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## North Korea and the Politics of Visual Representation

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GIGA Research Programme:  
Power, Norms and Governance in International Relations

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## **North Korea and the Politics of Visual Representation**

David Shim and Dirk Nabers

**No 164**

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## **North Korea and the Politics of Visual Representation**

### **Abstract**

Within international discourses on security, North Korea is often associated with risk and danger, emanating paradoxically from what can be called its strengths—particularly military strength, as embodied by its missile and nuclear programs—and its weaknesses—such as its ever-present political, economic, and food crises—which are considered to be imminent threats to international peace and stability. We argue that images play an important role in these representations, and suggest that one should take into account the role of visual imagery in the way particular issues, actions, and events related to North Korea are approached and understood. Reflecting on the politics of visual representation means to examine the functions and effects of images, that is what they do and how they are put to work by allowing only particular kinds of seeing. After addressing theoretical and methodological questions, we discuss individual (and serial) photographs depicting what we think are typical examples of how North Korea is portrayed in the Western media and imagined in international politics.

Keywords: Visual representation, synecdoche, identity, North Korea

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# North Korea and the Politics of Visual Representation<sup>1</sup>

David Shim and Dirk Nabers

## Article Outline

- 1 Introduction
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  - 3 The Significance of Visual Representations
  - 4 Representations of North Korea
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## 1 Introduction

Within international discourses on security, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter North Korea) is often associated with risk and danger, paradoxically emanating from what can be called its "strengths" and "weaknesses"—on the one hand, North Korea's military strength, as embodied in its missile and nuclear programs and the feared proliferation of related technologies; on the other, its internal weakness such as its ever-present political,

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economic, and food crises, which are considered to be imminent threats to regional and international peace and stability.

The 1990s appear to have been a defining period in these representations. North Korea's refusal in 1993 to admit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to its nuclear complex at Yongbyon, and its threat to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which almost resulted in a pre-emptive military strike by the United States, as well as its appeal in 1995 to the United Nations (UN) for aid assistance to help alleviate the worsening humanitarian situation made the country a continual issue of international concern.

Besides these highly polarized binary representations of "strength" and "weakness", North Korea is concurrently portrayed as pursuing "rational" and "irrational" actions, policies or behaviour patterns. In these readings, North Korea's supposed rationality is reflected in its calculating behaviour, which is sometimes referred to as "blackmail" or "coercive diplomacy", in international negotiations regarding its missile or nuclear programs. Under the threat violence, coercive diplomacy allows Pyongyang to gain maximum benefits in the form of economic or food assistance with minimal concessions regarding disarmament. Its supposed irrationality, which is at times taken as being synonymous with genuine madness ("insane Kim Jong-il"), could be inferred from its spontaneous or unpredictable behaviour, leading for instance to nuclear tests, missile starts, military attacks or the non-compliance of international agreements.

In short, North Korea is simultaneously seen in rather contradictory terms when it comes to international affairs: it is strong yet weak, rational yet irrational, and deserving of either international condemnation, isolation, and sanctions, or commiseration, cooperation, and assistance. Each representation leads to different, and, at times incongruous, political strategies towards North Korea. Different images and representations generate a whole new form of portrayal of North Korea. In the following pages, we discuss selected photographs and photo series of what we think are typical examples of how North Korea is portrayed in the Western media, and how this so-called pariah nation is imagined in international politics. It should be noted that we do not profess to cover the full range of North Korea's appearance in visual discourse—a possibly insurmountable task. It will be shown, however, that particular political strategies depend upon a pre-established field of perceptible reality in which visual images play a central role.

Any discourse analysis starts from the postulation that "all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is conferred by particular systems of significant differences" (Howarth 2001: 101). This is not to suggest that discourse has to be "text" in a narrow sense; it makes sense to include all kinds of meaning, as transmitted by, for example, visual images and sound effects, into the analysis. As argued later, visual representations in particular are of immense importance in times of increased transnational interconnectedness, because they bring about political consequences by shaping particular ways of seeing (Berger 1972), and, hence, by constructing "reality".

It should be noted at the outset that the kind of argument developed here requires substantial theoretical elaboration, which would go well beyond the scope of this article. In the next section, the paper outlines some necessary ontological arguments on the questions of difference and identity, mainly drawing on discourse-theoretical insights. Subsequently, it will be demonstrated theoretically how visual representations have political consequences, before turning to how North Korea is visually represented and how these depictions translate into political practices. The conclusion summarises the major theoretical implications of the analysis, and briefly touches upon the ethical dimension of identity constructions.

## 2 Identity Constructions in International Politics

“Difference” is located at the heart of any identity construction. Something is what it is only through its differential relationship to something else. Taking meaning as differential rather than referential simply gives language priority in the analysis of the world as we view it. Since there is no essential common ground that binds a society together, different identities have to be politically articulated. Identity remains partial; it can never be full or complete. It can therefore only be established by difference, by drawing a line between something and something else. All identity is relational, formed by social practices that link together a series of interrelated signifying elements. All principles and values, therefore, receive their meaning from relationships of difference and opposition (Laclau 1990: 21, 58).

The eventuality of a social identity thus depends on the construction of a threatening, excluded outside: “a radical exclusion is the ground and condition of all differences” (Laclau 1996: 39, 52). It is the unifying foundation of any system.<sup>2</sup> What follows from this is that there are relations of equivalence between in-group actors that create antagonisms in relation to other social groups. In opposition to the excluded element, all other elements are equivalent to each other in that they negate the excluded identity. The emergence of a community entails the passage from disconnected social demands to a universal one via the construction of a chain of equivalences and the creation of an external, antagonistic force—in our case North Korea. If there is anything like the “West” that has political meaning, it cannot be constructed on essentialist grounds, but rather, and only, by drawing a representational line between Self and Other. Two consequences follow. First, exclusion has an ethical dimension—it is never neutral and often takes the form of subordination. Relations between the in-group and the out-group are power relations. Second, equivalence is not synonymous with identity. Equivalence presupposes difference, but can eventually lead to the formation of tentative collective identities.

Moreover, the excluded Other keeps threatening the identity of the chain of equivalences. The latter cannot evolve into a positive identity, as it relies on a negative outsider for its con-

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<sup>2</sup> For comment, see Howarth (2001: 105); Critchley and Marchart (2004: 4); Gasché (2004: 25).

stitution. Therefore, political theorist Ernesto Laclau concludes “that in a relation of equivalence, each of the equivalent elements functions as a symbol of negativity as such, of a certain universal impossibility which penetrates the identity in question” (Laclau 1996: 14). Identity needs an external force for its very existence; without this Other, identity would be different. Hence, the annihilation or destruction of this excluded other would lead to a radical identity change, and a negative assertion of the excluded becomes the prevalent mode of representation. In this sense, the Other continuously feeds the identity of the Self.

The question remains of how one particular worldview, such as the representation of North Korea as a “menace”, can become dominant or *hegemonic*. Drawing on insights from Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, the article argues that hegemony rests on the assumption that any discourse tries to dominate the field of discursivity.

Particularly crucial for the following scrutiny of representations of North Korea, is that the hegemonic operation has a deeply catachrestical character. In fact, it often takes the form of a *synecdoche*, as a part comes to represent the whole (Laclau 2005: 72). Laclau conceptualises hegemony as a threefold process of symbolic representation that develops from a metonymic moment to metaphoric substitution and finally to a temporary and incomplete synecdoche (Laclau 1998: 158; for a critique see Wenman 2003). While the initial moment of metonymy establishes a political frontier between “us” and “them”, the metaphoric slide consists of the indifferent contents of particular demands, which make it possible for the part to represent the whole: synecdoche. In this context, Laclau concurs with deconstructionist Paul de Man that a synecdoche represents a “borderline figure that creates an ambivalent zone between metaphor and metonymy” (de Man as cited in Laclau 1998: 158). According to Jacques Lacan, metaphor and metonymy are the two central “figures of style” in the production of meaning (Lacan 1977: 157). While metaphor creatively replaces one signifier with another that is co-extensive with the substitutive or paradigmatic dimension of language, metonymy stands for the combination of signifiers, and represents the syntagmatic facet of language (Lacan 1977: 156-157; Barthes 1977: 60).

**Fig. 1: Synecdoche and the Hegemonic Process**



In accordance with his views on universalism, Laclau maintains that hegemony can only establish an “impure synecdoche” (Laclau 1998: 168). For Laclau, there needs to be one sector of society representing the ends of society at one particular moment. This one sector needs to have synecdochical potential to unite disparate emancipatory struggles for social integration.

It is here where the final moment of a synecdoche—the part standing in for the whole—can be seen, and the theoretical formulation presented here is essential for the following discussion of visual images.



### 3 The Significance of Visual Representations

In particular, visual representation seems to be crucial in times of increasing interconnectedness across time and space, because “it is one of the principal ways in which news from distant places is brought home” (Campbell 2007a: 220). Images can enact powerful effects since governments, international organisations and the public are almost always pressed to take action when confronted with imagery of human suffering, such as wars and famines (Lisle 2009; Campbell 2003, 2007b; Moeller 1999; Benthall 1987; Postman 1987). As Debbie Lisle (2009: 148) maintains, “[w]e see that the objects, issues and events we usually study [...] do not even exist without the media [...] to express them.” Accordingly, visual images have political and ethical consequences because of their role in shaping private and public ways of seeing (Bleiker and Kay 2007). The ways people come to know, think about, and respond to developments in the world, are deeply entrenched in the ways this information is made visible to them. In this sense, vision and visibility are part of political dynamics themselves since the practice of seeing entails serious repercussions concerning the ways in which people interact with one another.

Despite the obvious importance of visual representations in global politics, little attention has been paid to their analysis in the field of international relations (IR). Only a few scholars argue for the inclusion of aesthetic insights into IR inquiries in order to enhance the understanding of the “phenomena of world politics and to address the dilemmas that emanate from them” (Bleiker 2001: 519; 2006; Bleiker and Kay 2007; Campbell 2007b; Pusca 2009). There are nevertheless an increasing number of publications, which consider art, photography and other forms of visual representations as part of their inquiry. One of the latest examples, which proclaimed that “art matters” (Danchev and Lisle 2009: 775), was the 2009 special issue of the *Review of International Studies*.<sup>3</sup> It seems that the significance of the relationship between visual representations and reality has been acknowledged in IR primarily as a result of the coverage of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (Campbell and Shapiro 2007).

The publication of photographs showing North Korean leader Kim Jong-il serves as a good example of how visuals are referred to in international or regional security politics when it comes to underlining the necessity of specific policy responses, such as military contingency strategies and military exercises. In the autumn of 2008, the North Korean government began publishing pictures of Kim Jong-il after rumours and reports of his worsening health began to spread. Regardless of how these pictures are interpreted—underlining his health or ailment—this example shows how photographs function as referents to make legitimate statements and draw conclusions.

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<sup>3</sup> Other examples examining the relationship between aesthetics and IR are, for example, the special issues of *Millennium* in 2001 and 2006, and of *Security Dialogue* in 2007.

### 3.1 The Politics of Visual Representations

A photograph suggests the ability to witness reality as it is. As one among several modes of representation, photography possesses a specific feature, since, as Michael Shapiro asserts, “it is the one most easily assimilated into the discourses of knowledge and truth, for it is thought to be an unmediated simulacrum, a copy of what we consider the ‘real’” (Shapiro 1988: 124; see also Barthes 1977). The photograph suggests a quality of representation which scholars term mimetic (Bleiker 2001), reflective (Hall 1997), or documentary (Hamilton 1997), and which implies the possibility of seeing the unvarnished truth with one’s own eyes. However, as Campbell objects, photographs “are necessarily constructions in which the location of the photographer, the choice of the subject, the framing of the content, the exclusion of context, and limitations on publication and circulation unavoidably create a particular sense of place populated by a particular kind of people” (Campbell 2007a).

It is important to note that a photograph is neither objective nor neutral, since it is already an interpretation (Butler 2009). That is to say, photographs produce meaning because they determine what kinds of objects and subjects can be seen and how they are made visible. Photographs are by definition reductions of a given complexity since only parts of this complexity can be pictured. As Susan Sontag puts it, “to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Sontag 2003: 46). Therefore, not only can photographs be characterised as synecdochic representations, but they can also serve, in Laclauian terms, as visual figures of hegemony since photographic parts visually embody a totality (cf. Laclau 2000b). As mentioned above, a reduced representation translates into the modification of what is represented. In other words, photography is inevitably transformative of meaning because of its selections and reductions, which create a different, and thus new, meaning of what is pictured.

Of course, one might argue that any kind of discursive information, be it linguistic or non-linguistic, must be translated into a textual form in order for it to be analysable. Secondly, upon accepting this stance, working with text or writings leads to the deployment of those linguistic devices that correspond to the ontological assumptions outlined in discourse theory, for it is these assumptions that guide the analysis and are applied, modified and extended to a particular case. However, if we are interested in visual images as a means of communication, we also need to find ways to address non-verbal discourse in a more immediate manner. In fact, as Hamilton summarises, “the photograph seems closer to lived experience than words ever can be” (Hamilton 1997: 87)—a statement which would appear to favour the image over the written word. In common parlance, it is almost natural to say that a picture is worth a thousand words. The centrality of images in our everyday (Western) life, which has been called “ocularcentrism” by Martin Jay (1993), reveals the power relations of representation, according to which a single picture can be regarded as being more meaningful than a bundle of texts. Critics argue, however, that imagery has been important throughout history and to all societies, and object that the claims of the increasing importance of the visual are Eurocentric (Rose 2001: 8-9).

Regardless of the debate about whether an image is more powerful than a specific amount of words, there is a dispute in the literature about the relationship of texts and images. At the heart of the discussion stands the question of whether an image can speak for itself. That is to say, whether images rely on texts in order to be comprehended. For Roland Barthes (1977), there has been an historical turnaround in the connotation processes with the emergence of the press photograph. As he puts it, “[f]ormerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination” (ibid.: 26).<sup>4</sup> What can be inferred from Barthes’s work is the meaning-guiding function of texts. Captions contextualise, emphasise/prioritise or even add particular aspects to the image, so that it is read in a specific or new way. Susan Sontag argues similarly, stating that a photograph cannot provide an interpretation just by itself, without a text. It requires captions, which then channel its interpretation (Sontag 2003; Bleiker and Kay 2007). Judith Butler explicitly criticises Sontag’s argument, asserting instead that, “it does not make sense to accept Sontag’s claim [...] that the photograph cannot by itself offer an interpretation, that we need captions and written analysis to supplement the discrete and punctual image” (Butler 2009). Butler refers to the US Department of Defense’s frame, a regulated visual perspective, established for the public in recent and current wars, which structures the reading and interpretation of images in advance.

What can be concluded from this discussion is that on the one hand, images may be becoming increasingly more significant than words in our everyday life. But on the other hand, words can govern or facilitate the interpretation and hence the comprehension of these images. As Gillian Rose underlines, “it is important not to forget that knowledges are conveyed through all sorts of different media, including senses other than the visual, and the visual images very often work in conjunction with other kinds of representations” (Rose 2001).

### 3.2 Methodology

The focus of the following methodological discussion is on language and forms of language use. The analysis stays “totally clear of any relationship to what people really think. [It is] not interested in inner motives, in interests or beliefs; it studies something public, that is how meaning is generated and structured” (Waever 1995: 254). Theorists employing discourse theory for empirical analyses make a strong case for the study of language (Howarth 2000; Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000). As has been emphasised above, however, language must not be seen as text in a constricted sense. It is conceived of here more broadly. As Derrida, for instance, stressed,

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<sup>4</sup> The question of whether the image informs the word or vice versa is also debatable. For instance, Hamilton argues that the image is still supportive of the text by giving it a “representational legitimacy” (Hamilton 1997: 87, italics removed). As he states, “the apparent objectivity of the camera-produced image may help to fix the meaning of a given text, by providing it with a representational legitimacy” (Ibid., italics in original).

we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space or time is alien to the order of the voice: cinema photography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural 'writing'.

(Derrida 1998: 9 as cited in Campbell 1998: 271)

A crucial question in the analysis of visual representations is how we analyse visual materials such as paintings, photographs or films. What are the techniques or methodologies used to understand imagery? First of all, it is important to note, in accordance with Stuart Hall (1997: 9), that "there is no single or 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?'" That is to say, the "real" or "true" meaning of an image cannot be deduced, as in the case of a causal mechanism. Therefore, only interpretative inquiry will help identify and understand the meaning(s). However, this should not open the doors for methodological arbitrariness. Indeed, it is important to justify one's own interpretation of imagery convincingly. To this end the paper adopts insights from what Gillian Rose has called "critical visual methodology".<sup>5</sup> As Rose explains:

By "critical" I mean an approach that thinks about the visual in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations in which it is embedded; and that means thinking about the power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by, ways of seeing and imaging.

(Rose 2001: 3)

To analyse images, it is important to expose and understand their productive effects, representational patterns, and recurring visual key themes. That is, to reveal the ways in which visual representations enact subjectivities by positioning the viewer in relation to the viewed. The paper thus asks how images are entangled in the process of identity construction, and examines how they allow only specific kinds of seeing—how images determine the realm of the visible and, no less importantly, the invisible, which render specific actions and statements as legitimate or non-legitimate.

Concerning the image itself, there are specific photographic arrangements which affect its rhetorical force (Shapiro 1988). Present-day imagery of North Korea is assembled mostly in the form of photo essays that deploy their signifying effects through the telling of a particular narrative, a specific reality, which is mediated.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For Rose, there are three "sites" during which the meanings of an image are created. The first concerns the circumstances of its production; the second refers to the image itself; and the last targets the audience where the image is seen. Each of these sites operates on three further levels or modalities as Rose calls them. The technological, compositional, and social modalities function as methodological tools to differentiate the quality of an image. While the compositional and social level (referred to here as contextual modalities) will be adopted, the technological aspect can be neglected because all photographs in this paper are digitally produced pictures. Further, asserting that the three modes of meaning-making overlap, the paper focuses more on the site of the image and audience than on the mode of production (Rose 2001: 16).

<sup>6</sup> The depiction of "real" life in North Korea has been the focus of many recent publications: Demick 2009; Hassig and Oh 2009; Myers 2010.

The compositional and contextual aspects of images are useful for the analysis of visual representations. While the composition of images refers, for instance, to the content (what is shown?), colour (what is the hue, saturation or value of images?) and spatial organisation (how are the elements of the image positioned in relation to each other?), contextual factors comprise, for example, the time, practices, settings, and relations with which images are encircled (Rose 2001: Ch. 2).<sup>7</sup> All these qualities constitute elements of a particular thematic discourse.

On the basis of these methodological propositions, the following section discusses selected but characteristic imagery of North Korea. The photographs chosen cover the time span of over a decade, beginning with the mid-1990s, with an emphasis on more recent portraits of North Korean reality. It should be noted that this selection is not meant to serve as an extensive account of how North Korea is represented visually by the West or Western media. However, the photos are emblematic of the often-stereotypical ways in which North Korea is looked at, thus establishing boundaries and difference. It will be argued that images of North Korea showing its military “strength” and internal “weakness” are highlighted as idiosyncratic aspects to emphasize its Otherness. The use of images marks North Korea in particular ways, which separate “them” from “us”. It should also be stressed that the article does not question the correctness or content of the selected images but rather intends to show that specific depictions depend on a particular understanding of who and what is deserving representation and publication. Further, “the problem is not so much the *presence* of such imagery [...], but rather the *absence* of other views amongst the imagery the global visual economy transmits to audiences” (Campbell/Power 2010: 188). The prevalence of one visual perspective, necessarily indicating a lack of alternative representations, affects the ways how people come to know and respond to events, developments, and issues related to North Korea. In this vein, the visual reveals its political and ethical significance.

#### 4 Representations of North Korea

Among policy-making, academic, and media circles visual imagery of North Korea is widely assumed to be rare and unusual. This supposed lack of images might to a large extent be explained on the basis of the local conditions, which restrict the international media’s access to what is happening in the country. Possibly because of this, pictures and films depicting North Korea and its purported reality are regarded as even more special and desirable. “Rare visits” by foreign observers provide “rare glimpses” into a nation widely considered to be the world’s most isolated.<sup>8</sup> This exceptional (or presumed to be exceptional) situation sug-

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the distinction of the categories is not clear cut. While Rose attributes certain aspects such as focus, angle, or positioning of elements to the compositional mode, for some scholars these aspects have to be considered as contextual factors (e.g. Bleiker and Kay 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Such statements refer mostly to the country’s assumed lack of participation in regional or international relations. However, if measured in terms of official diplomatic relations, for instance, North Korea is not even remotely as isolated as Taiwan.

gests that because we do not see much of North Korea, we do not have sufficient knowledge about it, which in turn creates a legitimate reason or quasi-imperative to visualize it—one must “see it to believe it”. This situation points to the linkages between ways of seeing, knowledge and politics. Images not only promise to help us to see and, therefore, understand what is “really” going on, but they enable us to know which will inform our political and ethical responses.

Despite the above-mentioned claim that images of North Korea are lacking, numerous photographic essays, illustrated books, documentaries and television series, as well as platforms, social networks or services on the Internet such as *flickr*, *youtube* or *Google Earth*, reveal the principled availability of imagery of North Korea and its enduring visualization in contemporary discourses (BBC 2005, 2009; Bech 2007; Boston Globe 2008, 2009; Van Houtryve 2009a, 2009b; Kang and Watanabe 1997; LIFE undated; McNulty 1995; Lee 2008; Fragala 2009; Righetti 2003; Morris 2005).<sup>9</sup> They show that, contrary to popular belief, imagery of North Korea is not as rare and exceptional as presumed.<sup>10</sup>

So the basic question could be to ask how North Koreans and North Korea appear in visual discourse. Contemporary imagery of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) reveals similar compositional and contextual modalities, which result in recurring and sometimes contradictory (but in certain thematic fields congruent) representational patterns and key visual themes: backwardness, bleakness, madness, dangerousness, isolation, poverty, scarcity, and weakness. These depictions show how North Korea is visually construed as the very antithesis, and hence Other, of modern globalisation. The images tell us who they are and how life proceeds over there. Showing predominantly the same motifs (pitiful and miserable women and children, empty and deserted places and spaces, monuments, homogeneous masses, weapons and soldiers) and emphasising visual (contextual or spatial) contrast, these photographs result in what can be tentatively described as a hegemonic visuality—an interpretative or visual frame which allows for the depiction and reading of images only in specific ways. This visuality regulates the (in)visibility of objects, subjects, and circumstances, and therefore determines what is existent and what is not (Butler 2009).

#### 4.1 North Korea as a Wimp

A good example of what is (made) almost invisible in Western representations of North Korea is smiling or joyful ordinary North Korean people. Tomas van Houtryve’s photo essay,

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<sup>9</sup> The Internet in particular seems to provide an almost boundless source of academic, journalistic, governmental and private information on North Korea. For instance, Evan Ramstad reports on “citizen spies” uncovering what they believe are North Korea’s secrets with the help of Google Earth, an online service providing satellite images (Ramstad 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Especially after the publication of press reports according to which North Korean leader Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008, the interpretation of photography of Kim Jong-il became popular among North Korea observers (Kolonko 2009; Fragala 2009; Time 2008a, 2008b).

published recently in *Foreign Policy* (see Figure 2), is indicative of this visual frame (Van Houtryve 2009a). While the essay claims that van Houtryve “took arresting photographs [...] rarely captured and even more rarely distributed in the West”, its heading (“The Land of No Smiles”) suggests that happy or cheerful North Korean people are impossible to find. The caption of one of the images reinforces this frame by explaining that “[w]hen van Houtryve approached North Koreans, they walked off or averted their eyes. He never once photographed a smile. Even children ran away from him” (ibid.).

**Figure 2:** “The Land of No Smiles” (ibid.)



The observation of supposedly dismissive North Koreans made in the essay is not uncommon among many North Korea visitors. In his illustrated book entitled *The Last Paradise*, photojournalist Nicolas Righetti similarly noted,

Apart from my guide, in the street nobody speaks to me. When I am alone, no one establishes contact; no one seems to pay any attention to me. Life goes on if I did not exist. Not even the police or soldiers take the risk of approaching me. Fear imbues us all.

(Righetti 2003)

What these excerpts suggest is that the difficulty of establishing contact between visitors and locals in North Korea is due to the anxiety and reluctance on the part of North Korean people: “They [the North Koreans] walked off or averted their eyes [...] Even children ran away from him” or “nobody speaks to me [...] no one establishes contact”. The hindered contact is explained by North Korea analysts mostly in political terms, according to which ordinary North Korean citizens are prohibited from approaching foreigners. However, putting aside the likelihood that these North Korean people could at that time of day have simply been (non-politically) indifferent towards them, the question could be posed the other way round: why should North Koreans approach strangers holding a camera who, presumably, do not speak their language but nevertheless attempt to talk to and photograph them?

These citations are not meant to suggest that the photo essay and illustrated book (or other records of North Korea) are wrong or untrue; the concern is not related to the completeness or truthfulness of the images.<sup>11</sup> Rather it is a “question of what they do, how they function, and the impact of this operation” (Campbell 2007b). That is to say, how interpretations, identities, and responses are enacted through specific ways of seeing. Since images should not be understood as mediating objective information but rather as evoking affective responses on the part of the viewer, a change in the characteristics of the image from informative to normative can be concluded. In other words, photographs do not necessarily show what is going on; rather, they tell us how we should feel about what is going on (ibid.).

The photo essay published in *Foreign Policy* is interesting for another reason as well. While the introductory remarks mention that van Houtryve took photographs of “Pyongyang and its people”, the title “The Land of No Smiles” indicates a synecdochic relationship between images, text and title, in which the being of the whole (land) is inferred by the visual representation of the part (Pyongyang). As the introduction adds, “They [the images] show stark glimmers of everyday life in the world’s last gulag.”

In general, such synecdochic representations are not uncommon in media accounts or photo essays since the latter attempt to capture the very character of people, places and circumstances within a single moment. An article on North Korea’s food situation published in the *Observer* on August 18, 1997 also exemplifies a synecdochic link between text and image (see Figure 3).

With regard to photographic representations of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Bleiker and Kay (2007), for instance, have noted that some pictures of human suffering show exclusively decontextualised miseries in which the depicted are abstracted from their original context.<sup>12</sup> The photographs are taken from a specific perspective, leaving out particular cultural or societal features and showing only desolate, passive victims who are marked by their agony.

This kind of photography—the exposure of individuals mostly in the form of photographic close-ups—is characterised by a “personal code”, which can have depoliticising effects (Shapiro 1988). Such photographs mostly evoke pity instead of compassion on the part of the viewer, providing her with a secure and safe position away from the remote scene where the pictures were taken. It is important to note that depictions of suffering can “become a way of affirming life in the safe here and now, giving people a sense of belonging to a particular group that is distinct from others” (Bleiker and Kay 2007: 151). The suffering or

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<sup>11</sup> Photographers or photojournalists often have no control over how their images are being used or circulated since the pictures are refined by the publishers’ editorial departments. Van Houtryve’s personal website shows that his captions for the images published in *Foreign Policy* tend to be descriptive rather than interpretative.

<sup>12</sup> The abstraction of images from their original context resembles Laclau’s problematisation of (distorted) representation. That is to say, images are examples of distorted representations since, paraphrasing Laclau, an image “inscribes an interest in a complex reality different from that in which the interest was originally formulated, and in doing so [...] constructs and transforms that interest” (Laclau 1993: 290, italics in original).



death of the other is metonymic with the affirmation of the self as a member of a particular group (Biehl 2007: 139). In other words, the viewer's identity is substantiated through the viewing of such images.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3: "A nation's hunger in a child's face" (Observer 1997)**



Figure 3 shows a child lying on a floor in a North Korean hospital and carries the heading "A nation's hunger in a child's face". This picture epitomises a *pars pro toto* representation with the "motionless" and "listless" child embodying the "nation's hunger", that is, the suffering and plight of the people of the DPRK. The ailing boy serves as the synecdochic signifier for a vulnerable country and provides the reader with an interpretative frame, which allows for the reading of the image only in terms of a nationwide humanitarian emergency. Similar to the example above, the partial content (boy) assumes the legitimate representation of the whole (nation), thereby revealing the hegemonic mode of the image. The photograph—together with its captions—purports to offer a summary of the nutritional conditions in the country, suggesting that North Korea's reality is proceeding in the same way as the boy's. The part (boy) becomes constitutive of the whole (the nation's reality) or, as Chandler has noted, "[t]hat which is seen as forming part of a larger whole to which it refers is connected existentially to what is signified—as an integral part of its being" (Chandler 2007).

<sup>13</sup> In John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, an example is given of how representations of the Other serve as identity constructions of the Self by referring to the genre of European oil paintings depicting female nudes. While female nude paintings were not only representations of femininity (other), they were also constructions of masculinity (self), according to which "men act and women appear" (Berger 1972: 47, italics in original; see also Rose 2001: 12).

In conclusion, therefore, synecdochic representations can be crucial in mobilising and facilitating relief actions since they suggest causal chains between the well-being of a child and the well-being of a whole country. By reducing complexity, they create the incentive to act—“to do something”—and suggest that actions are effective. It is important to note the link between the enabling of effective actions and synecdochical representations. As Charlotte Epstein notes, “synecdochism [...] constitutes a set of beliefs or practice in which a part of an object or person is taken as equivalent to the whole, so that anything done to the part is held to impact the whole” (Epstein 2008: 112). On the basis of this significant argument, the paper establishes the link between particular representations of North Korea and related policy practices in the next section.

## 4.2 North Korea as a Menace

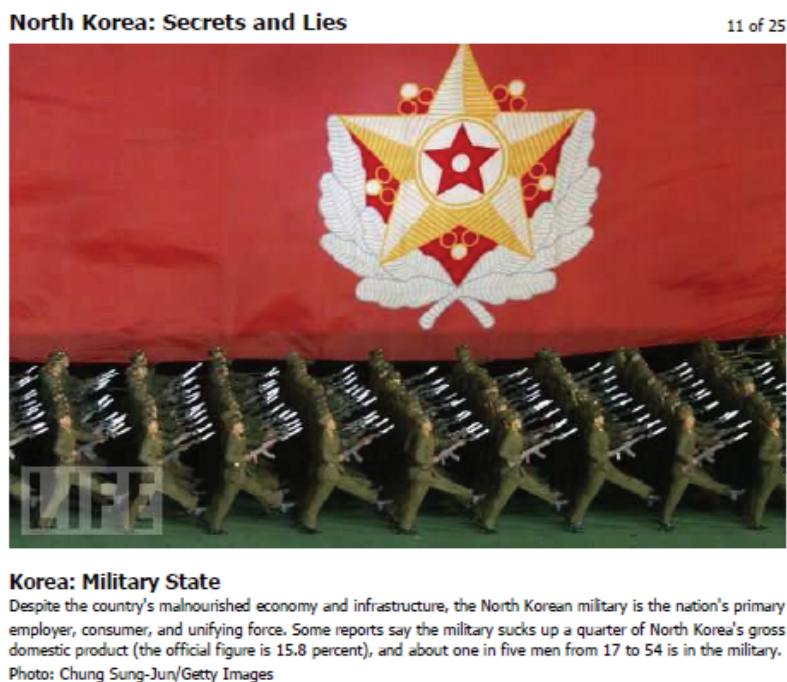
The main argument of this article holds that North Korea is represented in conflicting terms. The inner coherence and possible contradictions of these representations seem to play no role in this ambiguous picture. Within the field of international politics, North Korea’s threat potential is frequently associated with its missile and nuclear programmes and the possible proliferation of related technologies. One of the latest example is the US Department of Defense’s 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review, which considers North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and its development of long-range missiles “one of the most significant threats to the U.S. homeland” (US DoD 2010: 4). Even though North Korea has never successfully tested long-range missiles (not to mention that Pyongyang has always emphasised that it would test satellites), the report simply assumes that “sooner or later North Korea will have a successful test [...] and [...] will be able to mate a nuclear warhead to a proven delivery system” (ibid.).

As part of these threat representations, it is a common practice to *re*interpret imagery released by the North Korean government. For instance, photographs of North Korean military parades are usually taken and distributed by the country’s official Korea Central News Agency (KCNA). Outside North Korea, these images, are, however, habitually seen as exemplifying the belligerence and dangerousness of the Northeast Asian country, as in the above-mentioned US Department of Defense report (ibid., see also Time 2003). Another good example of *remaking* sense of official North Korean imagery is the photos of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, which are released by the government since autumn 2008 in an apparent attempt to dispel doubts concerning reports of his deteriorating health condition. Yet, they are mostly read exactly the other way around.

Another popular motive among threat representations of North Korea are photographs of its military, which, for instance, show a perfectly organised goose-stepping structure. Often this is simultaneously construed as a surprise given the weak economy and isolation of the political system. The text under the photo shown in *Figure 4*, published by *LIFE* magazine, constructs a mystifying oxymoron by contrasting “the country’s malnourished economy

and infrastructure” with a purportedly thriving army as “the nation’s primary employer, consumer, and unifying force.” The photograph is a good example of the concurrent integration of North Korea’s supposed weakness (“malnourished economy and infrastructure”) and threat (“military state”).

**Fig. 4: North Korea’s Military (LIFE [undated])**



It is also a striking example of the dissemination and reinforcement of hegemonic views by an uncritical, echoing press. Photos published outside North Korea also shape the media’s cognitive apprehension of North Korea, authorising in advance what will and will not be included in its public representation. In this process, media and politics form a coherent representative complex. In international politics, to take the example of the guidelines on the EU’s foreign and security policy in East Asia, North Korea’s nuclear programme and the proliferation of related technologies are a “major threat facing the region.” This danger would also affect the EU since “threats to regional security [...] have a direct bearing on the interests of the EU” (CEU 2007: 2).

It is through the combination of picture and text that discourse exercises its genuine power. As Judith Butler contends, “Interestingly, although narratives might mobilize us, photographs are needed as evidence [...]” (Butler 2009: 69). The construction of threat, incredibility, and a certain myth of the North Korean people as a homogeneous, robot-like mass go hand in hand. Pictures, such as that shown in *Figure 5*, undoubtedly structure our cognitive apprehension of North Korea as an international actor. The mechanism of political representation and an echoing media illustrate the constructive power of politics to “ratify” reality, that is, to regulate our perspective on something we have never directly seen.

**Fig. 5: A Homogeneous Mass (Boston Globe 2008)**

While North Korea is represented as a threat, it is also construed as standing outside of, or defying, international obligations and norms. In this context, observers frequently cite missile and nuclear tests as well as withdrawals, non-ratifications, and non-compliance with international treaties, such as the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and with the UN Security Council's resolutions (CEU 2009). The image of North Korea as an outcast is frequently mirrored in the international press and the pictorial representations of North Korea.

Under the heading "North Korea's Big Stick" (*Figure 6*), the explanation that comes with the picture maintains that "North Korea is believed to possess a large number of chemical weapons, and to have been pursuing nuclear weapons since 1956. It has also been developing its missile technology, and its current line of rockets might be able to reach Hawaii." Although South Korean missiles are shown as well, the caption fails to provide the same information on South Korea's missile technology and nuclear ambitions. For instance, according to the South Korean government, it is currently attempting to develop its own rocket technology to launch a satellite from its own soil. While North Korea claims to be pursuing the same goals, the problematic applicability of rockets, which entail so-called dual-use technology (bringing satellites into orbit with the same technology used for long-range missiles), is almost always stressed with regard to North Korea's rocket programme. Furthermore, concerns regarding nuclear proliferation, covert nuclear development, and the non-disclosure of nuclear activities are not unknown to South Korean politics. In 2008, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) released classified documents showing former president Park Chung-hee's ambition to develop nuclear weapons (Yoon 2008). In 2004, the South Korean government had to admit that scientists of the state-run Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute (KAERI) had conducted secret nuclear experiments and activities from the 1980s until 2000. These experiments involved the conversion and enrichment of uranium, and the separation of plutonium (Kang et al. 2005: 40-49). Although the experiments were



not officially authorised by the government and the amount of nuclear material involved was marginal, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who investigated and reported on the activities, found their nature and the failure of the administration to report them a “matter of serious concern” (IAEA 2004: paragraph 41). The admission showed that past South Korean governments had not only failed to abide by the safeguards system of the IAEA and the NPT, but had also intentionally misled the IAEA and violated international agreements. For Kang et al. these revelations entail “a major re-evaluation of what governments and analysts around the world thought they knew about South Korea’s nuclear history” (ibid.: paragraph 42).

**Fig. 6: The North Korean Missile Threat (LIFE [undated])**



The footer of the image provides a link to another photo essay which allows viewers to “see the after-effects of an atomic bomb.” The juxtaposition of the consequences of a nuclear attack with North Korea’s aforementioned nuclear ambitions and missile capabilities is a direct articulation of its dangerousness. What is left out is that the United States is the only country to have used nuclear weapons.

Therefore, while Susan Sontag maintains that “a narrative seems more likely to be effective than an image” (Sontag 2003: 122), it is argued here that the two go hand in hand. Following Judith Butler in this regard, it is attempted to show that political narratives might mobilise an echoing press and an international audience, but photographs serve to construct the “truth” on more solid ground. The political inscription of identities and of particular subjectivities for North Korea as a particular Other of a Western identity, are mutually constitutive. It is in this way that political representation and visual processing continuously fuel each other.

To be sure, representations of North Korea as a threat (and also as a wimp) do not need to be based on “hard facts” in order to be accepted. Publicly stated anticipations or estimations of an imminent event are sometimes sufficient for a particular reality to emerge (Campbell 1998: 3). A good example is the imminent launch of a North Korean projectile in 1999. As Suh (2004: 155) notes, US intelligence agencies allegedly had evidence of measures being taken by North Korea to test fire a missile. Although the launch had not yet been executed, it was treated as a fact, which enabled certain actions such as public criticism, the issuance of statements, and diplomatic activity. In other words, the practices of problematising North Korea took place *before* an action was even taken by the country.

The more recent example of a North Korean rocket launch in April 2009 shows that the nature of the particular activity does not matter in terms of the threat representation it fuels—in this case whether the projectile was a missile or a satellite. This launch sparked a debate about whether this object was “really” a missile or “indeed” a satellite. Although the South Korean defence minister and the US national intelligence director indicated that North Korea was more likely to have launched a satellite (Korea Herald 2009a; Yonhap 2009), this did not appear to have a bearing on international constructions. The launch did not matter in terms of hegemonic threat representations, because even the start of a North Korean satellite program was represented as a menace to regional peace and stability. An example is provided by the statement of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, former South Korean foreign minister, who portrayed the launch as being in opposition to peaceful purposes, regardless of its nature: “I’m concerned about the DPRK’s recent move to launch a satellite or long-range missile. This will threaten peace and stability in the region” (Korea Herald 2009b).

The standard verbal construction of this event also serves as an example of hegemonic representation. In accordance with the theoretical argument of this paper, one might contend that a successful hegemonic project requires that a particular identity is temporarily constructed through naming. Interestingly, the name “Taepodong” (“large cannon”) is used for instance predominantly by US, South Korean, and Japanese policy-makers, analysts and media to refer to a North Korean rocket type, although Pyongyang named it “Kwangmyongsong” (“bright star”). The predominant use of the former term indicates exclusionary practices, linking our argument with the main theoretical claim put forward in the first part of the paper: The contingency of a hegemonic discourse relies on the construction of a threatening, excluded outside. The simplicity of this conjecture is exemplified by the statement that “to be something is always not to be something else.” As the paper has attempted to make clear in the course of the argumentation, the process of exclusion is fundamental to any kind of identity construction.

## 5 Conclusion

This article argued for the importance in accounting for the significance of visual representations in approaching and apprehending matters related to North Korea. Due to the often-

claimed lack of knowledge about the country, North Korea appears to be beyond the realm of comprehension making images an important means for its understanding. The paper attempted to illustrate how North Korea is simultaneously—and sometimes contradictorily—represented as a weak and fragile country, and as a danger to, and outcast of, the international community. Theoretically, it was demonstrated that the limit of any social system and any collective identity is one of exclusion: the inside is constituted by an antagonistic relationship to the outside. The eventuality of a hegemonic discourse thus depends on the construction of a threatening, excluded outside. In the case of North Korea, a variety of images and representations generate a particular kind of subjectivity for the Northeast Asian “outcast”. The paper discussed a number of Western representations and showed that synecdochic depictions are pervasive in media accounts and photo essays which aim to capture the essential character of people, places and circumstances. The attempt to record the very being of people and places is a defining moment of identities and meanings, since images tell us who they are, what they do, and what it looks like “over there”.

Important to note are the consequences of such representations, that is, what kind of policies or responses appear suitable. Images of mass mobilisation like parades, exercises, or sports events in North Korea are often read as erasing the individuality of the people depicted on the photographs, turning them into a faceless, will-less and homogenous horde. Individuality, however, is constitutive of humanness. If we refuse to acknowledge the individuality of North Koreans we do not grant them the equal status of humanness, which in turn affects the ways we conceive or react to specific developments in North Korea.<sup>14</sup> Dehumanisation serves political purposes and reveals specific effects, such as the formulation and implementation of policy practices that would otherwise raise qualms.

The crucial problem remains that identity is status-quo oriented, in the sense that asserting one’s own identity means asserting the identity of a particular Other at the same time. Obviously, identity is in danger of taking a stable antagonistic frontier within the international society of states for granted. In such a situation, there is no room for change, but countries like North Korea are continuously represented in a similar way. We can start to think about alternative “realities” only if we acknowledge the heterogeneity of any collective identity and the inherent risk of hegemonic representations. In pointing to contradictions and perhaps misunderstandings in the way North Korea is seen in the world, this paper can also be seen as an effort to think anew about enemies, outsiders and countries that are probably too easily constructed as wimp and menace at the same time.

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, instead of viewing the performance of the North Korean Arirang mass games as the “strangest show on earth” as the Guardian did, this festival could also be made meaningful in an aesthetic or art discourse, which would enable the choreography to be recognized as a skilful and highly elaborate artistic performance (Guardian 2005; Butler 2004, 2009).

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