



# Writing Visual Global Politics: in Defence of a Pluralist Approach—a Response to Gabi Schlag, “Thinking and Writing Visual Global Politics”

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I am delighted and honoured to respond to Gabi Schlag’s generous and insightful review of *Visual Global Politics*. She endorses our open-ended “search for thinking space” and finds that one of the book’s “primary strength” lies in our effort to embrace “pluralism and diversity” in the study of visual global politics. At the same time, Schlag believes that this very attempt to eschew disciplinary boundaries leads to “missed opportunities”. The first and most important one has to do with the need for “a genealogy of visual IR”. Schlag highlights the benefits of historicising the “visual turn” in international relations (IR) research. Doing so, she stresses, would reveal the “conditions of possibility of research practices” and show how visibility has emerged and become a major topic of disciplinary inquiry. Schlag’s second key point follows this disciplinary self-reflection. She flags the importance of advancing “a critical engagement with methods” as a way of addressing the ambiguity and fluidity of the visual. This methodological move is seen as essential to demonstrate that ensuing research is legitimate and can produce “inter-subjective” knowledge.

On some level, we endorse Schlag’s call for disciplinary genealogy and I outline why and how we find a respective scholarly inquiry useful and important. But we also draw attention to the potential problems of such an approach. For one, visual global politics is such a broad field of inquiry that it would be necessary to trace the emergence of the respective scholarship through various different disciplines, not just international relations but also fields such as journalism, communications, geography, cultural studies, sociology and art history. All of them deal with the links between the visual and the political. But all of them also have their own disciplinary history and citation practices, which have as much to do with disciplinary politics than with the topic that is being investigated.

These are the reasons why, when putting together *Visual Global Politics*, I consciously decided to eschew disciplinary debates and initiated collaboration with and between scholars from numerous different disciplines. I invited them to put their disciplinary perspectives aside and write about visual global politics in an accessible way for a broad audience. In this sense,

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*Visual Global Politics* maps out the broad conceptual contours of visual global politics in an effort to understand the key issues at stake. Rather than aiming to adhere to one overarching disciplinary standard, the chapters are designed to defy easy summary in order to escape specialized and often narrow academic debates.

The idea of *Visual Global Politics*, in short, is to engage political phenomena directly and to open up debates as widely as possible. In this sense, the book is not an academic treatise—and certainly not a disciplinary one—but more a provocation designed to evoke reflection and discussion: a political engagement with the visual and a visual engagement with the political.

The key purpose of this commentary is to defend such a pluralist and interdisciplinary approach. While I have consulted the contributors to the volume, there is no way I can speak for all of them. We have over 50 contributors. But the consensus among them is strong: that eschewing a disciplinary genealogy in favour of a pluralist and interdisciplinary approach offers the most viable way of understanding the highly complex role that the visual plays in global politics. In defending such an approach I draw, and at times cite from, commentaries that William A. Callahan, Lene Hansen, Robert Hariman, Emma Hutchison and Rune Andersen offered in response to Schlag's comments. In this sense, this response is, in part, a collective effort, which is why I oscillate between using a singular and a plural voice. Ultimately, though, the main responsibility—particularly for possible misinterpretations—lies with myself.

## **Towards a Disciplinary Genealogy of Visual Global Politics?**

While on some level endorsing our quest for pluralism in the study of visual global politics, Schlag also laments the lack of a “disciplinary introduction to a rich and diverse field”. She would have liked to see an investigation into how the “visual turn” came about in international relations research, a kind of “genealogy of visual IR as a reflection upon the conditions of possibility of research practices”. Such a historization, Schlag points out, is necessary to understand “how concepts, theories, and methods travel”.

On some level, we fully endorse Schlag's call for a genealogy of visual global politics. Yes, investigations into the visual took far too long to become a major topic of investigation in international relations. The discipline was, indeed, “a latecomer to the ‘visual turn’”. We need to know when, how and under what conditions it became possible to investigate visuality as a legitimate research topic. One needs to know the choices taken and forgone in order to understand how scholarly conditions enabled and foreclosed possibilities of investigating visual global politics. One of our contributors, Robert Hariman, stresses the need to challenge “the standard categories and divisions” of the discipline which, he believes, should explore “how visual studies might lead to a reconstitution of the problem space for IR”. The implied point here is that the discipline of International Relations was not late to the the visual turn because it somehow missed it, but primarily because there is something about the discipline's conceptual framework that prevented a serious engagement with the role of images and visual artefacts.

Limited efforts at such genealogies of IR do exist. I have tried to outline the emergence of an “aesthetic turn” in international politics, which is broader than the study of images but includes visuality as a key aspect of cultivating a more open-ended sensibility about political issues (Bleiker 2001, 2009, 2017, 2018). Others have addressed the role of visuality more specifically, but they have done so mostly in the context of engaging particular visual realms or aspects of global politics (for instance Danchev and Lisle 2009, pp. 775–779; Callahan 2015, pp. 891–910; Hansen 2011, pp. 51–74; Harman 2018; Möller 2013; Shim 2014, pp. 9–46;

Vuori and Andersen 2018). Schlag herself has made important contributions here, particularly by outlining the implications of visuality in the realm of international security (Schlag and Heck, 2012, pp. 891–913; Schlag and Geis 2017). But she is right in stressing that so far we are still missing a systematic and fully fledged disciplinary genealogy of visual international relations.

While a genealogy of “visual international relations” is an important task, there are at least two reasons why visual global politics cannot be fully understood through a disciplinary investigation.

First, visual global politics is far too complex to be understood through the lens of one disciplinary tradition alone. Studying the politics of visuality involves understanding not only the role of images—still and moving ones—but also how visual artefacts and performances take on political significance. The spectrum of visual phenomena here ranges from photography, film, video and television to art, videogames, satellite images and computer vision, to name just a few random examples. These phenomena are linked, as Schlag puts it, to numerous overlapping concepts, such as “vision, visuality, in-/visibility, visualizing, visuals, visual representations, and performances as well as icons, images, and pictures”.

Given the complexity of visual global politics, scholars have explored the ensuing issues from a great variety of different disciplinary perspectives. Even within international relations, there are, as Schlag puts it, great differences between how different national/linguistic scholarly communities—say those of France, Germany, China and Brazil—approach the study of images and international relations. Add to this, and as Schlag acknowledges herself, that “the study of images was never exclusively to one discipline”. There are inquiries into visual global politics from disciplines as diverse as media studies, communication, cultural studies, art history, philosophy and geography. Given that each of these disciplines operates according to its own disciplinary conventions and rules, one would need to conduct separate genealogies of disciplinary visual global politics for each of these disciplines. Numerous such inquiries already exist, either in comprehensive ways or alongside inquiries that deal with specific issues (for instance Campbell, 2007; Dikovitskaya 2005; Elkins 2003; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Jay 2005; Mirzoeff 1998, 1999, 2011; Mitchell 1986, 1994, 2005; Ranci ere 2004).

Second, scholarly disciplines always discipline thought. This is their purpose: to arrange knowledge of the world so that it can be shared and debated and make sense to a scholarly community. Academic disciplines are powerful mechanisms that direct and control the production and diffusion of knowledge. They establish the rules of intellectual exchange and define the methods, techniques, and instruments that are considered proper for the pursuit of knowledge. They do so through a wide range of discipline-related procedures, linked to such aspects as university admittance standards, teaching curricula, examination topics, grant conditions, policies of hiring and promoting teaching/research staff, or publishing criteria determined by the major journals in the field.

Disciplinary debates thus say as much about the politics of disciplines than they do about the topics that are being studied. Disciplines are inevitably partial. They constrain thought as much as they enable it. And they can never assess all aspects of the complex interplay between the visual and global politics. Even if one brings into conversation disciplinary debates from several disciplines, one can never escape the politics involved in producing knowledge. A critical genealogical inquiry might be able to draw attention to the constraining aspects of such intellectual traditions but the very effort of highlighting disciplinary politics inevitably remains constraint by the parameters set up through the initial framing of debates.

## Pluralist and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Visual Global Politics

I approached *Visual Global Politics* in a manner I have advocated for long: that the most effective way of dealing with the constraints of disciplinary politics is not—or at least not only—to understand and critique debates waged in academic disciplines but to “forget” them: to tell new stories about global politics; stories that are not constraint by the boundaries of established narratives. The key task then consists of theorizing the political role of visibility independently of the agendas, issues and terminologies that have been present by existing disciplinary debates (Bleiker 1997, pp. 57–86).

By side-stepping disciplinary approaches, I embraced principles of pluralism and interdisciplinarity when designing and implementing *Visual Global Politics*. I invited and worked with scholars from numerous different disciplines, not just politics and international relations, but also art theory, geography, communications, media studies, journalism, sociology, anthropology and religion as well as development, gender, cultural and peace studies. In doing so I took inspiration from one of our key contributors, Alex Danchev. He tragically died during the final stages of our book, which is dedicated to him. His chapter on “Witnessing” as well as his work in general stands for a genuine and highly compelling embrace of interdisciplinarity. Danchev wrote on an exceptionally wide range of themes, from military history and terrorism to foreign policy and art history. In addition to his work on international relations, he wrote several well-acclaimed artist biographies. He was a traditional scholar but had no time for narrow intellectual traditions. He completely disregarded—and in doing so dismantled—disciplinary boundaries. In a commentary about the jazz musician Charles Lloyd, Danchev found the very model for such an interdisciplinary approach, stressing that Lloyd mixes freely, “independent of tribe”. He “plays tenor and alto saxophone, bass and alto flutes, and a modern ecstatic tarogato, a Hungarian folk instrument” (Danchev 2008; for samples of his work, see Danchev 2005, 2009, 2012, 2016; for my appreciation, see Bleiker 2016, pp. 13–21).

Accepting pluralism is to recognize that there is no one correct interpretation of visual global politics. One’s own theories and explanations, no matter how compelling they may seem, are inevitably partial. They reveal and conceal and there is no way out of this process. This is why I commissioned a large number of short chapters. In doing so, I was inspired by the volume *Theorizing Visual Studies* (Elkins et al. 2013) as well as by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1996) concept of rhizomes: constellations that have no beginning or end but instead, multiple entryways and exits; middles from where things expand and overflow. Rather than offer a comprehensive survey of a topic, the idea of short chapters is to provoke and to illuminate, to offer a range of views that depict the world of visual politics from different angles. I opted for a constellation of overlapping political themes—from war and violence to peace, gender and colonialism—because a structure along visual themes seemed too constraining and too disciplinary. I came to that view after having initially conceptualized the book by making distinctions between, say, old and new media, moving and still images, high art and popular culture. These divisions seem to align more with disciplinary investigations but the longer I worked on the book, the more they seem arbitrary and problematic. Where exactly is the difference between high art and popular culture? When do photographs move from a documentary practice to journalism to art? Where do satellite or drone images fit in and how do we understand memes and or military parades or the politics of fashion? In the end, a structure that revolves around a wide range of political phenomena and themes allowed us to criss-cross rhizomatic visual categories, exploring them from a range of angles without necessarily staking claim to some kind of authentic take on the nature and function of visual global politics.

## Visuality, Methods, Politics: in Defence of Pluralism

The argument for pluralism in the study of visual global politics becomes clearer when we get to Schlag's second key suggestions: that one needs a more "critical engagement with methods". She stresses that "how we conduct research" is particularly crucial because "most of us struggle with the ambiguity, polyseminess, contestedness, and fluidity of visuals". A more thorough debate of methods would allow to outline the "choices we have made" and thus counter "allegations that the interpretation of images cannot produce any inter-subjective knowledge".

Here too, we have no objections to Schag's recommendations. We endorse her call for a methodological engagement with the politics of visuals. We also endorse her call to extend "critical" inquiries from a theoretical to a methodological level. This would produce a "cascading approach" that presents methods as essential ways of knowing and constituting knowledge. Critical scholars have increasingly embraced this call for methods and stressed the need for transparency and self-reflection (see Aradau and Huysmans 2014; Strausz et al. forthcoming).

Because the *Visual Global Politics* is aimed at a broad readership, we did not explicitly engage the question of method. But conscious methodological considerations underlie the very structure and content of the book. They are linked to the form of pluralism that I flagged in the previous section and to methodological approaches to visual politics that I spelled out in detail elsewhere (Bleiker 2014, 2015, forthcoming). Here, I outlined how the concept of assemblage thinking provides a particularly useful way of anchoring a pluralist approach to the study of visual politics. It does so by breaking with epistemological systems that require each methodological component to behave according to the same coherent overall logic (see deLanda, 2006, pp. 10–11). Once the logic of totality is forgone, it becomes possible to combine seemingly incompatible methods, from ethnographies, semiologies, genealogies and experimental surveys to content and discourse analysis. This form of methodological pluralism lies at the heart of how *Visual Global Politics* makes space for numerous different and differently conceptualized contributions.

Schlag makes a particularly convincing point when drawing attention to the crucial role that question of causality play in the study of visuality and politics. She stresses that the political importance of the visual cannot be appreciated "as long as causal interference and comparative case study design dominate research practices". This is indeed the case, not least because much of the social science driven disciplinary study of international relations rely on methods that assess impact through causal models. They revolve around "a logic of stability and linear causality" (Van Wezemaal 2008, p. 169; Law and Urry 2004, p. 400). But there are only rare instances where causality can be attributed to images. In most cases, the impact of images is more diffuse. There are, for instance, clear links between the dramatic images of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the highly emotional rhetoric of good versus evil that emerged in response, and the ensuing war on terror. But these links would be very difficult—if not impossible—to assess with cause-effect models.

Images clearly matter in global politics but how exactly do we know? Prevailing social scientific models of cause and effect are of limited use. Rather than seeking to establish direct causal linkages, an assemblage-inspired approach appreciates how images perform the political in more indirect ways, by establishing what William Connolly (1991) called "the conditions of possibility". They frame what can be seen, thought and said. In Jacques Rancière's (2004) conceptualization, images are political in the most fundamental sense: they

delineate the “distribution of the sensible”, that is, how in any given society and at any given time, there are boundaries between what can be seen and not, felt and not, thought and not and, as a result, between what is politically possible and not.

In the spirit of this pluralist method, the chapters in *Visual Global Politics* address the issues at stake from numerous vantage points: some causal, others correlational, yet others more in the spirit of Connolly and Rancière’s line of thinking. Each of these inquiries pursues the politics of images through their own logic. Schlag draws attention to this tension between “causal and constitutive approaches” but laments that we “overlook the fact that methodological traditions are more diverse than a two-by-two matrix suggests”.

We see this tension neither in dualistic nor in exclusive terms. As one of our contributors, Robert Hariman, puts it in response to Schlag:

This back and forth movement should be seen not as a personal failing but rather as symptomatic of the basic problem: the desire for method is comprehensive while its availability is not. We want a method on both sides of the causation/constitution or behaviour/meaning divide, but method itself doesn’t make it intact through the membrane. The term can be used, but the reality is much different. Schlag is right to call for the attempt nonetheless, but I think more attention needs to be paid, not to the loss of or need for protocols, but rather to the opportunities for expanding qualitative thinking in the social sciences.

For Hariman, such an embrace of methodical pluralism goes beyond recognizing the need to move between different modes of analysis. It cuts to the very core of how we can and should pursue the study of visual global politics:

IR analysts could use the visual artefacts as occasions for coming to recognize and understand the social and cultural constituents of political realities, and they could redefine analysis away from generalizable explanation and more toward engaged encounters, thick description, and critique from which larger patterns of explanation can be developed, not by systematic extension of an abstraction, but through comparative study of analogous cases, recurrent situations, and the like. More simply, perhaps visual analysis could nudge IR into more explicit understanding of itself as a hermeneutical science. These are old debates, of course, but attempting to integrate visual study into IR may help to bring them more to the surface.

Drawing on his past and most recent collaborative work with John Lucaites (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 2016), Hariman adds one more point in response to Schlag:

That re-orientation has implications for the understanding of the image as an artefact. Again, the focus is less on how it works as one factor among many in a causal model, and more on how the image operates as a window or mirror or analogy or some other means for seeing, reflecting on, and reconsidering a situation. The image still can have causal efficacy, of course, but as it is an artefact it also is evidence of a lifeworld, and it can provide artistic resources for engaging with that world. When taking the latter approach, it becomes neither more nor less powerful, but rather it shifts from being a driver or a supplement to a means for understanding.

## Conclusion

We are grateful to Gabi Schlag for her insightful and engaging comments on *Visual Global Politics*. In response, I have outlined the contours of the pluralist approach that underlies and drives our effort to understand the links between visibility and the political. I stressed that images and visual artefacts are far too complex to be assessed and understood through one theory or one disciplinary body of knowledge alone. This is all the more the case in a rapidly changing digital age, as Laura Shepherd (2017, pp. 214–22) stresses, for the ever-increasing speed and capability of communication blurs the lines not only between mainstream and social media or between high and low culture but also between consumers and producers of visual and other forms of knowledge.

While acknowledging the need to understand how academic disciplines have come to frame the study of images, I also stressed the need to go beyond disciplines in an attempt to “forget” how they have come to delineate and constrain the production of knowledge. This is why *Visual Global Politics* eschews disciplinary debates and unites scholars from a range of different backgrounds. This form of cross-disciplinary collaboration relies on a methodological framework that seeks to facilitate understanding of how images and visual artefacts work across a range of different realms. These complex interactions cannot be understood through a single method or even a methodological framework that revolves around an internally coherent and closed logic. Different methods need to be given the chance to work based on their own logic, even if they are not compatible with an overall set of rules. The very structure of *Visual Global Politics*—a large number of short and relatively self-contained chapters—encapsulates this pluralist spirit.

While lamenting the lack of a disciplinary genealogy, Schlag also urges us to go one step further and turn our project “into a living document that grows infinitely and organically like a digital encyclopedia or dictionary”. She has in mind a format through which “imaging and writing intersect, overlap and crisscross”. We very much appreciate this suggestion and seek to take it even further. Several contributors to our volume suggest how this might be done. William A. Callahan stresses the need to do so in a pluralist way, reminding us that “the French Encyclopédistes that Schlag cites were not committed to such a decentred rhizomatic approach: quite the opposite, their Enlightenment goal was to rationally and completely collect universal knowledge”. Instead of hoping “to gather all knowledge in one place”, Callahan suggests that “we keep writing our books and articles to individually and collectively expand the decentred rhizomatic network of Visual Global Politics”. Rune Andersen urges us to take things further by moving beyond seeing images “as they once were – things to be looked at rather than the databases, organizing tools and interfaces that they also are”. Robert Hariman, likewise, wants us to go further:

We need to explore how image analysis can go beyond identifying how images are used (illustratively, strategically, or ideologically) to develop image interpretation as a way of *thinking into* political problems, scenarios, and conditions, and then drawing on aesthetic resources to better understand what is present and absent, actual and possible, emancipatory and dangerous, obligatory and degrading. These interpretive practices then become a mode of argument, and one that might be able of working through prior impasses.

As with the very structure, content and objective of *Visual Global Politics*, the way forward should not and cannot be determined by a single trajectory, a single framework or even a single scholarly tradition, whether it be disciplinary based or not. Only a pluralist spirit that embraces difference can provide us with the intellectual framework and scholarly tools to understand the complexities of visual global politics. The lack of a common standard of inquiry is not, as often lamented, a dangerous nihilist trap but, instead, the only genuine way to grapple with important, complex and constantly shifting political phenomena.

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