Review - Seeing Politics

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Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations
By Sophie Harman
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019

Sophie Harman's *Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations* is a tour de force that makes a sharp and incredibly important contribution to the critical methods literature in IR and to social science more broadly. It builds on the work of IR scholars such as Michael J. Shapiro, Cynthia Weber, and William Callahan who have used film in various guises throughout the research process. Using narrative feature film as a method of co-production, Harman brings feminist and decolonial works into conversation with the visual and aesthetic turns in IR to address the problem of "seeing" the women who are often silenced and/or made invisible in the study and practice of international politics. One of the biggest contributions of this work is its strength in and commitment to seeing 'the invisible', not only in terms of the people, stories and international politics that become visible on screen in the film – *Pili* – that this book is about, but all of the hidden, unseen, and unseeable-until-you're-confronted-by-it formal and informal politics of global health governance, the film industry, and even academic research. Below, I will give a broader overview of what I believe are the book's main contributions and strengths. I reflect on the concept of 'voice' and 'visuality' in Seeing Politics in more details elsewhere.

As the book opens, Harman grounds her work in feminist and decolonial approaches. She argues that international relations still frequently overlooks individuals—who are often the "end points" of international policies—as key agents in the international system. In the text that follows, Harman does not simply repeat the feminist mantra that the personal is political and international, she substantively shows exactly how women's lives are impacted by and mediated through 'the international', how women's lives and their experiences can teach us important lessons about international politics, and the ways that international politics does not just happen between states, diplomats, and through international organisations, but in myriad, entangled, messy, complex, formal and informal ways across macro, meso, and micro levels. Much of this would have gone 'unseen' and remained hidden had it not been for the use of filmmaking as research practice. For instance, the ways one local man is able to influence decisions of Tanzanian airport security and police officers, and how border politics impacts and is affected by research and film-making.

To acknowledge the invisibility of a lot of politics is also to acknowledge the power dynamics in research on 'international' politics. The methods we use, our ways of seeing and producing knowledge, are deeply embedded in social and historical contexts that require critical reflection to allow the people we often study and write about to represent themselves in ways beyond written/spoken discourse. To this end, *Seeing Politics* is a thought-provoking and critical intervention to the way we 'do' (visual) IR research that demonstrates how scholars might better 'get at' the everyday tactics people use to engage politically and with 'the international'.

Why film?

Chapter 1 takes this question head on. It offers four main answers, some of which pertain specifically to this project's focus: HIV/AIDS in Tanzania specifically and the African continent more generally. First, film problematises dominant aesthetic representations of HIV/AIDS — that of the white male living in North America or Europe — by showing

women living with HIV/AIDS. Second, it gives space for the "subaltern" to speak and be seen by allowing those represented to co-produce the narrative, the research, and to challenge racialised-gendered-sexualised discourses. Third, film has a particular force that affects the entire aesthetic registers of an audience. In this regard, *Seeing Politics* contributes to the theorisation of emotion and images by thinking through the ways that visuals produce emotional reactions and affect. I would have liked to see this pushed a little further: Harman convincingly argues that images provoke emotion and affect — that the visual works differently from spoken/written text as a sort of language in its own right — but a more rigorous theorisation of *how* that works would have added to an already scholastically brilliant text and helped convince any naysayers of visuality, emotion, and aesthetics's importance in theorising IR. Fourth, film has the *potential* to reach a global audience. This *potential* is subject to all forms of gatekeeping, global film governance, and in/formal politics — the subjects of Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 2 specifically deals with all of the steps and considerations that go into producing and shooting a film from pre- to post-production. This chapter is incredibly insightful not just for the would-be filmmaker but also for visual scholars conducting analyses of video or film. Having actually produced and distributed a film, Harman shows some of the unseen aspects of film-production such as casting, crew selection, working on-set, script writing and run-throughs, scheduling, security, location scouting, colouring, sound, and even equipment. Much of these production aspects have largely gone unconsidered in visual IR scholarship. *Seeing Politics,* then, not only provides a critical method for *doing* IR research, it offers an invaluable insight into the world of visual production. For IR scholars of visual material and popular culture, this should be a go-to chapter that will enable more nuanced analyses that question some of the 'unseen' parts that come together to produce the final, clean, 'image'.

I want to draw out one thing in particular that struck me from Chapter 2. It is perhaps one of the smallest and more mundane parts of film production: colouring. Buried in one paragraph (p.99) we are told how Malcolm — the film's colourist — makes sure that each shot looks the same colour and that the entire film matches the colour palette chosen by Harman and the film's director, Leanne. This speaks directly to the questions Andersen, Vuori, and Guillaume have posed in various outlets about chromatology (Andersen et al. 2015; Guillaume et al. 2016; Guillaume et al. 2018). For me, this small part of *Seeing Politics* added a new dimension to their argument that we need to pay attention to the colouring of the visual and the politics of colour in order to fully understand the sociopolitical work that images do and how they enact particular worlds. But, it also solidified just how produced — not necessarily a bad thing — the visual is: photorealistic mediums like film and photography are often taken at face value. This is not a new lesson but *Seeing Politics* demonstrates the actual processes involved in creating some of the images that we — as IR scholars interested in visual politics — analyse.

Seeing Women. Seeing Politics.

This is not just a book about seeing women's experiences of and engagement with politics. It is about seeing the everyday politics of 'the state' and 'the international' that structure life (in Tanzania). In Chapter 4, Harman shows how the (informal) gatekeeping politics that she had to work with and around at every level of the state often goes unseen. Especially when we consider the state to be a unitary actor (pp.143, 166-7). Harman also shows how this gatekeeping controls what and who is visible and seen via both formal and informal politics and procedures. This is a fascinating chapter that documents the patience needed, risks taken, and on-the-ground know-how that went into making *Pili.* More than that, it showcases all of the myriad ways that (international) politics plays out in the everyday, mundane, ways that feminists have shouted about for years. Not only does Harman demonstrate the importance of critical methods but how—just by trying to use them—we can see political practices we may not have if we stuck with tradition. Dare I say, had *Pili* never made it to screen, this book project would still have been a resounding success in exposing the politics around Tanzanian women's lives, HIV/AIDS, and global health.

Seeing women, of course, does not come without problems. It is important to "see" the people who have been silenced and/or invisibilised but it is equally so to question how these people — so often pushed to the margins of 'international politics' — might be seen when one uses film as a method of researching, producing and simultaneously disseminating knowledge. With regard to the film *Pili*, for me, this means asking questions about the way that the eponymous protagonist's story as well as those of the other eighty women in the film are interpreted by various audiences. How they are responded to and how the characters are figured and constituted in and through

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audiences' interpretations. This, as we know from Roland Barthes' (1967, 1977) work on the death of the author, is vitally important because all visual material is polysemous and open to multiple, often competing, interpretations. So, how is Pili constructed? Not just in the film but through responses to it? How is her story — although not a documentary film, the storyline is drawn and developed from Tanzanian women's daily lives — received and constituted by audiences? This is something Harman, in a somewhat auto-ethnographic fashion, reflects upon as the book draws to a close in Chapters 5 and 6 as she surveys the varying aesthetic effects the final film has on many different audiences.

The book *Seeing Politics* and the film *Pili* tell and show different stories about what 'seeing politics' is and can be. Both show that no matter how hard one tries to 'see' or 'show' and/or 'hear' or 'speak' politics, things always remain unseen/unshowable and/or unheard/unsayable: in the film we do not see Harman's engagement with and negotiation of in/formal gatekeeping but we see Pili's; in the book we read about both (ch4, esp. pp.168-170). This is an important point of reflection for IR scholars working in/with the visual. The visual can complement scholarship by creating space for new ways of thinking about silence/ing and in/visibility but it cannot do everything (Cooper-Cunningham 2019, 388). That forces us to consider textual/vocal, corporeal and visual means of constituting politics as well as their (combined) communicative force. This is to say that vision does not have "prime explanatory" power, nor do words (Zalewski 2018, 283).

What is incredibly refreshing about *Seeing Politics* is its frankness. It is honest and transparent about the research process and the obstacles that one encounters in both research and the making of a co-produced film. Harman does not shy away from talking about the power dynamics and hierarchies, especially those caused by money and ethnicity, in this work. Instead of denying hierarchies, Harman focuses on not exacerbating them and how best to negotiate the racialised-gendered-sexualised agent-structure relationship. *Seeing Politics* also deals with the reality of not knowing: Harman could not know if the film would be a success, whether there would be any financial return for the actors, etc. In this regard, I give the last word to Harman: "we need to be bolder in our use of…methods and work in the visual and aesthetic turn" (p.223). Embracing the unknown is crucial to that.

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