

# Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations

Gabriel F. Caetano\*

Callahan, William A. 2020. *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations*. Oxford University Press, 345 p.

William A. Callahan's *Sensible Politics* provokes us with a visceral proposal: we should appreciate politics as a multisensory performance beyond the visible. At a time when the International Relations (IR) community 'still knows very little about the precise role visibility plays' in global affairs (Bleiker 2018: 2), this book explores the entanglement between words, images and emotions to suggest a new set of affective communities of sense (Hutchison 2016; Schlag 2018). The sensibilities and embodied performances running through politics are actively complicating who/what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done in the post-literate age.

Callahan draws on his expertise as an IR and China scholar, his cinematic impetus, and his studies in garden design to transcend disciplinary boundaries and think and feel international politics in different registers. To achieve this, Callahan proposes 'look[ing] beyond iconic images' to understand how everyday bodily practices are constructed by means of 'performative experiences of visual artifacts such as veils, walls, and gardens' (p.1). The book consequently moves through the aesthetic, visual, and affective terrains carefully to bring this innovative idea forward. Hence, we are invited to think and feel the dynamic process of social and world-ordering that visual artifacts enact in sensory spaces.

The book is divided in three parts, with eleven chapters marked by Callahan's aesthetic signature. In Part I, Callahan introduces his analytical framework, aimed at challenging the ocular-centrism (re)produced by Euro-American sources in IR, and to overcome the rigid binary thinking characteristic of the Enlightenment project. Inspired by authors like Michael Shapiro, Jacques Rancière, and W. J. T. Mitchell, Callahan encourages us to explore the 'dynamic dyad' between *visibility* (social construction of the visual) and *visuality* (visual construction of the social), emphasizing the shift from 'meaning' to 'doing' (p. 16). In this perspective, the visual is not a mere passive representation of

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the world, but a dynamic force that actively shapes reality. Visibility thus relies on the hermeneutic method, which ascribes meaning to images and uncovers the underlying ideologies. In contrast, visuality explores how visual artifacts and sensory spaces enact as visceral means in constructing affective communities of sense. It is important to note that this distinction doesn't necessarily imply a conflict between the hermeneutic method of interpreting visibility and the critical aesthetic of visuality. In fact, Callahan endeavours to transcend this binary perspective by proposing that a more comprehensive understanding of visual international politics is better captured by the dynamism of the 'sensitivity, experience, performativity, and social-ordering and world-ordering in affective communities of sense' (p. 44). According to Callahan, the aim is not to switch from one approach to another, from visibility to visuality or from ideology to affect, but rather to show how binaries such as East/West, Civilization/barbarism, Inside/Outside, civility/martiality are, in fact, productive tensions and not a field of exclusions.

In Part II, Callahan addresses three hot topics in the current debate on visual IR: the aesthetic turn (Chapter 4); visual securitization (Chapter 5); and ethical witnessing (Chapter 6). By working with photographs, films, documentaries, and other visual sources, Callahan reflects critically on the limits of the hermeneutic mode of analysis and the excessive Euro-American attention on images of 'shock of savage violence' (p. 115). Callahan provokes the IR community to move from visual IR to sensible politics, and from verbally inflected securitization to the affect-work of images. Highlighting the conceptual weaknesses of securitization theory due to its excessive focus on speech acts, Callahan turns to the film *The Interview* (Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg 2014) and Islamic State propaganda on social media to demonstrate how images 'can actively provoke affective communities of sense that complicate what can (and cannot) be seen, said, thought, and done.' Chapter 6 discusses the cultural governance/resistance dynamic dyad from Ai Weiwei's artistic work. Callahan shifts securitization's focus from states and official elites to look at how less official contexts, such as popular culture and cyberspace, actively use images to shape the dynamics of cultural governance and resistance.

Part III is dedicated to applying the framework of *Sensible Politics*. Callahan here shows us how to push visual IR towards a multisensory and three-dimensional world: making maps (Chapter 7), wearing a veil (Chapter 8), building walls (Chapter 9), enjoying a garden (Chapter 10) and surfing the cyberspace (Chapter 11). Take, for example, the chapter on the Islamic veil and women's participation in beauty pageants. Here, Callahan explores the tension of concealing/revealing to analyse race, gender, and faith through the invisibility/hypervisibility of body politics. Callahan launches an interesting counterpoint, arguing that, contrary to what common sense thinks, veiling is not only about concealing, and beauty pageantry is not solely about revealing. Both strategies make the female body hyper visible: 'paradoxically, veiling's invisibility tactic often also makes the female body hypervisible in public' (p. 180). The author concludes by highlighting that sartorial practices are negotiated by Muslims and non-Muslims, states and corporations, all performing, legislating, policing, and resisting fixed signifiers in visual IR.

*Sensible Politics* offers a commendable introduction to the realm of multisensory knowledge within the field of IR. However, as I read, a multitude of questions arose. How

do disparities in symbolic and material power influence the doing of visual fieldwork in the Global South? If visual artifacts can provoke new social orders and world orders, how can we grasp the material agency of visibility? If things like images and other objects construct visual politics and warfare beyond of human agency, how can we assign accountability to them? Callahan's work warrants a closer examination from perspectives that explore how the ontological force of things like veils, walls, gardens, and images (as matter) interact with critical aesthetics.

## References

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## About the author

Gabriel Fernandes Caetano is an Assistant Professor at the graduate program of International Relations at IESB University Centre. He has a PhD in International Relations from Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IRI/PUC-Rio) and a Master's degree in International Relations from the Paraíba State University (UEPB). He is associate researcher at the Network of Peace, Conflict and Critical Security Studies (PCECS). His primary research interests encompass aesthetics, visibility, and the impacts of new military technologies within the realm of War and Peace.

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