Book Review

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Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing Is Believing

By David Shim. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2015. 192 pages. ISBN: 9781138125995.

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Most scholarship on North Korea has focused on what is happening in the country, but in *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing Is Believing*, David Shim asks *how* we know North Korea rather than what we know about it. This is an important distinction, because North Korea is selective about what it shares with and takes in from the rest of the world, which has led to its reputation as an enigma, an unknown and unknowable country. This does not mean that there is a paucity of information about the country, as Shim points out. Images of and about North Korea flood the media, for example. But there is a paradox in knowledge about North Korea—highly controlled on the one hand and sensationalized for commercial purposes on the other. Because of this, any critical observer must *interpret* images about North Korea. Shim is keenly aware of this and goes so far as to decode images in order to ask how they produce knowledge. In bringing together how formal and informal practices of media, academic institutions, and nongovernmental organizations work in tandem with governmental sectors, this book invites nonspecialists in international relations to examine their own position vis-à-vis the visual politics of North Korea.

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What Shim calls knowledge practices has at its center visuality, and specifically how visuality produces knowledge. Shim draws on the notion that *seeing is believing* throughout the book and dissects the truth claims that images produce. Drawing on debates about the *aesthetic turn* in international relations, a framework that contributed to bridging the everyday and international politics through images, Shim focuses on how images can be a topic of inquiry for North Korea. This is an ambitious and much-needed investigation into how images become an authoritative way of knowing about and shaping policies. Images do not simply illustrate information; they construct reality and thereby supply knowledge. The triangular relationship of visuality, knowledge, and politics reveals how the prevalent images about North Korea came to exist, whether North Korea is a rogue country threatening the normal global order or an incomprehensible other always objectified but never integrated into mainstream discourse. Shim questions the validity of these depictions of North Korea, and especially how images discover North Korea and claim to reveal truth behind the secretive veil of the North Korean state.

The book's biggest contribution is in its taking of the discursive practices about North Korea, not North Korea itself, as the subject of study. By turning attention to the power behind the rhetoric of truth, this approach reminds us that information gathering is never neutral. Shim challenges the objectivity of images by exploring visibility, different ways of seeing from above and on the ground, and how images interact with texts. Photography and satellite imagery are particularly significant to his analysis because they involve mechanically produced images, a technologized gaze that is seemingly free of human subjectivity and error. Shim demonstrates that these mediated images (especially satellite images) become "real" only once they have been "sorted, arranged, and circulated" (p. 107). Shim further argues that they do not simply reflect facts but serve to validate preconceived perceptions; they are deemed significant only when relevant to the current political climate. As Shim insightfully puts it, images create not only geographical information but also geographical imagination.

Two examples that Shim discusses—Thomas van Houtryve's photo

series *The Land of No Smiles,* published in *Foreign Policy* in 2009, and a satellite image of North Korea at night in contrast to its neighbors—share the portrayal of the country in terms of darkness, and both render North Korea as unknowable even while literally making it visible. This is striking because the remotely sensed satellite image involves surveillance over North Korea, whereas Houtryve posed as a businessman looking to open a chocolate factory to defy North Korean surveillance. That Houtryve's photographs claim a similar mastery of reality to satellite images—even with his limited access—attests to the hierarchical relationship of observer and object of observation. In other words, the position from the outside—whether from above or on the ground, in these cases—is what grants these images a superior truth. In that regard, not all images produce knowledge; it is the producer of images that determines their value.

Shim's book discusses the "unofficial" and "external" images of North Korea as opposed to North Korea's "official" and "internal" self-representations. Shim highlights how these depict a stark contrast, noting how only "unofficial" images are regarded as "legitimate source of knowledge" (p. 21). Although he acknowledges that antagonism between official and unofficial ways of seeing indicates a struggle between these two regimes of vision, an exclusive focus on "unofficial," "external" images without a careful probing of how North Korea's state-sponsored images are interpreted or disavowed reinforces the hierarchy of external images as legitimate and North Korea-produced images as illegitimate. This is also shown in Shim's characterizing of the knowledge production as hegemonic discourse, for which he argues that "the hegemonic form of visuality is totalizing, in that it marginalizes alternative modes of representation and determines whose, and what kind of, perspectives are meaningful" (p. 103).

The stark official-unofficial dichotomy also begs the question of how we should approach images that do not fall neatly into either category. For instance, Shim presents photographs from 2010 of the sixty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the ruling Workers' Party in 2010, taken by Associated Press reporter Jean H. Lee and photographer Vincent Yu, as alternative views of North Korea that could challenge hegemonic discourse about it.

The way Shim reads agency in North Koreans depicted in these photographs is illuminating, However, his reading of everyday life as vibrant and colorful in these images is a contrast to the monochromatic and dark portrayal of hegemonic discourse, which creates yet another dichotomy of hegemonic and counterhegemonic. These photographs, rather, could demand a closer look at the space in between rather than producing a counterhegemonic discourse. The Associated Press's Seoul bureau and the reporters were granted access by the North Korean state and the Associated Press went on to open a bureau in Pyongyang in 2012, the only US news agency based in North Korea's capital. This fact brings North Korea's self-representation back into the conversation. These photographs are not less truthful than Houtryve's smuggled-out images of North Korea, which were presumably obtained via bypassing North Korean surveillance. Shim is right in saying that these are more nuanced portrayals of North Korean people and everyday life, but they do not have to be interpreted in opposition to the hegemonic discourses. The more *real* depiction was possible perhaps because the images were not solely focused on debunking the prevailing "unofficial" narrative about North Korea or seeking out what is real. In the same vein, many images about North Korea consist of not only journalistic reporting but also photographs and videos from tourists who visited North Korea through any of several travel agencies that operate in North Korea, as well as photographers, filmmakers, and art collectors, many of whom visited the country with the blessing of the state and its official platform of promoting cultural exchange. The question of how hegemonic knowledge has been produced cannot be fully addressed without erasing these perspectives, and the sheer diversity of views defies neat categorization. In this zone outside of either-or, the question is no longer what is real or not but multiplies perspectives, including North Korea's own self-interest. In this way, the images are freed from being mere referent to reality, and a different kind of visual politics can emerge, as images can become a medium and a strategy of critical commentary and engagement.

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