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## Collage: An Art-inspired Methodology for Studying Laughter in World Politics

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SAARA SÄRMÄ, JUN 6 2015

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Today, many of us spend a significant part of our days connected to the world via our computers and smart phones, following and/or participating in social media and spending time in various other online spaces. The internet is where we encounter friends and strangers, and it is also where one comes across things belonging to the realm of world politics. Everyday online encounters with world politics consist of various fragments, which are textual and visual. This 'stuff'[1] circulates at an incredible speed from one corner of the world to another. Furthermore, which texts and images one comes by can seem quite random. All of this has implications for what is known of world politics at the level of the everyday. This also may have consequences for academic knowledge producers, since our 'products' – articles, books, blog posts – are just fragments among many other titbits of information competing for attention. I think that if we want our work to be accessible to a wide audience, we need to work with issues and materials that are familiar in the everyday (e.g. various pop culture artefacts) and we need to experiment with modes of expression which could draw in different audiences.

Thus, we should aim to understand the logics of the internet better, if we want to reach broader audiences and contribute to the everyday knowledge(s) of world politics. To this end, I focus here on internet parody images as a source for studying laughter in world politics and an art-inspired methodology – collaging – I have developed for this purpose. The circulation of internet stuff and the seeming randomness of our encounters with such stuff makes it challenging to engage with such material with standard social scientific methods of inquiry. Thus, I have turned to the art world for alternative modes of engaging with world politics.

Collaging is a playful mode of doing research that can be either theoretical, thematic, visual, or all of these at the same time. Theoretical and thematic collaging, and visual aspect as a way of looking at art, can be found in Christine Sylvester's work (e.g. 2009, 2007). Drawing from her work and my earlier artworks, I have developed the visual aspect into a methodology that utilises art-making as part of the research process and presents pieces of visual art as part of the end result (see Särmä 2014). My collages[2] consist of repetition and exaggeration, ironic and humorous juxtapositions, and I tend to use thick layers of bright colours to create texture.

Genre-wise, my artwork generally sits somewhere at the crossroads of Naïve Art and Pop Art, the collages are located more towards the latter tradition. 'Pop is a buzzword. It is cheerful, ironic and critical, quick to respond to the slogans of the mass media, whose stories make history, whose aesthetics shape the paintings and our image of the era, and whose clichéd 'models' determine our behaviour' (Osterworld 1991, p. 6). My collages are playful and they respond to questions of knowledge production in the internet era by bringing forth memes and other internet parody images, which anyone can produce and circulate. The notions of what the international is are no longer only mediated to us by mass media, scholarly works, and academic experts. On the contrary, all and any one of us can participate.

In my conceptualisation, visual collaging enables creativity and allows for a humorous and light-hearted approach in selecting and dealing with the research material. Epistemologically, it works as an engagement with fragmented ways

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of knowing and scrappy research material. Collaging also de-hierarchises the relationship between text and image when it methodologically uses art-making as visual mode of thinking and presenting research. In other words, collaging can invert or considerably shift the 'normal' priority of text over image (see Armstrong 2013, p. 23). Because collaging is visual form it can work as a way of thinking beyond language. Or at least I try to playfully experiment with pushing the boundaries of language-based IR scholarship. De-hierarchialising also refers to the way in which visual collaging can disrupt the relationship between the writer and the reader/viewer as it aims to involve, rather than inform, the latter (see Halberstam 2011, p. 15). Furthermore, visual collaging aims to (re-)politicise the images used as research material and invites the reader/viewer to pay attention, critically, to these kind of images in the everyday.

## **Everyday World Political Encounters: Internet Parody Images**

By paying attention to laughter and internet parody images and wondering what they might have to do with world politics, I have noticed that because everything circulates so fast and memes are born instantaneously, we sometimes come by a parody first and then find out what actually happened. For example, in 2011 there was a meme of 'the pepper spray cop',<sup>[3]</sup> where an image of a police officer spraying pepper spray was inserted in various classic artworks and other images. I happened to see the meme images before finding out about the incident where the police officer pepper-sprayed protesters at an Occupy movement demonstration at UC Davis. To figure out what had actually happened to prompt the meme, I actively had to do an internet search.

Another great example is the surge of parody images that came about in July 2008 after reports of an Iranian missile test spread in the Western media. Iran was reported to have tested nine missiles, and the news stories were accompanied by an image that showed four missiles taking off. It soon enough became clear that one of the missiles in the image had failed to take off but was photoshopped onto the image, which was then circulated in global media (see the images on, for example, the *New York Times* blog 'The Lede').<sup>[4]</sup> In response to the Iranian photoshop job, various websites published a bunch of parody images incredibly fast. The images mainly made fun of Iran's failures, which were multifaceted. On the one hand, Iran was technologically inept because it could not launch all the missiles; on the other hand, it was not even capable of mastering quite simple technology, such as photo manipulation. Furthermore, Iran failed in global PR and image control by releasing the 'wrong' image to global media. (For analysis of these parody images, see Särmä 2014, chapter 6; Särmä 2012) Again, for some casual followers of world politics, the parody images may have remained the sole connection to the event.

What we know about world politics on the everyday level in the internet age is increasingly anecdotal and accidental. The internet is a specific modality of knowledge; it is random and highly fragmented. Hence, our knowledge of many things remains fragmented if we do not actively search for more information. Because humour and laughter play a role in the circulation process (what is shared, how much, how fast), parodies can sometimes remain our sole connection to an event or issue.

The blogs and discussion forums where the images parodying the Iranian photoshopped missile appeared are specific cultural sites, and there are codes/conventions of commenting, linking and giving praise for the best and cleverest images and what seems like a bit of competition for who is first – i.e. fastest – and who is canniest in designing and releasing the images. The competitive nature of parody practices on the internet contributes to these surges of parody images relating to a specific event, like the photoshopped missile incident discussed here. Internet parody images cannot be divorced from real life. On the contrary, even though online happenings and encounters are so often described as separate from those that happen IRL (in real life), they actually, in very tangible ways, constitute our everyday understandings of world politics and our engagements with various issues that we associate with the realm of world politics. In other words, how, in the everyday, we make sense of Iran or North Korea, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, nuclear weapons and proliferation, is intimately tied to the viewing of, laughing at, and making and/or sharing of the various memes and parodies.

## **Laughter as a Political Sentiment**

Laughter in its multimodal manifestations frames and constitutes the relations of 'us' and 'them'. While there can be

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no universal definition of what is funny, it is important to pay attention to what we laugh at and how laughter is always tied up with power. Laughter can both invert and sustain power relations. Treating laughter as a political sentiment (see Aaltola 2009) directs attention to power hierarchies among and between political bodies in those moments when we laugh at something/someone.

By paying attention to laughter as a political sentiment, we can see how the various political bodies are located in relation to each other. Political bodies range from individuals to wider social constellations, such as nations, and all the way to the human polity, which is the widest possible political body. Political sentiments, such as laughter or compassion, orientate political bodies towards or away from other political bodies. The more powerful political bodies, hegemonies, often make claims in the name of the human polity, or humanity, yet not all humans always count as humans (see Aaltola 2009, pp. 9-12; Douzinas 2007, p. 5; Butler 2009, pp. 76-77). Laughter at certain Others of world politics can violently push them beyond the boundaries of human polity.

Because of the ordering function laughter and humour can have, IR scholars would be well positioned to explore issues pertaining to the humorous. However, because humour and laughter are usually understood to be the lighter and trivial side of the social and the political, the field that takes itself (even too) seriously has not yet paid much attention to the fun. More generally, emotions have only recently made it into wider IR discussions (see, for example, the Forum on Emotions and World Politics in *International Theory* 2014, issue 3). From a social scientific viewpoint, emotions have seemed too intangible and difficult to get at. Furthermore, they do not feature into the prevailing rationalist paradigm (see, for example, Bleiker and Hutchison 2008). The lack of attention to laughter and humour in IR is part of the dismissal of emotions more generally, but it also opens up questions about seriousness in terms of what and who gets taken seriously. As Cythia Enloe (2013, pp. 6, 18) aptly points out, to a gender-smart observer, the politics of seriousness are serious. To default to that which has always been taken seriously in our analysis and topics and modes of study will only serve to reinforce the old power structures.

Western, and more specifically American, pop culture is today globally dominant. Texts, images and references that originate in the West are recirculated and reproduced in funny internet stuff, such as internet parody images and memes. Consequently, the globality that is constituted via memes is a particular globality – a Western one – and viewers and producers are and become acculturated into it (see Brennan forthcoming).

Laughter can be inviting, it can appeal to people to come and join in the fun; 'laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary' (Bergson 2002[1911], p. 12). Laughter can be also seen as dangerous, because it 'is a boundary thrown up around those laughing, those sharing the joke. Its role in demarcating difference, or collectively identifying against an Other, is as bound up to processes of social exclusion as well as inclusion. Indeed, the two are one. Laughing "with" some people usually entails laughing "at" others' (Carty and Musharbash 2008, p. 214). 'Our laughter is always the laughter of a group' (Bergson 2002[1911], p. 12). On the other hand, laughter and humour can be seen to have positive effects precisely because they are inviting and inclusionary and can function as a cohesive force for group formation. They can be important in terms of creating national identities and the 'making of the citizen' (Dodds and Kirby 2013, p. 48).

On a global level, I argue, laughter functions in creating a wider group than just a nation and its citizens. In Western spectacles of laughter at various others, something I call 'hegemonic laughter' appears. It invites others to join in and attempts to create a common sociality, while also demarcating the boundaries of the human polity and excluding some from its sphere. For example, memes and other humorous internet imagery in the case of the nuclear wannabes, as exemplified by the Iranian photoshopped missile incident, incite laughter, which reverberates through various political bodies. In that particular moment, because the parody images and memes recirculate mainly Western pop culture references, they invite the viewer to join in the hegemonic laughter and create a sense of belonging to the West that easily masks itself as the human polity.

## Collaging as a Visual Methodology

Making collages as part of a research process is one way of making sense of the somewhat nonsensical and random collection of material. Because the speed of circulation on the internet is incredibly fast, any kind of attempt to collect

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a set of materials necessarily remains random. Thus, collaging as a methodology creatively engages with the internet as a specific modality of knowledge production. In order to deal with qualitatively different, random and fragmented materials, I have developed an approach that enables the flow of creativity. This art-based collage methodology offers both conceptual and technical means to deal with the fragmentation and randomness. It is impossible to collect a systematic and coherent data set from the internet, because things shift and move. Parodies circulate at incredible speed and sporadically; some disappear altogether after a while for one reason or another.

Furthermore, the visual technique of collage-making emphasises the intuitive parts of sense-making processes. By making collages and presenting them as a part of my work, I have wanted to retain a playful attitude to sense-making and to scholarly work, for both myself and the reader/viewer.

Collaging does several things methodologically:

1. It allows me to use internet parody images in a way that does not only reproduce them as illustrations and objects of analysis of my research, but can also produce the laughter – that is the problematic under examination – in reader/viewer, thus allowing me to extend the research scope from the image itself to the response of the viewer/reader.
2. It works as a mode of thinking that is both aesthetic and conceptual. I make aesthetic judgments when composing collages and this, in turn, emphasises or de-emphasises certain elements that have arisen in my previous analysis. Especially repetition and exaggeration highlight some themes over others in particular pieces of art. On the other hand, it can point me towards new themes and make new connections.
3. Because it is a visual form, it can work as a way of thinking beyond language. Or at least I try to playfully experiment with pushing the boundaries of language-based IR scholarship.
4. It produces pop culture artefacts while studying them. My hope is that the artwork can function as invitation or easy entry point for those not so familiar with academic theorising.

In other words, the collages as pop culture artefacts are not only an aesthetic and conceptual mode of thinking for me-the-researcher during the research process, but it is my hope that the collages serve as vehicles for further thinking for the reader/viewer in perhaps a different way than a solely text-based academic work might. Particular genres think in particular ways, and different discourses make different questions possible (Shapiro 2013, Cohn 1987). Thus, by presenting research as a mix of different modalities – visual and textual – I want to promote thinking as practice of critique rather as Michael Shapiro (2012, p. xv, emphasis in original) describes:

To *think* (rather than to seek to explain) in this sense is to invent and apply conceptual frames and create juxtapositions that disrupt and/or render historically contingent accepted knowledge practices. It is to compose the discourse, of investigation with critical juxtapositions that unbind what are ordinarily presumed to belong together and thereby challenge institutionalised ways of reproducing and understanding phenomena ... . To *think* rather than reproduce accepted knowledge frames is to create the conditions of possibility for imagining alternative worlds (and thus to be able to recognise the political commitments sequestered in every political imaginary).

For collecting the research material, I have used a method I call 'reverse snowballing'. This means, in practice, that I have done Google image searches with various relevant keywords related to the topic of study or keywords based on my initial analysis. For example, keywords such as Kim Jong-un parody, Iran missile, Iran missile parody, missile envy. I have also collected images by following links from one page to another; quite normal web-surfing, in other words. I have also saved images and links that I have just come across accidentally on social media. What the 'reverse' in the snowballing means is that the metaphorical snowball has rolled towards me, i.e. I have received links and images from my friends, who know my research interests. Through the reverse snowballing method, material keeps on piling up, especially when the topic is one that lives on and shifts and changes.

In the contemporary moment we are constantly surrounded by the visual; as we live in a visual culture, perhaps it is not an overstatement to say that we are constantly bombarded by the visual. We do, indeed, have more and more skills to critically engage with the visual we encounter in the everyday, yet we don't always necessarily notice what it is that we see (see Weber 2008, p. 42). Seeing and looking, or seeing and paying attention, are different modalities

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of knowing, just as hearing and really listening are; it is the paying attention part that makes images particularly important to scholarship and research. When we don't merely see but look and take note of what we see, we already enter a mode of analysis. Furthermore, the point of paying attention is also to persuade others, in academia and beyond, to pay attention as well (Weber 2008, p. 42). Entering a mode of analysis by paying attention, we can also take note of what we don't see.

Collaging can encourage the viewer and the researcher to pay attention in new, and enjoyable, ways. Collaging does not require one to feel like an Artist in order to pick it up. On the contrary, collaging can be used, for example, in IR classrooms to engage students in something creative in order for them to see things differently. As Brian French (1969, p. 9) encouraged:

The technical process is within anybody's scope: the materials used are cheap and they are to be found in most households. If collage is defined as the selection, arrangement and adhesion of ready-made materials to a surface, its scope is almost limitless. There is therefore very little to stand between you and the fluent visual interpretation of your thoughts.

We can go to a museum to look at pieces of art as heuristic tool to start thinking about what is missing in IR and what we are missing in our analysis (see Sylvester 2009, p. 181). Or we can gather material and construct collages, alone or in groups and see what possibilities open up for seeing the international, and IR, differently.

## Notes

[1] Stuff is not really a technical or academic term, but I prefer it to more conventional terms, such as data, because it captures the light-heartedness and junkiness of internet 'data' and I think it is a more accessible and less alienating term (see also Shepherd 2013, p. 1).

[2] Särmä, S. (n.d.) *Junk Feminism*, available online at <<http://www.huippumisukka.fi>>.

[3] 'Pepper Spraying Cop', *Tumblr*, <<http://peppersprayingcop.tumblr.com>>.

[4] Nizza, M. and Lyons, P.J. (2008) 'Iranian Image, a Missile Too Many', *The New York Times*, <<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/in-an-iranian-image-a-missile-too-many/>>.

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**Saara Särmä** is a feminist, an artist and a researcher in International Relations at the University of Tampere, Finland, where she received a doctorate in 2014. Saara's doctoral dissertation, *Junk Feminism and Nuclear Wannabe: Collaging Parodies of Iran and North Korea*, focused on internet parody images and memes, and developed a unique art-based collage methodology for studying world politics. She's interested in politics of visibility, feminist academic activism, and laughter in world politics. Currently she is working on developing the visual collage methodology further as both a research and a pedagogical tool and is experimenting with collective possibilities of collaging. Her artwork can be seen at [www.huippumisukka.fi](http://www.huippumisukka.fi).

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