



Nele Noesselt (Ed.)

Visualized Narratives

Signs, Symbols and
Political Mythology
in East Asia, Europe and the US



East Asian Politics
Regional and Global Dynamics

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Edited by
Nele Noesselt

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Preface: Approaching the Complexities of Visual Global Politics

Roland Bleiker

Visuality plays a key role in global politics. Scholars and practitioners—from diplomats to NGO workers—meanwhile recognize that visuals are political and politics is visual. Academic books and articles have begun to engage the issues at stake. They offer valuable insights about the power of visuals to reveal the political world around us and, at the same time, shape it in profound and lasting manners. At the same time, we are in many ways only just beginning to grapple with the diverse, complex and interactive dimensions between the political and the visual. This is in part the case because rapidly changing technological developments—from communication methods to the algorithms that drive big data—are constantly transforming how images are taken, circulated and received. These ongoing shape-shifting transformations not only render images ever more global but also amplify and alter the political roles they play.

Visualized Narratives offers insightful contributions that enter the key debates from a series of different vantage points. These contributions illustrate the exceptionally multifaceted relationship between the visual and the political. William A. Callahan, in his contribution to this book, highlights the power of visual art to provide us with both new insights into politics and a form of politics itself. Taking Ai Weiwei's art and activism as a focal point, Callahan situates the links between visibility and the political in the manner in which art offers a unique way of witnessing the political and, in doing so, a form of resisting repression. While Callahan focuses on artists, other contributors, such as Niko Switek, Han Xie, Lionel Fothergill and Andrea Riemenschnitter, examine the links between the visual and the political in popular television

programs, reality shows, series and movies. They reveal how popular culture is both omnipresent and highly political, even in instances when they do not seem to engage the political in explicit manners.

Visual politics happens anywhere across the spectrum that ranges from high art to popular culture. It is, in fact, precisely through mundane and seemingly apolitical representations that popular culture becomes political. This is the case because popular culture establishes and rehearses the kind of narratives that we live in, the ones that tell us who we are—as individuals and collectives—and what kind of values drive our attitudes and interactions. In this sense, popular culture provides the background against which politics takes place. Han Xie, in the contribution to this book, explores how Chinese entertainment shows are part of larger visual and verbal patterns that promote and legitimize a discourse of victimhood and anti-colonial national sentiment.

These visualized narratives, as the book appropriately calls and depicts them, become more explicitly political in the realm of photojournalism, advertisement and in the role of documentaries, as is explored in the book by Alex Heck, Lucy Xu Yang, Nele Noesselt, Tanja Eckstein, Elizaveta Priupolina and Tanja Walter. Central, here too, is how visuals contribute to depicting and entrenching particular notions of identity and nation building. And here, too, we see how various media representations not only represent but also constitute the political: they show us how the world around us and the many more worlds that lie far away function; they provide us with insights into the lives and fates of others and, in doing so, influence how we see, perceive, react to and interact in this world.

Diplomats have, for long, been acutely aware of the power of visuals. And, as a result, they have made conscious and strategic use of visuals and their efforts to project power. Iver B. Neumann's contribution illustrates the issues at stake in a particularly insightful manner. He illustrates how "the visual has always been, and remains, an inevitable aspect of diplomacy." These forms of visual diplomacies have multiple dimensions and multiple purposes. Face-to-face negotiations are set in surroundings designed to optimize their outcome. Joint press

conferences are publicly staged for a range of purposes, including to influence audiences at home.

One aspect is clear, then: the interactive dimensions between the visual and the political are exceptionally diverse and complex. The visual is a source of insight and a form of politics itself. And it is a form of politics that operates in countless different realms, from media representations to private photographs circulating on social media, from the use of videos by terrorist organizations to the visual projections of state ideologies during national holiday celebrations. But the visual also acquires political dimensions in and through many other realms, including maps, cartoons, video games, surveillance cameras, drones and satellites. Add to this that the visual is not just about two-dimensional images but at least as much about three-dimensional artefacts and performances, from national monuments to military parades and diplomatic ceremonies.

Given the complex nature of visual politics, a second aspect is equally clear: that we need a wide range of methods to understand how images and visual artefacts/performances become political and shape politics. One needs to understand how visuals emerge, how their content projects meaning, and how this meaning then shapes people and political dynamics. Understanding these completely different aspects of the visual requires an equally diverse and complex set of methods, including interviews, ethnographic field research, semiotics, content and discourse analysis and quantitative surveys. Then there are a range of more specific methods that are useful, from photo elicitation to visual autoethnography. The contributors to this book jointly offer a nice illustration of the wide range of methods required to understand visual politics. They range from Switek's quantitative coding of movie databases and viewer ratings to Lucy Xu Yang's narrative analysis and the close hermeneutic investigation of Fothergill and Riemenschnitter.

This is, in many ways, the key insight that *Visualized Narratives* offers: the recognition that visual politics is so complex that it can only be understood through a diverse set of approaches and insights. Promoting such diverse inquiries is essential even if—or perhaps precisely because—they might generate forms of insights that are seen as incompatible. There is no one right way to understand all aspects of

the relationship between visibility and the political. What we can do though is exactly what *Visualized Narratives* does: embrace the ensuing complexities and continue to grapple with the difficult challenge of understanding the ever changing nature of visual politics.

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