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Sketching Geopolitics

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Sketching geopolitics: comics and the case of the *Cheonan* sinking

Paper abstract:

Recent scholarship in International Relations (IR) and International Political Sociology (IPS) has made significant contributions to the study of images. Chief among such studies on visual politics has been the focus on popular visual media including cartoons, film, photography and video games. This paper takes a look at another prominent medium: the comic. Comics provide ample potential starting points for IR scholars and political sociologists: the comic's aesthetic qualities, that is the way in which it narrates geopolitical events to public audiences through condensed image–word relations, reveals a distinct politics of representation. Thus, the study of comics contributes to a better understanding of visuality—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically. This paper complements existing work by engaging an example outside of familiar European-language contexts. It discusses a comic booklet that was published by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense in the aftermath of the sinking of the *Cheonan*: a navy vessel that was allegedly sunk by a North Korean torpedo in 2010. Recognizing comics as narrative sites of (geo)politics, the paper explores the booklet's own way of seeing by discussing its dramatic structure and rhetorical devices. In this way the paper provides an exemplary reading of comics, which can serve as a conceptual basis for future studies in the field.

Keywords:

Comics, geopolitics, narrative, politics of representation, Korea

Introduction¹

On March 26, 2010 a corvette of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) navy, the *Cheonan*, sank near Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea. Of the 104 personnel onboard, 58 survived. It was not immediately clear what caused the vessel's sinking, which was on a routine patrol mission close to the disputed maritime border with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter North Korea). In response to this incident, then South Korean President Lee Myung-bak convened emergency security meetings and ordered an investigation. Almost two months later a team of military and civilian investigators, the so-called "Joint Investigation Group" (JIG), from Australia, South Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States concluded that the *Cheonan* had been sunk by a North Korean torpedo. These findings led to widespread fears about the escalation of tensions between the two Koreas, which are still currently in an official state of war. Another military incident—the shelling of the South Korean island Yeonpyeong by North Korean artillery in November 2010—exposed the tense geopolitical situation in the region, which is in the sphere of influence of the four nuclear powers China, North Korea, Russia, and the US. In an immediate response to the publication of the JIG's findings, North Korea strongly denied any involvement in the sinking and accused the South Korean-led investigation of manipulation and fabrication.

While the reactions of North Korea might not have been surprising (although it did offer to send its own inspection team, in an unusual move), skepticism about the conclusions of the JIG's investigation grew both in South Korea and abroad. A domestic survey, for instance, found that less than one-third of South Koreans believed the findings of the investigation (Chosun Ilbo 2010). In order to dispel doubts at home and abroad, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense (MND) published in September 2010 a Korean- and English-language report in order to make the findings of the JIG available to a broader domestic and international audience (MND 2010a). Earlier in June the South Korean government had already presented the results of the official investigation in a letter to the United Nations Security Council (Park 2010), which contained photographic images of the ship wreckage in an attempt to provide visual evidence of its claim. As the UN body issued a Presidential Statement on the sinking—though without naming an aggressor, but accepting that it was caused by an attack and not, for instance, by an accident—these initiatives came to be part of a broader approach of the Seoul administration to both tell its version of the story and establish international consensus on its geopolitical narrative.

Embedded in these efforts of producing particular knowledge of the event was the commissioning of a comic booklet, the paper's central object of analysis, which the MND distributed to public institutions including schools, libraries, and government offices (MND 2010b). The comic *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack* features a story about a young journalist who is investigating

¹ The full comic can be accessed at: <http://cheonan46.tistory.com/96>

the sinking and, eventually, convinces his fiancée that North Korea was responsible for it. Leaving no doubt about the nature of the incident—it was an attack and nothing else—it has been published in Korean in both a print and in an online version. While the MND had published cartoons and comics before, they were mainly aimed at members of the armed forces. Commissioning storytelling of geopolitics to society at large through the Ministry of National Defense—instead of other cabinet-level bodies such as the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Public Administration—does not only signal the booklet’s extraordinary rhetoric of national security, but also provides insights into the international political sociology of *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack*.

The linking of a “serious” matter of “high politics” (i.e. the sinking of the *Cheonan*) with an “unserious” item of popular culture (i.e. the medium of the comics) reveals that comics affect political practice because they are deemed fit by governments to represent matters related to national security. In the present case, the comic is a central part of a state’s reasoning on geopolitical affairs and a crucial site to relate to a public audience. In fact many state and non-state actors resort and, no less important, react to comic images in ways suggesting their significance in setting the conditions for meaningful social practices in domestic and global politics. Comics—understood here as deliberate sequential arrangements of multiple, sketched image-text panels to convey information (cf. McCloud 1993; Groensteen 2007)—therefore require a thorough discussion of their politics of representation: the main goal of the paper.

Making sense of geopolitics through comics has begged the question for critical scholarship in IR and IPS of how geopolitical storytelling is put to work through such images (for example, Hansen 2016; Rech 2014; Thorsten 2012). This paper’s specific contributions thereto consist of conceptual reflections about the peculiarity of the medium of the comics. While this implies laying bare the connections of sketched art to the broader analysis of global politics, it means also to develop an awareness regarding the complicity of comics—and in a wider sense of modes of representation—in performing the political (Section 2). Arguing for the need to work with a specific understanding of the political—a central term (not only) for critical scholarship (cf. Guillaume and Bilgin 2017)—this section aims at rethinking the term “propaganda,” which is often—also implicitly—associated with official comic imagery in current research.² Furthermore, by contrasting comics with other forms of visual media, the section will show what comics can “do” that other media cannot. In short, this means approaching comics as a form of visual *storytelling*—different to the cartoon, which rather makes a visual *statement*—that has a dual function (in contrast to photorealistic media): that is, reducing the complexity of the real world *and* enhancing narrative capability. Thus, comics not only convey geopolitical storytelling but also facilitate its subsequent understanding. Important to note is

² As one reviewer correctly pointed out, graphic narratives stemming from popular comics artists like Joe Sacco or Art Spiegelman are understood to be critical texts commenting on political and social issues rather than ones serving propaganda purposes.

that this dual function is achieved specifically by virtue of comics' peculiar aesthetic qualities. Narrative authority, hence, is reliant on comics' artificial and artistic representation of reality at large.

Another key contribution of the paper is to complement ongoing debates in IPS on visual methodologies (for example, Bleiker 2017; Lisle 2017). While Roland Bleiker and Debbie Lisle have by now outlined important sets of methodological questions so as to better account for visibility—Bleiker explores multiple methodologies and sites of analysis, whereas Lisle engages with the operation of power in embodied relations of seeing—this paper goes a step further and offers a concrete method for the study of comics (Section 3). Herein emphasis is put on the rhetorical strategies of *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack*, in order to show how meaning is created—as well as a particular reading of the ship's sinking normalized, via image–text relations (Rose 2016).

In this vein, the visual discourse analysis provides an interpretive reading of the comic's dramatic structure and of its rhetorical devices. While the emphasis on the narrative structure is meant to demonstrate how the comic tells its story, a familiar approach in analyzing various forms of narration (for example, Armes 1994; Chatman 1980), this section engages in particular with the booklet's distinct politics of representation. That means specifically the plot's reliance on the figure of the journalist as well as the continuous juxtaposition of gendered (state/society), media (comics/photography), and spatial (private/public) binaries—crucial facets for critical scholarship to scrutinize so as to gain further insight into the meaning-making process of visibility (cf. Huysmans and Nogueira 2012). The analysis will also help diversify current research in IR/IPS as many studies on popular media are rather located in European-language contexts, usually English, possibly impairing a broader understanding of how visual imagery is put to work in different cultural and political spaces (see also, Acharya 2014). The conclusion will place the findings of the paper into the larger IR/IPS context.

The sketched image and the political

Proclaiming that sketched images have significance for global politics is nothing new. There have been numerous recent examples illustrating the geopolitical importance and implications of illustrated visual art. For instance in 2007 the International Criminal Court (ICC) accepted child drawings depicting the conflict in Darfur as evidence against Sudanese officials during their trials for war crimes (see also, Aradau and Hill 2013). Graphic illustrations of the torture practiced in North Korean prison camps figured prominently in the 2014 UN Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (OHCHR 2014). Based on this report, the Commission recommended the prosecution by the ICC of the country's leadership, including North Korean ruler Kim Jong-un, for crimes against humanity. And arguably the most well-known incidents

illustrating the severe implications of drawn images for world politics are the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in European media outlets such as the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* and, more recently, the French publication *Charlie Hebdo*.

In this vein, image-based studies in the broader field of IR/IPS—mostly associated with what is often called Aesthetic IR (for example, Bleiker 2009; Moore and Shepherd 2010), Popular Culture and World Politics (for example, Grayson et al. 2009; Kiersey and Neumann 2013), and Popular/Critical Geopolitics (for example, Dittmer and Dodds 2008, MacDonald et al. 2010)—have focused on the cartoon as a particular object of study. Klaus Dodds' (2007) engagement with the art work of British cartoonist Steve Bell on the US "War on Terror" and Lene Hansen's (2011) discussion of the so called Muhammed Cartoon Crisis can serve as the most prominent examples in the field (see also, Berg 2003; Hammett 2010; Manzo 2012; Ridanpää 2009). In fact, cartoons, a form of visual art mostly illustrated with a single or a limited number of panels, seem to be predestined for a visual political analysis given their instant connection to the political: they are often sketched and published in newspapers, mostly in the politics section, as a way to question or criticize the powerful. With cartoonists regularly being arrested for their artwork in many different countries, cartoons speak truth to power by means of caricature, irony, and mockery. Cartoons, hence, emerge as visual sites of contestation; they are sights of resistance.

Comics, however, might not disclose themselves immediately to the political. Rather, they are often viewed as innocent pieces of "low art" requiring additional explanation for serious engagements with them. This "lack of legitimacy", as one well-known comics scholar put it (Groensteen 2009: 3), is also due to the fact that reading comics is often made sense of in terms of (children's) education and entertainment and, therefore, is considered to belong to the rather profane activities of everyday life. This allegedly juvenile character of comics arguably aided the emergence of what is widely called the "graphic novel," which by its very name suggests a more serious and mature outlook, but is not necessarily a different form of comic-based storytelling. Yet, scholars of above mentioned backgrounds have addressed the comic as a distinct, political medium of meaning making with Hansen's (2016) study of Bosnian War comics being a recent example (others include, Holland 2012; Rech 2014; Thorsten 2012). Edward Holland (2012), for instance, explores the potential of a graphic novel by comic journalist Joe Sacco as a counter-hegemonic reading of the everyday experience of internally displaced people during the wars in Chechnya. By drawing on Gerard Toal's concept of anti-geopolitical eye, Holland conceives the graphic narrative as a form of disrupting the dominant perspective of states on geopolitical events. By contrast, Matthew F. Rech (2014), in his analysis of a military recruiting campaign of the British Royal Air Force, shows how state-centric narratives of geopolitics are reproduced through aesthetic conventions prevalent in the genre of war comics.

Most academic engagements with comics, however, explore how national identity and nationalism are enacted in and through them. Oliver Dunnett (2009), for instance, provides an analysis of (Belgian) identity representations in the comic series *The Adventures of Tin Tin* by comic artist Georges Remi. Dunnett identifies specific geopolitical discourses—colonialism, European preeminence and anti-Americanism—which resonate throughout the comic series and which promote Eurocentric values and views on the world. Jason Dittmer, turning to superheroes stories such as *Watchmen* and *Captain America* from DC Comics and Marvel Comics, theorizes comic books as a specific medium through which US geopolitical worldviews and notions of US national identity are conveyed (Dittmer 2005, 2007, 2013). While the figure of the superhero provides a popular script for academic inquires to reimagine current affairs in global politics (see the symposium on “The Politics of the Superhero” in *Political Science & Politics*, Costello and Worchester 2014, but also Costello 2009; DiPaolo 2011; Scott 2015; Smith and Goodrum 2011), other studies have outlined how comics have been used to convey particular political messages to audiences. For instance, Nathan Vernon Madison (2013) and Cord A. Scott (2014) show how US governments and publishers have employed graphic art to denigrate US enemies or to entice public support for ongoing war efforts (see also, Donovan 2012; Graham 2011). Thus, rethinking the putative innocence of comics as the very condition of advancing political knowledge claims helps to discern the complicity of comics in performing the political.

This complicity, however, as Fredrik Strömberg (2010) has shown in depictions of war and conflict in official or commercial comic imagery, has often been labelled and, more importantly, been condemned as propaganda; something which is implicated as ideology in comics in above mentioned scholarship (see also, DiPaolo 2011; Platz Cortsen et al. 2014; Scott 2007). One of the implications of such a designation is that comics are not recognized as crucial sites of politics. Put simply, since these aesthetic texts only constitute instances of deception and brainwashing then, they are meaningless for the study of the political. This line of argumentation, however, is problematic in two interrelated ways: First, it could be asked whether people and society at large really are the passive subjects who are exposed to, and at the mercy of, ideological indoctrination. Second, and more important, an understanding of propaganda as distortion implies that an authentic or original path to politics is attainable. As if we would only need to liberate politics from propaganda for its pure form to become discernable. Such an understanding of propaganda fails to take into account that, in essence, any attempts designed to influence opinions, advance certain knowledge claims, and/or persuade people to believe in particular ideas can be called propaganda—or, for that matter, brainwashing. This includes matters as diverse as, for instance, everyday advertising in modern societies, educational practices in schools and universities, as well as democracy promotion in foreign countries. In all these

instances, people's "hearts and minds" are targeted by particular means designed to persuade them to believe in certain concepts, knowledges, and values.

As such, the question could in fact be turned the other way round: what is politics about if not denoting the very practice of influencing people's worldview on a local, regional, or global scale? What follows then is a different notion of the political; one that is not necessarily about the organization of social communities or the distribution of material values, but linked to constant struggles over the prerogative of interpretation of material and social formations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These struggles, in turn, are linked to multiple modes of representation, among which comics are a part. While this understanding implies that modes of representation are entangled with material worlds, it points also to the mutual imbrication of the political and the representational (cf. Lisle 2017). For the close affiliation between the state—or indeed any other bearer of politics—and the comic image shows that political practice cannot be separated from its visual representation. Hence, as the comic constitutes an empirical site of the visual politics of states, it becomes a necessary object of political inquiry.

The juxtaposition of the comic with other visual media—in particular with its close relative the cartoon and *the* measure of reality, photography—helps to better understand comics' own politics of representation. For what will be emphasized here and should be taken into account by current scholarship is the scope that the comic has, in contrast to the cartoon, to mediate a story. That is to say, comics reveal an inherent breadth of visual storytelling, which relates to the development of context, characters and plot so as to represent narrative complexity in a condensed manner. The narrative coherence of cartoons, on the other hand, is usually limited to a few sketches requiring prior contextual knowledge (for example, about politics, history, society). While this is not about making clear-cut distinctions between or providing precise definitions of cartoons and comics—this has been done more fruitfully elsewhere (see, for example, Chute 2010; Eisner 1985; Groensteen 2007; McCloud 1993)—differentiating both visual media as heuristic categories is done so as to point out their distinct articulatory objectives. Put simply, while cartoons make a statement (for example, the Muhammed cartoons), comics tell a story (for example, narrating national identity). In this way, a focus on comics can contribute to advance the field's understanding of the drawn image.

The peculiarity of the comic can also be well elucidated in comparison to photorealistic media. The genres of documentary film and photojournalism, for instance, uphold a knowledge claim, after which their images function as copies of "the rational" and "the real." This is why these images, as will be shown in the following section in more detail, work as incontrovertible evidence across distinct spatial and temporal discourses: since the popularization of photographic technologies in the nineteenth century, people have referred to these mimetic representations as self-evident facts

regardless of their different cultural, historical, or geographical backgrounds. In other words, photographs (are thought to) speak for themselves. In this vein, photographic images, in aesthetic approaches to politics, come close to bridging what has been described as the “gap of representation” (for example, Ankersmit 1996; Bleiker 2009; Kompridis 2014). That is, photography is believed to overcome the inevitable difference between the represented (the event) and its representation (the image). While for some scholars this gap, and its attempted closure, enable the practice of politics (for example, Ankersmit 1996; Bleiker 2009; Laclau 1996), it is posited that it is precisely the comic’s lack of realism that articulates the medium’s distinct way of seeing and showing. Put simply, instead of bridging the gap of representation, comics rather—due to their aesthetic qualities—widen it. For as comic images already appear treated, processed, and adapted, they are instantly recognizable as artificial or artistic representations of reality and not as its corresponding equivalent. Important to note is that these imaginary renderings work both ways: comic images convey the complexity of reality (and of storytelling), that is issues and processes of the “real world,” in a simplified *as well as* in a focused manner. That is to say the comic not only reduces the concept of reality to sketched shades of grey (or color for that matter), but simultaneously condenses narrative structure too.³ Thus the comic not only takes something away—that is, (photo)realism—it also adds something by foregrounding the essentials of storytelling such as plot and character development. What follows is the comics’ peculiar politics of representation: they are not only deployed to mediate geopolitical discourse, but also to facilitate its understanding as many examples show.

For instance, the Australian Department for Immigration and Border Protection published in November 2013 a graphic novel in order to discourage potential refugees from seeking asylum in Australia (Laughland 2014). Containing no words or other textual explanations, the 18-page digital comic “speaks” via its images alone: it, hence, transcends cultural and linguistic barriers and makes Australian border protection narratives easily understandable to particular audiences. Another example of how comics are meant to represent and aid the comprehension of political events concerns the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Providing another illustration of the juxtaposition of “serious” geopolitics and its “unserious” representation, the National Commission on the Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States sanctioned an official comic version of its final report in order to help explain the processes that led to the coordinated attacks by the terrorist group al-Qaeda. The purpose of *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* is clear: to make the complex developments comprehensible to a broader public (Jacobson and Colon 2006).

The very same rationality applies to *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack* (Interview with Lee, October 22, 2014). For in order to make visible what has been invisible—that is, the event itself as well as the intricate processes related to fact-finding and official reasoning—the comic seems to have

³ I thank...for pointing this out to me.

emerged as the only suitable format by which to visualize South Korea's geopolitical narrative. For what becomes evident in the uses of sketched visual art, is that the medium of the comics is meant to embed itself in the message (McLuhan 1965). Thus, the content becomes intertwined with its form of presentation, so that the reading of the message is affected by its messenger. It follows that the medium or the form is never neutral in how it tells a story, as it is also *itself a story*. Consequently, the medium constitutes distinct knowledge and represents geopolitics in a particular way. People's interactions with sketched art are a good example of the comic's own epistemologies. Regardless of its content, readers relate to the medium's aesthetic appeal and easy accessibility as well as to its reduction of complexity and to its artistic freedom in the representation of reality. It is precisely the comic's own way of seeing and showing which makes it deeply political. Thus the comic, because it is able to speak in a way that other forms of visual media cannot—in the words of Frank Möller (2013: 164), it transcends the limits of representation—, has to be the medium used to recount the geopolitical narrative about the *Cheonan*. Following on, the next sections will now provide a discussion of the (geo)politics of the comic booklet.

Geopolitics sketched

The 32-page color comic booklet *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack* is sketched in a Japanese *Manga*—or, what would be called in Korea, *Manhwa*—style iconography emphasizing childlike facial features (for example, enlarged eyes, small noses and mouths) and expressive character designs. This particular aesthetic style functions as a form of nonverbal, purely visual communication (for example, through the visual exaggeration of emotions such as anger, joy, and pain). The pages of the comic contain two to nine panels, as individual image frames, which are separated by white blank spaces (“the gutter”). In the present case, the separating gutter helps the story to be read as individual images arranged in a sequential order.⁴ Except for onomatopoeic expressions such as “crash,” “boom,” “bang” that address the text *as* image as well as adding an aural dimension to visual art, the text itself in the speech bubbles does not interact aesthetically with the drawn images (Eisner 1985). In other words, the textual and the visual are addressed as two distinct modes of meaning making.⁵ The major storyline is constructed around the protagonist's search for the cause of the ship's sinking, which is linked to the personal relationships between the main characters.⁶

⁴ For a further engagement with the function of the gutter, see Dittmer and Latham (2015).

⁵ In order to evoke particular emotions, comics engage the text as images. For instance, a sense of fear and horror can be aggravated by rendering the (content of) text in red resembling flowing blood (see also, Eisner 1985: 12). In this way, the text-as-image rendering affects the reading of the comic.

⁶ According to the Chief Officer of the Planning Group of the Scientific Investigation Lab of the Ministry of National Defense, the reason for embedding the story of the *Cheonan* sinking in the context of a romantic partnership and not, for instance, in friendship or kinship, was because, he argued, such sensitive issues tend to

Considering comics as a (visual) narrative medium means to outline an interpretive method that finds application especially in discourse analytical approaches (Rose 2016). In order to understand how meaning is created, and a particular reading of the sinking normalized through image–text relations, the following visual discourse analysis places emphasis on the rhetorical strategies of the comic. For this, the discussion explores the dramatic structure and rhetorical devices of the booklet—thereby, as noted, advancing a step further recent research on visual methodologies (for example, Bleiker 2017; Lisle 2017). For similar to a plot structure in a film or a play, the comic entails narrative segments—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, dénouement—that together make up its story and which articulate specific assumptions about the characters and the narration of the course of events (see also, Eisner 2008). Therefore, it makes sense to discuss each of the narrative segments consecutively and to relate them to the comic’s politics of representation. In this vein the empirical discussion will pay particular attention to the juxtaposition of narrative elements pertaining to the gendered depiction of the lead characters, the interplay between comic and photographic images, the figure of the journalist, and the spatial settings of the story. This will help discern how the comics medium is utilized to articulate the ship’s sinking in ways that draw on wider social discourses, including ones of gender, inter-visibility, class, and space. It is in this vein that these elements—as knowledge practices themselves involved in framing—become political (Lisle 2017).

Thus, the analysis will discuss images in conjunction with their accompanying texts, the speech bubbles, as well as pay attention to how readers are made to see and to know through the comic’s visuality. The goal here is twofold: to show how the visual storytelling of the comic functions in producing a specific account of the event, and to provide an exemplary analysis for subsequent research on sequential visual imagery. In addition, the discussion of the booklet is complemented by insights that have been gained through email exchanges and onsite interviews. These were conducted in Autumn 2014 with the author of the comic booklet, Kang Chon, and the Chief Officer of the Planning Group of the Scientific Investigation Lab of the Ministry of National Defense, Lee Jae-hwa, as well as his assistant, So Jae-hyun.

Exposition

The exposition of the comic introduces the main characters to the readers and explains what the story is about. This part is important for the story’s understanding because, in short, we learn who they are, what is driving their quest, and how they relate to each other (cf. MND 2010b: 2–6). The

be discussed more freely and sincerely (Interview with Lee, October 22, 2014). Some theorists in comic studies have suggested that invoking the theme of romance works to appeal feminine readerships (Duncan and Levitz 2015).

plot is set in South Korea a couple of months after the sinking of the *Cheonan* and unfolds in a private spatial setting: at home. Kang Ho-ryong, the protagonist of the comic, is awoken in the morning by a phone call from his fiancée, Song Eun-hye (see Figure 1 below). The reader learns that Song is complaining about the first encounter that Kang had with her father some time earlier. Instead of trying to make a good impression on her father, she complains, he spoke his mind too freely when he stated his intention to live with her in a friendship-like manner yet intending to have many children (MND 2010b: 3). This independent and outspoken character trait of Kang, which will play a role later in the discussion, is reinforced by the fact that he lives on his own.

Figure 1: introductory scene taking place in private space; all images are reproduced with permission of the ROK Ministry of National Defense



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The introductory scenes also show how Kang, who is a journalist working for a Sunday newspaper, is asked by his superior to reopen the case of the *Cheonan* sinking—and, for that matter, determine its real cause. A renewed investigation based on facts would be needed since, as his boss explains to a surprised Kang, “there are still people who have doubts about the incident” (MND 2010b: 5). Given that the investigation about the sinking is portrayed as a career opportunity for the young journalist, the reader can expect the assignment to be carried out with commitment, resolve, and seriousness. For instance the reader finds out that Kang has already worked on this case for two months, even before he was “officially” given the task of its reinvestigation (MND 2010b: 10). In a later scene he is shown to be so absorbed by his investigation that he forgets his date with his finance (MND 2010b: 9). Furthermore, since Kang is also portrayed as a character who expresses his opinion freely, we can infer his upright and authentic nature.⁷ Put into the wider context of the story, the sinking of the *Cheonan* will be investigated with determination and professionalism regardless of the interests of, and interference by, politics, the public, or other third parties. For being portrayed as someone who is undeterred and unaffected by any exertion of outside influence, Kang can pursue his investigation without interference from the domestic realm as well—something which helps to reveal the gendered nature of the booklet’s storytelling.

The articulation of gendered difference not only becomes visible through the use of colors in the comic—he wears blue and she wears pink; even her cell phone is pink—but also through the protagonists’ way of behaving: he pursues a professional undertaking, while she is following a personal interest; Song is portrayed as being primarily occupied with the imminent wedding of the couple. He has a job, she does not; while he earns the money, she only takes it. He is reasonable and rational, whereas she is emotional and hysterical. He explains “serious” affairs of “high politics,” while she is obsessed with “soft” issues of romance and marriage; she constantly brings up the wedding in her personal conversations with Kang, who is shown to be deep in his investigation. He possesses factual knowledge, while she echoes rumors about the sinking; in other words he knows, while she is only enlightened by him. While the politics of gender—the presence and agency of men and the absence and passivity of women—resonate well within popular representations of international politics (cf. Dixit 2014), it also provides insights into the political sociology of the booklet. Namely by linking the personal relationship here to a broader political context.

For what becomes clear in the course of the comic is that both characters perform the role of the government and the public in South Korea respectively. While the male character comes to represent the South Korean government—as mentioned, always in an active and in a knowing pose—the female character embodies the position of the South Korean public: critical but uninformed, distracted and passive. As the characters’ relationship is presented in rather conflictual terms

⁷ I would like to thank...for directing my attention to this point.

throughout the comic—she calls into question his words, actions, or intentions; she appears to control him continuously, while he has to be accountable for his actions and attempts to appease her steadily (e.g. MND 2010b: 4, 9–12, 27–29; see also, Figure 2 below)—the antagonistic depiction corresponds with the general nature of the government’s relation to the public in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking. This was marked by distrust toward the official investigation, demands for greater accountability, and public pledges of transparency by the government. The comic’s juxtaposition of gendered difference functions, hence, as a reference point to the overall separation that emerged during the *Cheonan* crisis between the government and the public—a separation that will, through the narrative means of the marriage, eventually be overcome.

Figure 2: gendered depiction of state/society relations



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Rising action

The second narrative segment, which takes up the largest share of the plot structure, shows the beginning of the investigation and the research conducted by Kang (MND 2010b: 6–20). This segment serves as the narrative preparation of the story’s climax, which is about to blame North Korea while also reaching a consensus over that. This is done by adhering to the technicalities of scientific discourse. Kang uses graphs, images, and numbers to argue and convince, and not to assert and persuade. His impersonal and dispassionate language, which contains formal terminology and references to scientific methodology (see, for example, MND 2010b: 12–17), stands in contrast to Song’s emotional outbursts. In other words, the journalist’s knowledge claims are credible, substantial, and valid. Consequently he is dismissing each of the different hypotheses that have been proposed in the aftermath of the ship’s sinking. For instance the reader is shown Kang’s visit to the site of the sinking, where he is told that bad weather conditions made rescue attempts difficult. The visualization of the site of the sinking—depicted in dark and opaque tones—helps the reader to see, and therefore to better understand, the difficulties of the salvage operation; an argumentative clarification given the public criticism that the government had faced due to what was perceived to be a delayed response to rescuing the ship’s crew by officials (see MND 2010b: 7).

In this section Kang explains to Song—and, by extension, to the reader—the background to and the circumstances of the official investigation. In doing so, Song is echoing the public disbelief that had accompanied the findings of the JIG ever since they were published. However, with his deduced knowledge and devotion to the case—he is shown to be busy with and deep in the case (e.g. MND 2010b: 6, 8, 9)—he always has ready a convincing answer to whatever question she may have. The (visual) rhetoric of science is also enhanced by contrasting two distinct modes of visibility, which are rather rarely found in (studies of) graphic art: comic images and photographs (see Figure 3).

The visual politics of the comic points here to a hierarchical relationship between both forms of representation; a hierarchy that is deliberately reliant on the contrasting of the “fantasy” of the comic with the “reality” of the photographs. For what becomes clear is that the comic image is used for illustrative purposes in the booklet. That is to say the comic image is explanatory of, and therefore secondary to, actual knowledge about the incident. It is not itself (relevant) knowledge. In contrast, photographs of the wreckage serve here as self-evident arguments. The photographs function as knowledge in themselves. So while the comic images indicate fictional knowledge belonging to the imagined world, the photographs contrariwise constitute factual knowledge defining the real world.

The photographs are able to enhance their rhetorical force precisely by being placed in contradistinction to the comic image. As mentioned above, this is due to their different aesthetic qualities. A photograph is what Roland Barthes (1977: 12) has famously called a “message without a

code” through which we can witness truth and reality as they are, and not as we wish them to be. Photographs are therefore authentic and authoritative and trump other modes of representation such as language, sound, and text (for example, eyewitness over earwitness or “a picture is worth a thousand words” logic). The comic, due to its style and appearance, is however immediately identifiable as an artistic and, crucially, *artificial* rendering of reality. The medium of the comics is not able to close the blank space between the represented (the event) and its representation (the image). On the contrary it actually widens the gap. This is why the comic image always refers to the photograph, and not vice versa. Employing seeing as a way of knowing, Kang repeatedly instructs Song to “look at the photograph” (e.g. MND 2010b: 13, 14; see Figure 3 below).

Climax

The use of photographs as facts continues in the third segment, which forms the narrative climax of the comic (MND 2010b: 21–26). This part culminates with two key facets: substantiating, first, that the *Cheonan* was sunk in an attack that, second, was caused by a North Korean torpedo. In this segment, Song, who is echoing public doubts about the investigation results, is finally convinced about the factual circumstances of the sinking. Similar to the previous section, photographs take up here a central role in articulating the message of the segment (see Figure 3 below). In this regard, the booklet’s climax refers to South Korea’s geopolitical reasoning at the UN Security Council, where it maintained that Korean-language markings found on the torpedo fragments were what it called “conclusive evidence” about North Korea’s involvement in the ship’s sinking (Park 2010; see Figure 3 below). In the words of the comic’s lead character: “[...] the UN Security Council, too, has shown overwhelmingly support [for the findings of the JIG] and adopted a strong Presidential Statement [...] when we summarize the results, we can be certain that the attack on the *Cheonan* was conducted by a North Korean torpedo” (MND 2010b: 25).

Since the photographs of the torpedo fragments and of the wreckage have been presented as self-explaining facts, both at the UN Security Council and in the comic, they are meant to “speak” security. In this way, and due to a comic’s inherent lack of realism, the pictures work to mend the gap of representation: the truth about the event becomes knowable via its immediate photographic depiction. However, as mentioned already above, neither facts nor photographs speak for themselves. This is not to question the content or the accuracy of these pictures, but to acknowledge that, as can be seen throughout the course of the booklet, they are already embedded in an interpretive framework of signs (e.g. comic images, captions, arrows, circles), one that guides their reading and, hence, facilitates understanding of South Korea’s geopolitical narrative in the first place.

Figure 3: recontextualization of photographs presented at the UN Security Council



Falling action

The fourth narrative segment of falling action takes place in a bar, and depicts a conversation between Kang and Song (MND 2010b: 27–31). In another sign of her preoccupation with the imminent wedding, Song suggests a follow-up meeting with her father so that Kang can promise to him that he will be a good husband. As their conversation switches to the sinking of the *Cheonan*, she does not understand why people still say that the findings of the investigation have been manipulated. Responding that everybody can express her or his opinion freely in a democracy, it is not a coincidence that Kang—or, put differently, the journalist—refers here to the fundamental democratic principle of “free speech.”

For in any case the figure of the journalist, another central device of the booklet’s storytelling, shows how the comic is put to work. First, the protagonist is easily recognizable by his mere visual appearance: the notepad. The notepad, and its corresponding pen, is arguably the most iconic symbol of investigative journalism. This is why it always accompanies him while he is shown to conduct field research (e.g. MND 2010b: 8, 18, 19, 31). The icon of the notebook also transcends linguistic and cultural barriers: a reader does not have to speak Korean in order to understand what the depiction of the notepad signifies.

Second, and more importantly, other male figures with an investigatory directive such as a policeman or a private detective could also have been invoked for illustrating the practice of investigation.⁸ However only the character of the journalist combines the attributes that are essential to mediating the message of the story: namely informing the general public by means of objective and independent investigation. While a private detective does not go well with the overall public mandate of a reporter, a policeman would arguably be too easily identifiable as an agent of the state. That the reader is able to follow the journalist’s investigation from the perspective of an observer—we see how he works and how ‘the truth’ about the *Cheonan* attack is built incrementally—only adds to rendering his activities accountable and verifiable. The politics of the journalist figure, which possesses an authoritative voice in democratic systems, becomes clear: by drawing on the nature of professional journalism – balanced reporting, impartial research, being a watchdog for governmental bodies – the comic booklet disguises its own *official* origins.

Equally important to mention in this section is how the lead characters, after North Korea’s role in the *Cheonan* attack has been substantiated, make sense of the event as it contains the take-home messages for the reader. As Song wonders why North Korea did what it did—even though, she notes, the South Korean government was helping the regime—Kang explains this by way of recent developments in the country: the North Korean leadership needed a distraction after public

⁸ With the notable exception of Agatha Christie, the emphasis on *male* subjectivity is important because the figure of the investigator is heavily gender-biased in popular investigation imaginaries.

sentiment in the country had turned against it due to the failed currency reform of 2009, which hit the domestic economy hard. Furthermore, in order to strengthen the loyalty of the military, the young successor to power, Kim Jong-un, wanted to demonstrate his firm stance (MND 2010b: 30). However the most likely reason for North Korea's behavior is, because, according to Kang, it wants to divide public opinion in South Korea (MND 2010b: 30).

The rhetoric of separation—the division between the public and the government, among the general public and on the Korean peninsula—as well as its overcoming figure prominently in this section. In a flashback scene of Kang's research, he recalls a conversation he had with a surviving soldier. Inviting him to address the general public, the MND is directly speaking to the reader of the comic via one of its agents. Accordingly, despite recent provocations by the North—such as the *Cheonan* attack or a 2009 skirmish off Daechong Island—South Korean citizens would seem to be too complacent, the soldier says. Asking for continuing trust in and support of the country's military, the soldier conveys a central message to the reader: “For the sake of [national] security, it is desirable if everybody speaks with one voice” (MND 2010b: 31). In this way, he repeats an equally-worded sentence that Song expressed earlier in her conversation with Kang about the freedom of speech in democracies (“Our country is the only divided nation in the world. For the sake of [national] security, it is desirable if everybody speaks with one voice” (MND, 2010b: 30). The evocation of unity and the overcoming of a separation, also discussed in earlier sections, concludes in the following segment of the booklet.

Dénouement

The final section closes storytelling of the comic. It shows both characters outside, after they have left the bar. While the reader is implied as a target throughout the story—noticeable, for instance, through the way how Kang presents photographic evidence to the reader in Figure 3—it is nevertheless the first time where the characters directly, visually and verbally, address and interact with the audience. Addressing the reader through Song signals that the overall point—understanding how the government reached its conclusion about North Korea's guilt—is taken by the public (“Now you know everything, right?” MND 2010b: 32). Her raised index finger indicates a reference to educational authority, in that the reader is “in the picture”, thus enlightened. At the same time, it also refers to moral authority in that what has been claimed in the booklet is just and righteous.

The setting of the last scene deserves particular mention as it reveals a distinct spatial politics, which reinforces the message to the public. In the beginning of the comic, the lack of knowledge about the sinking is connected to private space. The protagonist is at home, who is, literally and figuratively, receiving a wake-up call (see Figure 1). The point to mention here is that the place of home suggests the lack of knowledge is an *individual* matter, something which is contained inside

domestic space. In contrast, with the comic ending outside of home, the reader sees a vibrant scene taking place in a metropolitan setting, the state of having knowledge and being enlightened is linked to public space (Figure 4 below). The public venue suggests that knowledge about the sinking has become a *collective* matter, something which can be expressed outside in public space. Spatializing the beginning and the ending of the comic works to frame the story of the *Cheonan* in binaries including private/public, state/society, inside/outside and division/unity. While both lead characters, or state and society for that matter, were separated from, and in conflict with, each other in the beginning—they are both home alone and have an argument—, at the end they have found a common ground and walk harmoniously alongside each other. Furthermore, they are about to tie the knot. Reiterating unity in matters of national security, both sides have bridged their spatial and political distance and overcame difference. The comic, hence, emerges as a site where social consensus is established and a common sense understanding of geopolitical affairs articulated. In doing so, *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack* is involved in setting the boundaries of legitimate geopolitical knowledge.

Figure 4: concluding scene taking place in public space



Conclusion

The paper's specific contribution to current scholarship on visual politics has been its conceptual reflection on the peculiarity of the comics medium, based on the selected example of *The Truth about the Cheonan Attack*. This official comic booklet was published by the South Korean Ministry of National Defense in the aftermath of the sinking of one of its navy ships, the *Cheonan*, in March 2010. In particular, the paper has argued for the need to develop a sensitivity concerning the complicity of the comics medium in performing the political. For, as was shown, comics are a good example of the impact that artefacts of visual culture have on politics, since many political actors rely on them to advance certain knowledge claims to public audiences. Comics, hence, are involved in setting the conditions for meaningful social practices in international relations—ample reason why IPS and IR scholars should study them closely. As has been argued, this means to look at comics as crucial sites of politics and not as mere instruments of propaganda—as is often done in current research. Comics are a distinct form of visual storytelling—in contrast to the cartoon, which rather makes a visual statement—that operates at the level of reduction (reality) and condensation (narration). In this vein comics are also different to photorealistic media forms, which assume political authority via mimetic representability. Comics, contrariwise, claim authority due to their artificial and artistic representations of reality.

Another contribution of the paper has been to offer a concrete method for analyzing comics, in contrast to the recent works by critical scholars that explored diverse methodological approaches in the more general study of visibility (for example, Bleiker 2017; Lisle 2017). Stressing the rhetorical strategies of the comic, the visual discourse analysis explored how meaning is constructed and particular knowledge about the sinking produced in the image–text relations presented. It was suggested that critical scholars need in future to develop an appreciation particularly of the dramatic structure and the rhetorical devices of a comic. In the case study presented here, this meant being attentive to the gendered depictions of characters, the interplay between different visualities, the social roles played by the protagonists, and the spatial settings of the story. These cut across and permeate the comic's narrative segments of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement, and are all crucial aspects for scholars to consider—ultimately so as to better understand the meaning-making process of visibility.

The findings of the paper give rise to key questions that could be addressed in further engagements with the medium of the comics. For instance, it could be asked how the interplay between different visualities affects the involvement of viewers—and in multiple ways. Whereas the juxtaposition of comic and photographic imagery in the present booklet rather turns the viewer into a passive witness, facilitated by an image-text that invites watching and reading but not challenging the protagonist's line of argumentation (Kang merely presents facts to the viewer), it could also be

asked how inter-visibility mediates an event as immediate and immersive—with the consequence of the viewer then becoming an active participant (see also, Möller 2013). Theorizing inter-visibility might also help us to rethink the limits of representation, in particular with regard to the representability of events that are deemed to be too atrocious and horrific to be made visual (for example, Spiegelman’s (2003) artistic engagement with the Holocaust). Similarly IR scholars could explore how rhetorical devices—for example, the specific roles of people and places—work in comics, which contain no words. This is pertinent for example in the case of the abovementioned (anti-)refugee graphic novel of the Australian Department for Immigration and Border Protection, which communicates narratives of international relations solely via visual imagery.

While critical IR scholarship goes on to address geopolitical storytelling, it is important to note that, in fact, there are many ways to mediate—and therefore to make sense of—an event. Far from being self-evident or self-narrating, stories can be conveyed in various narrative forms (for example, prose, news, novel) and/or representational modes (for example, film, photography, video). While one of the ways, as seen, relates to the medium of the comics, the principle openness of narration reveals that storytelling implies an *imaginative* dimension. Accounting for the narrative and imaginative dimension of international politics—most notably put forward through the methods of autoethnography, autobiography and what is called “fictional IR” (for example, Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Park-Kang 2014; Inayatullah 2011)—does require to study comics as geopolitical imaginaries; comics that are themselves geopolitical in that they not only tell a story about the military, national security or international relations, but in that they articulate difference alongside, as seen in the discussion, dichotomies of high-/low-politics, inside/outside, private/public, man/woman, rational/emotional and imagined/real (see also, Campbell 2007). In this vein, the role of the comic in enacting geopolitical knowledge requires continued attention of critical scholarship.

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