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Depicting Childhood: A Critical Framework for Engaging Images of Children in IR

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ABSTRACT

Visual representations of children are ubiquitous in international relations, they illustrate, indicate, and indict, but we rarely stop to consider the implications of their presence. Such images reproduce stereotypical conceptions of childhood: starving children as paragons of innocence, teens clutching AK-47s as delinquent or posing a risk, and dead children as the ultimate condemnation of circumstance. Such images present children as iconic, a synecdoche for understanding a political event; they illustrate without reflection. This chapter asks what a more critical engagement with images of children and childhood might offer IR. It outlines a critical framework for considering such images to draw out the possibilities and tensions inherent in the circulation of evocative images of children in international relations. It outlines a way for those interested in engaging with the visual politics of childhood to consider the complex ways frames and discourses reproduce global inequalities, stereotypes about conflict and disaster, and allow a more meaningful engagement with representations of childhood in international relations.

INTRODUCTION

There is a predictable ubiquity to the use of images of children to illustrate conflicts, crises, and disasters around the world. There are some images of specific children that have captured the world's attention at the time of a particular event, and then endured as 'icons' (Hansen 2014; Berents 2016) These include the so called 'migrant crisis' at the borders of Europe being captured in the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi in 2015, or the consequences of the Vietnam War through the agony of Kim Phúc, naked and running from flames in 1972, or Kevin Carter's photo

of the starving child and vulture in Sudan in 1993 capturing the crisis of famine sweeping the region. There are also more ‘generic’ images which stand in for particular political crises or issues. Images of young boys holding oversized AK-47s became ubiquitous in reporting on several civil conflicts in Africa in the 1990s, while refugee camps are frequently visualized through seemingly more generic images of “womenandchildren” (Carpenter 2006).

Images of injured, suffering, threatening children demand attention. They rely on commonly held assumptions about childhood to identify these children as ‘out of place’—they are not protected, safe, private, but rather subject to violence, indignity and politicization. John Berger argues that such photos are “arresting”, we are “seized by them” (Berger 1992, 42). This profoundly affective encounter often precludes meaningful action.¹ The call to attend to these images is complex, as such images do not tell the viewer explicitly what they should feel, how they should respond. Thus, they may both simultaneously crystallise an affective response, and complicate the discourse around an event.

Often, however, such images are not critically considered; they illustrate, indicate and indict, but the implications of their use are overlooked. This chapter explores what it means to consider images of children in international relations (IR). It asks IR scholars to more critically consider how they encounter, consider, and use images of children. By denaturalizing images of children as stand-ins for political events, and instead focusing on the work such images do this chapter outlines key considerations of the potential and problems of engaging with the visual politics of childhood in IR. Considering images of children in IR more seriously opens up important avenues for reflection about the construction of political events in public discourse, the enduring way uneven global power relations are created and maintained, as well as for legitimizing children’s experiences of global events as sites of knowledge.

There is a tension in arguing for a more reflective use of and engagement with these images. In suggesting there are problematic narratives and frames often associated with images of children, I am not denying the very real and very damaging consequences of conflict, disaster and other violence experienced by children. Children are disproportionately affected by crisis and conflict, and systems to support and care for them as well as to enable their own efforts and responses are vital. Rather, I am arguing that images of children be considered critically, in terms of how and

¹ This reaction described by Berger is identified by other scholars also, whose work constitutes a particular line of argument that the aestheticisation, and impulse of affective response, precludes political response. On this see Berger 1992, Campbell 2004; Sontag 2003. All these authors question this moment of seizure, and subsequent affective and social responses, arguing for questioning the naturalness of this response.

when they are used and for what purpose they are deployed. Images can be a powerful mover of public opinion, but they can also be a vehicle for the reinforcement of reductive and limiting narratives about young people in these contexts.

This chapter argues that we need to better account for the ways in which children are represented in IR, to more fully understand the events we explore as scholars of global political events. What is the political and affective dimensions of using images of children to illustrate, and under what circumstances is the active presence of young people made notable? What work do images of children do in IR? How do they come to illustrate global political events but not be seen as *part of the event* themselves? What are the potential benefits of a more critical consideration of such images, and what are some of the problems inherent in analysing and using them?

To consider these questions, this chapter proceeds in four parts. It first considers the politics of images and the merit in taking images—in this case, photographs—more seriously in IR; to do this it draws on a growing literature in IR on visual politics. Second, it demonstrates the ubiquity of images of children in a range of sites and for a range of purposes to denaturalise the taken-for-granted and often ‘background’ nature of these images; arguing instead the fact of this ubiquity requires more nuanced attention. Third, it critically considers *how* children are represented in these images: as victims, delinquents, and icons. In this section I make a case for considering these not as fixed categories but rather as *frames*, which allows for recognition of the political nature of their use and their often-overlapping deployment. Fourth, this chapter presents a reflection on appropriate methods for considering images of children in IR, and outlines a critical framework of questions scholar should engage when undertaking this work. Finally, by way of conclusion I offer some reflections on the potential and pitfalls of taking images of children seriously as a site of politics in IR. Together these four sections outline a rationale for a nuanced, reflective, critical framework for engaging images of children in conflict, crisis and disaster.

POLITICS OF IMAGES

Global events are profoundly mediatised. While it is true that images of children are ubiquitous in coverage of global events, it is also true more broadly that our engagement with global politics is saturated in the visual. Pollock argues that “[m]ediatized culture disseminates images of gross, persistent, dehumanizing agony caused by political violence and economic greed” (2012, 71).

Mediatised cultures rely on multiple forms of visual media. While there are many forms of visual media, this chapter focuses on photography and still visual images. Photographs remain a key

means by which images of conflicts, crises, and disasters are distributed. As Hutchinson, Bleiker and Campbell (2013) note, they can be shared easily across a range of different media and with a variety of intentions.

A consideration of images of children in global politics must be situated within a broader understanding of the role of images. Firstly, images are an affective site of politics. An attention to images of children sits within a tradition that recognises that images are a form of representation, and that such representations both shape political and social spaces, but are also sites of politics themselves (Bleiker 2001; Shapiro 1988). As Hutchinson has persuasively demonstrated, such representations draw not just on ‘cognition’ or how we think about the world, but also about affect, “how individuals are emotionally constituted by, and thus situated within and attached to, the world around them” (2014, 4). Thus, I would argue, that attending to the politics of images of children in IR requires a reflection on how images do political and affective work, and recognition that these two are not distinct.

Secondly, discourses concerning images are contested and multiple. Feminist and postcolonial scholars argue for the vital need for attention to self-reflective practices about positionality and privilege inherent in the production and circulation of these images. There are often assumptions made about the subject/object of a photograph and the audience/viewer. Sontag argues that “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (2003, 6). Elsewhere Sontag notes that photographs of the subjects of violence continues colonial practices of “exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings” in a ways that are “oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence” (2003, 65). Considering the ‘we’ in the context of the contemporary hyper-connected digital landscape raises further complexities: Alan Kurdi’s aunt mourned her nephew on television from her Canadian home. “The frankest representations of war, and of disaster-injured bodies, are of those who seem most foreign, therefore least likely to be known” (Sontag, 2003, 55). How these images are produced, circulated, encountered, and re-shared, must be critically evaluated in terms of our own differentiated positions of privilege and positionality (see also Berents 2019, 7). Sharon Sliwinski argues, drawing on Kant, Arendt, Woolf and Sontag, that the viewer of images of atrocities and human rights abuses—what Sliwinski calls the ‘world spectator’—occupies an important position in relation to these images (Sliwinski 2011, 21-33). The affective response of the spectator, demonstrates and enables action, it is situated in the tension between intellectual thought and emotional response, and thus it allows a space for discussion about responses to such abuses and violences. The contestation of images can be both problematic and productive.

Thirdly, images also capture and fix a time. We cannot see what is beyond the frame of the camera lens. While it is generally recognised that photographs are not an objective representation of the world, it is the “illusion of authenticity that makes photographs such powerful tools to convey the meaning of crises to distant audiences” (Hutchinson, Bleiker and Campbell 2014). This apparent “glimpse of the real” can enable a “seductive belief that what we see in a photograph is an authentic representation of the world” (Bleiker 2018, 12). This illusion of authenticity, as Bleiker argues “masks the political values that such photograph representations embody (2018, 13). Rather images work by “twinning denotation and connotation, matching the ability to depict the world ‘as it is’ with the ability to couch what is depicted in a symbolic frame consonant with broader understandings of the world” (Zelizer 2010, 3).

Images of children in global politics are a perfect example of the twinning of the world ‘as it is’ with powerful symbolic frames. Photographs of children in particular reinforce dominant conceptions of children as passive and unable to respond to the events they find themselves within. As Katrina Lee-Koo notes “these children are mute and paralysed, seen but not heard” (2018, 52).

The ways in which we can account for children’s presence is limited by the kinds of images of children that circulate. Take for example, the ubiquity of images of young boys standing with oversized AK-47s as a visual marker of ‘child soldiers’ that reinforces a particular view of what child soldiers are, which does not account for many experiences of child soldiers. This image does not even align with the accepted international definition of child soldiers that was first articulated in the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices in 1997, that includes both children who carry arms as well as “cooks, porters, messengers” and “girls recruited for sexual purposes” (UNICEF, 1997). Despite this widely adopted definition of child soldiers, images of children recruited by armed groups are limited and do not visually depict many of the children who fall within this definition. The consequences of this are limited attention to girl child soldiers, and to those children who may have been involved in conflict but not holding a gun (Honwana 2006). This limits the capacity and will for solutions to the broader issues at play. The images that circulate have a profound impact on both how children are seen, but also what responses are made.

Finally, images of children are not always about the child. Images of children in certain contexts can influence political discourse. This chapter is interested in the ways in which images of

children function as synecdoches for broader political events (see Moeller 2002), and how they are deeply complicit in reinforcing certain norms and understandings of global politics. It explores the representational quality of images of children, with all the attendant considerations of the affective dimensions of such images, as well as concern for uneven global power relations and researcher positionality in considering them. Having established the implications of the contemporary mediatised global landscape, this chapter turns its attention to the sites where images of children appear.

NOTICING THE UBIQUITY OF IMAGES OF CHILDREN

Images of children are deployed and politicised by a range of actors, and have long been used as motivators for political action. While most often this action is a compulsion to intervene, to save, to fix, images of children can also be a prompt for military intervention, condemnation, or sanctions. Thus, images of children function as potential powerful political and social drivers. In this section I draw attention to the ubiquity of images of children in global politics from newspapers, politicians and humanitarian actors, to social media virality, use by terrorist groups, and even our own complicity as IR scholars in using these images.

Images of children are used by newspapers to ‘tell stories’ about world events; for example the image of Alan Kurdi galvanised efforts by news outlets to convey the seriousness of the so-called migration crisis (Olesen 2017; Pruitt, Berents and Munro 2018; Vis and Gourinova 2015). In 1938, images of German-Jewish children arriving on trains in the UK as part of the *Kindertransport* from Germany, divided the press, with some coverage concerned about these children ‘overrunning’ the country, while others emphasised the assimilationist efforts of the policy in incorporating these children into British life (see Pistol 2017). Similarly, news stories about the separation of children from their parents at the southern border of the US in 2018 was illustrated with photographs of distressed children crying for their parents (see Beaumont 2018).

Images of children are used by politicians to justify political actions; in 2017 images of the deaths of children in a sarin-gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun in Syria prompted Trump to condemn Assad because “even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered” (Lander 2017) and ordering a retaliatory missile strike on Syria. The shocking image in 2014 of seven-year-old Australian boy Abdullah Sharrouf standing next to his father Khaled in Syria holding the decapitated head of a Syrian soldier prompted widespread condemnation and discussion of strengthening Australian legislation in response to jihadist terrorism (Khaled Sharrouf was the first person to have his Australian citizenship stripped under new laws in 2017).

Humanitarian and advocacy organisations have long used images of children to prompt donations and support for causes, often in frameworks that are both paternalistic, reductive and neo-colonial (Ali, James and Vultee 2013; Burman 1994; Pupavac; Berents 2016; Dencik and Allan 2017). This is evident through regular donation campaigns like Save the Children's 'sponsor a child' efforts. Similarly, other NGO campaigns depict children as decontextualized, suffering victims where poverty and violence threaten and implicitly condemn the children's home community and country as being unable or unwilling to assist (Wells 2013; Zarzycka 2016; Burman 1994; Pupavac 2001).

Images produced by news media also gain traction and virality on social media, often reproducing but also exceeding the original frames in which such images appeared. Social media sharing of images of Alan Kurdi for example, reveal the affective dimensions of the images and contradictory calls to help asylum seekers, condemnation of Kurdi's father for bringing his family by boat, and scepticism of the truthfulness of the image (Olesen 2017; Pruitt, Berents and Munro 2018).

They can also be used by parties to a conflict and terrorist groups themselves. Watkins and Looney, for example, explore a range of magazines produced by different terrorist groups to identify the use of images of children as either child-perpetrators of violence, or victims of western-backed warfare (2018).

Finally, images are also used by IR academics. Even when not focusing on the image itself, scholars chose to use these images in teaching practice and in presenting academic material. Illustratively, at an International Studies Association annual convention when the so-called 'Mediterranean migrant crisis' was a popular topic of papers, I saw the image of Kurdi used in four different presentations either as an illustrative photo or, in one case, as the literal background for the slideshow presentation, although the image was only directly referenced by one presenter who noted that those of us in the audience 'were probably familiar with the consequences of the crisis' while pointing at Kurdi's image. In these presentations the politics of complicity in reproducing the image, and particularly using an image of a dead child as a generic stand-in for the "crisis" had not been considered by the academics. This is an anecdotal example, and I do not mention this example to criticise these presenters particularly, but rather to highlight the way in which images of children become 'background' and the ways in which these images function as

symbolic without consideration of the implications. As scholars of global politics we are not separate from the politics of reproduction of these images.

It is evident that images of children are ubiquitous in a wide variety of sites of discussion and analysis of global events. These images vary across time and location in terms of specifics, but there are features of photography of children that endures. The following section unpacks the dominant frames of childhood that are evident. Through their varied and widespread use images of children reinforce often problematic neo-colonial power relations, function to erase the capacity of actors outside the global north, and locate political agency in the hands of the viewers of these images.

DELINQUENT, VICTIM, ICON: FRAMING IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD

Children are widely understood as appearing in dichotomous ways in international politics: they are delinquents or victims. Seen as apolitical, children are frequently overlooked in IR. However, representations of children and childhood are profoundly political and politicised.² Kate Lee-Koo notes that children in images do not wield political power themselves, “[i]n fact, the power of the images is fuelled by the subject’s lack of power” (2018, 51).

This dichotomous normative categories represents children as either essentialised victims or as dangerous delinquents. The dichotomous, and stereotypical, depictions of children both flatten and ‘fix’ children’s experiences of conflict, crisis or disaster, and “oversimplify a complex reality” (Wessells 1998, 641). By understanding images of children through categories, we limit our ability to fully explore their politicisation and deployment as affective icons. Rather, I argue we should understand these descriptors as frames rather than fixed categories.

An understanding of frames allows the unpicking of the assumptions and stereotypes that inform these images. Discourses frequently use terms such as ‘child victim’ or ‘delinquent child’. Understanding these as frames, allows a critical questioning of how we see what is *framed as* victimisation or delinquency. This denaturalises the narratives *about* children and separates such narratives from the site of children’s bodies themselves. Such a move also allows for an

² I would stress that children themselves also have political agency; a fact which is also often ignored or dismissed in IR. While I am focused here on the *representations* of children as political, I do not want to erase the political agency and subjecthood of children themselves. For more on this see Berents (2018), Beier (2015), Lee-Koo (2011), Watson (2009) among others. I also do not want to imply that these framings are inherently false; children do suffer disproportionately in conflict and their experiences of violence are complex and traumatic in a multitude of ways. Rather, it is to argue that these frames shape discourses in particular ways, and limit other—and more nuanced—understandings of children’s experience of global political events

accounting of the way frames can overlap, creating powerful images of children. Images of young boys holding guns is framed both as victimisation of children but also as a potential site of danger and delinquency. The child has to be both rescued, *and* contained and re-socialised. While I am arguing here for a reconfiguration of our understanding of images of children as being framed, rather than being categories; the broad typology still holds. Images of children are generally framed as engaged in dangerous activities, as victimised and suffering, or as undertaking activities that are seen as exceptional for children.

Delinquent, Suffering, Exceptional

Images of children framed as delinquent or dangerous can be seen in some depictions of child soldiering, as well as youth involvement in civil protest and violence (particularly in urban centres of the global south). These images are used by news agents, but also appear in films such as the 2007 *Blood Diamond*. Images of dangerous children are also used in the politicisation of the irregular movement of people. Both the so-called Mediterranean migrant ‘crisis’ (Pruitt, Berents, and Munro 2018), and the arrival of people from the Northern Triangle of Central America to the border with the United States of America were frequently illustrated with images of large numbers of (male) children and young men, framed as threats and dangers.

When it comes to images of children in contexts of global politics there is no doubt that it is frames of suffering and victimisation that dominate. The protracted conflict in Syria has led to several profoundly difficult images of the suffering and death of children, from the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi on a Turkish beach in 2015, to five-year-old Omran Daqneesh covered in blood and dust in the back of an ambulance in Aleppo, to the deaths of children in the gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun. In 2018, it was images of starving, emaciated children in Yemen that circulated globally; images that echoed previous photos of starvation, including most famously the image of the starving Sudanese girl and the vulture which won photographer Kevin Carter the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 1994. The image of Kim Phúc, naked and running from a napalm attack, taken by Nick Ut in 1973 is still frequently invoked and used to illustrate the violence of war for children. The tropes in these famous images to illustrate children’s suffering from starvation, disease and war, and their victimisation through injury and death are repeated in many images used by news outlets and advocacy organisations.

Finally, I add to the usual dichotomy of delinquency/victimisation the frame of exceptionalism. Children who, as I have argued previously, exceed what is expected of them as children due to powerful assumptions about gender, age, race, and global power relations (Berents 2016). Such

images are held up as iconic; they embody actions that others should aspire to. Nobel-prize winner, Malala Yousafzai, fifteen-years-old when she was shot by the Taliban for her advocacy for girls' education, is an example of an iconic child (see Berents 2016). Sixteen-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg, whose advocacy for political action on climate change has seen her speak around Europe, be on the cover of *Time Magazine*, and be nominated for a Nobel prize can also be understood as exceptional. Eight-year-old Bana Alabed, who with assistance from her mother, tweeted from Aleppo during the time it was under siege in 2016, can be understood as exceptional. Images of her tweeted during the siege gave a face to the events and experiences from the position of a child. This frame usually depends on the child first being framed as victimised, and overcoming that victimisation to achieve recognition of their exceptionalism.

Considering how the experiences and actions of children in conflict come to be *framed* visually as delinquency, victimisation, or exceptionalism exposes the political work images of children do. The next section unpacks the implications and underpinnings of these framings.

Implications of These Frames of Childhood

While it is possible to identify the dominant and stereotypical frames used to visualise childhood, there are complex implications and underpinnings that help inform these simplistic characteristics. Images of children are complex and contested. They draw on particular ideas of childhood that stem from the global North, are imbued with layers of historical assumptions, and rely on profoundly gendered, racialized, and ageist tropes. Images of children function to both represent the child themselves, but also to implicate adults in various ways too.

Understandings of children as innocent, pure, and in need of protection stem from a long history of western thought, and have been exported globally, particularly with the rise of international human rights discourse. Kate Manzo notes that while the association of images of children with human rights discourse might be recent, “tropes of *innocence*, *dependence* and *protection* have a far longer lineage in colonial ideology (including the child-centrism of missionary iconography) and development theory” (2008, 636, italics original). There is a hierarchy of childhood evident in how these images are chosen for publication and circulated and shared, whereby certain kinds of bodies are able to be photographed in agony or violence, and others are not depicted (Berents 2019, 11).

These frames are also profoundly gendered. Erica Burman notes the assumption that operates is that “good girls need to be saved, but bad boys need to be contained” (1994, 245). While girlhood

in the global North is seen to be autonomous and educated, girlhood in the global South is depicted as failing to be this. Girlhood in the global South is “perceived to be always in danger, at risk of co-optation by ideologies and adult (men) who do not share the liberal enlightened values of the Global North” (Berents, 2016, 5). Even when it is not girls specifically, vulnerability and victimisation are coded feminine. In contrast delinquency and potential danger of children is rooted in masculinised stereotypes. Age also plays a role here, with the feminised space of victimisation most often depicting younger children, while delinquency is most commonly evidenced by children approaching the cusp of youthhood or adulthood (Pruitt, Berents and Munro 2018).

Cynthia Enloe’s influential observation of the frequent collapsing of the categories of children and of women as “womenandchildren” when discussing foreign policy is relevant here (Enloe 1990). “Womenandchildren” becomes a homogenous category that experiences victimisation and is associated with passivity and innocence. Humanitarian organisations and other aid efforts draw on this construction to gain support for causes (Carpenter 2006). This norm is reinforced and perpetuated through the use of particular images of deserving victims in disaster and conflict situations.

The inevitable failure of parents, adults, and by extension whole countries, predominantly in the global south, to protect children is evidenced via images of children’s suffering. Susan Moeller argues that children are “a synecdoche for a country’s future, for the political and social well-being of a culture” (2002, 39). Young girls as the quintessential child victim collapse “femininity and childish dependency” to “evoke sympathy” (Burman, 1994, 242). Such a collapse “reinforces assumptions of children’s passivity, and reproduces patriarchal relations, both within and between donor and recipient countries” (Burman 1994, 242). Narratives of passivity and victimisation also “mediates engagements within the Global North about issues in the Global South while erasing any complicity by states of the Global North in contributing to the crisis that is being responded to” (Berents, 2016, 5).

By and large, images of children in conflict and crisis reproduce framing of children as either victimised or engaged in delinquent behaviour. Images of children as dangerous or victimised do not have a voice, and these images reinforce certain representations that underpin understandings of broader issues. Exceptional children such as Malala Yousafzai or Greta Thunberg are not only exceptional in their visual representations, but images of both young women are often accompanied by their own voice. Young women like Malala can speak because she is

reproducing a framework of ‘good girlhood’ (see Berents 2016). When children are allowed to speak, these moments also are bound in politics and politicised.

Images of children usually depict children using one or more key frames: children as engaged in dangerous activities, children as victimised and suffering, and children as exceptional. These frames are saturated in implicit assumptions about age, gender and race and operate through powerfully uneven global power relations. Recognising this is a first step towards taking images of children more seriously as a site of politics in IR; this chapter now turns to suggestions for how to more systematically engage in this work.

A FRAMEWORK: METHODS AND CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Methods and Approaches

There is not one straightforward approach to taking images seriously in IR. The ‘visual turn’ in IR has led to a fruitful expansion of consideration of images in global politics, and a proliferation of ways of attending to images. Roland Bleiker advocates “drawing on multiple, diverse and even incompatible methods” (2015, 877). His proposed sites and modalities for considering images draws on Gillian Rose’s work on visual methods (2006). Rose identifies four sites: the site of production, the site of the image, the site of circulation, and the site of audiencing. Through these four sites, three modalities can be explored: technological, compositional, and social (see Rose 2006, 24-47). Bleiker notes that the variety of methods required to consider these different sites and modalities might exceed the capabilities of any one researcher. However, various efforts by multiple researchers across these sites and modalities can uncover the value of considering the way images are imbricated in political events. For those interested in taking images of children in global politics more seriously, Rose’s sites and modalities offers a clear, structured outline to be engaged when considering how a piece of research might be positioned. Each site and modality have their own potentials and pitfalls also, in terms of what it can uncover and what it might overlook.

A Proposal for a Critical Framework

This discussion so far leads to the necessary demand of how, then, images of children should be given serious consideration in IR. I propose here a series of questions, that taken together can be considered a framework for how, as scholars concerned with the appearance of such images and the representations of children within them, we might take seriously their presence. In some ways this is a very simplistic framework. To ask “what, how, where, when, why” can be seen as

reductive and limited. However, I propose it here as a way to prompt the vitally necessary *critical* questions which are so often absent in analyses of images of children in IR.

The first is to ask: **what images of children are we seeing?** As discussed above, certain children and certain frames of childhood are more often used when representing children in global politics. Critical consideration of what frames we are seeing children through is a first step to a more critical engagement with images of children. To an extent this is a content question—are the images of child soldiers, or of suffering children, or children who are dead? If children are suffering, what are they suffering from: war, disease, or starvation? The counter to this question, which must also be considered is: what images of children are we not seeing? When certain images of certain children gain prominence there are other children whose experiences are marginalised or erased. Accounting for absences is a more difficult task but one it is important to undertake to understand the presence of the visible images also. Critical exploration of images of Malala Yousafzai in the aftermath of the attempted assassination notes there were two other girls in the vehicle with Yousafzai—Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan—who were also injured, yet images of their suffering were not circulated. In depicting the so-called Mediterranean migrant ‘crisis’, the image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi went viral, whereas images of older children and adults did not (Pruitt, Berents and Munro 2018), a feature of disaster and humanitarian photography with a long history (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015).

Images of children that frequently circulate are of certain kinds of children. Tanya Steele argues that “brown children matter when it comes time to illustrate grief and suffering” (2014), while Emma Hutchinson highlights the colonial implications of images of disaster, noting that victims of the 2004 Asian Tsunami were “as dark, primitive, and powerless” (2014, 2). There are implications around what kind of children are understood to be able to be photographed in these contexts that are deeply saturated with concerns about age, race and gender.

Having considered what kinds of images we are seeing, the related question that might be asked is: **how are children depicted in these images?** In outlining a critical visual methodology Rose argues that the site of the image itself is an important site of meaning for images (2016, 32). While an image cannot be understood without context, the composition of an image shapes the message an image may convey. Images of children’s suffering are often depicted through close shots of children’s faces both in news coverage and in humanitarian and advocacy work (Burman 1994; Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). Images of delinquent or dangerous children are often portrayed through images that take in a large number of children and youth. Such tropes hold

powerful sway in relation to images of children that circulate in global political discourse. The composition of such images is a valuable site of critical enquiry, and may be explored by adopting an approach such as compositional interpretation (Rose 2006, 56-85) or even a more straightforward content analysis to explore what is in the images.

There is another way to consider the question of **how** children are depicted, and that is to consider the people who capture these images. Photojournalists, often working under very difficult circumstances, make political, ethical, and aesthetic decisions about what to focus their lenses on in the first place. Kevin Carter, who photographed the starving Sudanese girl and the vulture in 1993, was the object of public condemnation for taking the image (the accusation being he photographed rather than helped, although he explained later that he subsequently carried the girl to aid) (Pollock 2012, 75). Nilufer Demir, who photographed Alan Kurdi on the Turkish beach acknowledged her inability to do anything to ‘save’ Kurdi, saying “There was nothing to do except take his photograph ... and that is exactly what I did...I thought, 'This is the only way I can express the scream of his silent body’” (quoted in Griggs 2015). Critical exploration of how certain depictions of children are chosen by the photographer is another dimension to an exploration of these images.

Third, as scholars of IR we can ask **where are we seeing images of children?** Historically it has been news outlets that have made the editorial decisions about publication of images. The now-iconic image of then nine-year-old Kim Phúc and other children running from a napalm attack during the Vietnam War “almost didn’t run” according to the senior photo editor of the Associated Press (Miller 2012, 147). Yet it was published by the *New York Times* and then other outlets, generating outrage and becoming one of the key visual markers of the war. In relation to the publication of the image of Alan Kurdi in 2015, several newspapers have publicly discussed the editorial decision-making process in deciding to publish. Mortensen and colleagues (2017) argue that editors in publishing the image of Kurdi considered the influence of social media, the affective qualities of the image and its ability to ‘move’ an audience, and the historical precedents of previously published images of death and suffering. Images of starving children in Yemen in 2018 were published by the *New York Times*, with the international picture editor David Furst arguing that the paper chooses not to publish many “horrific” or “invasive” images but that in publishing these images “we felt it would be a disservice to the victims of this war to publish sanitized images that don’t fully reflect their suffering” (Nagourney and Slackman 2018). Images

of suffering children in this instance are situated as *the best* form to convey the broader horror of the war.³

More recently “the visual field has become increasingly democratised” (Bleiker 2015, 86). As smartphones become commonplace and devices with social media sharing capabilities widely used, images are not only shared by news outlets, but can be directly uploaded to image sharing services and social media platforms such as Flickr or Twitter. Journalists, and human rights activists share photos taken ‘on the ground’ which can go viral before traditional media outlets have processed similar images.

The publication and sharing of images of children is central to considerations of the uneven global power relations that are implicated in images of children in conflict and crises. Who the desired audience is, what editors think audiences should or should not see, and the power of social media to disrupt traditional modes of sharing such images needs critical consideration. The ways in which children are framed is important to unpack to better account for the role of these images in IR.

The fourth question to consider is: **when do we see images of children?** This question is interested in the context in which images circulate. Here we can ask what event the image of the child is associated with, drawing on considerations of the framing of the child to consider the way in which the image functions as a shorthand. When a news story about violence in a civil conflict in an African country is headed with an image of young boys holding guns, what is the audience being asked to understand about this conflict in particular? Images of children—as child soldiers or as starving victims add an urgency to the story being shared. They also visually depict a range of assumptions and stereotypes. Erica Burman (1994) and Vanessa Pupavac (2001) both explore how depictions of children reinforce patriarchal relationships between the global north and south. When images of children are used whether by news or advocacy organisations they are caught up in powerful norms and assumptions which require unpacking.

Asking when images of children are seen in global politics also necessitates questions about the conditions which lead to the image being widely shared. The image of Alan Kurdi was shared via

³ It exceeds the scope of the discussion here, but the NYT’s editorial about publication of these images also repeatedly refers to the trauma of the journalist and photojournalist on assignment in Yemen and the need to honour the risk and trauma the journalists have experienced. This is an odd justification for the publication of images of children’s suffering and death, which seems to hold equivalent the suffering of the children and journalists as motivation for publication (see Nagourney and Slackman 2018)

a Turkish news agency and confined to small volume sharing and retweeting by mainly Turkish Twitter accounts until firstly the Emergency Director at Human Rights Watch, Peter Bouckaert and then Washington Post Beirut Bureau Chief, Liz Sly both tweeted the image spreading it to a global audience, and leading to news outlets running the image the following day (for excellent detailed analysis of the spread of the images of Kurdi see D’Orazio 2015; Vis and Goriunova 2015). While no other image has had the viral reach of Kurdi, other images are shared and retweeted to significant effect. The images of children dying from gas in Khan Sheikhoun in Syria in 2017 led to direct foreign policy consequences as US President Trump ordered airstrikes in response to seeing images of the “beautiful babies”. When images of children are successfully shared the frames and composition of the images can become a significant factor in influencing international politics.

Finally, these previous questions lead to the key question: **why are we seeing these images of children?** What are the direct political, social, and ethical questions that images of children in global politics provokes? At the most basic level any images of children are published, tweeted, or used in advocacy campaigns because they draw on essentialised ideas of childhood. The dominant framings of children are powerful indicators of the severity of political events. While Trump’s reaction to the Syrian children as “beautiful babies” who were murdered has a different motivation to the use of a sad-looking girl-child alone on a rubbish pile by an NGO seeking sponsorship and funding; both return to a notion of children as innocent, dependent and in need of protection. Why after months of reports and photographs and video of refugees attempting to cross into Europe during 2015, did an image of a dead toddler capture the world’s attention? What work did images of children on the *Kindertransports* in WWII do for public understanding of the evils of the Nazi regime? What are the implications of terrorist organisations using images of child-martyrs in their magazines (see Watkins and Looney 2018)? Thinking beyond these images as illustrations of crises, conflict and disaster and instead critically questioning how and why images of children influence and contribute to an affective global politics allows more nuance to be made visible.

Each of these questions by themselves may be sufficient for considering a certain image, or set of images. However, they function powerfully together to denaturalise the presence of images of children in the spaces of concern to IR scholars. The questions proposed here prompt different forms of inquiry into the presence of images of children in global politics; some will be more relevant than others in certain instances. However, all of them prompt two forms of inquiry, one that asks what role these images play in the unfolding of global politics, and the other that asks

what politics and invisibl(ised) assumptions underpin the production, circulation, and affective responses to these images. In all cases, one should also ask what is *not* visible in these contexts also.

CONCLUSIONS

The questions proposed here, and the outline of methods and approaches provides those interested in taking images of children more seriously a framework for thinking about how to undertake this kind of work. It is offered as a starting point, not a total solution or toolkit.

By drawing on the symbolic value of children, images can function to abstract or universalise a particular moment. This move to abstraction can also be a depoliticising move, an invocation of the assumed universality of norms of childhood. Through this chapter I have argued to resist the assumed natural depoliticisation of images of children and instead to consider them as sites of profound political contestation. As Burman has argued, it is particularly due to the “ideological functions of the iconography of children” (2008, 179) that childhood is a key analytical lens to consider pressing issues of contemporary times.

There are limitations and pitfalls in undertaking this work. Images capture particular moments and exclude others; they are subject to editorial selection, contested affective reactions, and political responses. Focusing on the images that are evident in global political discourse risks reifying and freezing our understanding of children’s role in conflicts and crises. Using images of children ourselves as scholars of IR in teaching and research presentations as a stand-in of a broader issue contributes to the reproduction of problematic framings of childhood. However, the framework outlined here can help respond to this, by prompting a critical questioning of the appearance of images which holds the potential for a more inclusive, responsive form of IR. Asking what, how, where, when and why we see these images opens space to consider their production, circulation and reception, and requires making visible the sites of uneven global power relations that influence the way that age, gender, race, and geography shape what images are seen. Images of children are a key site of politics, emotion, and social contestation and deserve closer attention by IR scholars.

Ariella Azoulay has reframed the act of looking at a photograph as instead a form of ‘reading’. She argues that viewing images of suffering and atrocity “allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation” (2004, 14). In taking

images of children seriously as scholars of IR, I argue we can extend our understanding of suffering and violence in global politics. Instead of simply looking at an image of a child as a synecdoche for broader issues, we should *read* the ubiquitous images of children in global politics to better understand our collective role in situations of conflict and disaster. With this approach, images of children's suffering, violence, and strength could form a core part of a potentially more ethical response to conflict and disaster that responds to the inherently exploitative and unequal power relations that are present in the circulation of images of children in contemporary contexts.

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