



## **Images, Popular Culture, Aesthetics, Emotions The Future of International Politics?<sup>1</sup>**

**Linda Åhäll**

Department of Political Science and International Studies  
University of Birmingham

This article explores current theoretical innovations regarding how, what and where we study international politics. I argue that visual representations cannot be ignored if we are to understand how meaning is constructed in today's highly visualised world. Moreover, since meaning construction is not contained by disciplinary borders, neither should data for political analysis be categorised in such a limited way. Thus, our understanding of what counts as politics needs to be broadened and data from popular culture or other aesthetic sources should not be excluded. In addition, in order to overcome myths and 'unconscious ideologies' constructing inequalities in our societies, the role of emotions needs to be examined if such myths are to be re-politicised. In order to illustrate the applicability of the discussed theoretical insights, I apply the framework to the political puzzle of motherhood and female agency in political violence and show how it enables us to reveal how unconscious gendered ideologies construct motherhood as natural and thereby create a myth that motherhood is incompatible with female agency in political violence.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Laura Shepherd, Cerwyn Moore and Laurence Cooley at Birmingham University as well as the anonymous referee for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. However, mistakes and errors remain the author's responsibility.

Conducting research from a post-positivist epistemological position involves an interest in how various subjects, objects, and interpretative dispositions are socially constructed, thus, how meanings are produced (Doty, 1993). Traditional methodological approaches are extremely limited when it comes to analysing how meaning is produced, especially with references to issues such as gender and agency. In this paper, I present a methodological framework based on discourse analysis that incorporates some contemporary theoretical innovations in the study of international politics. I use the case of motherhood and female agency in political violence as an example of a research area where such approaches are vital in order to understand the political puzzle in question.

First, I will show how representations of female agency in political violence are gendered and why the concept of motherhood needs to be examined in greater detail in relation to such representations. I present the components of the theoretical framework underpinning my argument, poststructuralism, feminism, and Roland Barthes' mythology framework. In the following sections, I explore theoretical innovations regarding how, what and where to study international politics. This includes the inclusion of visual representations; the use of data from popular culture; the

aesthetic turn in IR; and the value of studying emotions and world politics. I apply the methodological framework to the political puzzle of motherhood and female agency in political violence and show how it enables us to reveal how unconscious gendered ideologies construct motherhood as natural and thereby create a myth that motherhood is incompatible with female agency in political violence.

In the concluding remarks, I argue that we need to dissolve disciplinary borders in order to make more fruitful contributions to academic knowledge. What counts as politics needs to be broadened and an open mind to sources of political data and methodological ways of undertaking political research needs to be maintained. As Roland Bleiker argues: 'the dilemmas that currently haunt world politics, from terrorism to raising inequalities, are far too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence to understand and deal with them' (2001: 529). For these reasons, theoretical innovations such as the ones considered here are not only useful, but essential if we are to fully understand complex political puzzles in our highly visual, intertextual, instantaneous and unequal world.

## **Female agency in political violence is gendered**

Within the academic field of IR, a growing literature has illuminated women's role in international politics in a broad sense (cf Enloe, 2000), and in warfare and political violence more specifically. Griset and Mahan (2003) categorise women's contributions in war as sympathisers, spies, warriors and dominant forces, and Goldstein (2004) explores the historicity of female combatants. However, as Miranda Alison points out, 'the mere fact that it is necessary to specify 'female combatants' indicates their historical rarity and symbolic position as unconventional figures' (Alison, 2004: 447). Overall, women tend to continue to be seen as victims whilst their contribution to warfare is rendered invisible.

The inclusion of female soldiers in military units and the increasing occurrence of female suicide-bombers would seem to suggest that there is an acceptance of women performing tasks traditionally reserved for men and an acceptance that women can be agents of political violence. At first, this may seem to represent a move towards more gender equality. However, recent feminist scholarship has done much to reveal the gendered nature of agency and the implications of it. Scholars have shown that women are actually often deprived of agency in

representations of these cases. Put simply, women's and men's violence is explained differently.

Sjoberg and Gentry distinguish between three different narratives regarding female agency in political violence. Women engaged in proscribed violence, they argue, are often portrayed either as "mothers", women who are fulfilling their biological destinies; as 'monsters', women who are pathologically damaged and are therefore drawn to violence; or as 'whores', women whose violence is inspired by sexual dependence and depravity' (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007: 12). When it comes to representations of female soldiers' agency, the cases of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England are prominent. The two women, both serving the US army in Iraq in 2003, were represented very differently in the media. Both cases, however, provide gendered representations of female agency in war.

The initial story about Lynch broke when video footage of her rescue, produced by the military, was aired in the news media. Lynch was a true heroine, a female soldier bravely serving her country in the 'war on terror', the story told. She was said to be suffering gun shots and stab wounds following an encounter with Iraqi forces, and having reportedly been

(sexually) mistreated during her detention in an Iraqi hospital. However, later investigation showed that many facts in the 'Jessica Lynch War Story'<sup>2</sup> were fabricated by the military. For example, her injuries were caused by a road accident, she did not return fire when the group came under attack, and she was not raped or sexually abused while held in captivity (Kampfner, 2003; Campbell, 2003; Kumar, 2004).

Véronique Pin-Fat and Maria Stern argue that Lynch, as a female prisoner of war, could not be sacrificed while in captivity because, as a woman, she symbolically stands for what the military traditionally is supposed to be protecting. Lynch was still a victim in need of a rescue operation; she needed to be saved by the real heroes (all of whom were men) (Pin-Fat and Stern, 2005). Moreover, other scholars such as Kumar (2004) and Sjoberg (2007) have drawn attention to how the focus on Lynch at the time excluded representations of the other two female soldiers involved in the incident, Shoshana Johnson, an African American, and Lori Piestewa, a Native American. These untold stories both expose the racial aspect of what is often termed 'appropriate femininity'<sup>3</sup>, and their agency in the incident is removed. Kumar,

---

<sup>2</sup> See Cooke (1996) and Hunt and Rygiel (2006) for an overview of the concept of gendered war stories.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of how 'appropriate femininity' was played out immediately after the terror attacks on 11 September, 2001 see Shepherd (2006).

furthermore, argues that the military was enabled to talk about a controversial war in emotional rather than rational language simply because Lynch was a female prisoner of war. Hence, the story also illuminates how women are strategically used to win support for war, as war propaganda (Kumar, 2004).

Lynndie England was one of three female prison guards involved in the Abu Ghraib scandal in Iraq in 2003. Even though there were thousands of photos, most of them portraying males, the ones of Lynndie England were by far the most published and written about (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007: 67). England was described as the 'Anti-Jessica Lynch', the 'sex sadist of Baghdad', and 'the star of the Abu Ghraib horror picture show', even though most of the military guards charged with abusing prisoners were men (Brittain, 2006: 86). Sjoberg and Gentry show how the 'mother/monster/whore' narratives are played out in the Lynndie England story and how they worked to deny her agency. For example, her pregnancy with Charles Graner's child at the time of the abuse (mother narrative); the strong focus on her appearance and thus (lack of) femininity (monster narrative); and detailed information about her sexual relationship with Graner (whore narrative) (2007: ch 3). What is more, in the aftermath of the incidents, England's agency is again gendered and

removed as she was denied the right to plea guilty, after a witness statement by Graner that England did not realise she was doing anything wrong at the time of the abuse. The court determined that she could have been so manipulated by her boyfriend at the time that she had lost her sense of right and wrong (Sjoberg, 2007: 96). To Sjoberg, the fact that there were no accounts of the possibility of the female perpetrators' guilt in mainstream US media at the time regarding the Abu Ghraib scandal was because Americans were not ready for women torturers and perpetrators of such violence (Sjoberg, 2007: 90).

Various feminist scholars have shown that representations of female agency in political violence such as terrorism tend to be gendered in the way that female perpetrators' motivations are explained in personal rather than political terms. This is the case even though females committing suicide bombings tend to be older and better educated than males (Toles Parkin, 2004: 84), and even if the perpetrators' own video-recorded martyrdom statements focus on their political ambitions (West, 2004). For example, Jessica West argues that the women referred to as 'black widows' in Chechnya have been described as desperate and revenge-seeking wives and sisters of Chechen fighters who have been killed. West argues that their actions have been represented as a result of



victimisation rather than agency (West, 2004: 1). Similarly, in representations of female suicide bombers in Israel/Palestine, where the use of political martyrdom statements is common, the coverage and analysis of their behaviour often still focuses on their personal lives and feminine shortcomings, for example a divorce or a miscarriage, rather than their agency in a political cause (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007: 120). In West's words:

Terrorism is a political act, yet no one has stopped to ask what women's political goals are. It is just assumed that they seek personal revenge. Practically, by treating women as instruments rather than as agents of war, their political goals are likely to be overlooked in any future negotiations, when their presence is no longer needed. (West, 2004: 9)

Hence, even if women clearly are perpetrators of political violence, their agency is removed in representations of these cases. Why is it that women's violence has to be explained with reference to an inability to give birth or a sexual deviance? Why is it that a woman's role as a mother is assumed to be relevant to her activities in global politics? It is necessary, I argue, that we deconstruct the concept of motherhood in relation to female agency in political violence, as this captures the tension between identities of life-giving and life-taking, between the 'cultural' and the 'natural', which, as I will show, is a crucial element in both myth

production and the continuation of (gendered) ideologies. As I will argue below, it is also important to revisit representations of female agency in popular culture as this can give us further clues about the politics behind these representations; there is no need to separate between different kinds of 'culture'.

### **Poststructuralism, feminism, mythologies**

In the following sections, I will present a methodological framework that enable alternative and fuller understandings of political puzzles, especially in relation to gender, agency and violence. First, however, it is necessary to sketch out the theoretical background to my position and its debt to poststructuralism, feminism and Roland Barthes' mythology framework.

A poststructuralist approach calls attention to the importance of representation, power and knowledge, and the politics of identity in the production and understanding of global affairs (Campbell, 2007). It generally seeks to understand *how*, rather than explain *why* something occurs. Thus, by posing how-questions, poststructuralist research manages to deal with an important aspect of power that why-questions too often neglect. This kind of power is productive of meanings, subject

identities, their interrelationships, and a range of imaginable conduct (Doty, 1993: 299). Furthermore, poststructuralism's insistence that language is political means that discourses are themselves recognised as practices that systematically form or create the objects that they speak of and that they are themselves productive of knowledge and meaning (Baxter, 2003). Thus, language is a site for production and reproduction of particular subjectivities and identities while others are simultaneously excluded (Hansen, 2006: 19). In other words, language and systems of representation do not reflect an already existing reality so much as they organise, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 12-13). By re-politicising dominant representations, poststructural analyses call attention to the inclusions and exclusions involved in producing that which appears to be natural, fixed, and timeless, and argue that the political action which follows from naturalised understandings could be pursued differently (Campbell, 2007: 225).

Since I am interested in gendered representations, a feminist approach, with its focus on gender relations as particular expressions of power, provides the appropriate tools for analysis. However, feminism is a broad, varied and interdisciplinary theoretical framework, which means there are

by necessity many feminisms and many ways of conducting feminist research. To Butler and Scott, feminism suggests 'a field of critical practices that cannot be totalized' (Butler and Scott, 1992: xiii). To Moya Lloyd, feminism is an insistent practice of critique rejecting what is unsatisfactory in the present (Lloyd, 2005: 111). For the purpose of this paper, I will simply discuss the theoretical contribution that a combination of poststructuralism and feminist thought can bring.

Traditionally, the concept of gender constitutes the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' which are seen as social constructions in opposition to sex which denotes the physiological distinction between males and females and is seen as 'natural'. From a poststructuralist perspective, however, the separation between the biological and the social becomes blurred as the category of sex in itself is seen as a construction (Butler, 1993)<sup>4</sup>. Since gender is cultural, it also varies across time and across societies and is cut across by considerations of class, race, age, and so forth. As such, Lloyd argues, there is no direct link back to the sexed body (Lloyd, 2005: 133). Thus, gender identities are, at best, naturalised fictions (rather than natural entities), always prone to dissonance and uncertainty. Acknowledging this fictiveness, Lloyd argues, enables gender to be de-

---

<sup>4</sup> For more reading on the compatibility of poststructuralism and feminism, see Butler (1990); McNay (2000); and Baxter (2003).

coupled from sex. Once gender roles are recognised as 'designated', and not natural, any necessary link between women and femininity is broken (Lloyd, 2005: 21).

Moreover, a poststructural perspective assumes that there is no singular feminine subject or feminist approach. Because of this, poststructuralism has been critiqued for taking the 'heat off patriarchy' and seen as a 'refusal to engage with grand structures of oppression' (Roseneil, 1999: 161). In this way, poststructuralism is seen as undermining the feminist commitment to women's agency and thus not compatible with a commitment to feminist politics (Shepherd, 2008a: 4; Dietz, 2003: 413). Moya Lloyd argues that the claim that feminism requires a stable, coherent subject in order to justify and ground its politics and to challenge the oppressive structures confining women, relies on essentialist claims and thus sets a limit to how feminism conceives politics and disguises the power relations that underpin this conception (Lloyd, 2005: 3). The philosophy of feminist poststructuralism does not share the feminist quest to expose the gendered nature of society or the structural inequalities it produces. This is because feminist poststructuralism appreciates the unevenness and ambiguities of power relations between males and

females: 'The theories of females as universal victims of patriarchy no longer do' (Baxter, 2003: 31).

The last component of the theoretical framework underpinning my argument is Roland Barthes' mythology framework. According to Barthes, myth is a type of speech, a system of communication, a message. But it is also a value; a language which does not want to die (Barthes, 1993: 110, 120). The essential function of myth is the naturalisation of the concept (Barthes, 1993: 118). In this sense, myth transforms what is particular, cultural, and ideological into what appears to be universal, natural, and purely empirical. It is naturalising meanings, making them into common sense, when they really are but cultural constructions. The myth function makes a fact out of an interpretation, transforming the cultural into the natural and this, Cynthia Weber argues, is a highly political practice that depends on configurations of power (Weber, 2005: 7). In a general sense, power works through myths by appearing to take the political out of the ideological. This is because something that appears to be natural and unalterable also appears to be apolitical. Yet, to Weber, such 'natural facts' are the most political stories of all, 'not just because of what they say (what the specific myth is) but because of what

they do (they remove themselves and the tradition they support from political debate)' (Weber, 2005: 7).

Building on Barthes, Weber discusses the concept of 'unconscious ideology', which is ideology that is not formally named and that is therefore difficult to identify:

It is the common sense foundation of our world views that is beyond debate. We use them to help make sense of our worlds, very often without realizing it. And because we don't realize we hold unconscious ideologies or use them to make sense of our worlds, we very rarely interrogate them. We rarely ask difficult questions about them that might upset them as common sense. (Weber, 2005: 5)

In other words, one of the reasons we tend not to notice the ideological construction of our world is because ideology denies itself as an ideology. It does not express itself as an ideology but as reality because it conceals its own construction (Lacey, 1998: 101).

Furthermore, according to Barthes, anything that has meaning has the potential of becoming mythical. This is why there is no need to separate between linguistic and visual representations. They are both signs of meaning and they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language-object (Barthes, 1993: 100). This motivates the use of

popular culture and the focus on images as representations of a political puzzle, in this case female agency in political violence.

What follows from this theoretical background is a methodological focus on discourses and their gendered nature in order to expose and deconstruct how the concept of motherhood is understood in relation to female agency in political violence.

A discourse is commonly defined as a linguistic practice that puts into play sets of rules and procedures for the formation of objects, speakers, and themes (Shapiro, 1990: 329), or, in Doty's words, 'a system of statements in which each individual statement makes sense and the discourse thus produces interpretive possibilities by making it virtually impossible to think outside of it' (Doty, 1993: 302). In this way, discourses do not exist out there in the world; rather, they are 'structures of meaning-in-use' (Milliken, 1999: 231). Discourses provide discursive spaces for concepts, categories, metaphors, models, and analogies by which meaning is created (Doty, 1993: 302). While the relationship between discourse and ideology is neither simple nor settled, it is useful, Weldes argues, to see discourse as enabling a process of making meaning and ideology as an effect of that process. This way, a discourse has



ideological effects, such as privileging certain groups over others, and is always implicated in the production and reproduction of power relations (Weldes, 2003: 20).

The idea of discourse analysis is simply that discourse is studied as a subject in its own right, not as an indicator of something else. Moreover, this implies that discursive studies must empirically analyse language practices and because discourse has traditionally been defined as a linguistic practice, most discourse analysis has been concerned with written language, especially in the field of international politics (Hansen, 2006). However, as mentioned above, from a poststructuralist perspective, discursive practices both manifest and construct discourse through representation and reproduction. Because of this, practices of representation and reproduction are the sites at which it is possible to locate power in a given discursive terrain. Thus, discourse-theoretical analysis is concerned with representation as a source for the reproduction of knowledge (Hall, 1997: 43; Shepherd, 2008b: 215) and representations are not limited to written text. Below, I present some contemporary theoretical innovations that challenge traditional approaches to discourse analysis, innovations that, I argue, add value to

how we conduct discourse analyses of world politics in a highly visual and intertextual cultural environment.

### **The inclusion of the visual**

Even if most discourse analysis has concerned written language, language does not have to be linguistic nor verbal. In fact, discourse analysis, I argue, should not be confined to the linguistic simply because communicative structures and meaning-production are by no means limited to the linguistic.

Visual representation has historically involved drawings, photography, and television, but with the growth of mass media, the Internet and real time transmission, the relative importance of the visual has increased (Hansen, 2000: 300). Today, most of us live in cultures that are ever more permeated by visual images with a variety of purposes and intended effects, whether it is CCTV footage, Google Earth, or the predominance of images in news media. In addition, visual representations sits well with a poststructuralist account because visual imagery calls attention to questions of interpretation, perspective and their political effects and foregrounds representation (Campbell, 2007: 220). For these reasons, it has been argued that the recent interest in

images and visual representations is a result of a pictorial turn that is taking over from the linguistic turn of twentieth century philosophy in social theory (Campbell, 2003: 72), and that the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies (Rose, 2001: 6).

From Cultural Studies, which has a longer history of analysing the visual than IR, we learn that the capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed. Hence, using theories to study images allows us to examine what images tell us about the cultures in which they are produced and at the same time, reading and interpreting images are ways that we, as viewers, contribute to the process of assigning value to the culture in which we live. Because images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected, to explore the meaning of images is to recognise that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 6, 25, 42).

Within IR, an increasing number of scholars have highlighted the importance of acknowledging visual representations. In 1990, Michael Shapiro pointed out that those who produce and manage the official strategic discourse are involved in a struggle over visual representations, a 'video war', where policy-makers have to overcome any potential disjuncture between professed and implemented policy (Shapiro, 1990: 337). Since then, scholars such as James Der Derian and David Campbell have explored the interweaving and interdependence of the military, media and information industries; how policy-makers try to influence audiences' interpretations of visual images in what Der Derian has termed the 'Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network' (MIME-NET); and how the US military strategy of 'Revolution in Military Affairs' is deployed (Campbell, 2003; Der Derian, 2001). Similarly, the collection edited by Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel explores how the war on terror is being fought with embedded media on gendered terms in order to win support for the war (Hunt and Rygiel, 2006). Other scholars, such as Miriam Cooke, have highlighted the importance of images in narratives of war, such as when a Croatian Admiral who found himself cornered in Dubrovnik, asked the local television station to show ten minutes of Top Gun on the evening news in order to make the Serbian fleet withdraw. The ploy worked (Cooke, 1996: 76).

The connections between wars and their representation suggests that 'victory no longer belongs to those who wreak the greatest devastation on the greatest number of opponent bodies, but to those who tell the most convincing story' (Cooke, 1996: 94) and also that 'what the word can only represent, the picture supposedly proves' (Der Derian, 2005: 35). To some extent this explains the political strategy of embedding journalists with troops and the links between media, news and military institutions. As a response to the events of 11 September 2001, the 'war on terror' was partly communicated by and made meaningful through visual representation in such a way (Shepherd, 2008b: 213; Hunt and Rygiel, 2006).

Furthermore, feminist scholars have remarked that a women's rights narrative was used in order to sell the 'war on terror', as one of the reasons the war was launched was in order to free the women of Afghanistan from their Taliban oppressors (Ferguson, 2005; Shepherd, 2006; Sjoberg, 2007). Michael C. Williams (2003) has stressed the importance of visual representations in the so called securitisation theory framework and David Campbell (2003) has noted visual imagery's particular importance for international politics in news production and

communication, and how elements of news media, film and documentary photography have contributed to the expression of collective identity. Laura Shepherd has shown how central visual representation is to political legitimacy in the 'war on terror'. For example, Shepherd argues that the Bush administration, by discursively disciplining the subjects and objects represented in the Abu Ghraib images as 'a few bad apples', was able to distancing itself from the images and thereby able to continue defending the presence of US troops in Iraq (Shepherd, 2008b: 219-220). Furthermore, Der Derian has also highlighted the power of images with reference to terrorism:

Thanks to the immediacy of television, the internet and other networked information technology, we see terrorism everywhere in real time, all the time. In turn, terrorism has taken on an iconic, fetishised and, most significantly, highly optical character. (Der Derian, 2005: 26)

Der Derian argues that the press and academics have been slow to consider questions of how not only cultural interpretation, moral judgement and ideological fervour, but also new technical means or reproduction, real-time transmission and global circulation via the internet produce profound and potentially uncontrollable truth-effects through the use of photographic and videographic imagery (Der Derian, 2005: 33).

Challenging the notion that 'reality' can somehow present itself unmediated to interpretation (Shepherd, 2008b: 214), a poststructuralist approach offers a way to study how knowledge and power is distributed in the cultures and societies we live in. It is important that visual culture is understood in an analytical way not only by art historians and other 'image specialists,' but by all of us who increasingly encounter images in our daily lives (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 4). However, it needs to be pointed out that foregrounding the visual in visual culture does not mean separating images from writing, speech, language, or other modes of representation and experience because images are often integrated with words (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 5).

### **Mass culture: the popular site for politics**

There are many different ways of defining 'culture'. According to Cynthia Weber, culture has to do with how we make sense of the world and how we produce, reproduce, and circulate that sense (Weber, 2005: 3). Stuart Hall defines culture as a process, a set of practices, but also as about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas (Hall, 1997: 2). Studying culture understood as 'sense-making', 'signifying practices', or 'an ensemble of stories, beliefs and habits' means we have to pay attention to how meanings are made. We must think about how

meaning-making relies on what is said and what goes without saying (Weber, 2005: 4). The multiplicity of definitions of culture and meaning construction, moreover, implies that meanings can be contested.

Media is the plural form of medium, which in a familiar definition is a means of mediation or communication, neutral or intermediary form through which messages pass (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 153). The term mass media has been used to define those media designed to reach large audiences perceived to have shared interests (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 152). Popular culture has traditionally been defined as those cultural artefacts actually produced by 'the people', and specifically by subordinated classes. I argue a broader definition of popular culture is needed. Following Jutta Weldes (1999), I suggest the term mass culture is more useful as it designates those artefacts that, while consumed by 'the people', are not necessarily produced by them. In this way, popular culture is not separated from 'high culture' and 'fact' is not separated from 'fiction'. This way both traditional news media and popular sites of discursive practices are included in the analysis of world politics.

Similar to academic analysis of visual representations, the study of popular culture has a much longer history in Cultural Studies than in IR.



In fields such as cinema, television and media studies, a value of studying popular forms of visual media are established. However, 'whether by neglect, by design, or by displacement, the politics of the popular is among the most undervalued and therefore under-analysed aspects of international politics' (Weber, 2005: 187). Also, most studies of discourse tend to focus on elite (and academic) rather than popular sites of discursive practices (Weldes, 1999: 118). Weber suggests one answer might be because IR theorists simply do not yet appreciate how the popular functions politically in relation to international politics and international theory: 'because they don't appreciate it, they don't take it seriously' (Weber, 2005: 186).

Still, popular culture is increasingly seen as a site to study international politics. Jutta Weldes has illuminated a number of strong parallels between how US foreign policy discourse and the discursive universe of Star Trek is structured, implying that 'that there might be more going on when audiences sit down to watch television than students of international relations have previously assumed' (Weldes, 1999: 133). Weldes argues that state policy has a pervasive cultural basis and that state action is made commonsensical through popular culture (Weldes, 1999: 119). Shapiro has highlighted that, in many respects, various

aspects of popular culture provide counter-discourses to official strategic discourse (Shapiro, 1990: 335). In this way, it is possible for popular culture to challenge the boundaries of common sense, to contest the taken-for-granted (Weldes, 2003: 6). Campbell has shown how a state's identity, as well as being performed by the official discourses of government, may equally well be performed or represented in unofficial cultural discourses of the community and represented in art, film and literature (Campbell, 2003: 57). Similarly, Lene Hansen (2006), exploring the western discourse on the Balkans during 1990s war in Bosnia, has shown how non-academic and non-political texts might influence central foreign policy-makers decisions to intervene. For Weber, accessing visual culture through popular films allows us to consider the connections between IR theory and our everyday lives, between the popular and the political (Weber, 2005). Weber argues that the stories and myths we find in IR theory are often the same ones we find in popular films, which means that meanings of IR theory are produced and circulated in both traditional academic 'high cultural' realms and popular 'low culture':

If the work of propagating and circulating IR myths occurs in popular films as well as in IR theories, then neglecting this realm of "low politics" in our attempts to come to grips with how the world works would be a mistake. We must interrogate IR theory as a site for cultural practice wherever it occurs- in classic IR texts, in classrooms, and in more

popular sites of culture like film, literature, art, and television.  
(Weber, 2005: 186)

Other studies of popular culture include film, fiction, television, computer games, photography, and comic books that, for example analyse how a particular region, country, or people is cinematically represented; how espionage is treated within popular fiction; or how a war (the Vietnam war) can be won through another (American success in the Gulf war) (Hansen, 2006: 58; Cooke, 1996: 93).

Today, interpretations or readings of the world often come to us through the media and mass communication and 'television is perhaps the most crucial source of collective consciousness today' (Bleiker, 2001: 525). In addition, visual culture is integral to ideologies and power relations. Ideologies are produced and affirmed through the social institutions in a given society, such as the family, education, medicine, the law, the government, and the entertainment industry, among others (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 22). At the same time, reality and representation blur into one another as 'fiction-generating' and 'reality-conferring' are seen to be equivalents. Fiction makes fact (Cooke, 1996: 90) and popular culture is one of the narrative spaces of visual culture. Film and television are therefore media through which we see reinforced ideological

constructions (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 21). Whether a particular popular cultural text supports or undermines existing relations of power, or both at once, examining such texts helps us to highlight the workings of power (Weldes, 2003: 7). Weber suggests that interpretations of historical narratives and their popular signifying forms are so crossed and confused with one another that attempting to police fact from fiction is not only likely to fail but such attempts turn a blind eye to what popular representations can tell us about the politics and the politics of desire bound up in interpretations of historical events (Weber, 2002: 131).

In addition, an important element of ideologies, as mentioned above, is that they appear to be natural or given, rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 21). Therefore, as Weber (2005: 188) argues:

*All cultural sites are powerful arenas in which political struggles take place. Culture is not opposed to politics. Culture is political, and politics is cultural. (emphasis in original)*

Despite the fact a growing number of scholars are including visual representations from mass culture in their analysis, and have pointed out that 'the legacy of the cold war lives on through popular culture' (Der

Derian, 2005: 27); and that we need to 'go cultural' (Weldes, 1999), the analysis of popular culture is still marginalised in the study of world politics. By focusing on representations in popular culture and mass media, a contribution to Weldes' wider attempt to 'pluralise' world politics by multiplying 'the sites and categories that count as political' is made (2003: 6).

### **The aesthetic turn and the role of emotions in world politics**

What is referred to as 'the aesthetic turn in IR' involves two main shifts in the production of knowledge about world politics. The first shift occurred during the 1980s when the positivist foundations of international theory started to be challenged by postmodern scholars such as Richard Ashley, Michael Shapiro, James Der Derian and R.B.J. Walker. The second shift has taken place during the last decade or so when a growing strand of literature has explored different forms of insight into world politics, from sources such as visual arts, literature, music, cinema, arts and popular culture (Bleiker, 2001: 510).

But what does an aesthetic approach to politics really mean? As an explanation, Roland Bleiker contrasts aesthetic with mimetic forms of representation, where the latter equals traditional and dominant IR

scholarship that seeks to represent politics as realistically as possible (Bleiker, 2001: 510). The difference with an aesthetic approach is that it assumes that political reality does not exist in an a priori way. It comes into being only through the process of representation. Furthermore, there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as traditional approaches do, aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics (Bleiker, 2001: 512). Representations matter and they do so in a highly politicised manner because representation is always an act of power (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 130; Bleiker, 2001: 515).

An aesthetic approach, thus, shares many traits with poststructuralism; both critique traditional approaches for seeking objective knowledge of the 'real world'; both share an interest in power and representation; and both value interpretation. In addition, by legitimising images, narratives and sounds as important sources for insight into world politics, aesthetic approaches have moved scholarship away from an exclusive and often very narrow reliance on diplomatic documents, statistical data, political

speeches, academic treaties and other traditional sources of knowledge about world politics (Bleiker, 2001: 526).

For researchers of world politics, war presents political puzzles (Moore, 2006: 187). Through interpreting texts, literary or visual, and their aesthetic quality, we can understand these political puzzles in a different light, different from what is possible within traditional IR approaches. Christine Sylvester argues that IR has not achieved a level of methodological comfort with the feel, sight, and sense of art-based investigations of international relations: 'Missing from IR (discouraged, in fact) and present in art is the non-rational realm of bodily sense' (Sylvester, 2006: 201). Sylvester argues that art is (hidden) within international relations, for example in the use of metaphors such as an election referred to as a "farce", or "dramas" regarding asylum seekers. Sylvester suspects that this means that the typical methodologies employed by the field of IR are not creative and imaginative enough to grasp the world it studies. Therefore, 'art helps IR to realize that there are many ways into a puzzle' (Sylvester, 2006: 219). Moreover, in exploring the literary turn and Chechnya, Cerwyn Moore argues that by employing literature IR theory may be able to relate to the different referents, including the courage, shame, cruelty and honour commonly associated

with stories of war, that condition violence (Moore, 2006: 187). To Moore, aesthetic IR can be seen as a way of unsettling the dominant political discourses of war by highlighting the role of agency (188).

According to Bleiker and Hutchison (2008), an aesthetic approach is also particularly important in order to study emotions, something that is frequently overlooked yet is 'everywhere in world politics' (Crawford, 2000: 116). An aesthetic approach can be used to study emotions because representation is the process by which individual emotions acquire a collective dimension and, in turn, shape social and political processes (Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 130). In 2000, Neta Crawford encouraged scholars of international politics to take emotions seriously. She demonstrated that emotion is already part of theories of world politics, such as neo-realism or neo-liberalism, although it is usually implicit and under-theorised (2000: 119). For example, when it comes to persuasion:

Political leaders, policy makers, and activists are aware, at least naively, of the effects of emotion on information processing, risk assessment, and receptivity to arguments, and they use emotion in their discourse to influence those processes and motivate their audiences. Although Aristotle mentions emotion in his study of rhetoric, there is little contemporary political science research on the relationship of emotions to argument. Yet political actors constantly evoke and manipulate emotions. (Crawford, 2000: 149)



Crawford defines emotions as:

inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings, and those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioral states and changes. Thus, emotions are first of all subjective experiences that also have psychological, intersubjective, and cultural components. Feelings are internally experienced, but the meaning attached to those feelings, the behaviours associated with them, and the recognition of emotions in others are cognitively and culturally construed and constructed. (Crawford, 2000: 125)

Taking the argument further, Andrew Ross argues that constructivist tools for interpreting discursive representations are ill-equipped to study affects in global politics, which he defines as non-conscious and embodied emotional states. Building on Deleuze, Ross argues that whereas feelings are subjective ideas, affects are 'resonances' that connect individuals in collectivities. Hence, an affect is not a property of an individual but a capacity of a body that brings it into some specific social relation, such as a nation or political movement (Ross, 2006: 213). Moreover, affects are experienced by decision-makers and publics alike. In this light, Ross suggests that the memories and other affects induced by the terrorist attacks on 11 September, 2001 provoked American voters and elites to converge in their endorsements of military intervention abroad (Ross, 2006: 199).

To Ross, affects shape our receptivity to social and political movements, ideologies, and identities. This means that everyday events such as popular demonstrations, public speeches, cinema, media representations, and internet transmissions are involved in forging new affective dispositions (Ross, 2006: 204). This also means, I argue, that everyday events (as represented in mass culture) have an emotional value that may contribute to the construction and maintenance of powerful ideologies. I take this argument further by suggesting that emotions are communicated through mythical speech within unconscious ideologies. In this sense, emotions play a role in myth production and the construction and maintenance of powerful ideologies. For this reason it is crucial that we take emotions seriously if we are to fully understand and reveal contemporary myths and unconscious ideologies constructing inequalities in our societies.

So far, I have presented the research context in which my project is set, the theoretical background, and some contemporary theoretical and methodological trends in the study of world politics. In the next section, I will discuss how these are linked and can be applied to understand motherhood and female agency in political violence.

## **Applying the framework**

As shown above, female agency in political violence tends to be represented in gendered terms. But how can we move beyond this? I make the case that the concept of motherhood needs to be examined in relation to representations of female agency in political violence. Only in this way can the tension between identities of life-giving and life-taking in such gendered representations be explored. Only this way can the myth be re-politicised. Applying the methodological framework to representations of the tension between motherhood and female agency in political violence enables us to understand the political puzzle in question in a new light. As visual imagery plays a central role in how we understand, interpret and construct the world around us, restricting discourse analysis to written text at the detriment of the visual simply does not make sense. The use and communicative message of images are linked to emotions or affects, which in turn is an expression of the culture we live in. Ross' linking of affects to ideologies motivates the urge to analyse the emotional links between representations of motherhood and female agency in political violence in order to reveal the unconscious ideologies behind these gendered representations. As mentioned above, Ross suggests that affects not only shape our reciprocity to ideologies, but also that everyday events are involved in forging new affective

dispositions. Similarly, according to Barthes' mythology framework, any type of speech or language, visual, bodily, musical or written, has the potential to constitute a myth. If everyday events are involved in shaping emotional responses, there is really no need to separate between high and low culture, and between popular culture and traditional data for analysis. Instead, the term 'mass culture', I argue, captures both traditional news media and popular culture, focusing on 'what is out there' for the mass population, for the consumers of myths, on what is underpinning their understandings of the political. By providing a link between using data from cultural sites and a methodological tool to study emotions, the use of an aesthetic approach to the study of world politics is motivated.

If theoretical innovations such as using data from mass or popular culture and including visual representations help us make decisions about what data to analyse with discourse analysis, unpacking unconscious ideologies and myths, to reveal how power works to mythologize something cultural into something natural, is the aim of study in order to achieve political change. I argue that the tension in representations of motherhood (life-giving) and female agency in political violence (life-taking) constitutes a myth created by unconscious gendered ideologies

that constructs motherhood as natural, when it is in fact cultural. By constructing motherhood as a natural fact, something we do not question, the unconscious ideology in turn constructs our understanding of female agency in political violence as incompatible with motherhood. This is the content of the myth.

Following the arguments regarding emotions and world politics as described above, I argue that emotions and affects are essential to myth production and thus needs to be taken into account when we want to analyse and overcome the gendered myths regarding female agency in political violence. How we understand female agency in relation to motherhood is an example of how such a myth is constructed and what gendered (unconscious) ideologies are maintained.

To conclude, motherhood and female agency in political violence is best studied as discursive practices including visual representations in mass culture, including aesthetic sources and by analysing the emotional response to such representations.

## **Concluding remarks**

In this paper, I have presented a methodological framework with an interdisciplinary approach based on discourse analysis. I have discussed some contemporary theoretical innovations that challenge how, what and where we study international politics. These theoretical innovations may be situated on the margins today, but could, or perhaps should, transform how we conduct studies of world politics in the future. It might sound contradictory, but if the key objective for researching world politics concerns finding new ways to understand the dilemmas of world politics, as Bleiker argues, we need to 'forget IR theory' (Bleiker, 1997) and move beyond academic disciplines in order to ensure sustainable academic progress and prosperity within IR.

Following such an argument, I have argued that visual representations cannot be ignored in this highly visualised and intertextual world. On the contrary, a politics of the visual is needed in order to get at the complexities of political puzzles of today, and especially in relation to gender, agency and violence. Moreover, since meaning construction is not contained by disciplinary borders, neither should data for political analysis be categorised in such a limited way. Data from popular culture should not be separated from traditional data used in studies of politics,

nor should it be divided in neat categories such as high and low culture. What is more, the 'unconscious ideologies' constructing unequal power relations need to be revealed and 'made conscious' and the myths of our societies need to be re-politicised in order for us to have the possibility to change them and work towards a more equal society. The study of emotions is essential in this process and cannot be ignored.

This paper also makes a case for studying world politics through aesthetic sources. Only if we broaden our knowledge of what counts as politics and keep an open mind to alternative sources of data and methodological ways to conducting political research, can we fully understand 'the dilemmas that currently haunt world politics' (Bleiker, 2001: 529).

## Bibliography

- Alison, Miranda. 2004. "Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security", *Security Dialogue*, 35(4): 447-463.
- Barthes, Roland. 1993. "Myth Today", in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Roland Barthes Reader*, pp93-149. London: Vintage.
- Baxter, Judith. 2003. *Positioning Gender in Discourse: A Feminist Methodology*. New York: Palgrave.
- Bleiker, Roland. 1997. "Forget IR Theory", *Alternatives*, 22(1): 57-85.
- Bleiker, Roland. 2001. "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30(3): 509-533.
- Bleiker, Roland. and Hutchinson, Emma. 2008. "Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics", *Review of International Studies*, 34: 115-135.
- Brittain, Melissa. 2006 "Benevolent Invaders, Heroic Victims and Depraved Villains: White Femininity in Media Coverage of the Invasion of Iraq" in Krista Hunt and Kim Rygiel, eds., *(En)gendering the War on Terror*, pp73-96. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. and Scott, Joan. (eds), 1992. *Feminists Theorize the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, David. 2003. "Cultural Governance and Pictorial Resistance: Reflections on the Imagining of War", *Review of International Studies*, 29: 57-73.
- Campbell, David. 2007, "Post-Structuralism", in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, pp204-228. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooke, Miriam. 1996. *Women and the War Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



Crawford, Neta C. 2000. "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships", *International Security*, 24(4): 116-156.

Der Derian, James. 2001. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Der Derian, James. 2005. "Imagining Terror: Logos, Pathos and Ethos", *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1): 23-37.

Dietz, Mary G. 2003. "Current Controversies in Feminist Theory", *The Annual Review of Political Science*, 6: 399-431.

Doty, Roxanne L. 1993. "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines", *International Studies Quarterly*, 37(3): 297-320.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2000. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ferguson, Michael L. 2005. "'W' Stands for Women: Feminism and Security Rhetoric in the Post-9/11 Bush Administration", *Politics and Gender*, 1: 9-38.

Goldstein, Joshua S. 2004. *War and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Griset, Pamala and Mahan, Sue. 2003. *Terrorism in Perspective*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. "The Work of Representation", in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, pp13-74. London: Sage.

Hansen, Lene. 2000. "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma: The Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29(2): 285-306.

Hansen, Lene. 2006. *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge.

- Hunt, Krista and Rygiel, Kim (eds). 2006. *(En)gendering the War on Terror*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kampfner, John. 2003. "The Truth About Jessica", *The Guardian*, 15 May: A1.
- Kumar, Deepa. 2004. "War Propaganda and the (AB)uses of Women", *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3): 297-313.
- Lacey, Nick. 1998. *Image and Representation: Key Concepts in Media Studies*. New York: Palgrave.
- Lloyd, Moya. 2005. *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power & Politics*. London: Sage Publications.
- McNay, Lois. 2000. *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Milliken, Jennifer. 1999. "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods", *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2, 225-254.
- Moore, Cerwyn. 2006. "Reading the Hermeneutics of Violence: The Literary Turn and Chechnya", *Global Society*, 20(2): 179-198.
- Pin-Fat, Véronique. and Stern, Maria. 2005. "The Scripting of Private Jessica Lynch: Biopolitics, Gender, and the "Feminization" of the US Military", *Alternatives*, 30: 25-53.
- Rose, Gillian. 2001. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London: Sage Publications.
- Roseneil, Sasha. 1999. "Postmodern Feminist Politics: The Art of the (Im)possible?", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 6: 161-182.
- Ross, Andrew G. 2006. "Coming in from the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions", *European Journal of International Relations*, 12: 2, 197-222.
- Shapiro, Michael J. 1990. "Strategic Discourse/Discursive Strategy: The Representation of "Security Policy" in the Video Age", *International Studies Quarterly*, 34: 327-340.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2006. "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(1): 19-41.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2008a. *Gender, Violence and Security: Discourse as Practice*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Shepherd, Laura J. 2008b. "Visualising Violence: Legitimacy and Authority in the 'War on Terror'", *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 1(2): 213-226.

Sjoberg, Laura. 2007. "Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations from the War in Iraq", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9(1): 82-101.

Sjoberg, Laura. and Gentry, Caron E. 2007. *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Sontag, Susa. 1993. *A Roland Barthes Reader*. London: Vintage.

Sturken, Marita and Cartwright, Lisa. 2001. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sylvester, Christine. 2006. "Bringing Art/Museums to Feminist IR", in B. A. Ackerly, M. Stern and J. True, eds., *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, pp201-220. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Toles Parkin, Terri. 2004. "Explosive Baggage: Female Palestinian Suicide Bombers and the Rhetoric of Emotion", *Women and Language*, 27(2): 79-88.

Weber, Cynthia. 2002. "Flying Planes Can Be Dangerous", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31(1): 129-147.

Weber, Cynthia. 2005. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Weldes, Jutta. 1999. "Going Cultural: Star Trek, State Action and Popular Culture", *Millennium: Journal of International Politics*, 28(1): 117-134.

Weldes, Jutta. 2003. "Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations", in Jutta Weldes, ed., *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, pp1-27. New York: Palgrave.

West, Jessica. 2004. "Feminist IR and the Case of the 'Black Widows': Reproducing Gendered Divisions", *Innovations: A Journal of Politics*, 5: 1-16.

Williams, Michael C. 2003. "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics", *International Studies Quarterly*, 47(4): 511-531.