# Visual Biopolitics:
# Outlining a Research (Sub)field

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## Abstract

*The article introduces the concept of visual biopolitics as a new research approach to studying politics. The analysis starts with a discussion of how visualization might be helpful for political analysis and continues with academic engagement with semiotic studies, along with the theories of aesthetic and mimetic representation and performativity. Then the author explains how visuals can trigger political debates, particularly in the sphere of biopolitics and biopower, as well as in the adjacent domains of sovereignty, governmentality, and border politics. The concluding section projects the visual biopolitics frame onto the field of illiberal studies.*

Keywords: Visual Analysis, Biopolitics, Performativity, Representation

Visual analysis is an important research tool for such disciplines as anthropology, ethnography, cultural sociology, and media and communication studies. Political science and foreign relations have engaged with visual analysis mainly through relatively recent research in popular geopolitics and the ensuing pictorial and aesthetic turns in political and international affairs. Other domains of political scholarship, including biopolitics and biopower, are still waiting to be aligned with the domain of visual studies.

In this essay, I introduce the basics of visual politics and then extend it to the sphere of biopolitics. I explain the relevance of visual biopolitics for understanding different political phenomena and concepts, including those related to the spectrum of liberal–illiberal politics.

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**Visual Politics as a Research Subfield**

The sense that the disciplines of international and comparative studies are "ready for a visual turn" is gradually gaining prominence in academic circles.[1] "Visual politics emerges as a recognized area" of research that has the potential to inform a deeper understanding of political categories by focusing on the semiotic value ingrained in visuals.[2] Visual regimes as elements of statecraft, power relations, and sovereignty define how the world is seen, how our perceptions are anchored, and how images can be politicized, securitized, and weaponized. On the one hand, the "visual turn" is an effect of new technologies of production, distribution, and consumption of images; on the other hand, it has left a deep mark on public perceptions of the entire sphere of images, such that it might be considered a "paradigm shift" in the social sciences. Visualization envisions a break with path dependency or analogical reasoning, making it possible to reach beyond dominant consensual discourses, ordered and established languages and concepts, to open up our imaginations to new and innovative interpretations of politics.

The most dynamic forms of visualization (memes, avatars, emoji sliders, video games) are constitutive of the state-of-the-art technology of instant communication between individuals; they are also meaningful components of group formation and mobilization. Such digital computation techniques as Photoshop might be used for product promotion, as well as for visual propaganda and misinformation. The appearance of new visualized objects of analysis (for example, drone footage) may transform geopolitical imageries and perceptions of space. A plethora of relatively new and constantly progressing techniques of surveillance, monitoring, and face recognition based on visualization are crucial components of the new security apparatus.

The growing importance of visual analysis for domestic and international politics might be explained by the unique qualities of visual communication, which cannot be reduced to verbal forms of expression. In many cases, linguistic means might be insufficient to colorfully and convincingly represent concepts and ideas or deliver political messages: we may often lack the proper words to describe an increasingly complex political reality. Indeed, "images can depict as well as symbolize in a way that the code of language cannot."[3] In comparison to written texts, visualization techniques have a broader spectrum of affective means: they employ sounds, colors, and spatial movements as powerful tools in the increasingly competitive information and popular culture markets. A typical case of visualization is book-based films, which leave ample space for creative imagination and might significantly differ from the original texts, as well as from each other, in their representation of protagonists and events.

In critical discourse analysis, "semiotic modalities," including visual images, are often viewed as detached from language in a narrow sense.[4] Some authors anticipate

1 Michael Pfonner and Patrick James, "The Visual International Relations Project," *International Studies Review* 22 (2020): 192–213, 211, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa014.

2 "Editors' Introduction: Visual Politics, Grand Collaborative Programs, and the Opportunity to Think Big," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 1 (2021): 5 –21, 5, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220970361.

3 David Machin, "The Need for a Social and Affordance-Driven Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies," *Discourse & Society* 27, no. 3 (2016): 322–334, 327, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516630903.

4 Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Policy Studies," *Critical Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 177-197, 179-180, https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.798239.

"a straightforward replacement of language by pictures, books by television."[5] Yet do images indeed substitute for words as political arguments in policy debates and public discussions? The literature on visual argumentation avers that images are able to convey information that cannot be expressed verbally,[6] but images co-exist with words, as the approach known as multi-modality suggests. This approach seeks to identify and flesh out relations of power in texts and visuals, which might highlight certain parts of the political reality while hiding others. The application of multimodal analysis presupposes the unpacking of mechanisms that legitimate the power positions of performers and producers of politically relevant content: images, layout, soundtracks and music, public performances, 3D objects, and other forms of sign- and meaning-making. As some authors explain:

> images are seen as fragments of events and thus meaningless without verbal contextualization; they depict only the surface features of the world, rather than structure, complexity, or subjective depth; they activate merely emotional reactions that short-circuit critical reason; they "aestheticize reality" and promote voyeurism, nostalgia, and other fantasies; this capacity for enthrallment becomes a means for mass manipulation and political domination, creating a society of spectacles and scopic regimes.[7]

Moreover, visual products and objects can trigger politically consequential actions implying different forms of mobilizations, which becomes particularly relevant due to what Roland Bleiker has dubbed the "democratization of visual politics" on account of its openness, user-friendliness and accessibility.

**Two Dimensions of Visual Politics…**

The visual turn in political studies has a double meaning. First, visuality is a quality of public life, including the spheres of arts, media, and of course politics. Technologies produce new devices that function as "instruments embedded in social practices, deployed in configurations of power, and creating new distributions of visibility."[8] The image-centric structure of public politics necessitates condensed metaphors exemplified by pictorial expressions, illustrated slogans, mottos, and mascots. Visuals are able to represent an idea or an argument in a concise and illustrative form that catches the eye.[9] For instance, in many countries, presidential debates are unthinkable as a purely verbal genre, since pivotal elements include emotions, facial expressions, gestures, and mimicry.

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5 Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters," *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50, no. 2–3 (2009): 103–121, 114-115, https://doi.org/10.1080/14735780903240075.

6 Anthony Blair, "Probative Norms for Multimodal Visual Arguments," *Argumentation* 29 (2015): 217–233, 218, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-014-9333-3.

7 Robert Hariman, "Between Confusion and Boredom in the Study of Visual Argument," *Argumentation* 29 (2015): 239–242, 240, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-015-9346-6.

8 Anthony Amicelle and Claudia Aradau, "Questioning Security Devices: Performativity, Resistance, Politics," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 4 (2015): 293–306, 297, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615586964.

9 Thomas Powell, Michael Hameleers, and Toni G. L. A. van der Meer, "Selection in a Snapshot? The Contribution of Visuals to the Selection and Avoidance of Political News in Information-Rich Media Settings," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 1 (2021): 46–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220966730.

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Second, visual analysis is a research methodology, a toolkit particularly applicable to ethnography, anthropology, applied sociology, and videographic geography.[10] When it comes to visual politics as a research program or sub-discipline, it emerges at the intersection of two mutually complementary perspectives. One is the projection or extension of visual semiotic research to the sphere of political analysis. This trajectory takes the researcher from visual grammar and literacy (akin to reading skills) to interpretation (a subjective vision or version of visualized objects, their explanation, unpacking, and de-coding) and then to conceptualization (generalizable assumptions linking visual objects with conceptual apparatus and theories always open to new meanings). Key questions to ask would be: How do visuals engender political meanings? Who produces these meanings and who interprets them (and how)? Which visual genres are the most important for political analysis?

For example, maps may be a part of "semiotic landscapes"[11] because they represent a desirable way of looking at the world. Another genre is caricatures that "bypass contemplation and induce fast-paced, habitual comprehension, confirming prejudices and perpetuating stereotypes."[12] Caricatures essentialize reality, reducing it to a limited number of visually recognizable traits, and condense meanings in the sense that "intentionally false" and "inaccurate" images express something that refers to (or claims to be) "truth."

In this context, one should mention the "new visual semiotics," a sub-discipline that is interested in covering a variety of micro-practices and micro-policies constitutive of communal life, such as, for example, studying and learning, accommodating immigrants, or media reporting. This type of semiotic analysis focuses less on "meaning" and "representation" than on how individuals "use the embodied and affective dimensions of visual communication to negotiate their physical experiences in the world and their relationships with others."[13]

Another methodological perspective leads from political studies to semiotics: its points of departure are political discourses and visual practices that are scrutinized as "signs [that] carry traces of power relations."[14] For this methodological track, key questions would be: How do political meanings reveal themselves through visuals? How can we discuss politics in visual terms, i.e., on the basis of visual materials? What does visuality add to political analysis? Can visuals open up for discussion different dimensions of politics and power relations? Can they tell us more about politics than written texts?

The political effects of visual representations are contextual and depend on both visual agency[15] and visual consumption.[16] In this vein, it is important to discuss whether and

10 Bradley Garrett, "Videographic Geographies: Using Digital Video for Geographic Research," *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 4 (2010): 521–541, 521, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510388337.

11 Gunter Kress and Theo van Leewen, "The Semiotic Landscape," in *Images: A Reader*, ed. Sunil Manghani, Arthur Piper, and Jon Simon (London: SAGE, 2006), 119-123, 119.

12 Eric Herhuth, "Overloading, Incongruity, Animation: A Theory of Caricature and Caricatural Logic in Contemporary Media," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 3 (July 2018): 627-651.

13 Rodney Jones, "Towards an Embodied Visual Semiotics: Negotiating the Right to Look," in *Visualizing Digital Discourse: Interactional, Institutional and Ideological Perspectives*, ed. Crispin Thurlow, Christa Dürscheid, and Federica Diémoz (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2020), 22, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510113-002.

14 Machin, "The Need for a Social," 331.

15 Dana Hercbergs and Chaim Noy, "Mobile Cartographies and Mobilized Ideologies: The Visual Management of Jerusalem," *Antipode* 47, no. 4 (2015): 942–962, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12137.

16 Priya Dixit, "Decolonizing Visuality in Security Studies: Reflections on the Death of Osama bin Laden," *Critical Studies on Security* 2, no. 3 (2014): 337-351, 340, https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.978670.

how political phenomena can be visualized, given that they are represented through symbols, signified by icons, and surrounded by visual metaphors. Since "these visual representations are imbued with preconceived, arbitrary and very political notions… then there is literally an unlimited and meaningless number of images that can depict" them.[17] This is of particular importance when it comes to deeply dislocated political concepts that function as "empty" or "floating" signifiers open to multiple interpretations (security, democracy, liberalism and illiberalism, etc.).

These two research trajectories differ from each other not only in their argumentative style and focus, but also—and primarily—in what constitutes their main operational unit of analysis. For the cluster of originally semiotic studies that go political, the central unit is the sign materialized in—and exemplified by—specific visual objects, always individual in their singularity. For political studies that go semiotic, the pivotal focal points are concepts that go through semantic screening in an attempt to find out how a specific idea, term or notion might be represented and expressed in a visual form.

### … and Three Theoretical Components

The sphere of visual politics synthesizes three different theoretical traditions. One is grounded in Jacques Ranciere's idea of the "distribution of the sensible,"[18] which shapes the boundaries of what is visible and invisible, thinkable and unthinkable, seemingly rational and irrational,[19] included and excluded, accepted and rejected, "named" and "unnamed," semiotized and non-semiotized. Politics in this context is about moving and unstable boundaries that divide signified and non-signified realities, since what is excluded (silenced, forgotten, forbidden, expelled) "as a-semiotic instead appears an otherwise structured or belonging to a different semiotic system."[20]

By analogy with "language games," the "distribution of the sensible" might be viewed as a realm of "image games" of marking, appropriating, and signifying spaces and their symbols, and integrating them into *hegemonic regimes of visibility*. This concept seeks to explain the production and functioning of consensual and standardized representations authorized by the dominant symbolic order and designed to be aesthetically appealing and socially enjoyable. They function as a regulated and unified system of marketable signs and images in which irregular and uncoordinated semiotic elements (especially if they might be interpreted as disturbing) are treated as alien, foreign, and inappropriate, and therefore expelled. Through the lens of this concept, national identity appears as a complex semantic construct incorporating a wide range of visual products pertinent to culture, morals and ethics, memory politics, and borders.

Hegemonic regimes of visibility are dependent on the cultural phenomenon known as *gazing,* which denotes the semiotic experience of encountering visual imageries as the "socially constructed seeing."[21] Gazing "is always entangled … with sets of rules

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17 Roland Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 21.

18 Jacques Ranciere, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 12-13.

19 Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, "Emotions, Discourse and Power in World Politics," *International Studies Review* 19 (2017): 481–508, 502.

20 Daniele Monticelli, *Wholeness and Its Remainders: Theoretical Procedures of Totalization and Detotalization in Semiotics, Philosophy and Politics* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2008).

21 Jonas Larsen and John Urry, "Gazing and Performing," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 1110-1125, 1110, https://doi.org/10.1068/d21410.

and expectations associated with particular contexts and particular societies about who has the right to look and who has the right to be seen."[22]

A good example of the construction of a hegemonic regime of visibility is a classical music concert by top Russian conductor Valery Gergiev and his orchestra in Palmyra in 2015. The event became a visualized attempt to appeal to universal norms and values of world culture in justifying the Russian military operation in Syria as a civilizational mission aimed against barbarity and terrorism. From a political perspective, the concert was a cultural message of Russia's equality and indispensability in the world and an invitation to the West to engage in partnership.[23]

Visual hegemonic regimes are highly dependent on *locational context*, including the symbolic status of places where visual objects are situated, their surroundings, social and cultural environment, or adjacent objects that might be competing or complementary. One illustration is the transformations within the urban aesthetic landscapes of Russian cities that hosted the 2018 FIFA World Cup. In Nizhny Novgorod, for example, the new football stadium was constructed in close proximity to a major Orthodox cathedral, which was interpreted by some critics as a competition of two cult sites and an intrusion on the visual hegemony of the church as a symbol of Russian religious, cultural, and historical traditions.[24]

Another pertinent example is the 2007 relocation of Tallinn's Bronze Soldier monument, a military symbol of the Soviet era, from the city center to a military cemetery. The visual object itself—the statue—was not damaged, but its relocation from a central square to a city outskirt triggered an outburst of violent reactions from Russophone political activists who felt offended by the removal.

By the same token, material objects of high visibility may be politically resignified in line with the changed hegemonic regime of visibility. One example is statues of Lenin, which have in some Ukrainian cities been decorated by national activists in traditional national attire (*vyshivanka*). This symbolic "re-nationalization" of Lenin was a gesture of ironic deconstruction of Soviet history.

A second source of theoretical inspiration for visual politics is Roland Bleiker's concept of the "aesthetic turn" in international studies. Central to Bleiker's post-positivist and post-structuralist aesthetics[25] is the idea of representation, which is always "an act of power… an inevitably political issue [manifesting] a gap between what is observed and how this observation is represented… The difference between represented and representation is the very location of politics." [26] In other words, the aesthetic regime of visual culture produces political relations by means of the inevitable discrepancy and cleavages between signifiers and signifieds (or between what is represented and how it is represented). The sphere of aesthetics is therefore a powerful producer of political meanings and shaper of political concepts. The concept

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22 Jones, "Towards an Embodied Visual Semiotics," 20.

23 "S molitvoi o Pal'mire HD POLNAIA VERSIIA," YouTube video, 45:31, posted by "Kodakstudi1," May 6, 2016, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVH0XzBY6Bs.

24 "Nastroenie 'Zima': Stadium 'Nizhny Novgorod' / 2018 Fifa World Cup In Russia," YouTube video, 2:34, posted by "Gonz0070 Aeros"emka," January 27, 2017, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sY93r5anCVc.

25 Cerwyn Moore and Laura J. Shepherd, "Aesthetics and International Relations: Towards a Global Politics," *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 299-309, 309, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2010.485564.

26 Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21-22.

of aesthetic regime[27] is closely related to visual culture as "a catalyst for dealing with identity, voice, trauma and political notions of self-determination and civic rights," which presupposes "a power to define politics"[28] as a semantic struggle for hegemony through exposing some elements of reality and "giving voice to something"[29] that is excluded or silenced.

However, Bleiker's opposition between "mimetic" and "aesthetic" (otherwise dubbed "simulative") regimes is vulnerable to two criticisms. First, instead of binarizing the regimes of visibility, it would be more appropriate to approach them as marking the opposite ends of a spectrum of images into which various forms of visual representation—both politicized and de-politicized—are embedded. Second, mimetic regimes of visibility, while trying to approximate a sign (a picture, a photo, or a video) as closely to its material reification as possible, still leave ample space for aesthetic and simulative components that generate implicitly political meanings.[30]

The impossibility of drawing a clear line between aesthetic and mimetic imageries creates a zone of indistinction between the two and engenders hybrid forms of visual representation. More specifically, mimetic images are ostensibly aestheticized through the visualization of material elements, from stadia to monuments, which opens prospects for unveiling hidden political meanings in the urban environment. Politics emanates from the inevitably manipulative use of signs that exist within semiotic spaces between signifiers (images or discourses) and signifieds (ideational or material reality represented through signs).

One of the multiple examples of mimetic representations is photography, which, despite its inherent ability to reflect life "as it is," leaves ample room for the manipulation of meaning. On the one hand, with mimetic authenticity, photography creates an effect of approximating representations to "reality," which is instrumental for building relations of trust and respect. On the other hand, this alleged authenticity—manifested through singular images and aimed at capturing a specific moment—might be challenged by the function of representation inherent to visual genres that catch, contextualize, and stage typical events or characters, and thus reflect some preconceived ideas open to additional meanings. One study explains how photos of the victims of a deadly virus, for example, might become a robust source of (re)politicization:

The media coverage of the Ebola epidemic in the Global North has largely fed into a culture of fear; stigma and paranoia were on the rise, reminiscent of a colonial gaze of the 'Other'… In response, a TV anchor and photographer started a movement of visual resistance of her own: she produced a video that quickly spread across social media in which she declares: "I am Liberian, not a virus."[31]

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27 Lola Frost, "Aesthetics and Politics," *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 433-443, 437, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2010.485560.

28 Gabi Schlag, "Moving Images and the Politics of Pity: A Multilevel Approach to the Interpretation of Images and Emotions," in *Researching Emotions in International Relations Methodological Perspectives on the Emotional Turn*, ed. Maéva Clément and Eric Sangar (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 209-230.

29 Rok Bencin, "Rethinking Representation in Ontology and Aesthetics via Badiou and Ranciere," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 5 (2019): 95–112, 96, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418806573.

30 Brent Steele, "Recognising, and Realising, the Promise of the Aesthetic Turn," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017): 206–213, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816684254.

31 Ingrid Gessner, "Picturing Ebola: Photography as an Instrument of Biopolitical (In)Justice," Project: Biopolitics/Biopower in Transnational American Cultures, March 2020.

Documentaries provide another lucid illustration of politicized and securitized mimetic representations. For example, during military campaigns, many defense ministries publish online video footage of air strikes or flights over enemy territory, along with the ensuing destruction of the targeted military objects. These mimetic episodes usually remain almost silent and are meant to serve as hard evidence of the power to destroy.

Another example of mimetic representation is cartography, a field of scientific knowledge that is supposed to represent geography yet is saturated with various signs and tropes: "Maps communicate knowledge which can only be conveyed in a graphic format. They are deliberate constructs which possess emotional and intellectual appeal, and can potentially form a unique category of propaganda."[32] One may argue that "historically, maps have promoted a decisive discourse underlying the configuration of a modern political authority based on strict territorial boundaries… [which] has been the basis to create hierarchies between Europeans and non-Europeans as well as among higher and lesser breeds of Europeans."[33]

In addition to the clusters exemplified by Ranciere and Bleiker, we find common ground with the idea of *performativity* as introduced to the academic literature by Judith Butler. Performativity is usually discussed as a concept suitable for studying emotive and aesthetic practices that, through acts of interpellation, create and consolidate political subjects. Performativity is understood as a concept instrumental for discussing public actions of high visibility that do not so much reflect as produce reality and that have ontological effects through multiple reiterations.[34] It is through the lens of performativity that one can look at political battles as being fought within the visual and imaginary fields, "where affectively charged images shape our understanding of political phenomena more so than the actual phenomena themselves."[35]

Performativity expresses itself through public and ritualistic acts and cultural gestures of role-taking and role ascription with a certain visibility and a semiotic background. "The hegemony of vision"[36] appears to be a key operational element of performativity. "Visuals are thought to send people along emotive pathways where textual/verbal material leaves them in a more rational, logical and linear pathway of thought."[37] From the perspective of performativity, all identities are "cultural fictions."[38] In other words, "after Butler, identities and belongings … can never be securely pinned down. They must be seen as fundamentally contingent, stabilized only through the performative acts that attempt, unsteadily, to fix them as integral markings of our existence."[39] Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle" seems to be a

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32 Russell Foster, "TabulaImperiiEuropae: A Cartographic Approach to the Current Debate on the European Union as Empire," *Geopolitics* 18, no. 2 (2013): 371-402, 380, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2012.716466.

33 Rodrigo Bueno Lacy and Henk van Houtum, "Lies, Damned Lies & Maps: The EU's Cartopolitical Invention of Europe," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 4 (2015): 447-499, 448, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2015.1056727

34 Judith Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," in *Observant States Geopolitics and Visual Culture*, ed. Fraser MacDonald, Rachel Hughes, and Klaus Dodds (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

35 Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, "Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 34, no. S1 (2008): 115-135, 131, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210508007821.

36 Jones, "Towards an Embodied Visual Semiotics," 20.

37 Helene Joffe, "The Power of Visual Material: Persuasion, Emotion and Identification," *Diogenes* 217 (2008): 84–93, 84, https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192107087919.

38 Alan McKinlay, "Performativity and the Politics of Identity: Putting Butler to Work," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21 (2010): 232–242, 235, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2008.01.011.

39 Lynne Segal, "After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them?" *Subjectivity* 25 (2008): 381–394, 381, https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.26.

good match for this theory.[40]

Performativity, like Bleiker's aesthetics, recognizes the inevitability of a gap between a material or physical object and its visualized interpretation. What the theory of performativity adds is an emphasis on repetitions and reiterations embedded in each politically meaningful action. In the meantime, "any refusal to repeat an act that confirms a subordinate identity [...] necessarily has a political effect" as well.[41] Since political identities emerge "as neither foundational grounds nor fully expressed products,"[42] they are recurrently re-signified through rituals of repetition and reiteration.[43] To qualify as performative, a social action (a political or cultural gesture, or a public event) should be "re-enacted" and "re-experienced" within the established set of meanings.[44] From a semiotic perspective, "every sign can be cited, and consequently it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts."[45] This presupposes that performative actions require publicity (as opposed to technocratic decision-making behind the closed doors of corporate institutions, parliaments or governmental agencies), that they should be replicable and reproducible in a variety of discursive and visual forms, and that they engender a certain potential for resistance to—and subversion of—the dominant discourses of power. One may say that "reiteration is compulsory, but agency lies in the possibility of resignification, i.e. the reworking of the discourse through which subject effects are produced."[46]

Performativity is closely related to the politics of emotions,[47] which expands the scope of possible modalities and tonalities of imageries and which has been conceptualized as the "emotional turn" in the constructivist literature on international relations.[48] This approach treats performing subjects as aesthetically constructed through myths "produced by modern media images, whether these were tools of totalitarianism or the distracting, depoliticizing, or manipulative products of popular culture... Aestheticization of politics in this sense means the victory of the spectacle over the public sphere... [since] aesthetics is variously identified with irrationality, illusion ... and sensual seduction."[49] This is particularly true in situations where fantasies, in a Lacanian interpretation, "function as a protecting mechanism ... in the absence of a stable, unique and complete identity."[50]

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40 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967).

41 McKinlay, "Performativity and the Politics of Identity," 236.

42 Alecia Youngblood Jackson, "Performativity Identified," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 5 (2004): 673-690, 675, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403257673.

43 Lise Nelson, "Bodies (and Spaces) Do Matter: The Limits of Performativity," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 6, no. 4 (1999): 331-353, 338, https://doi.org/10.1080/09663699924926.

44 Silvia Stoller, "Expressivity and Performativity: Merleau-Ponty and Butler," *Continental Philosophical Review* 43 (2010): 97–110, 102, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-010-9133-x.

45 Moya Lloyd, "Radical Democratic Activism and the Politics of Resignification," *Constellations* 14, no. 1 (2007): 129-146, 131, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2007.00426.x.

46 Mark Laffey, "Locating Identity: Performativity, Foreign Policy and State Action," *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 3 (July 2000): 429-444, 430, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500004290.

47 Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchinson, "Theorizing Emotions in World Politics," *International Theory* 6 no. 3 (2014): 491-514, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000232.

48 Simon Koschut, "Introduction to Discourse and Emotions in International Relations," *International Studies Review* 19 (2017): 481–508, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix033.

49 Michael Williams, "International Relations in the Age of the Image," *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018): 880-891, 885, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy030.

50 Jakub Eberle, "Narrative, Desire, Ontological Security, Transgression: Fantasy as a Factor in International Politics," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 1 (March): 243-268, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0104-2.

Emotions may be regarded as political in the sense that they function as evaluative judgments and social bonds between community members. Each political concept has its emotional dimension (friendship and enmity, war and peace, justice and crime, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, security and insecurity, etc.). Arguably, "visuality might have a specific power through its affective, mimetic, immediate, and performative qualities,"[51] particularly when it comes to the study of post-materialist politics of identity, from celebrity performances to electoral rallies. This type of "power of affect" operates as an "assemblage of techniques and technologies of affective event amplification through which the cultural and corporeal logics of intervention come to resonate emotionally."[52]

Emotions, as an inalienable part of the representational process, fall into the aesthetic and performative spheres. Arguably, "emotions lie at the heart of how international politics is conducted. Emotions influence and, in some cases, underpin the normative frameworks that determine how states and other key actors should behave."[53] Emotions matter because their functioning differs from practices of cognition in at least two ways. First, they reveal certain sensibilities and vulnerabilities pertaining to social and cultural groups. In this sense, visual politics may contribute to studies of "emotional communities" grounded in the production of shared signs of traumatic experiences of grief or injustice.

Second, emotions, especially in visualized forms, interrupt the everyday routine and open up specific situations to a variety of new perspectives. The concept of "emotional contagion,"[54] with the concomitant "affective, rather than purely cognitive, aspects of infographic consumption,"[55] adds an emotional dimension to performativity. In the meantime, "emotional contagion" might become a powerful driver of manipulation, totalization, and "modes of control."[56] Thus, the crying mayor of the Italian city of Bergamo, filmed by the Russian media[57] and referred to as the epitome of Italy's desperate war on COVID-19, serves as a good illustration of the emotive power of images and the "emotional construction of subjects"[58] instrumentalized by the pro-Kremlin media.

However, the idea of collective "emotional communities presumed upon the production of shared signs of traumatic grief or injustice might be challenged due to an inability of outsiders (those who did not experience traumatic events) to completely immerse themselves into this type of imagined community."[59] At the core of this argument is the "inability of representation to access, describe or give

51 Axel Heck, "Analyzing Docudramas in International Relations: Narratives in the Film *A Murderous Decision*," *International Studies Perspectives* 18 (2017): 365–390, 370, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekw012.

52 Sean Carter and Derek P. McCormack, "Film, Geopolitics and the Affective Logics of Intervention," *Political Geography* 25 (2006): 228-245, 242, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2005.11.004.

53 Hutchison and Bleiker, "Emotions, Discourse and Power in World Politics," 504.

54 Michael Mutz and Markus Gerke, "Major Sporting Events and National Identification: The Moderating Effect of Emotional Involvement and the Role of the Media," *Communication & Sport* 6, no. 5 (2018): 605-626, 606, https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479517733447.

55 Eedan Amit-Danhi and Limor Shifman, "Digital Political Infographics: A Rhetorical Palette of an Emergent Genre," *New Media and Society* 20, no. 10 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817750565.

56 Beatrice Fazi, "Digital Aesthetics: The Discrete and the Continuous," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (2019): 3–26, 12, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418770243.

57 "Rossiiskie voennye v epitsentre koronavirusa v Italii," YouTube video, 15:22, posted by "Rossiya 24," March 28, 2020, accessed August 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqlsiHqlmdc.

58 Koschut, "Introduction to Discourse and Emotions," 485.

59 Jessica Auchter, "Narrating Trauma: Individuals, Communities, Storytelling," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 273– 283, 283, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818808385.

meaning to a specific experience"[60] and, therefore, to represent the singular.

## How Can Visual Politics Spark Political Debate?

Arguably, the most interesting research vectors in the field of visual politics are those studying how images stimulate or spark political debate or action. An illustrative example comes from Estonia: father and son Mart and Martin Helme, two key figures in the right-wing ERKE party, while being sworn in to the Estonian Parliament, made gestures that appeared to be an "OK" sign, with their thumbs and index fingers making a circle while their other three fingers were held out. The gesture has taken on new significance in nationalist and jingoist circles; according to the Anti-Defamation League, white supremacists use it to signal their support for White Power.[61] A few months later, EKRE member Ruuben Kaalep took a selfie with head of the French National Rally Marine Le Pen, who was visiting Tallinn, in which he made the same gesture; Le Pen later insisted he delete the picture from his Facebook page. Martin Helme has pledged to continue to use the gesture as a sign of defiance against "left-wing radicals who want to hijack the language."[62]

Another example comes from Ukraine, where an actor who played a president on TV ultimately became president, which makes it possible to analyze Zelensky's political leadership as an extension of the sitcom scenario. Many elements of the plot have to some extent defined Zelensky's presidency: ideological emptiness, an anti-oligarchic agenda, the prioritization of domestic issues over relations with Russia, etc.

A third example is a series of annual performances staged in Crimea since 2011 by the Russian Night Wolves biker group, known for its explicit pro-Kremlin stance. A few years before the annexation, they were sending very clear semiotic messages that Crimea was a part of the Russian World and should one day "come back" in response to Western liberal expansionism. This is not by any means to say that the Night Wolves preempted the annexation of Crimea; what this example illustrates is that some political actions can be viewed through the lens of visual semiotics, which might be used as an explanatory tool for understanding different political logics.

## Introducing Visual Biopolitics

This sketchy overview brings us closer to a set of questions concerning the nascent sphere of visual biopolitics: How should we understand this concept and why do we need it? How might biopolitical categories be visualized and why this is important? How can we speak about biopolitics in the language of images?

Thus far, visual biopolitics does not constitute a well-established academic sub-discipline or a research field. Instead, it resembles an archipelago of different studies and critical inquiries, with various focal points and methods. However, there is a strong impression that "visual culture and biopolitics are becoming aligned,"[63] since

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60 Benjamin Meiches, "Traumas without Bodies: A Reply to Emma Hutchison's Affective Communities," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 237–248, 241, https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818808384.

61 Rachel Frazin, "Estonian Lawmakers Appear to Make White Power Sign," *The Hill,* March 5, 2019, https://thehill.com/policy/international/europe/441956-estonian-officials-raise-concern-new-lawmakers-flashed-white.

62 Jack Montgomery, "Populist Revolt Spreads: Estonia's New Government Ministers Oppose EU Integration," *Breitbart,* May 20, 2019, https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2019/05/20/populist-revolt-spreads-estonias-new-govt-minister-will-oppose-eu-integration/#.

63 Lieve Gies, "The Frenzy of Digital Photography: A Biopolitical Assessment" in *Cultures of Participation: Media Practices, Politics and Literacy,* ed. H. Greif et al. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 195-209, 202.

the increasingly complex (bio)political reality necessitates visual representations/ imageries and its own "pictorial turn" to convey content that cannot be expressed solely verbally. The goal is to start aggregating some pieces of research, putting them together and making them talk to each other in different contexts.

Visual biopolitics emerges at the intersection of the personal/private and communal/ societal domains, and may provide novel explanations for both totalizing forms of biopower and their contestation/deconstruction. Importantly, visual biopolitics *creates* political relations that involve "actors, audiences, stages, scripts and mise-en-scene,"[64] with a broad variety of performative forms and genres that might be inscribed into its frame.

At this point, an analogy between visual biopolitics and visual geopolitics might be pertinent.[65] The latter has recently appeared "as a range of social practices that contribute to the production and performance of geopolitical imaginaries."[66] Close genealogical correlations between geopolitics and biopolitics as two expressions and manifestations of the political seem to be crucial at this juncture. The two concepts have common genealogical roots (*Lebensraum*) and may merge into what might be dubbed "geo-biopolitics." Both denote major dimensions of power (as related to territories and populations); they therefore represent two autonomous yet mutually constitutive discourses. Major geopolitical categories—borders, sovereignties, spaces, etc.—have their biopolitical doubles. Some scholars aver that as the "old" geopolitical paradigm gradually becomes obsolete and outdated, biopolitics is becoming a more prominent component of power relations.

What can research in visual biopolitics learn from visual geopolitics? Several points seem to be important. First, politics in general, and its geo- and bio-versions in particular, is increasingly dependent on visual forms of representation.[67] For instance, soft power and the concomitant attraction require what might be dubbed a "visual grammar of persuasion." In the opposite scenario of conflict and confrontation, "wars of images" appear to be equally inevitable. The interpretation and (re)signification of critical events are grounded in visual memories, exemplified by photographs of human beings, or by "sites of memory" with their monuments, statues, museums or commemorative plaques.

Second, there is a widespread belief that "what the word can only represent, the picture supposedly proves."[68] However, visuals define "the sayable and the visible,"[69] and also the unsayable and the invisible. The struggle for visibility might become a major generator of biopolitical forms of mobilization,[70] particularly when it comes to

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64 Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, "Civil Society, Populism and Religion," *Constellations* 24 (2017): 283–295, 286, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12312.

65 Rachel Hughes, "Through the Looking Blast: Geopolitics and Visual Culture," *Geography Compass* 1, no. 5 (2007): 976–994, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00052.x.

66 Connie Yang, "Visuality and Violence: Touring the Occupied West Bank," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 4 (2021): 1175-1195, 1176, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1656609.

67 Fraser MacDonald, Rachel Hughes, and Klaus Dodds, "Envisioning Geopolitics," in *Observant States: Geopolitics and Visual Culture*, ed. Fraser MacDonald, Rachel Hughes, and Klaus Dodds (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 1-21, 2.

68 James Der Derian, "Imaging Terror: Logos, Pathos and Ethos," in *Observant States: Geopolitics and Visual Culture*, ed. Fraser MacDonald, Rachel Hughes, and Klaus Dodds (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 23-40, 37.

69 Ranciere, *Politics of Aesthetics*.

70 Aleksandra Krstić, "Visualising the Politics of Appearance in Times of Democratisation: An Analysis of the 2010 Belgrade Pride Parade Television Coverage," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 165-183, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417743042.

protests against—and resistance to—injustices and/or inequalities.[71] In this respect, emotions might be considered part of visual biopolitics.[72]

In this context, the case of torture pictures from the U.S. detention center in Abu Ghraib that were leaked to the media and provoked a furious reaction seems to be emblematic. Judith Butler's contribution to the ensuing debate was an attempt to construct a discourse that integrates high-visibility geopolitical and biopolitical/ corporeal issues. The naked bodies of prisoners or detainees were marked with strong connotations with *homines sacri*, a concept developed by the Italian political philosopher and major voice in biopolitical studies Giorgio Agamben. This "pornography of horror"[73] might also be approached through the lens of the Foucauldian biopolitics "of visual pleasure,"[74] yet Butler's focus is different: "How much of this torture is actually done for the camera, to 'show' what the USA can do, as a sign of military triumphalism, sadistic control, the ability to effect a nearly complete degradation of the putative enemy, an effort to win the *clash of* civilisations and subject the ostensible barbarians to our civilising mission?"[75] She adds: "The camera is in the photo, since the soldiers are not 'caught' holding the leash tied to the neck of a bound and named man on the floor. They look directly into the camera and wait for the camera to record them."[76]

In a more general sense, photography can be "described as a technology of life: it not only represents life but also shapes and regulates it—while also documenting or even envisioning its demise. Thanks to the proliferation of digital and portable media as well as broadband connectivity, photography has become pervasive and ubiquitous: we could go so far as to say that our very sense of existence is now shaped by it… To live is to be photographed, to have a record of one's life, and therefore to go on with one's life oblivious, or claiming to be oblivious, to the camera's nonstop attentions."[77]

**Sovereignty, Governmentality, and Borders**

In our analysis of visual biopolitics, we flesh out three major concepts that play pivotal roles in understanding how biopower functions and what effects it triggers.

One is *sovereignty*, represented through an assemblage of different performative styles under the aegis of political hegemony. Based on our previous studies—largely related to the Russian context—we may identify various modalities of sovereign power visualized by means of political images.

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71 Rhys Crilley, "Where We At? New Directions for Research on Popular Culture and World Politics," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 164-180, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa027.

72 Ben Anderson, "Affect and Biopower: Towards a Politics of Life," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 37, no. 1 (2012): 28-43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2011.00441.x.

73 J.M. Bernstein, "Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror," *Parallax* 10, no. 1 (2004): 2-16, 10, https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464032000171046.

74 Tim Dean, "The Biopolitics of Pleasure," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 478-496, 484, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1596245.

75 Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," 53.

76 Ibid., 55.

77 Jones, "Towards an Embodied Visual Semiotics," 29.

A concept coined earlier in close conjunction with sovereignty is *biopolitical patriotism*. As I have argued elsewhere, the upsurge of the state-led "Russian world" mythology in reaction to the EuroMaidan in Ukraine, characterized by mass-scale public support for land grabs and flexing of military muscle, has its roots in the wars in Chechnya of 1994-1996 and 1999-2000. Such ethno-imperial mobilization does not require a modern, effective, rational, or socially caring state in order to function. Rather than stemming from a feeling of duty to a well-governed state, biopolitical patriotism is both created by and reinforces a nationalist discourse based on a sense of belonging to a constructed, symbolic community of like-minded compatriots. Foucault claimed that biopower must be distinguished from sovereign power, yet in illiberal polities the two in fact very much intersect. Biopolitics function at the micro-level and can produce patriotism that develops beyond the confines of the political state yet is pragmatically instrumentalized by the sovereign power. Many cinematographic representations of the Chechen wars in Russia serve as visual confirmations of this argument.[78]

Another cluster of implicitly biopolitical visuals produced on behalf of the sovereign power put into the limelight glorified representations of the idea of the collective body as a totalitarian ideal of the ordered and healthy society. A classic example in this respect is Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film "Olympia. Festival of Nations," which documents the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games and reveals the Nazi cult of the racially purified and unified national body loyal to ancient traditions.[79]

When it comes to more recent sports megaevents, a good follow-up reference point would be the visual message sent by the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, which has its own connotations of the aesthetic of the collective body. The visual narrative assumes that Russia was historically an empire but Russians should not be ashamed of this; moreover, they ought to be proud of the imperial legacy, which does not prevent Russia from claiming its belonging to Europe. Within this frame, the ostensibly positive visual representation of the Soviet era makes the Soviet Union a modernization project alternative to the West. The most striking part of this logic is that the visual representation of Russia ends with the 1980 Moscow Olympics, as if the USSR did not fall apart and in fact still exists, which should be taken as a far-reaching political message helpful for understanding the political semiotics of the Putin regime.

These top-down and state-led interpretations of national identity differ drastically from the plethora of post-political visual narratives of world-class megaevents. For example, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics were largely promoted through what might be dubbed an *anatomopolitical* (i.e., individual body-centric) vision that places at the center of attention individual bodies who might be physically impaired, or even clumsy.[80] A promo video for the 2012 London Olympics was based on another anatomopolitical story, whose protagonists are children in non-Western countries who were inspired by the Games and ultimately became champions; notably, the

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78 Andrey Makarychev, "From Chechnya to Ukraine: Biopolitical Patriotism in Times of War," Wilson Center, September 9, 2015, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/chechnya-to-ukraine-biopolitical-patriotism-times-war, accessed August 24, 2021.

79 "Leni Riefenstahl: Olympia – Festival of Nations (1936)," YouTube video, 1:55:03, posted by "Storia del Cinema," October 24, 2017, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3LOPhRq3Es.

80 "JAPAN 2020 TOKYO Olympics Promo Movie," YouTube video, 1:46, posted by "Mun Yoshihara," October 19, 2016, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPnsPnFRq2c.

city of London is not even visually present in the clip.[81] Even more innovative is a visualization of the 2016 Rio Olympics in a *zoopolitical* manner,[82] with animals featuring as the main heroes of a promo video, thus opening up the storyline to environmental and posthuman allusions.

The Covid-19 crisis brought new meanings into the debate on the biopolitics of sovereignty, which found visual expression in a number of fictional films featuring pandemics. Their plots might be discussed as visualized scenarios of post-disaster futures and translated into the language of political analysis. Thus, a dystopian scenario implies a fully administered society that has effectively collapsed the distinction between heteronomy and autonomy, servitude and freedom—that is, the key distinctions upon which politics has been premised. In particular, Spanish serial "Barrier" imagines a well-ordered, hence rational, society in which the state ensures that we all stay where we must, and care and murder may coincide. Another plot explores the concept of *homines sacri*: it places in the limelight people abandoned by the dysfunctional state who lose their human qualities ("Doomsday"; "Alive"). An alternative option might be called *dissipated sovereignty:* survivors must recreate from scratch their communities of the abandoned and the isolated ("Between"; "To the Lake"). In a more radical version, communities of the infected ("V-Wars") fight for their agency by forcefully challenging the distinction between the normal and the abnormal.

A second concept that deserves attention as an object of visual(ized) biopolitics is *governmentality*. Governmentality techniques usually intersect with the biopolitical perspective since both imply different interventions into peoples' regular lives. The notion of biopolitical governmentality has been introduced in the literature to denote the rationality of managerial policies and sustainable supply of basic needs for populations in environmental protection, education, nutrition, and other essential spheres of life. In a wider sense, "biopolitical forces adapted to neoliberal ends seek to minimize societal risk and maximize individual wellbeing through scientific engineering and individual technologies of the self."[83]

I will give two examples that may serve as possible leads for further research in this area. One is the idea of biopolitical urbanism, which has already been tested by the Chinese experience of hosting megaevents[84] and in a broader sense approaches urban policies as a biopolitical toolkit.[85] Depending on the context, biopolitical urbanism correlates with such concepts as "philosophy and livability" and the ideas of

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81 "London 2012—Inspiration Ian McKellan—Olympic Promotional Video," YouTube video, 5:28, posted by "Carlos Scott Lopez," August 3, 2016, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MA8X3Hz-_n0.

82 "Rio 2016 Olympic Games: Trailer—BBC Sport," YouTube video, 1:30, posted by "BBC," July 10, 2016, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKcEySuuUuE.

83 Marja Holmen Nadesan, *Governmentality, Biopower and Everyday Life* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

84 Tim Oakes, "Happy Town: Cultural Governance and Biopolitical Urbanism in China," *EPA: Economy and Space* 51, no. 1 (2019): 244–262, https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17693621.

85 Lukasz Stanek, "Biopolitics of Scale: Architecture, Urbanism, the Welfare State and After," in *The Politics of Life: Michel Foucault and the Biopolitics of Modernity*, ed. S.-O. Wallenstein and J. Nilsson (Stockholm: Iaspis, 2013), 106-20, 115.

"enlivened city,"[86] "productive city,"[87] or "eco-aesthetic" city.[88] Biopolitical urbanism is heavily affected by post-political policies targeting different categorizations of life—emotional, intimate, enjoyable, "sensible"—all of them aimed at the cultivation of "positive feelings" through "livability" and "conviviality." Biopolitical urbanism as a concept helps to unveil the multiple effects of large-scale infrastructural projects upon urban lifestyles and what Giorgio Agamben calls "forms of life."[89] It is instrumental for studying the appearance of new hierarchies in urban spaces with different levels of engagement among local populations, as well as new visual categorizations of bordering/de-bordering, and exclusion/inclusion. This is what the concept of "biopolitical city" implies—the biopoliticized urban infrastructure aimed at "rearranging and reanimating urban life,"[90] which seems to resonate with the concepts of "live sites" and "live zones."[91]

Another highly relevant field of research is visualization of *medical governmentality*, a concept that raises the status of medical knowledge not only as a source of professional expertise, but also as a public argument in debates on matters of trust, equity, solidarity, fairness, and inclusion. This type of "governing rationalities" functions through research, funding, educational practices and organizational skills, administrative and managerial tools of crisis management, and responsibilization. With the eruption of Covid-19, the idea of "homo medicus"[92] became an exemplifying metaphor for a strategy of medicalization as a logic of power, with the ensuing immunization paradigm as a "mechanism through which the political body will be protected in a way analogous to the way in which the immune function protects the biological body."[93] Against this backdrop, "technologies of popular scientific visualization are inherently political in character in that they marshal, organize and purport to speak on behalf of objects that are rendered silent."[94] Scientific visualism[95] became a matter of popular gaze through such documentaries as "Coronavirus Explained" and "Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak," among others.

The third concept though which visual biopolitics might be unpacked is the *bordering/debordering* binary. In the extant literature, border biopolitics is approached as a sphere encompassing the assemblage of medical, immigration, and transportation authorities aimed at codification of incoming groups of people, their examination, and ascription to them of certain statuses on the basis of political

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86 Anri Hamrane, "Enlivened City: Inclusive Design, Biopolitics, and the Philosophy of Liveability," *Built Environment* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 77-104, https://doi.org/10.2148/benv.44.1.77.

87 Raphael Besson, "Productive Cities: Toward a New Biopolitics of Cities," *The Conversation*, November 22, 2017, https://theconversation.com/productive-cities-toward-a-new-biopolitics-of-cities-86792.

88 Milena Popov, "Relations Between Biopolitics and Eco-Aesthetics," Proceedings of the 8th Conference of the International Forum on Urbanism, Incheon, 2015.

89 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics,* translated by Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2000).

90 Alessandra Renzi and Greg Elmer, "The Biopolitics of Sacrifice: Securing Infrastructure at the G20 Summit," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 5 (2013): 45–69, 63, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412474327.

91 David McGillivray, "Sport Events, Space and the 'Live City,'" *Cities* 85 (2019): 196-202, 196, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.09.007.

92 Dan Degerman, "The Political Is Medical Now: COVID-19, Medicalization and Political Theory," *Theory and Event* 23, no. 4 (2020 Supp.), S-61-S-75, S-70.

93 Greg Bird and Johnathan Short, "Community, Immunity and the Proper. An Introduction to the Political Theory of Roberto Esposito," in *Community, Immunity and the Proper*, ed. Greg Bird and Johnathan Short (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 1-12, 6.

94 Michael Emmison and Philip Smith, *Researching the Visual. Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry* (London: SAGE, 2000), 53.

95 Don Ihde, "Scientific Visualism," in *Images. A Reader*, ed. Sunil Manghani, Arthur Piper, and Jon Simon (London: SAGE, 2006), 141-144, 141.

reasoning (desirable and undesirable) or health conditions (placed in quarantine or exempted from border checkups, etc.)[96] Of particular importance in this regard is the idea of "generalized biopolitical border" developed by Nick Vaughan-Williams and mostly applied to the refugee crisis in Europe to demonstrate that the EU's external borders not only delineate national jurisdictions, but also filter out and categorize border-crossers, for whom various biopolitical norms, rules, and procedures are established.[97] A similar approach was applied to studying what might be dubbed biometrical borders as an element of the war on terror.[98] It is due to the generalizability of the concept of biopolitical border that it can be extended to other cases where borders function as institutional spaces producing practices of exclusion from and inclusion in neighboring sovereign polities.

What the approach grounded in visual biopolitics can add to these assumptions is an analysis of imageries and pictorial representations of borders as spaces inhabited by human bodies and culturally defined by a plethora of border-crossing, border-trespassing, and debordering experiences. As seen from the perspective of border biopolitics, "people base their choices of where to live on how well the image of the place coincides with the varying levels of social, economic, and cultural capital of the residents."[99] The study of video materials covering a broad variety of trans-border cultural events contributes to the re-signification of territories, from sites of geopolitical distinctions and confrontation to common cultural, societal, communal, humanitarian, and environmental spaces, or "life worlds."[100] Visual (cultural and artistic) representations of territories include meaningful references to different regimes of care-taking and invite us to think beyond territorial forms of politics.[101] The ensuing "spaces of encounters"[102] foster "dialogical intermissions";[103] eventually, the "border [becomes] less automatically connected to states alone"[104] and more "polymorphic"[105] and multiperspectival.[106]

A good illustration of these academic premises is a visual art project in the form of a teeter-totter installed by a group of American art activists at the U.S.-Mexico

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96 William Walters, "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002): 561-580, 563-575, https://doi.org/10.1068/d274t.

97 Nick Vaughan-Williams, "The Generalised Bio-Political Border? Re-Conceptualising the Limits of Sovereign Power," *Review of International Studies* 35 (2009): 729–749, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990155.

98 Louise Amoore, "Biometric Borders: Governing Mobilities in the War on Terror," *Political Geography* 25 no. 3 (2006), 336-351, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.02.001.

99 Julia Bennett, "Gifted Places: The Inalienable Nature of Belonging in Place," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, no. 4 (2014): 658-671, https://doi.org/10.1068/d4913p.

100 Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, "Intimately Inhabiting Borders: Walking In-Between Belonging and Otherness through Constructions of Home," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 404-424, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1611560.

101 James Anderson and Liam O'Dowd, "Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance," *Regional Studies* 33, no. 7 (1999): 593-604, 598, https://doi.org/10.1080/00343409950078648.

102 Àgnes Németh, "The immigrant "Other" and artistic expression: (de)bordering via festivals and social activism in Finland," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 34 no. 1 (2017): 51-69, 54, https://doi.org/10.1080/08873631.2016.1231384.

103 Elzbieta Matynia, "The Promise of Borderlands," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 24 (2011): 75-81, 79, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-010-9109-1.

104 Henk Van Houtum, "The Geopolitics of Borders and Boundaries," *Geopolitics* 10 no. 4 (2005): 672-699, 674, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500318522.

105 Andrew Burridge, Nick Gill, Austin Kocher, and Lauren Martin, "Polymorphic Borders," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5, no. 3 (2017): 239-251, https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2017.1297253.

106 Chris Rumford, "Towards a Multiperspectival Study of Borders," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2012): 887-902.

border.[107] The idea of transforming a border from a walled protection area into a space for bodily communication between children and their parents correlates with a broader understanding of the two sides of the border area as a single ecosystem that may be administratively divided but is connected through nature as well as intense human mobility.

In popular music, biopolitical debordering takes a variety of forms. An example of cultural re-imagination of borders is M.I.A.'s eponymous composition.[108] In the music video "Borders," she resignifies borderlines from land lines separating national jurisdictions to living spaces shaped by the bodies of contemporary nomads: escapees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants. This type of visual representation is in line with academic appeals "to uncover dominant visual portrayals of the current refugee crisis in mainstream media in order to understand how refugees' lives are defined by biopolitical objectives."[109]

In a very different—but still biopolitical—context, the Latvian–Estonian band *Lotos* has visualized the idea of debordering as an appeal to lift coronavirus-related cross-border restrictions and reopen borders for human contacts. Their romantic song *Lotos* tells the story of a family separated by the temporarily closed Estonian-Russian border and awaiting reunification.[110] The visual background—urban landscapes of the Russian city of Ivangorod and the Estonian city of Narva—adds a spatio-geopolitical flavor to the story.

In ethnically and linguistically diverse countries with invisible domestic boundaries and corresponding political tensions, visual biopolitics might be particularly sensitive and topical.  Another bilingual (Estonian-Russian) musician, the rapper Evgeniy Lyapin, performatively visualized cultural hybridity as a (bio)political manifesto of cultural and linguistic integration premised on loyalty to the Estonian state in his song "I am Russian but Love Estonia."[111] The Estonian rapper Nublu added some nuances to the cultural representation of identities: his clip "Für Oksana" is a musical travelogue of an Estonian young man in the Russophone city of Narva whose search for a girl named Oksana turns into an ironic deconstruction of the so-called "Russian identity" of this Estonian city.[112] Both Lyapin and Nublu visually represent Narva as a site of domestic otherness, yet they do so differently: the former celebrates his unconditional integration into the Estonian socio-political and linguistic milieu, while the latter leaves ample space for various forms of cultural bordering that exoticize and Orientalize Narva to an Estonian cultural gaze.

In yet another biopolitical deconstruction of internal boundaries, the Estonian artist Evi Pärn, in a playful 2012 work, portrays two female tongues, decorated in the Estonian and Russian national colors, as a sexualized metaphor of linguistic equality

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107 "Why a Designer Turned the U.S.-Mexico Border into an Art Installation | The New Yorker," YouTube video, 15:36, posted by "The New Yorker," November 12, 2019, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOFlpfxY268.

108 "M.I.A. – Borders," YouTube video, 4:42, posted by "M.I.A.," February 17, 2016, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Nw7HbaeWY.

109 Annabelle Cathryn Wilmott, "The Politics of Photography: Visual Depictions of Syrian Refugees in U.K. Online Media," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2017): 67-82, 70, https://doi.org/10.1080/15551393.2017.1307113.

110 "Lotos – Granitsy," YouTube video, 4:26, posted by "LOTOSBAND," July 19, 2020, accessed August 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiVJyvHNlcA.

111 "Stuf Olen venelane," YouTube video, 3:31, posted by "Adesladiselt," January 12, 2017, accessed Augsut 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLuwoJ2Jo2I.

112 "Nublu x Gameboy tetris – für Oksana," YouTube video, 4:02, posted by "Nublu," August 7, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgJqak4BuzQ.

and integration. Playing on the tongue/language ambiguity, she blends geopolitical (Russia and Estonia) and biopolitical (a bodily encounter of two females) meanings[113] and represents integration as a biopolitical encounter.

In other contexts, of course, visuals can play a bordering and securitizing role. One possible example is a mural at a high-rise apartment building in the Ukrainian city of Mariupol that shows a girl holding a toy. The mural memorializes victims of the Russian war-by-proxy that has, since 2014, transformed Mariupol into a frontline city whose peaceful citizens have become exposed to the mortal danger coming from the Russian-occupied separatist territories.

**Conclusion**

Visual biopolitics is of particular importance for studying the plethora of illiberal practices, policies, and discourses for two main reasons. First, the domain of visual biopolitics sheds some light on illiberal forms of governance and opens up new facets of control and domination over human bodies. The research optics of visual biopolitics allow us to look more deeply into the manipulative techniques of fake news, brainwashing, and propaganda that illiberal regimes include in their foreign policy arsenals. In this respect, visuals are an indispensable part of illiberal regimes' direct—and largely populist—appeals to the population, with biopolitical messages implying relations of exclusion, bordering, expulsion, and even purification, which evidently generates hierarchies of power, with regular rules and norms being suspended and different types of normality and legitimacy being accepted.

Second, the research toolkit of visual biopolitics is helpful for identifying different forms of resistance. Under illiberal regimes of governance, the visual aesthetics of protest is a powerful tool in the hands of opposition groups whose consolidation is meaningfully shaped by common signs of solidarity and mutual support. Good illustrations are the accentuation of the gender dimension of the 2020 opposition rallies in Belarus, Pussy Riot's anti-establishment performances, or Piotr Pavlensky's actionist art of radical protest in Russia.

Against this background, as mentioned earlier, visual biopolitics not only reflects political dynamics embedded in imageries of corporeality, sexuality, and medicalization, but also produces its own semiospheres where political meanings are created and communicated. Interesting reference points might be the red eyepatches that became ubiquitous during the 2019 protests in Tbilisi, FEMEN's exposures of naked female bodies as an actionist and performative means of fighting hegemonic masculinity, or the "Party of the Dead" art project in Russia that ridicules the obsession with venerating bygone generations. Therefore, visible symbols of disloyalty and protest vindicate that visual biopolitics may be seen as a space for projections and contestations of relations of power and as a site for hegemonic and counter-hegemonic moves with far-reaching implications.

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113 Evi Pärn, personal website, accessed August 24, 2021, https://eviparn.wixsite.com/parnevi.