. Spectators view and re-view crises through various media sources until the enormity of the event seems graspable. In doing so, photographs not only shape an individual's perception but also larger, collective forms of consciousness.

Photographs are thus politically partial and not just because they can be manipulated and faked. All images – still and moving ones – always express a particular perspective. Images reflect certain aesthetic choices. They represent the world from a particular angle. They inevitably exclude as much as they include. A photograph cannot be neutral because it always is an image chosen and composed by a particular person. It is taken from a particular angle, and then produced and reproduced in a certain manner, thereby excluding a range of alternative ways of capturing the object in question.

Similar political processes are at play when it comes to our individual and collective efforts of understanding images. Photographs do not make sense by themselves. They need to be seen and interpreted. They gain meaning in relation

The Power of Images in Global Politics

Written by Roland Bleiker

to other images and the personal and societal assumptions and norms that surround us. Our viewing experience is thus intertwined not only with previous experiences, such as our memory of other photographs we have seen in the past, but also with the values and visual traditions that are accepted as common sense by established societal norms. There are inevitably power relationships involved in this nexus between visuality, society, and politics.

Look at one of the most iconic images of the past few decades, the 'Tiananmen Man' image, depicting a lone protester in front of a series of tanks. This image immediately makes sense for many people around the world, as long as they know about the historic event in Beijing in 1989: the occurrence of the protest movement and its suppression by the police. But many people inside China, for whom depictions and reportage of Tiananmen massacre remain censored, do not have the background knowledge necessary to interpret this photograph let alone recognise it as an icon.

How Images and Visual Artefacts Function Politically

Understanding the aesthetic and political dynamics associated with visuality is, of course, far too complex to be summarized in a few simple propositions. I would thus like to draw attention to just one important aspect: images and visual artefacts do not only represent the world but also, and in doing so, influence the associated political dynamics.

Images and visual artefacts do things. They are political forces in themselves. They often shape politics as much as they depict it. Early modern cartographic techniques played a key role in legitimising the emergence of territorial states. Hollywood films provide us with well-rehearsed and deeply entrenched models of heroes and villains to the point that they shape societal values. A terrorist suicide bombing is designed to kill people with a maximum visual impact: images of the event are meant to go around the world and spread fear.

Consider how images and artefacts visually depict and perform and thus politically frame a sense of identity and community. Flags, parades, religious symbols, monuments and mausoleums are just the most obvious examples. Look at the Mao Mausoleum, located at the already mentioned Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It is a national monument designed to celebrate China's revolutionary spirit and foster a sense of identity, unity and purpose. Even today, when the Chinese government has moved on from the radical and violent revolutionary spirit of Mao, thousands of people still line up and wait for hours to pay their respect to the preserved body of the Chairman.

The Power of Images in Global Politics

Written by Roland Bleiker

Fig 2: Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, Beijing. Source: Roland Bleiker

Images and visual artefacts tell us something about the world and, perhaps more importantly, about how we see the world. They are witnesses of our time and of times past. Monuments remind us of past events and their significance for today's political communities. Satellite images provide information about the world's surface. Photographs document wars or diplomatic summits or protest movements.

Visual Power: Domination and Resistance

Images and visual artefacts are neither progressive nor regressive. They can entrench existing power relations or they can uproot them. There are plenty of examples of how visuality served existing political forces and structures. The paradigmatic here is Leni Riefenstahl. Her stunning films of Nazi rallies, such as *Triumph of the Will* or *Olympia*, helped the Nazi regime turn mere propaganda into a broader mythology that was instrumental in gaining popular support for a racist and militaristic state apparatus. Socialist realist art, likewise, played a key role in glorifying and legitimizing authoritarian Communist practices in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Consider how the global North, influenced by liberal-western values, visually depicts the rest of the world. Television and photographic portrayals of celebrity engagement with famine, for instance, tend to revolve around a patronising and view of Africa, depicted as a generic place of destitution, where innocent and powerless victims are in need of western help. Or so consider how a variety of seemingly mundane visual performances, from hairstyles to body movements, signal and normalise gendered systems of exclusion.

The Power of Images in Global Politics

Written by Roland Bleiker

Fig 3: 'Majority Rule (Bus),' Michael Cook. 2014. With permission from the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer.

But just as images and visual artefacts entrench power relations they can also uproot them. Michael Cook, whose photograph are featured here, challenges stereotypes and the colonial understanding of history associated with them. He visually reverses how colonial Australia has rendered the Indigenous population invisible. Indigenous art has, indeed, a long history of exposing the undersides of Australia's past and of advancing protest forms that eventually contribute to political and social change.

Creative Visions for Global Politics

Some scholars do, indeed, credit visual art in particular with the ability to challenge political narratives and push the boundaries of what can be seen, thought, and done in the realm of the political. Alex Danchev was one of these scholars. He was one of the most prolific and influential contributors to debates on art and politics. He wrote a chapter for our book, on "Witnessing." He died unexpectedly during the final stages of the book, which is dedicated to him. I have offered a detailed appreciation of Alex's legacy in the journal *New Perspectives*, but the key points for our purpose here is the following.

Danchev shows how the visual both traces our political past and opens up important opportunities for the future. This is the case because the visual – in its various forms – is intrinsically linked to politics and ethics.

Art, in particular, can help us imagine the unimaginable. In doing so it becomes a form of moral consciousness and an expression of political hope because it ruptures and transcends the language of habit that surrounds us and circumvents what is and is not politically visible, thinkable and possible. Art plays such a powerful role precisely because it does neither try to visually represent the world as it is nor relies on familiar visual patterns. The very power of art lies in stimulating our imagination by creating a distance between itself and the world

Artists, in this sense, serve as moral witnesses, Danchev stressed. They embark on visual adventures that makes us see the world anew, that "rubs it red raw." They help us re-view, re-feel, and re-think politics in the most fundamental manner. Images, in this sense, make, unmake and remake politics. This is why Danchev believed that "contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order."

Fig 4: 'Majority Rule (Senate),' Michael Cook. 2014. With permission from the artist and Andrew Baker Art Dealer.

The Power of Images in Global Politics

Written by Roland Bleiker

Artists and the creative spirit they advance can, in this sense, also help us scholars understand the exceptionally complex role that images and visual artefacts play in global politics. Although we live in a visual age, knowledge conventions – both in academia and in the wider realm – are by and large still revolving around texts and textual analysis. The challenge ahead lies in gaining a fuller and more sophisticated understanding of the links between visuality and the political. How do we assess the political implications of the visual phenomena that surround us? What would it mean to communicate and think and act in visual ways? How would the media, books, classrooms and other realms be transformed if we were to treat images not just as illustrations or as representations but as political forces themselves? Numerous scholars have started to address these and other issues, but we have a long way to go until we understand and appreciate the power of images in global politics.

About the author:

Roland Bleiker is Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland, where he directs an interdisciplinary research program on Visual Politics. His work has explored the political role of aesthetics, visuality and emotions. Recent books include *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Palgrave 2009/2012) and, as editor, *Visual Global Politics* (Routledge 2018).