

# Sensible Politics: Expanding from Visual IR to Multisensory Politics

Written by William A. Callahan

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WILLIAM A. CALLAHAN, APR 2 2020

***Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2020) can be ordered here with promo code ASFLYQ6 for a 30% discount.**

One of the exciting trends in the study of international relations is the growing appreciation of the visual in global politics. It builds on path-breaking work on aesthetics and IR (see Bleiker 2012, Shapiro 2014), to examine how images shape our view of the world, especially in our post-literate age where people primarily get their information about international affairs from visual media. As we saw with the photograph of the dead toddler Alan Kurdi during Europe's migration crisis in 2015, iconic photographs can put issues on the global policy agenda, even provoking Angela Merkel to allow over one million refugees into Germany. This attention to the politics of framing – who and what is included inside the frame of the political, and how people and issues are excluded from the international – shows how iconic images can be very powerful, even demanding an ethical and political response. Many scholars thus argue that we need to understand how visuals are important not just because of the content of their meaning, but also consider how their meaning is constructed by the 'who, when, where, and how' issues of their production, distribution, and viewership. This attention to the social construction of the visible is what I call the 'visibility strategy': its goal is to 'think visually', and hence 'speak truth to power' by revealing the state and corporate power relations behind the image (see Bleiker 2018; Campbell 2003; Hansen 2011; Harman 2019; Vuori and Andersen 2018).

My book *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2020) likewise employs the 'visibility strategy' to think about how aesthetics, securitization, and ethical witnessing shape visual IR. But the book is also the product of the growing frustration among scholars with the visibility strategy's (1) tendency to turn visuals into texts for discursive analysis, and (2) its narrow focus on visual images of war and violence, (3) that come from Euro-American sources. The book's argument is not that the visibility strategy is 'wrong', but that it is not enough. While 'thinking visually' is important, we also need to appreciate the importance of 'feeling visually' in international politics. Critical inquiry here changes from asking how is the image constructed, to ask how does it make you feel? Because images can viscerally move us in unexpected ways, they need to be appreciated not just in terms of their ideological-value, but also in terms of their affect-work: not just what they mean, but also how they make us feel, both as individuals and as collectives (see Massumi 2002). The horrible photo of Alan Kurdi did not simply provide information for a greater understanding of the plight of migrants; it viscerally moved and connected people. Feeling here is not simply emotions produced by elite manipulation; rather, 'feeling visually' appreciates how visuals themselves can be performative, to do things and make things, and thus visually provoke social-ordering and world-ordering practices.

*Sensible Politics* explores this 'thinking visually/feeling visually' dynamic by looking beyond visual studies to other developments in critical IR and social theory: new materialism, the practice turn, affect and emotions, embodied performances, feminist IR, Global IR, Chinese thought, comparative political theory, among others. In particular, it draws on Hutchison's (2016) 'affective communities' and Rancière's (2009) 'communities of sense' to develop the idea of 'affective communities of sense', which figures visual IR as a collective, affective, and multisensory activity that provokes new social orders and world orders both in elite forums and in pragmatic everyday experience.

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This new approach considers how visuals don't just illustrate international events as visual texts, but how they also can actively create international politics as nonverbal and nonnarrative performances and experiences. Whilst the visibility strategy works to reveal the social construction of the visible, here we examine the visual construction of the social (Mitchell 2005: 343)—and the multisensory performance of both domestic and international politics. This is what I call the 'visuality strategy', and it explores how visual images provide an opportunity to appreciate international politics in a different register that values both thinking and feeling, meaning and doing, and deconstruction and creativity.

While much of visual IR analyzes photographs, cartoons, film, and visual art, *Sensible Politics* also develops the idea of 'multisensory artifacts'—veils, walls, imperial gardens, and cyberspace—as performative spaces of creative social-ordering and world-ordering that complicate what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done (Ranci re 2004: 13; Shapiro 2013). On the one hand, the definition of 'artifact' is simple; as Hamilton (2016: 37) explains, etymologically it refers to a thing made (*fatto*) with skill (*arte*). Artifacts thus aren't natural objects, but are human-made and thus embody social relations. On the other hand, artifacts can also range from the small and self-contained to the very large and complex, from things that you can hold in your hand, such as a map or a veil, to things that are difficult for humans to comprehend as a single entity, such as the Great Wall of China or the Internet.

There is also the issue of intent and agency. The craftsman who draws a map, sews a veil, constructs a wall, builds a garden, or uses social media certainly has intent, and thus shapes the meaning of those artifacts. But the book also examines the unstable meaning of the 'Europe in 2035' maps (see figure 1 below)—which seem to map out Putin's dream of a strong Russia and divided western Europe—to explain how artifacts can also provoke new social orders and world orders far beyond the imagination or intent of any particular actor (see Lecev 2012; Jacobs 2014). Those maps gained meaning and value not just in their production, but also through their circulation and exchange in various affective communities of sense. As one of my students reminded me, while maps are images that you read, in the classroom they are also artifacts that you touch—and that can touch you viscerally when they spark the attraction (and revulsion) of patriotic themes. As Bennett argues, such material artifacts can have agency—'material vitality'—to mean things and do things 'in excess of human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve' (Bennett 2010: 6, 20).

*Figure 1: "Europe in 2035": Map 2 (2012). Courtesy Ekspress Gazeta. Used with permission.*

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This attention to multisensory artifacts builds on analysis of the international politics of visual art and film, as well as critical IR's analysis of memorials, monuments, museums, architecture, and landscapes (see chapters in Bleiker

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2018). Certainly, much of this research turns visuals into texts for discursive analysis. Yet maps, veils, walls, and gardens aren't simply two-dimensional representations of things that demand critical interpretation; as three-dimensional spatiotemporal artifacts, they are the things, events, and spaces that one can experience and perform as an observer, a participant – and, when things go awry, even as a target. To appreciate a wall or a garden, looking at it is not enough; you have to performatively 'walk it' as an active participant. This experience surely is visual, but it is also multisensory; you touch and smell maps and veils, while walls and gardens are sites of sight, sound, touch, smell—and even taste.

As 'artifacts', walls, gardens, and the Internet are a site, an institution, an enactment, an encounter—and an ideology. While Raymond Williams discusses politics and culture in terms of 'structures of feeling', artifacts can be appreciated as 'infrastructures of feeling' in which politics is represented, performed, and experienced in affective communities of sense. For example, in the Palestinian feature film *Omar* (Abu-Aasad 2013), the West Bank barrier is not presented as an insurmountable material and ideological barrier. Rather, the wall is a site, an institution, an enactment, an encounter that Omar performatively surmounts on his everyday visits to his girlfriend. Omar's experience thus exemplifies the sensible politics of artifacts, which work through both multisensory experiences and the pragmatic everydayness of crossing a border (or wearing a veil, or surfing the Web).

Although it might be easy to accept maps, walls, and gardens as artifacts, what about cyberspace: Isn't it a nondimensional virtual space that we (primarily) see on two-dimensional screens? As Brennan (2015: 244) explains, the Internet is an assemblage of artifacts that includes 'devices, computers, cell phones, and tablets; telephone lines, fiber-optic cables, cellular networks, and satellites'; server farms, power grids, companies, and governments; and the software that runs these devices, as well as the protocols that connect them. *Sensory Politics* thus considers how such artifactual assemblages are moving, shifting, connecting, attracting, and repelling as part of social-ordering and world-ordering. Artifacts thus are both social constructions and provoke social relations. The book here works to appreciate visual artifacts as sensory spaces where international politics is represented, performed, and experienced through more embodied, affective, and everyday encounters on the local, national, and world stage. Here 'sensible politics' isn't just sensory, but looks beyond icons and ideology to the pragmatic politics of everyday life.

Eurocentrism increasingly is seen as a problem in IR, and much visual IR addresses this issue through a robust critique of Euro-American images of the non-Western Other. My concern is that Eurocentrism is not simply about content – e.g. analysis of the global power of Hollywood – but also about theory and method, where the 'West as method' dominates discussions of Asia as well as of Euro-America (Chen 2010: 216). How can we address this Eurocentrism of theory and method? One response is to reverse the East/West power dynamic to see China/Asia as the site not just of alternative perspectives, but as the source of a ready-made comprehensive alternative theory; e.g. China's All-under-Heaven (*Tianxia*) system as an alternative to the Westphalian system. Nevertheless, rather than replacing 'Eurocentric' theory with 'Sinocentric' theory, *Sensible Politics* aims to explore visual international politics through an assemblage of concepts that are Chinese, Asian, Islamic, Western, traditional, and contemporary. The goal here is to use Asian and Middle Eastern concepts, practices, and experiences as a critical juxtaposition to decenter (but not necessarily discard) critical IR discourse that characteristically generalizes from Euro-American examples.

Since my expertise is in Chinese and Asian politics, the analysis often starts from that point. For example, *Sensible Politics* uses the concepts, practices, and experiences of the Great Wall of China to rethink Trump's Wall. It employs the aesthetic conventions and techniques of Chinese and Japanese garden-building to reconsider civil/military relations, as well as to understand the 9/11 memorial in New York. It explores the visual politics of women's fashion and Internet surveillance in the Middle East, China, and Europe to turn the question of visual IR around: not just how things look, but how you are seen—and how you creatively perform—especially in relation to the male gaze, white/colonial gaze, and surveillant gaze. To address the creative aspects of multisensory politics, I made two films that complement the analysis in the book: 'toilet adventures' (2015) uses ethnographic methods to explore transnational vulnerability, and 'Great Walls' (2019) asks why we hate Trump's wall and love the Great Wall of China. The book and the films thus stress how Asian and Middle Eastern visual images and multisensory artifacts provide important concepts, practices, and experiences that can aid us in understanding sensible politics both beyond Eurocentrism and within Euro-America (see Jenco 2015).

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*Sensible Politics* hence engages with visual IR, new materialism, the practice turn, affect theory, Global IR, and other critical interventions; but its analysis is not reducible to any one of them. Some of the concepts employed—e.g., the visual artifact—are unwieldy and open to contestation. But that can be a strength, rather than a weakness. In a way, *Sensible Politics* addresses IR's abstract arguments (e.g., envisioning world order, mapping the discursive field, unveiling the truth, building conceptual bridges, and tearing down ideological walls) by materializing these metaphors through an examination of how such infrastructures of feeling actually work to create (and destroy) affective communities of sense.

It is common to respond to the challenges of the 'post-truth' era by deconstructing 'fake news': i.e. speaking truth to power by fact-checking the lies (of Brexit, Trump, the Islamic State, and the Chinese Communist Party). *Sensible Politics*, however, argues that political critique also needs to creatively produce sensory artifacts that can move and connect people to fight such populism. The sense in much of critical IR is that drawing boundaries is an ethical and political problem, and it is the job of analysts to deconstruct inside/outside and self/Other distinctions as representational problems. For example, according to many scholars the solution to the social construction of security – i.e. securitization – is desecuritization. My sense of politics, on the other hand, follows that of the classical Chinese philosopher Xunzi: 'Wherein lies that which makes humanity human? I say it lies in humanity's possession of boundaries.' Rather than pursuing an emancipatory project to erase all boundaries—Reagan telling Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, or the Pope telling Trump to build bridges rather than walls—*Sensible Politics* examines how visuals can actively create social order and world order in ways that creatively play with inside/outside and self/Other distinctions. Ordering here is less a technical problem, and more a political performance, where people actively visualize the world they want to live in, as well as the societies that they don't want to see and feel. In other words, we move seeing IR in terms of security (and desecuritization) to ordering (and re-ordering), as seen in Rancière's (re)distribution of the sensible.

*Sensible Politics* thus aims to decenter our understanding of social theory and international politics by (1) expanding from the verbal to include the visual and the multisensory; (2) expanding from Eurocentric investigations of visual IR to a more comparative approach that looks to Asia and the Middle East; and (3) shifting from critical IR's focus on inside/outside and self/Other distinctions to see politics in terms of creative processes of social-ordering and world-ordering.

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**William A. Callahan** is professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His publications include *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2020). He also makes documentary films: 'China Dreams' was broadcast on KCET (Los Angeles) in 2015, 'toilet adventures' (2015) was shortlisted for a major award by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and 'Great Walls' (2019) asks why we hate Trump's wall and love the Great Wall of China.