Scopic Regimes, Drones, and the Visual Turn in International Relations

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International relations as a discipline is shaped by an unacknowledged visuality present in key concepts (e.g., *mirror imaging*), methods (e.g., process *tracing*), and a preference for forms of inquiry that claim to capture 'reality' as it really appears. Yet, it is only in the past two decades that questions, about how visual artifacts and modes of visuality contribute to world politics, have been pursued in a sustained manner. This 'visual turn' has encompassed diverse scholarship from meta-theoretical concerns over aesthetics, *mimesis*, and the politics of representation; to methodological concerns over how to best capture the intersections of visual depiction, discourse, and subjectivity; to analytically driven concerns regarding how photography, colour, or cartooning shape the contours of the international. At the same time, underlying this diversity has been a shared interest in how we see the world, what we see in the world, where we see in the world, and how visual representations of the world contribute to the institutions, processes, and dynamics of international relations, however, defined.

We believe that although the existing literature demonstrates a willingness to argue that the political shapes the visual, this is most often framed by asking which discourses contribute to the understanding of an image via its relationship to other texts. Less frequently, the influence of genre and status have been considered, such as the role of iconic images in world politics. Mapping inter-texts is important. However, more attention needs to be paid to how the visual conditions the political. We think that visual analysis in international relations can go beyond establishing connections to the object of investigation (e.g., what an image does politically) to determining the ways of seeing shaping visual fields and what is understood to appear within them.

To these ends, in a recent article, we have argued that that systematized practices of seeing that shape visual fields are central to world politics. More specifically we contend that scopic regimes, what Allen Feldman refers to as 'an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish truth claims, typicality, and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing', are essential to understanding how images gain political traction within world politics.

In order to substantiate this claim, we draw from ongoing controversies surrounding targeted killing via drones. We demonstrate that novel insights into the visual politics of drone warfare arise from being attentive to relations of power produced through its predominant scopic regimes and alternatives that may challenge them. We contend that central to the production of drone warfare are the asymmetries amongst who controls what is seen, how it is experienced, and by whom it is experienced. To do so, we compare three different understandings of the field of view produced through the drone.

The first is the operator's gaze which relies on the spatial ordering aspects of Cartesian perspectivalism for the production of truth claims that can then be mobilized within the kill chain to unleash kinetic force. The view positions those who see from the drone as privileged observers while reinforcing the legitimacy of the violence delivered from this perspective. At the same time, the influence of Baconian empiricism on the drone's visual field gives credence to the claim that its sensing technologies are able to reveal the true essence of targets, and non-targets, alike. Both scopic regimes produce a viewer who determines if/when to be seen and who thus enjoys an asymmetrical relationship of visibility with viewers below and on-the-ground eye-witnesses.

The second has been the legal/human rights perspective. This has been mobilized around calls, most notably by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, for footage from all drone strikes to be provided to independent assessors in order to verify the legality of such attacks. While there is indeed some benefit from public scrutiny of this footage, we argue there is also a danger in that, by assuming this partial perspective has privileged access to the truth, one incorporates the most limiting aspects of Cartesian perspectivalism and Baconian empiricism. From Cartesian perspectivalism it is the reliance on geometric abstraction in the service of a supposedly neutral (or a-political) order(er). From Baconian empiricism, it is the assumption that one can capture the material essence of objects that will hold, regardless of one's vantage point.

The third is produced through the art of Mahwish Chishty who is able to decolonize the scopic regimes underpinning drone warfare. She does so by taking the figure of the drone and reflecting it through the symbolic markers used to decorate trucks in Pakistan. These symbols are themselves associated with *al-ghayb*, which in Islamic traditions refers to the hidden, the unseen, and the invisible which co-constitutes the visible rather than serving as its outer limit. *Al-ghayb* includes those parts of reality that are covered by other visible objects, phenomena that by their nature cannot be perceived (e.g. different spiritual planes or temporal points like past and future), as well as anything that is blocked from view by one's perspective.

Chishty's collection draws our attention to the fact that invisibility is not necessarily something that can be overcome through technology or information sharing; it is precisely what co-constitutes what is seen by drone operators, human rights organizations, local authorities, people on the ground, and global audiences. There is always the imperceptible, that over which we cannot be certain, in everything we see. The political question then is whether to fear this invisibility or to accept its presence as a reminder to be more circumspect about claims we make about what constitutes a visual field and what is present within it.

For the future of IR, we conclude that the discipline needs to better engage with different ways of seeing, particularly those scopic regimes arising from outside of western traditions. This will require the development of new visual methodologies and methods that take neither the visual field, its content,, or observers for granted. By doing so, we believe that international relations will be better equipped to understand how the visual shapes the political across a range of topic areas, furthering the understanding of how the sites, and sights, of world politics, interact in the production of truth and power.

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