

Conceptualizing International Practices

*Directions for the Practice Turn
in International Relations*

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10 Visibility

Practices of Seeing and Overlooking

Jonathan Luke Austin with Anna Leander

Seeing things – *really* seeing them – is difficult. In *On Constructing a Reality*, Heinz von Foerster (2003: 212) provides the neatest physical/physiological example of this (see Figure 10.1) by asking us to

Hold Figure 1 with your right hand, close your left eye and fixate [on the] asterisk of Figure 1 with your right eye. Move the book slowly back and forth along [your] line of vision until at an appropriate distance, from about 12 to 14 inches, [and] the round black spot disappears. Keeping the asterisk well focused, the spot should remain invisible even if the figure is slowly moved parallel to itself.

The blind spot here is produced owing to the absence of photoreceptors at the point on the retina where fibres converge to form the optic nerve. This phenomenon is well known. It is just a mind game, but one with far wider lessons: picking a point of focus, we'll see, always pushes other things to the margins.

Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (2011a: 3) have led a call within IR that seeks to develop the concept of 'practice' as a conceptual 'focal point' around which empirical and theoretical work of an otherwise eclectic mix can meet. As they suggest, 'the notion of practice ... [makes] interparadigmatic conversations possible' (Adler and Pouliot, 2011a: 3). Already, their claim has been amply proven by the vitality of the ongoing work of the International Practice Theory (IPT) programme within IR.¹ However, and in the older terms of Donna Haraway (1988), any focal point – including focusing on one or another set of social practices – is always partial in the perspectives it brings to

We are grateful to editors and the participants in the two workshops for their comments on earlier versions of this argument.

¹ For theoretical work see, inter alia, Neumann (2002), Pouliot (2008), Adler and Pouliot (2011b), Bigo (2011), Leander (2011), Bueger (2013), Ringmar (2014), Berling (2015), Kustermans (2016), McCourt (2016). For empirical applications see, inter alia, Pouliot (2010, 2016b), Neumann and Pouliot (2011), Bueger (2013, 2015), Bueger and Bethke (2013), Leander (2013, 2016), Acuto (2014), Adler-Nissen (2014b), Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014), Autesserre (2014), Sending et al. (2015), Austin (2016, 2017b).



Figure 10.1 An example of the optical illusion used by Heinz von Foerster in his *On Constructing a Reality*

view. It always has blindspots, things it makes invisible. It is thus that in this intervention, we want to introduce and insist on the importance of tending more carefully to the concept of visibility in practice theorizing as a means to ensure that IPT retains the space for (evolving) interparadigmatic conversations. We will argue that tending to visibility, and in doing so locating blindspots centrally in social scientific inquiry, is necessary to ensure that IPT enhances our capacity to look at the world quite differently, sometimes radically so. This we would contend is a matter of no small importance for scholars of IR, particularly if we connect it to (cultivating) the ability to act differently with/in the world (Austin and Leander, 2021; Austin, 2020b).

This insistence on blindspots may perplex when the very introduction of the study of practices to IR and other disciplines has been intended to extend the array of phenomena that scholars pay attention to. IPT seeks to return to the quotidian and every day, the mundane and seemingly simple. It seeks – indeed – to avoid overlooking the lived experience of the world by challenging the dominance of what Cynthia Enloe (2016: 623) terms ‘inattentive’ scholarship that refuses to notice and take seriously matters that fall outside established scholarly frames. IPT does so by claiming, ultimately, that world politics is about people doing things, performing the world and the political. Politics is practice. Indeed, as the title of Von Foerster’s essay indicates, practices are sets of actions that ‘construct’ one particular reality. In evoking the non-representational logic of practicality, IPT has made visible – ‘opened our eyes’ – to how this occurs sociologically: it has expanded our vision. However, Von Foerster introduced his mind game to remind us that ‘perceiving’ is also a type of ‘doing’ (a practice) and thus that ‘if I don’t see’ certain practices then ‘I am blind’ to the fact that there always exist a multitude of other (possible or extant) realities constituted by similar or different types of (world political) practice.²

² Notably, Von Foerster’s claims here foreshadow far more contemporary social theory and its focus on the concepts of ‘multiplicity’ and/or ‘performativity’ as constitutive of social realities. See, inter alia, Law (1999), Law and Mol (2001), Mol (2002), Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Bryant (2011).

We argue that ‘visibility’ is a crucial social and social scientific category that can ‘forearm’ us against the risks of IPT becoming unnecessarily narrow as a research programme. This risk has already been acknowledged, of course. David M. McCourt (2016), for instance, has recently compared the evolution of IPT to that of Constructivism within IR. As he notes, although IPT has sought to avoid becoming an ‘ism’, it seems quite true that ‘a practice theoretic perspective would view IR itself is a practice: a distinct arena of social competition with its own practical logics’ (McCourt, 2016: 482). McCourt’s point here is not to critique the goals of IPT but, rather, to highlight the danger of overlooking the gradual emergence and standardization of a particular practice theory-driven way of doing social science, itself made up of innumerable little practices, that dictate what the approach can or cannot appreciate about the world around us. The risk, to repeat ourselves, is thus that blindspots are being introduced into IPT; blindspots that, more significantly, are perpetuated and made permanent through the disciplining effects of disciplinary practices that surround all constraining forms of theorizing (Leander 2020; Kratochwil, Chapter 11).

In our argument, the risk of perpetuating blindspots within IPT reflects the fact that our ability to ‘see’ the world and its realities is enacted in certain inescapably political fields (Brighenti, 2010) or regimes (Van Winkel, 2005; Heinich, 2012) of visibility that focus our vision on some things rather than others. These fields and regimes of visibility generate power and politics in both obvious and less obvious ways. Basic propaganda is implicated in any regime of visibility, for instance, but so are the many ‘great divides’ of the social sciences (Bourdieu, 1993; Latour, 1993). In world politics, violence, gender, religion, and culture are all intersected by regimes of visibility that establish dichotomies, hierarchies, blockages, and further ‘misrecognitions’ of the world (Austin, 2017b; Austin et al., 2019). More than this, visibility involves aesthetic sensibilities. It therefore also always implicates affect. It is a ‘double’ that combines both perception and affect (Deleuze, 1991). As Andrea Brighenti (2010: 44) puts it, visibility is ‘an aspect of social life that enables us to introduce thresholds of relevance and selective attention’ linked to this double and, so, ‘as a property of subjects, sites, events ... rhythms’ and – indeed – practices, ‘visibility is employed as a means of sorting, classifying and ranking...’. Because of this, ‘visibility cannot be reduced to traditional sociological categories such as actor, organisation, system, class, gender, race, and so on, although it meaningfully intersects all of them’ (Brighenti, 2010: 38). It is a category in its own right.

Thinking in terms of visibility, we thus suggest, sensitizes us to the politics of practice(s) – theoretical and/or otherwise – in a manner that

locates perception and aesthetics at the core of world politics. In so doing, the concept of visibility might assist in deepening the work of IPT by quite literally extending its field of vision in a manner ensuring that its blindspots are constantly contested, preventing IPT from becoming a disciplining force and instead turning it into the open space of reflection that Adler and Pouliot wished it to be. To advance this argument, we now proceed in four main parts. First, we explore the ways in which visibility is politically crucial to IR by drawing on long-standing and more recent work in social theory that demonstrates the ways in which *who* or *what* is seen or, inversely, remains unseen is essential for establishing both local and world political hierarchies, ranging from formal political hierarchies to hierarchies in observation. Second, we foreground that while this process and the blindspots entailed are inescapable, a cognizance of its politics provides opportunities for practice theory to broaden its view on what constitutes international relations and so to avoid becoming a sclerotic enterprise, which is both normatively and politically essential for its future as a field of study. Third, we anchor this argument in a real-world example. We focus on the import of visibility for the differing ways in which the use of extraordinary rendition (and torture) by the United States and the Syrian Arab Republic have been made (in)visible to both public and social scientific analysis. Fourthly, we draw on this empirical discussion to argue that practices of making seen or unseen are regimes that predefine the focal point of any (scientific or not) mode of observation or analysis. As a result, we suggest, the study of *any other set of practices* is filtered through regimes of visibility, and hence *practices of visibility filter the way we see all practices*. Tending to visibility, blindspots, and practices of seeing and of overlooking is therefore crucial for the IPT research programme. Finally, we turn to the ‘broader’ consequences of this deepening of the perceptual and affective lenses of IPT for the discipline of IR and beyond.

Enacting Ambiguous Evolving Regimes of Visibility

Politics is visual. Arguably, it has become increasingly so as we communicate ever more through visual media in a world where ‘creativity dispositives’ are omnipresent (Weber, 2008; Reckwitz, 2012). Who and what is seen or – inversely – remains unseen can thus be seen as essential for the establishment and maintenance of hierarchies, including formal political hierarchies and, more broadly in the terms of Jacques Rancière (2004) for the division of the ‘sensible’. To see this, let’s begin by going back a little in time. Ethnomethodology has long studied

practices empirically and systematically (Mauss, 1950; Garfinkel, 1967; Liberman, 2013). In one of its classic texts, 'Notes on Police Assessment of Moral Character', Harvey Sacks (1972) describes a problem faced by police officers: inferring the 'goodness' or 'badness' of a person walking down a street or hanging out on a street corner without knowing anything about them. Sacks (1972: 284, emphasis added) describes how police 'treat their beat as a territory of *normal appearances*' based on the idea that 'being noticeable and being deviant seem intimately related'. Spotting criminals thus relies on an 'incongruity procedure' that scans individuals and environments for abnormalities as they are conceived in comparison with the 'normal ecology' of a territory that is 'normative' in the sense of being unnoticeable (Sacks, 1972: 286).

Sacks' description of specialized practices of surveillance are real-world examples of what Rancière (2004) called the 'police order' of society. Rancière's thesis extends Sacks' localized observations and theorizes the presence of a set of largely unconscious or implicit norms and social practices that determine forms of social exclusion and the distribution of power. Norms and practices are repeated and transformed in their repetition (also Schäfer, Chapter 9). Ultimately, these norms and practices are themselves based on the 'distribution of the sensible' which is a means of controlling or ordering what becomes visible or invisible, speakable or unspeakable, and noticeable or not. In this, exclusions and silencings are necessarily implicit. And more than this, if the social order is a police order refusing the possibility of flux and contestation then the social is, to a large degree, an *anti-political* form of order in the sense of both 'translating political controversies into technical objectives' and encouraging a 'non-identification' – a making *invisible* – of certain political issues (Walters, 2009: 116). Anti-political does not here mean *apolitical*. Quite the contrary: attempting to render certain issues *invisible* (e.g. drone strikes, surveillance data) is often a prompt for their heightened politicization. But the *anti-political* desire seeks to leverage *invisibility* so as to remove certain issues from politics or prevent them from ever arising. It makes them imperceptible and therefore unspeakable. Thus, politics is about vision (however obscured, however partial), and the anti-political is about *attempting* to make-invisible. Following this, a truly politically sensitive IPT must develop a set of methods, practices, and theories that work to make more 'sensible' practices, such as those described by Sacks.

We can begin developing the necessary tools for appreciating the importance of visibility for IPT by turning to two social theorists – Nathalie Heinich (1991, 2001, 2012) and Andrea Mubi Brighenti (2007, 2008, 2010) – who have both worked to re-theorize practices by placing

visibility at the core of their thinking. Heinich (2012), to get us started, discusses how a certain ‘visibility-capital’ (*capital de visibilité*) defines the status of visibility, generally, and plays a specifically central (and historically evolving) role in the morphologies of politics, economics, art, and beyond. It has, for example, taken on a specific contemporary form in the cultivation of celebrities. Celebrity is about ‘being known’ and being known because one is seen. For Heinich (2012: 66), the mass reproduction of images and the asymmetries in the distribution of who or what is seen in these images has produced a new social category and, in turn, a new social class or ‘elite’ who gain positive or negative social capital from their relative social (in)visibility.

Importantly, however, Heinich does not connect the (in)visibility of any individual person to their ontological status as a particular kind of person or, that is, to any ‘essence’ they may possess or to their social status. Instead, she insists that (in)visibility is linked to their place in a visual economy, where it is their image that matters and that comes to take on a place and standing of its own. As she underlines, ‘the “star” is not at the origin of the multiplication of their own images (at their base, they are nothing but a person possessing certain talents), but it is instead the images themselves that create the “star”’ (Heinich, 2012: 21). Heinich’s words here move towards attributing ‘worth’ or ‘value’ to (artistic or otherwise) images and objects in and of themselves (c.f. Gielen, 2005). In this regard, she places great importance on the medium of visibility. For her, aesthetic objects must be attributed a certain form of ‘agency’, a position much work on images and visibility shares (Mitchell, 2005; Latour, 2010; Austin, 2019; Bertram, 2019). The image itself does ‘work’ in her account: *it is the images themselves that create the ‘star’*. To understand how this occurs, Heinich insists that we grapple seriously with issues of perception and affect as they are mediated through objects and aesthetic practices in ways that exceed reason, logic, intention, or interest, or indeed – and as demonstrated by Hansen (1997, 2000) – actually *produce* reason, logic, intention or interests. Heinich’s account is particularly pertinent for international practices as she insists on the place of visibility in power and hierarchies. Her focus on visibility as a form of social capital produced both through social inequalities and also the autonomous affects of particular media and objects of representation thus allows us to make quite direct connections to the enactment of practices, power, and politics in realms central to world politics.

Consider images of violence. The fact that such images tend to provoke shock and/or horror to one degree or another – whatever happens afterwards and however much we may become desensitized – reveals these

objects not only to be subject merely to a judgement of taste but also to possess an autonomous aesthetic involving both perception and affect. When we observe images of violence they do things to us, whether we want them to or not. However, such objects are unequally distributed in terms of their visibility-capital vis-à-vis distinctly positioned actors (see the example given later). And it is here the political enters. Many societal hierarchies – those based on race, gender, class, and so on – are generated in an affective economy of visibility, constituted by certain practices of making seen or unseen, and affecting how world political practices are perceived. These practices mobilize ‘implicit schemata, patterns and selection criteria, [and] culturally acquired competencies’ (Reckwitz, 2014: 26). Thus, an execution by the militant group Daesh is seen very differently from an extra-judicial drone strike by the United States. The politics of this are clear. Regimes of visibility are crucially important to making this politics possible: what we see, and how we see it, matters to how we perceive the world.

If Heinich’s focus is on visibility as a social category that places the aesthetics of objects at the centre of practice theorizing, then Brighenti’s work is especially useful for attending to some specificities of the deployment of visibility in world political practices and specifying the nature of invisibility capital. Brighenti lays out ‘three different types of visibility schemes’ that allow us to nuance our understanding: a ‘social’ type, which is an ‘enabling resource, linked to recognition’, a ‘media-type ... whereby subjects are isolated from their original context and projected into a different one endowed with its own logic and rules’, and, finally, a ‘control-type’ that ‘transforms visibility into a strategic resource for regulation (as in Foucault’s surveillance model) or selectivity and stratification (as in Deleuze’s society of control model), or both (as in Haggerty and Ericson’s surveillant assemblage)’ (Brighenti, 2007: 339). Later, Brighenti (2010: 45–50) systematizes these categories in terms of visibility as *recognition*, *control*, and *spectacle*, and conceptualizes an array of practices of making seen (visible) and unseen (invisible) which together form a *field* of visibility. Importantly, Brighenti distinguishes clearly between the ‘visual’ and the ‘visible’ by noting how the visible is always *inter-visible*: it is about the crossing of gazes between the observer and the observed (whether these are human or not) and the ways in which the regime of visibility affecting the former interacts with her perception of the latter in order to alter it, positively or negatively (Brighenti, 2010: 44). Taken together, he provides a nuanced toolkit grasping the ambiguous and variable, relationships between politics, power, and the visible, and converting it into a social-scientific category. As he writes:

The relationship between power and visibility is complex: power does not rest univocally either with visibility or with invisibility. In the moral domain, a fundamental tension between recognition and control has emerged. Both practices are connected to visibility. In other words, visibility is not correlated in any straightforward way to recognition and control, or to any specific moral value. As such, it does not constitute anything inherently liberating, nor, conversely, does it necessarily imply oppression. But, in the end, isn't this open range of possibilities what we expect from a sufficiently general descriptive and interpretive social scientific category? (Brighenti, 2007: 340)

Brighenti's final words here are what makes his work particularly useful for IPT, where a set of complex and intersecting practices are often analysed in their chaotic and contradictory deployments, necessitating theoretical and conceptual flexibility in our analysis. Rarely will a single practice or set of practices univocally support or disrupt power relations in one way or another. Instead, the status of practice tends to be both ambiguous and evolving. This is also the case vis-à-vis the visibility of practice. Thinking in terms of visibility is important then to unpack the densely contradictory 'hinterlands' (Law, 2004), 'mangles' (Pickering, 1995) or 'shadows' (Nordstrom, 2004) of practice in a way that nourishes the depth of analysis occurring within IPT.

The Non-Intentional Aesthetic Politics of Visibility and Perception

A few clarifications are now in order. It is important to stress that, of course, when discussing visibility, the use of phrases such as 'making seen' or 'making unseen' can be read in terms of deliberate agency and intentionality; intimating classical understandings of the use of propaganda to purposefully make things seen or unseen. Such manipulations of visibility obviously abound. So do the preparatory efforts to pave way for them, for example by making 'scenes' (Walters, Chapter 6). However, they are far from all we are referring to. Indeed, it is likely that deliberate manipulations of visibility are only a minor part of sustaining a regime of (in)visibility. Consider, for example, the case of racial minorities and – again – their targeting by police. This form of visibility occurs largely because of biases that are firmly held within the minds of police agents and which correlate visibility based on 'looks' – and the deviation of particular 'looks' from a 'normal' standard – as indicating a propensity to carry out crime. There is no intentionality here in the *form* that visibility takes (skin pigment), but, instead, a regime of visibility exists based on dynamics of power and subordination that have evolved over centuries, produced originally through both intentional and non-intentional means. More than this, certain

practices work to reproduce regimes of (in)visibility *indirectly*, peripherally, or collaterally to their primary purpose. When wealthy parents dress their children in more expensive clothes than their less-wealthy peers, the goal of these parents is not necessarily to carry out a practice (fashionable dressing) in order to reproduce racial and class hierarchies that feed into a set of regimes of (in)visibility perpetuating political inequality. This process occurs independently of the goal of the originally enacted practice.

For a fuller example, consider the cases described by medical anthropologists who have studied interactions between local and foreign visiting doctors at relatively impoverished hospitals found mostly outside Europe and North America. In one such hospital in Malawi, Wendland (2012: 113) describes how:

One late afternoon I followed sounds of commotion to a bay in the labour ward where a pregnant woman lay convulsing in a prolonged seizure ... It was hot, and the air felt thick with the smells of blood, bleach, and amniotic fluid ... Handwritten notices taped to the walls reminded staff how to resuscitate newborns, clean equipment, and manage haemorrhages. On the hallway floor, cardboard boxes made makeshift containers for 'sharps' – the blades and needles that pose particular dangers in southern African hospitals ... In one of the labour bays, the midwife stood holding the seizing woman's head to one side, ensuring that she could breathe. Two sweating Dutch medical students flanked her, struggling to draw up medication to stop the seizure. The bay was littered with discarded syringes and medicine vials ... Meanwhile labouring women in the other bays cried out: 'Asista, adokotala, thandizani' [sister, doctor, help me]. One of the students looked up, met my eye, and said quietly, 'Welcome to hell'.

What is visible in this case are seemingly chaotic and 'make-do' practices through which doctors at an impoverished hospital treat patients: with cardboard boxes for needles, handwritten notes, and blood disinfected with bleach but not immediately wiped away. These practices are described as 'hell' by foreign doctors. They are the elements of an image of dysfunction, non-professionalism, and essentially a 'lesser' form of medical care. By contrast, local doctors took notice of the foreign doctors' 'white coats [that] bulged with stethoscopes, penlights, pocket medical guides, and other accoutrements' (Wendland, 2012: 112). Those foreign bodies are adorned with material objects that *suggest* the presence of 'better' practices elsewhere, based on an assumption of greater expertise and the fact of greater material capacity: 'the wretchedness of clinical practice in Malawi depended on a contrast with medicine ... elsewhere' (Wendland, 2012: 112).

At the same time, many of the practices that become visible in this example, which seem to be dirty and inadequate, can be 'seen' in quite a different light as representing a remarkable capacity to 'make do' and

keep saving lives without the prosthetic aids of advanced technologies. An ability to make do, moreover, that foreign doctors often lacked: visiting doctors ‘could rarely feel an enlarged spleen with their hands or confirm profound anemia without a hematocrit by examining a patient’s nail beds and mucous membranes. Accustomed to following protocols in which one diagnostic or therapeutic step led to the next, visitors had little capacity to improvise when the required materials were not available’. (Wendland, 2012: 114) The comparative advantage of the practices being carried out by local doctors is made *invisible* through a regime that privileges signs of material cleanliness and abundance (white coats, technologies, etc.) as signals of professionalism. Importantly, however, the emergence of this way of seeing things is not deliberate. Many of the practices that create the impression of ‘danger’ or ‘hell’ are entirely necessary and quite effective in this context but they produce aesthetic and affective responses. Likewise, few suggest that doctors in more wealthy states should do away with their advanced medical tools. These are medical practices that those doctors in Malawi themselves would desire. But placed in contrast with their own practices they intensify the perception of the ‘wretchedness of clinical practice in Malawi’ nonetheless.

This example also captures a second key element of our discussion: the aesthetic aspects of regimes of visibility. The Dutch doctor’s remark – ‘Welcome to hell’ – represents a visceral response to an environment in which dirt and blood pervade. If we were to take a snapshot of this hospital, then the reader would likely feel much the same. We all react to what is visible and sensible through the aesthetic qualities of what is perceived, with aesthetics referring here – and hereafter – to a broad conception of the judgements of sentiments and taste that are evoked whenever we perceive something (Austin, 2019). Necessarily, we are also thus concerned here with thinking visibility in terms of a *political* aesthetics, ‘by connecting an idea of ... [the aesthetic] with a cultural diagnosis of, and political commitment to, the historical situation of human practices’ (Garcia, 2014: 274). As seen earlier, regimes of visibility alter the affective quality of the aesthetics of particular scenes quite notably. For foreign doctors, this ‘hell’ could be contrasted to a cleaner, neater, more efficient, and more attractive foreign alternative, while local doctors saw *beyond* this also to the unique efficacy of their own practices of making do. In one case, the aesthetics of the scene led to an overlooking of what else could be seen there and in the other not because – to be sure – regimes of visibility are translated, altered, and adapted based on the social, political, and corporeal positionality of the observer.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the aesthetic dimension of visibility does go beyond this: the point here is *not* at all that local doctors in the case cited are not dissatisfied and themselves even disturbed by what they

objectively ‘see’ in their hospital. They are affected by the ‘hell’ of medical treatment in Malawi to the same – most probably greater – extent as their foreign colleagues, and they desire – as such – the same resources as those colleagues. The aesthetics of visibility, in this sense, cannot be argued with. It may therefore stymie the efforts of certain disenfranchised groups to get their Others to look beyond what they see at first glance and gain a broader optic on the scenes they are coming to encounter. A fundamental tension exists, therefore, in which practitioners or observers have an inherent capacity to ‘look at things differently’ (i.e. interpret practice differently) but are caught nonetheless in webs of affect, mediated through visibility, that render this process difficult or even undesirable. There is no easy resolution to this tension. Nonetheless, the effects of regimes of (in)visibility must – first and foremost – be considered politically. Once we sensitize ourselves to how our impressions of world political practice are mediated through visibility, aesthetics, and affect, we gain the capacity to think politics differently as well as of reflecting more realistically on the import of sensual perceptions for political agency. The result is that it becomes possible to see a consideration of visibility as holding positive normative capacities, where awareness of its effects can lead to political change at both individual and institutional levels.

As the example given here demonstrates, the concept of visibility can serve a positive (political) role for IPT. Considering visibility forces us to acknowledge how the world becomes ‘multiple’ in its apprehension in often unintended ways. Practices of making (in)visible, in short, always fashion how other practices are perceived. Employing visibility in our analyses of international practices thus works as a mode of sensitization provoking an awareness of what was taken for granted, went unsaid, and passed unseen in world politics. More than this, we have seen how the concept forces us to acknowledge the place of aesthetics and affect in the political practices we observe and such an acknowledgement will often call radically into question assumptions of the ‘reasoned’ or ‘rational’ nature of practices by articulating a less scholastic view of world political practices and therefore perhaps also a more strongly objective one (Crone, 2014; Leander, 2017; Austin, 2020a).

One of the attractions of practice approaches is that they lead us away from the ‘hyperintellectualization’ of scholars who commit the fallacy of assuming that *their* categories and forms of reasoning are shared by and guide the observed (Reckwitz, 2002: 258). In contrast, the aesthetic and affective dimensions of practice matter actually as much for the classical realms of world politics: diplomacy, military cooperation, international organizations, global governance, European integration, international law, and so on, as it does for the realm of the political world outside the borders of these classical realms and in practices of

theorizing. Theorists, statesmen, people, and things are engaged in often non-intentionally producing an aesthetic politics of visibility. Indeed, we want to stress the import of recognizing this fundamental ‘symmetry’ of practices in IPT and thus of extending the study of practices generally, as well as tending to practices of seeing and overlooking also to more marginalized and disenfranchised actants, whether they are humans such as torturers and terrorists, activists, artists, doctors, and shamans, or things such as digital infrastructures, border fences, and facial recognition software. And while shifting our vision in these ways will often be deeply uncomfortable, it is of fundamental political import. It will help us see the fissures and fractures from which potentials for political change may arise (Austin, 2017b; Leander, 2017).

Seeing and Overlooking Practices of Torture

In order to flesh out this discussion, we now draw on an extended example of the importance of visibility for IPT. To begin, we would like to ask the reader to consider Figures 10.2, 10.3, and 10.4. Each of these depicts the process by which prisoners were ‘rendered’ from a point of capture to a



Figure 10.2 Post-9/11 rendition of captured prisoners by the United States from Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay



Figure 10.3 Post-9/11 rendition of captured prisoners by the United States from Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay

detention facility, where they were typically tortured, by either the United States (post-2001) or the Syrian state (post-2011). You may already be familiar with Figures 10.2 and 10.3, which show the early stages of the (extraordinary) rendition of prisoners from Afghanistan that began in 2002. Prisoners are bound to the floor by mesh cables, wear heavy-duty earmuffs, and in other pictures are seen to be masked with surgical-looking equipment such that they can neither see nor hear. They are then hooded. The goal is total sensory deprivation. An American flag is hung in the background. Soldiers can be seen either standing in the foreground, not interacting with the prisoners, or sitting, with their legs crossed over each other. These men seem – more than anything – quite relaxed with what is going on: nonchalant, calm, unwinding; taking it easy.

Figure 10.4 will be unfamiliar and is quite hard to make out: pixelated lumps and colours splotted with blackness. It comes from a video filmed in Syria, the content being clearer when watched. The lumps making up the picture are bodies, bent over and bowed forward. Their hands are tied behind their backs and their faces are blindfolded. But this means of achieving the state of being blindfolded is entirely improvised: the T-shirt of each prisoner is pulled forward above their eyes. If this is unclear,



Figure 10.4 Post-2011 'rendition' of prisoners by the Syrian Arab Republic during the Syrian civil war

try it. If you are wearing one, pull your T-shirt upwards from its seam at your waist and over your head. You will see that you *can* still see. The fabric stretches out and becomes porous. It does not possess the capacity to block sight entirely. Hence, prisoners must also bow down. If you are wearing a buttoned shirt then this procedure will not work: the buttons will either not hold or will leave gaps in your vision. In this case, the video demonstrates an alternative solution: the crafting of a blindfold from a piece of cloth, probably torn from your shirt itself. In either case, the permeable properties of cloth like this means that prisoners need to remain bowed to be truly blindfolded. Prisoners can still hear, however: there are no earmuffs in these images. Instead, a soldier can be seen traversing over the backs of the tightly squeezed together prisoners and whipping them to enforce their bowed position and prevent them from talking to each other. He shouts and screams and falls as the aircraft moves from side to side. This soldier does not seem at all relaxed.

These images depict military practitioners carrying out what seems a quite different set of activities. In one there is beating and whipping, and in the other there is mere infrastructure: a process of transporting prisoners. In one set of images, we see brutal human practices and in the other

seated soldiers watching numbly as their ‘cargo’ is transported from site to site. That is what we can *see*. Nonetheless, many of their *possible* ‘intervisibilities’ with ourselves as viewers and wider publics, or a host of even more invisible actants, are often overlooked (Brighenti, 2007: 326). When we describe the images, as we have here, we do not express exactly what we see or could be seeing. A certain regime or field of visibility and our position and relation to this regime and field will fashion the tone and tenor of each description and the seeing it renders. So will our sense of aesthetics and our affective sensibilities that are deeply embedded within our corporeality as acting human subjects. These fields and the aesthetic and affective sensibilities associated with them may be somehow ingrained in human practice at its broadest level (Garcia, 2014; Austin, 2017a).

Whether or not they are, the (in)visibilities they engender are ultimately indeterminate. They are modulated also by the personal history, experiences, and sensibilities of each observer. The consequent ambiguous, non-intentional, and aesthetic practices of seeing and overlooking will appear self-evident to us all and are therefore unlikely to provoke much reflection. For the same reason, their enactment cannot be better discerned from an observing individual sitting outside this practice than from someone inside it. Insider informants will not be telling stories about them or translating vernacular visibility to the kinds of visibility outside observers may be more accustomed to. Precisely because of this resistance to observation, regimes of (in)visibility are prone to be re-enacted and reproduced. Precisely for this reason, it matters that IPT attends to them more carefully.

The regimes of (in)visibility through which we understand these images are all the more likely to be reproduced in our practices of seeing and observing because they are closely intertwined not only with ‘seeing’ but also ‘sensing’ more broadly. As Laura Marks (2004) argues, it is important to recognize that images are haptic rather than just optic. The separation between the image and the observer that an optic understanding of images rests on breaks down if one begins to think of images as ‘grabbing’ the observer and in turn being ‘grabbed’ by the observing gaze. On this account images are also sensuous: you can feel them physically, touch them, smell them. Regimes of (in)visibility are therefore reproduced not only through vision but also through the broader ‘bodily unconscious’ of us all, the core of our experiential engagement with the world, the point where ‘the eye and the body of the observer merge, and in doing so merge with what they observe’ (Taussig, 2009: 86).

What, then, are the regimes of (in)visibility these two sets of images are likely to re-enact and reproduce? In what ways are most people, including ourselves, likely to look at them? First, although the

practices these images hint at – torture and killing – are subject to great controversy in both cases, we would not expect to find any symmetry in their descriptions; neither within each set of images nor between the two sets but, rather, the re-enactment of dominant points of view. The practices carried out by the United States in the first set of images have variously been defended as justified by the threats of global terror or alternatively been critically related back to a critique of the discourse of sovereign exceptionalism during ‘states of emergency’ leading to the systemic production of bare life and/or more simply to a condemnation of the leaders of the Bush regime and/or the CIA as having made possible or ‘ordered’ rendition. In either case, this renders the ‘cogs in the machine’ – the relaxed-looking soldiers – relatively invisible as violence workers. They are, after all, transporting men for torture. They are, however, visible as professionals without qualifiers. They do not beat or whip. They are simply ‘carrying out their duty’ while following all the relevant rules and regulations. Inversely, the bodies of the men being transported are transformed beyond seeing into monstrous cyborgs. They are wrapped in hoods and earmuffs. Things to be shunned and feared. Things it’s most comfortable not to look at.

In the case of the second set of images, our eyes immediately focus upon the man who (in the video) is jumping and whipping bodies. This figure becomes a perpetrator of war crimes entangled with the leadership of the Syrian state, which is considered, in the end, a ‘pro-torture’ regime in and of itself, leading to a corruption of all limits of moral restraint. He is not a professional. He is not even a violence worker: he is a criminal seen in his criminality. By contrast, we can see more of the men he is harming: while they appear as lumps, we can still ‘see’ their screams and moans, and the patterns on their T-shirts: reflective of their personalities or their interests or their favourite football team. We see the tortured as humans, for the moment at least, and the torturer as inhuman: a precise inversion of the first image. Here, the affective power of visibility is brought to bear upon the viewer. And while much of this has to do with the biases and prejudices of world politics against the non-Euro-American world, it is important to recall that when white soldiers come to torture brown bodies in a closer manner to that being depicted in Figure 10.3, the temptation of any Euro-American observer is typically to sever direct links between these figures and their own identity, or that of the nation-state they belonged to. For example, for many, the perpetrators in Abu Ghraib were aberrant figures, non-reflective of the values of the democratic United States. These figures risked puncturing the dominant regime of visibility presenting the ‘Civilized West’ in one way and the ‘Barbaric Arabs/Muslims’ in another.

Tending to (in)visibility can help us look at these images differently and reflect on some of their usually overlooked aspects. For example, it may help us draw attention to the socio-material *agencements* that ‘French Pragmatists’ have made central to practice theoretical toolkits. It may help us see the practical work being undertaken by the mundane ‘missing masses’ of materiality (Bénatouïl, 1999; Baert and Da Silva, 2010; Bueger and Gadinger, 2015). In Figures 10.2 and 10.3, much of the ‘work’ undertaken to restrain and ensure the sensory deprivation of the prisoners is achieved by material objects: hoods, cables, earmuffs, and shackles. These objects allow the soldiers to rest and relax on the plane. Their work in ensuring sensory deprivation is the result of decades of ‘congealed labour’ carried out by the United States, and incorporating scientists, psychologists, and doctors, to discover the most ‘effective’ way to carry out these practices (McCoy, 2012; Austin, 2016). The political significance of this becomes clear, however, when we apply the same analysis to Figure 10.4, and allow it to reinstate a form of symmetry. Here, the Syrian soldier is attempting to enforce precisely the same practice as his American colleague: sensory deprivation by removing sight and sound from the prisoners transported. But he lacks the ‘congealed labour’ gifted to these latter violence workers and so must rely on improvised material props as well as be constantly vigilant that the prisoners do not raise their backs: hence the shouting and beating of the prisoners. This is why he is not relaxed, but also why his involvement in rendition would likely be ‘judged’ more seriously when made visible than that of his American counterparts: it is *he* who is acting to disappear these men, unlike those American soldiers who watch passively as one set of missing masses go about creating another. Nonetheless, stripped of the regimes of (in-)visibility through which they are typically observed and normatively or politically evaluated, the practices depicted in each of these videos are identical.

There are two issues here. First, the difficulty of perceiving the role of those material ‘missing masses’ in enabling and structuring the visibility of practice. A difficulty – simply – of ‘seeing’ what is happening. Second, the ways in which we as viewers and the men on screen as actors are distinctly affectively proximate or distant from the reassuringly regulated, legal, and ‘clean’ system of violence depicted in Figure 10.2. Dramatics of the case aside, not much is different here from our earlier discussion of hospitals. But consider nonetheless Edmund Clark and Crofton Black’s (2016) reflections on their own attempts to put together the story of rendition through photographs, redacted documents, and legal documents:

In piecing together evidence of rendition, our account includes *locations where nothing happened and people who never existed*. A flight crew, enjoying a rest and recuperation stop in Palma de Mallorca, travelled under *false names with no addresses* other than anonymous PO boxes. A plane filed a flight plan for Helsinki but *never arrived there*, going instead to Lithuania, then recorded its onward destination as Portugal while travelling to Cairo. A company registered in Panama and Washington DC gave power of attorney to a man whose address turned out to be a student dormitory where *no one of that name was known...* [emphasis added]

As they note, all these little misdirections are ‘masks, obscuring by design and revealing by accident’ (Clark and Black, 2016). Hiding behind these masks not only lay a torture regime that was arguably as ‘brutal’ as that ongoing in Syria today – albeit at a smaller scale – but also much ‘cleaner’ in its visibilities: luxury jets, holding companies, redacted text, and relaxed soldiers. The power to work with visibility in these ways – to engage successfully in the ‘management of gazes’ (Brighenti, 2010: 51) – is intimately related to our ability to perceive what practices are, how they emerge, and what they mean. This is related to William Walters’ description in Chapter 6 of practices of secrecy, and how they are implicated in regimes of (in)visibility, but it also goes further. Our gazes are managed not only by active, intentional efforts to make-invisible, but also by material objects, those missing masses, that we find very difficult to recognize as being crucial to the enactment of practices, and perhaps most importantly by the affective and aesthetic qualities of the field and regimes of visibility shaping our engagement with images of violence. Ultimately, what becomes clear in examples like this is the import of tending to (in)visibility. It stands at the heart of our ability to observe and theorize practices and hence also of our ability to engage them politically.

Contesting and Shifting Focal Points in Practice Theorizing

To conclude, we can now enunciate two key points that are always interconnected when considering visibility. First, there exist *practices of making seen and making unseen which together form a regime of (in-)visibility*. These practices are materially embedded, technologically mediated, and – today – often digitally and algorithmically structured. They work through affect and emotion as much as through language and reflection. (In)visibility as a mode of analysis is thus distinct from ‘discourse’. Of course, both speak to conditions of enunciation within a social sphere. But visibility is distinct in ways in which it does not privilege the ideational or the semiotic but integrates materiality, affect,

aesthetics, circulation, and beyond. Second, these practices of making seen or unseen form regimes that predefine the focal points of any (academic/scientific or otherwise) mode of observation or analysis. As a result, and for IPT specifically, the study of any other set of practices is filtered through these regimes of visibility, and hence *practices of visibility shape the way we see all practices*. All practices – torture and terrorism, diplomacy and negotiation, kissing and sex, bombing and shooting, writing and reading – are made (in)visible by these ontologically prior practices of making seen and unseen. These practices are, in one sense, ontologically prior to any other practice: they always structure how we see or participate in any other practice. In doing so, regimes of (in)visibility are fundamentally about power, politics, and order. Indeed, appreciating this fact allows us to suggest that many world political hierarchies are produced by practices of making seen and unseen and that IPT therefore needs to be far more attentive to them, lest it contribute to conservatively reproducing the status quo (Austin, 2017b). Combining the ontological sensibilities of IPT with a sensitizing understanding of visibility opens up the possibility of politicizing practice theorizing more thoroughly than has previously been achieved.

This politicization takes place across the five fault lines fracturing IPT according to Alena Drieschova and Christian Bueger in Chapter 1. Enacting ambiguous evolving regimes of (in)visibility is at the same time stabilizing existing power-relations *and* an opportunity for counter-practices transforming them. Similarly, on the one hand regimes of (in)visibility are materially inscribed, embodied, reflecting ‘unintentional aesthetic’ sensemaking. On the other, they form part of consciousness and rationality. The ‘strategies’ of the American and Syrian torturers we describe are material *and* conscious. Third, and still along similar lines, in our account the everyday and the aggregate are connected. The interactions we describe between local and visiting doctors in the Malawi hospital are both mundane quotidian interactions *and* enactments of different aggregate regimes of (in)visibility and of the visceral reactions associated with them. Fourth, in our discussion power and communities are not opposed to each other. Rather, the regimes of (in)visibility we discuss are core to upholding both power *and* communities, where power is crucial in the making of communities and communities in the making of power. Along these lines, the images of white torturers in Abu Ghraib disturbed both community and power by ‘puncturing’ the regime of (in)visibility upholding the distinction between the Civilized West and the Barbaric Muslims and the order within each community. Fifth and finally, we conceive of practice theory as being about practice *and* theory. We have provided an argument

that is both about regimes of (in)visibility (theory) and about the doings of US/Syrian tortures and of foreign and local doctors in Malawian hospitals (practice). More generally, the kind of practice theorizing we discuss flattens the distinction between theory and practice, treating theorizing as a specific kind of practice. As we point out, also theorizing is contextual, embodied, affective, aesthetic, and messy in its enactment of regimes of (in)visibility and inescapably dirty as it enacts the politics associated with them.

Beyond that capacity to politicize IPT in a manner transgressing the binaries that keep haunting theoretical work in IR and beyond, thinking the study of practice through the lens of (in)visibility also expands our awareness of the repertoire of practices relevant to practice thinking by 'opening up' previously black-boxed sets of practices concerned with questions of power, its construction, and its projection. Take, for instance, the concept of *soft power*. Generally, this refers to the capacity to gain influence not through blunt power-projection but via the capacity to be 'attractive' to potential allies or adversaries. As Nye argues in his work on this subject, it is the 'attractiveness of a country's culture', the 'friendly and attractive' nature of its 'policing', its dedication to 'attractive causes such as economic aid or peacemaking' or 'attractive' ideology that ensures influence (Nye, 2004: X, 5, 9, 10, 6). In the end: 'soft power is attractive power' (Nye, 2004: 6). Notably, at no point does Nye suggest what actually makes something attractive per se. Seen through the lens of visibility, however, it becomes clear that whatever is deemed globally 'attractive' is not seen as such solely due to a reasoned or logical debate over contents (e.g. a sober look at the advantages of democratic institutions). Instead, attractiveness is fashioned by regimes of (in)visibility in which aesthetic and affective qualities are central. Cultivating such an attractive aesthetics requires a carefully constructed and contingently arrived at regime of (in)visibility that draws focus to that which attracts and distracts from that which does not. Soft power, in this sense, is nothing but the expression of a specific regime of visibility, and a capacity to manipulate it; to make seen and unseen and to shift the quality of the seeing.

Examples like these demonstrate why (in)visibility is something that the state and other centres of power attempt to control to such a high degree. Indeed, and to come to a conclusion, consider Rancière's (1998: 28) reflection on the 'visibility and invisibility of repression' in reference to the 1961 massacre in Paris by police of peaceful Algerian and French-Algerian demonstrators. Rancière notes how the 'police cleared the public space and, thanks to a news blackout, made its own operations invisible':

For us, this meant that something had been done in our country and in our name, and that it was taken away from us ... At the time, it was impossible even to count the victims. A phrase used by Sartre in his preface to *Les Damnés de la terre* helps us to understand, *a contrario*, the meaning of that twofold disappearance: 'The blinding sun of torture has now reached its zenith, and it is lighting up the whole country'. Now, the truth is that *this blinding sun never lit up anything*. Marked and tortured bodies do not light up anything. We know that now, now that images from Bosnia, Rwanda and elsewhere show us much more than we were shown in those days (Rancièrè, 1998: 28).

What we perceive in the world is always controlled, both directly and indirectly, intentionally and non-intentionally, through practices of making seen and unseen, filtered through the affective, aesthetic, and material. For France to retain its image as a democratic and – indeed – 'enlightened' state required it blot out the 'blinding sun' of its torture that Sartre hoped would revolutionize society. The United States, we have seen, has sought much the same in its similar machinations. And the same battle is occurring in the summer of 2020. In this regard, the abstraction of the 'police' as a core symbol of state power should never be taken to be represented 'primarily [as] a strong-arm repressive force' but, rather, as a 'form of intervention which prescribes what can be seen and what cannot be seen' (Rancièrè, 1998: 28). And it is this power that practice theory must reckon with.

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