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Visual Politics in the Age of Algorithms: A Four-Dimensional Model of Meaning, Visibility, Affect, and Legitimacy

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Abstract: This article develops a four-dimensional conceptual framework for analysing visual politics under conditions of algorithmic mediation. It argues that contemporary political images become politically consequential through the interaction of four dimensions that exceed representational analysis alone: constructive meaning-making, regimes of visibility, affective mobilisation, and the visual performance of legitimacy. By synthesising insights from visual culture, political aesthetics, and international relations, the article reframes visual politics as a discursive and infrastructural process shaped by hybrid human-machine assemblages. It further argues, drawing on a contemporary case of platform-circulated synthetic imagery, that algorithmic systems of circulation, ranking, and amplification may reconfigure each dimension, allowing visibility to operate as a provisional source of authority and accelerating affective and legitimacy effects beyond human deliberation. Through analyses of iconic photographs and a case of AI-generated misinformation, the article compares historical configurations of visual politics with a contemporary, platform-mediated episode to clarify

how operative logics shift under algorithmic visibility. The framework offers a transferable analytical vocabulary for examining political imagery in platform-mediated environments and across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: visual politics, algorithmic mediation, visibility, affect, legitimacy

Introduction

Images have long been central to political life. From war photography and state ceremonies to protest imagery and humanitarian campaigns, visual forms shape how political events are perceived, remembered, and evaluated. Across visual culture studies, political theory, international relations, and media and communication research, a substantial body of scholarship has demonstrated that images are not merely illustrative supplements to political discourse but active forces in the production of meaning, authority, affect, and collective orientation. Images intervene in what can be seen, felt, recognised, and acted upon in public life, thereby participating directly in the organisation of political experience. As Lehman and Hoyte-West (2021) observe, “novel developments in digital communication ... open new avenues of dissemination of knowledge and communication with diversified audiences” (p. 11), a dynamic that likewise reshapes how images circulate across media infrastructures, acquire meaning through dispersed publics, and become politically salient under contemporary conditions of mediated visibility.

Within this expanding field, the concept of visual politics has emerged as a broad analytical lens for examining how power operates through visual practices. Influential contributions have shown that images function as agents of meaning-making (Mitchell, 1994), organise regimes of visibility and authority (Campbell, 2003; Hansen, 2015), mobilise affective responses that shape political judgement (Bleiker, 2009), and establish civic and ethical relations between subjects, spectators, and institutions (Azoulay, 2008). Despite these shared concerns, however, scholarship on visual politics remains conceptually dispersed. Theoretical insights are often developed within distinct disciplinary

traditions and mobilised in parallel, which leaves the field without a consolidated framework capable of capturing how different visual mechanisms interact in the production of political power.

The conditions under which visual politics operates have undergone significant transformation. Contemporary political imagery circulates within media environments increasingly shaped by platform infrastructures, algorithmic curation, and AI-driven image generation. Processes of ranking, recommendation, amplification, and automated moderation now play a central role in determining which images become visible, how they circulate, and what kinds of affective and political responses they generate. Under such conditions, political meaning, authority, and legitimacy are no longer produced solely through human authorship, editorial judgement, or institutional framing, but emerge from hybrid assemblages in which human and computational agents jointly participate. While existing theories of visual politics offer powerful conceptual tools, they have only partially addressed how algorithmic mediation reshapes the production, circulation, and political force of images. These dynamics place questions of authorship, voice, and discursive production at the centre of contemporary visual politics, as images increasingly operate not only as representations but as forms of argument and intervention within algorithmically mediated cultures. Responding to this gap, this article develops a four-dimensional conceptual model of visual politics attentive to such environments, synthesising key strands of visual-political scholarship and re-reading them in light of contemporary media conditions without seeking to replace existing theories.

Drawing on work by Mitchell, Campbell, Hansen, Bleiker, Azoulay, and Hariman and Lucaites, the article conceptualises visual politics as operating across four analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions:

- 1) the constructive dimension, through which images participate in making political reality;
- 2) the visibility dimension, through which images organise appearance and concealment;
- 3) the affective dimension, through which images mobilise emotional response and collective orientation;

- 4) the legitimacy and power dimension, through which images visualise, perform, and contest political authority.

The model further demonstrates how each of these dimensions is reshaped under conditions of algorithmic mediation, where meaning-making, visibility, affect, and legitimacy are increasingly conditioned by computational systems alongside human actors. Empirically, the article illustrates the framework through a series of iconic case analyses, including *Saigon Execution* (1968), *Falling Man* (2001), and the photograph of Alan Kurdi (2015), supplemented by a contemporary example involving AI-generated misinformation surrounding a fabricated image of an explosion near the Pentagon. These cases demonstrate how visual politics operates across historical moments and media regimes, while also revealing how algorithmic circulation, platform trust signals, and automated amplification introduce new dynamics into the political life of images. Claims about algorithmic mediation in this article are grounded primarily in the contemporary case of platform-circulated synthetic imagery, while the historical photographs establish baseline configurations of visual politics under earlier media regimes.

Literature Review: Key Approaches to Visual Politics in the Age of Algorithms

Images as Agents: Representation, Meaning and Perception

A foundational approach to visual politics begins from the premise that images are not passive reflections of reality but active participants in processes of meaning-making. Mitchell's theorisation of images as cultural agents is central to this view, emphasising that images intervene in perception and interpretation by shaping what becomes thinkable, recognisable, or intelligible within political life (Mitchell, 1994). This emphasis on visual agency reflects a broader epistemological shift toward understanding representation as a constitutive force in political reality. Scholars working in political aesthetics

have extended this insight by examining how shared sensory and perceptual orders structure political possibilities. Blaney's engagement with Rancière, and Bleiker's work on aesthetics and world politics, both foreground the idea that political experience is organised through culturally specific regimes of perception that delimit what can be seen, felt, or acted upon (Blaney, 2023; Bleiker, 2009). From this perspective, visual politics emerges as a domain in which images organise cognitive and symbolic frameworks that anchor political meaning and orient collective understanding. Read through the lens of contemporary media environments, these arguments provide a conceptual foundation for analysing how visual agency is reconfigured when processes of perception and meaning-making are increasingly shaped by algorithmically mediated systems of circulation and visibility.

Visual Authority: Governance, Discourse and Circulation

A second body of research examines how images acquire authority within political discourse and how that authority is governed, contested, and circulated. Campbell's account of cultural governance is pivotal in this regard, arguing that states and institutions do not merely represent political conditions but actively constitute them through visual practices that define what counts as war, threat, or humanitarian crisis (Campbell, 2003). This perspective shifts analytical attention from images as discrete artefacts to the infrastructures and regimes that regulate visibility, including editorial norms, military restrictions, strategic communication, and media logics. Hansen's analysis of international icons extends this line of inquiry by demonstrating how certain images achieve global resonance through repeated circulation, affective uptake, and discursive contestation across political and cultural contexts (Hansen, 2015). Her three-layered model of reception, debate, and appropriation underscores that visual authority is produced relationally, not fixed by any single institutional actor. Read in light of contemporary platform environments, these insights invite further attention to how regimes of visibility are increasingly shaped not only by state and media institutions but also by algorithmic systems of ranking, recommendation, and moderation. In such contexts, visual authority

is reorganised through computational governance, as algorithms participate alongside human actors in determining which images gain prominence, circulate transnationally, or are rendered invisible within public discourse.

Aesthetics and Affect: The Emotional and Sensory Dimensions of the Political

A third strand foregrounds the aesthetic and affective dynamics through which images shape political response. Bleiker's critique of rationalist political epistemologies emphasises that images operate through modes of apprehension that extend beyond deliberation, activating emotional registers that orient political judgment and action (Bleiker, 2009). Affect, in this account, is not reducible to subjective feeling but functions as a structuring force that configures the conditions of political perception. Blaney's work on political aesthetics similarly highlights how sensory experience and affective resonance contribute to the formation of political communities and to the disruption of dominant perceptual orders (Blaney, 2023). Together, these perspectives situate visual politics within broader debates on embodiment and emotion, underscoring that images matter politically because they mobilise feelings that precede, accompany, or exceed rational evaluation. Read in the context of contemporary platform environments, these insights point to the growing significance of algorithmic amplification in shaping affective circulation. In digital media systems organised around engagement and visibility, emotions such as outrage, compassion, and empathy are not merely expressed but are differentially intensified and circulated through algorithmically structured flows, contributing to affective dynamics that influence public attention, collective sentiment, and political orientation.

Photography as a Civic and Ethical Relation

A distinct contribution to visual-politics scholarship is Azoulay's reconceptualisation of photography as a civic encounter. She conceptualises photographs as relational spaces structured by obligations between photographer, photographed subject, and spectator (Azoulay, 2008), shifting

analytical attention away from representation toward civic relations. This notion of a “civil contract” foregrounds the ethical stakes of visibility, particularly in contexts marked by violence, inequality, or dispossession, by emphasising the responsibilities images assign to viewers as civic participants. From this perspective, the political force of photography emerges not simply from what images depict but from the civic relations they enact or foreclose, extending visual politics into questions of citizenship, rights, and transnational ethical claims. Read in light of algorithmically mediated visual cultures, however, Azoulay’s framework also raises new questions about responsibility and accountability when images are generated, altered, or circulated by artificial intelligence systems. In cases where no identifiable photographer exists, or where authorship is distributed across datasets, models, and platforms, the ethical relations that underpin the civil contract become less stable and more difficult to locate. This reframing does not invalidate Azoulay’s approach but underscores its continued relevance by highlighting how the civic and ethical dimensions of visual politics must be reconsidered under conditions in which human and non-human actors jointly participate in the production and circulation of images.

Algorithmic Mediation and the Transformation of Visual Authorship

Recent debates on AI art and machine vision suggest that visual politics is increasingly shaped not only by representational practices but also by algorithmic mediation, understood as the computational infrastructures through which images are generated, filtered, ranked, and circulated across digital platforms. Instead of functioning as neutral technical tools, algorithms intervene directly in cultural and political processes by structuring visibility, directing circulation, and privileging particular visual forms and narratives. As Zylinska (2020) argues, contemporary AI art needs to be situated within a broader media ecology shaped by platform capitalism, data extraction, and automated decision-making, in which images emerge from complex interactions between human intention, technical systems, and institutional power. This algorithmic turn has significant implications for visual authorship and voice, as AI-generated and algorithmically curated images unsettle long-standing

assumptions about originality, creativity, and individual agency that have historically underpinned photographic and artistic practice. Instead of a singular authorial subject, visual production increasingly takes the form of an assemblage involving datasets, models, interfaces, platforms, and dispersed forms of human labour. Zylinska cautions against framing this transformation through a simplistic opposition between human creators and autonomous machines, calling instead for an approach that foregrounds “entangled human–nonhuman agency” while remaining attentive to the political conditions under which such entanglements operate (Zylinska, 2020, p. 94). From the perspective of visual politics, algorithmic mediation reshapes all four dimensions proposed in this article: it affects constructive meaning-making through generative recombination and algorithmic prioritisation; reorganises regimes of visibility through ranking, moderation, and recommendation; intensifies affective mobilisation through amplification logics tied to engagement; and complicates questions of legitimacy and accountability when visual artefacts are produced and circulated by hybrid human–machine assemblages. This body of scholarship provides a critical bridge between visual theory and contemporary debates on AI, culture, and political communication, underscoring that visual politics in the age of AI is no longer centred on images as discrete artefacts but on the discursive, technical, and institutional processes through which images are made to matter.

Synthesis: Toward an Algorithm-Aware and Discursive Framework

The approaches reviewed in above sections collectively demonstrate that visual politics has developed as a multifaceted field concerned with how images participate in the production of political meaning, authority, affect, and ethical relations. Although these strands of scholarship emerge from different disciplinary traditions (visual culture, political aesthetics, international relations, and media studies), they converge on an understanding of images as active forces embedded in broader cultural and institutional processes. Contemporary debates increasingly emphasise that these processes now unfold within environments profoundly shaped by algorithmic mediation.

Across the literature, several interrelated analytical mechanisms become apparent. Research on images as agents of meaning-making underscores that political interpretation is never a matter of representation alone but is structured through culturally organised regimes of perception. In algorithmically mediated contexts, this insight extends to the ways in which filtering, prioritisation, and circulation condition what becomes intelligible or salient within public discourse. Meaning, in this sense, is produced not only through symbolic content but also through the infrastructural arrangements that govern visual exposure.

Studies of visual authority and governance further demonstrate that visibility operates as a politically regulated resource. While earlier work focused primarily on states, media institutions, and editorial practices, more recent scholarship highlights the growing influence of platform logics and computational systems. Algorithmic ranking, recommendation, and moderation increasingly function as regimes of visibility that shape transnational circulation and redistribute authority over which images gain prominence or remain marginal. Authority is thus neither fully centralised nor dissolved but reconfigured through hybrid forms of human and computational governance.

Aesthetic and affect-oriented approaches, in turn, emphasise that images exert political force by mobilising emotions that orient judgment and collective response. In digital media environments organised around engagement and virality, affective dynamics are not merely intensified but patterned through algorithmic amplification. Emotions such as outrage, empathy, or compassion circulate unevenly, contributing to the formation of affective publics whose attention and orientation are shaped by platform-driven logics of visibility. Affect thereby functions as a crucial link between visual experience and political mobilisation under contemporary conditions.

Ethical and civic perspectives, particularly Azoulay's conception of photography as a civil contract, draw attention to the responsibilities and relational obligations embedded in acts of seeing. Algorithmically mediated and AI-generated imagery complicates these relations by dispersing authorship and obscuring lines of accountability. When images are produced or altered by hybrid human-machine assemblages, questions of responsibility, legitimacy, and ethical obligation become more difficult to locate, yet more

politically consequential. Instead of rendering civic approaches obsolete, these developments underscore the need to reconsider how ethical relations are constituted under conditions of distributed agency.

These approaches indicate that visual politics can no longer be adequately analysed through images as isolated artefacts or through singular sites of production and interpretation. Visual power increasingly emerges from discursive processes that unfold within complex assemblages of human actors, technological infrastructures, and institutional arrangements. Algorithmic mediation does not replace established theories of visual politics but reconfigures the conditions under which they operate, reshaping how images are produced, circulated, encountered, and made politically consequential.

In this context, visual politics is best understood not as a stable object of analysis but as a dynamic field of practices in which agency is distributed across human and non-human actors. Algorithms do not simply transmit or distort visual meaning; they participate in structuring regimes of perception, amplifying affective responses, governing visibility, and complicating questions of authorship and accountability. What is at stake, therefore, is not the emergence of a wholly new form of visual politics, but a transformation in its operative logic: from image-centred analysis to an examination of the discursive, technical, and institutional processes through which visual meaning, authority, and responsibility are continuously negotiated in algorithmically mediated environments.

This synthesis provides the conceptual groundwork for the following section, which articulates a definition of visual politics attentive to these transformations and introduces a multidimensional analytical framework for examining the interconnections between meaning, visibility, affect, and legitimacy under contemporary conditions.

Defining Visual Politics in Algorithmically Mediated Environments

Understanding what scholars mean by visual politics requires navigating a field that spans multiple disciplines yet remains conceptually dispersed.

Research in visual culture, political theory, international relations, and media and communication studies has consistently demonstrated that images play a central role in shaping how publics perceive, interpret, and engage with political life. Despite this sustained attention, however, the term *visual politics* has often been employed descriptively rather than defined analytically, leaving its conceptual centre of gravity under-specified. Building on the theoretical synthesis developed in the previous section, this section articulates a definition of visual politics attentive to the transformations introduced by algorithmic mediation while preserving the core insights of established visual theory.

A foundational point of departure lies in the rejection of purely representational accounts of images. As Mitchell argues, images are never neutral surfaces for the transmission of meaning but participate in a “politics of representation” that shapes what can be thought, said, and recognised within a given cultural moment (Mitchell, 1994). This understanding is reinforced by Rancière’s theorisation of the “distribution of the sensible”, which conceptualises politics as a continual reconfiguration of what can be seen, heard, and rendered intelligible in public life. From this perspective, visual politics does not concern images as static objects but as practices that intervene in perceptual orders and delimit the conditions of appearance. Images matter politically not only because of what they depict, but because of how they organise attention, structure interpretive possibilities, and regulate visibility within shared cultural spaces.

Work in international relations and political communication further extends this argument by demonstrating that visual representation is constitutive of political reality. Campbell shows that images help produce and stabilise categories such as war, threat, and humanitarian crisis, functioning as mechanisms through which political authority is imagined, legitimised, and contested (Campbell, 2003). Hansen’s analysis of international icons similarly reveals that the political significance of images emerges through processes of circulation, emotional resonance, and discursive uptake across national and cultural contexts (Hansen, 2015). These accounts underscore that visual politics operates through practices of governance and circulation, through which images are embedded in broader regimes of visibility and authority.

Aesthetic and affect-oriented approaches highlight that the political force of images cannot be reduced to cognitive interpretation or discursive framing. As Bleiker argues, images mobilise affective responses that orient judgment and action through sensory and emotional registers that precede or exceed rational deliberation (Bleiker, 2009). Visual politics thus unfolds partly through embodied experience, shaping political dispositions by aligning emotions such as fear, outrage, empathy, or solidarity. In contemporary media environments, where images circulate rapidly across digital platforms, these affective dynamics are increasingly structured by algorithmic systems that amplify, prioritise, or suppress particular emotional cues, further complicating the relationship between visual experience and political engagement.

Azoulay's reconceptualisation of photography as a civic encounter adds an ethical and relational dimension to this field. By framing photography as a "civil contract" between photographer, photographed subject, and spectator, Azoulay foregrounds the responsibilities and obligations embedded in acts of seeing (Azoulay, 2008). Visual politics, from this standpoint, is inseparable from questions of citizenship, rights, and recognition, as images position viewers within civic relations that entail ethical claims. Under conditions of algorithmic mediation and AI-generated imagery, however, these relations are increasingly destabilised. When authorship is distributed across datasets, models, interfaces, and platforms, responsibility and accountability become more difficult to locate, raising new questions about agency and legitimacy in visual communication.

These perspectives converge on several shared commitments across the field:

- 1) images are treated as agents in the production of political reality, not merely as neutral carriers of information;
- 2) visibility is understood as politically structured, with images regulating who appears in the public sphere and under what interpretive conditions;
- 3) affect is recognised as a central mechanism through which images shape political orientation and collective response;

- 4) visual practices establish relational and ethical claims that bind image-makers, depicted subjects, and publics within fields of responsibility and recognition; and
- 5) images contribute to the formation and reconfiguration of political communities through shared memory, symbolic identification, and affective mobilisation.

Under contemporary conditions of algorithmic mediation, these commitments remain foundational but must be reconsidered in light of distributed agency and computational governance. Building on these converging insights, visual politics may be defined as the study of how visual practices and representations produce, distribute, and contest political power by shaping perception, visibility, affect, and relations of agency and responsibility within culturally, institutionally, and algorithmically mediated environments. This definition foregrounds images not as isolated artefacts but as participants in discursive and technical processes through which political meaning, authority, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. By conceptualising visual politics as a multidimensional and processual field, this approach provides the foundation for the analytical framework developed in the following section.

A Four-Dimensional Conceptual Model of Visual Politics

Constructive Dimension: How Images Participate in Making Political Reality

Images function as formative elements in the production of political meaning, shaping political reality beyond any role as neutral reflections of external events. Across the theoretical traditions reviewed above, scholars emphasise that visual materials intervene in how publics understand events, assign moral significance, and construct collective memory. Mitchell's account of images as culturally operative agents highlights their capacity to organise perception and delimit

interpretive possibilities, shaping what becomes knowable, recognisable, and politically salient (Mitchell, 1994). From this perspective, images participate actively in the construction of political reality by providing symbolic frameworks through which events are interpreted and evaluated.

This constructive role is further developed in Campbell's analysis of visual representation in international politics, which demonstrates that images actively constitute phenomena such as war, security, or humanitarian crisis, instead of simply depicting them (Campbell, 2003). Images do not simply illustrate political conditions; they shape the conceptual and moral vocabularies through which those conditions become intelligible. Hansen's notion of international icons extends this insight by demonstrating how certain images acquire political force through circulation, resonance, and discursive uptake across different cultural and geopolitical contexts (Hansen, 2015). Through repeated circulation and affective engagement, such images offer condensed interpretive templates that stabilise particular understandings of political events while marginalising alternative readings. The constructive dimension therefore refers to the capacity of images to anchor narratives, structure moral frameworks, and supply the symbolic resources through which political realities take form. This work is simultaneously epistemic and affective: images shape both what is known and how it is felt, operating across cognition, memory, and shared cultural imagination. Political meaning emerges not solely from visual content but from the ways images are embedded within discursive practices of interpretation, circulation, and remembrance.

Under contemporary conditions of algorithmic mediation, this constructive function is increasingly shaped by computational systems that participate in the generation, recombination, and prioritisation of visual forms. Meaning-making is no longer fully attributable to human authorship but emerges from assemblages involving datasets, models, platforms, and interpretive communities. In such environments, the constructive dimension of visual politics extends beyond representational framing to encompass algorithmically mediated processes that influence which images are produced, how they circulate, and which interpretations gain prominence within public discourse.

Visibility Dimension: The Politics of Appearance and Concealment

The second dimension concerns the ways images organise visibility, determining what enters public perception and what remains obscured. Politics, as Rancière suggests, is inseparable from the distribution of the sensible: the normative arrangements that govern who may appear, which experiences become recognisable, and which forms of life become intelligible as part of public life. Viewed through this lens, images function not merely as representations of reality but as mechanisms that regulate access to visibility, shaping the perceptual boundaries within which political subjects and events can be recognised.

Azoulay's emphasis on absence as a constitutive feature of photography deepens this perspective by drawing attention to what is excluded from the frame (Azoulay, 2008). What remains unseen, whether through structural marginalisation, censorship, or editorial decision-making, can be as politically consequential as what is made visible. Absence here should be understood not as a lack, but as a condition actively produced through visual practices. Campbell's analysis of visual regimes further demonstrates how states, media institutions, and other authoritative actors manage these boundaries of appearance, authorising certain images of suffering, threat, or authority for public circulation while suppressing others (Campbell, 2003).

The visibility dimension thus highlights that images exercise political force by organising perceptual hierarchies. They shape recognition, determine whose experiences count as publicly intelligible, and delineate the boundaries of collective attention. Visibility is therefore not merely a descriptive condition but a distributive practice through which political subjectivity is affirmed or denied. Lorés (2021) reminds us that "visibility can only be properly understood if verbal markers are analysed in combination with other modes with which they connect (i.e. visual)" (p. 53), underscoring that visibility is always a multimodal and discursively mediated phenomenon.

In contemporary platform-mediated environments, regimes of visibility are increasingly shaped by computational systems that rank, recommend, and moderate visual content across digital platforms. Visibility becomes a dynamically governed resource, structured not only by institutional decision-making but

also by platform logics that prioritise engagement, circulation, and attention. Algorithms do not simply transmit images; they participate in organising what becomes visible, marginal, or invisible at scale within platform-mediated publics. In such environments, the politics of appearance and concealment is reconfigured through hybrid regimes in which human and computational forms of governance jointly shape the visual field of political life.

Affective Dimension: Emotional Economies of Visual Communication

A third dimension centres on the affective charge of images, their capacity to evoke and circulate emotions that become integral to political engagement. Unlike verbal discourse, which tends to operate through rational deliberation, images frequently intervene through immediacy and intensity. As Bleiker argues, aesthetic experience opens onto aspects of political life that remain inaccessible to rationalist frameworks, reaching publics through sensory and emotional registers that precede reflective judgment (Bleiker, 2009). From this perspective, affect is not a secondary response to visual content but a constitutive mechanism through which political meaning is apprehended and oriented.

Hansen's work on international icons further underscores that images acquire symbolic and political force when they activate strong emotional identification (Hansen, 2015). Their resonance is not reducible to representational content but depends on affective intensity and circulation. Communication research similarly suggests that publics often rely on affective heuristics when engaging with political imagery, particularly in contexts characterised by uncertainty, distance, or low levels of prior information. The affective dimension thus refers to the emotional infrastructures within which images circulate, resonate, and acquire political significance.

Within digital media environments organised around engagement and virality, affective dynamics are increasingly patterned through algorithmic amplification. Images that provoke outrage, compassion, fear, or empathy are differentially prioritised and circulated according to platform logics that reward emotional intensity and sustained attention. In such contexts, affect does not merely accompany visual communication but becomes a key driver of

visibility, circulation, and political mobilisation. The affective dimension of visual politics therefore operates through feedback loops in which emotional response, algorithmic prioritisation, and public attention mutually reinforce one another, shaping how political images are encountered, interpreted, and acted upon.

Legitimacy and Power Dimension: Visualising Authority and Political Order

The fourth dimension highlights how images participate in the articulation and contestation of political authority. Visual representations do not merely depict power; they contribute to its performance, stabilisation, and recognition within public life. Contemporary politics is increasingly mediated through style, symbolism, and visual display. The self-presentation of political actors (through posture, gesture, setting, and symbolic alignment) functions as a form of visual performance through which credibility, authority, and legitimacy are constructed and communicated.

Hariman and Lucaites (2016) emphasise that photographs stage civic identity and invite viewers into shared interpretive spaces where legitimacy is either affirmed or challenged. Images operate as sites of civic spectatorship, positioning publics in relation to authority through visual cues that signal trust, leadership, or moral standing. Campbell's notion of pictorial authority similarly captures how visual regimes naturalise state narratives, choreograph scenes of unity and purpose, and render particular political orders as self-evident or necessary (Campbell, 2003). In these accounts, legitimacy emerges not from coercion alone but from the successful visual performance of authority within culturally recognisable forms. The legitimacy and power dimension therefore concern the aesthetic and symbolic labour through which political authority becomes visible, persuasive, and publicly recognisable. Images help stabilise political orders by aligning actors, symbols, and emotions within coherent visual narratives, yet they also expose points of fragility when performances fail or when alternative visual representations contest dominant claims to authority. Authority, in this sense, is always provisional and dependent on ongoing processes of visual recognition.

In contemporary media environments marked by AI-generated imagery, synthetic media, and algorithmically intensified circulation, the visual performance of authority becomes increasingly unstable. The proliferation of manipulated, staged, or automated images complicates established assumptions about authenticity, authorship, and accountability. Political legitimacy can no longer rely solely on institutional credibility or human authorship, but must instead be negotiated within hybrid human-machine assemblages in contemporary visual cultures, where authority is performed, circulated, and evaluated under conditions of heightened visual uncertainty. In such contexts, the legitimacy of political power is not only visualised but continually tested through shifting dynamics of trust, recognition, and technological mediation.

Interactions Across the Four Dimensions

Although each of the four dimensions (constructive, visibility, affective, and legitimacy) captures a distinct analytical mechanism, their political effects are realised only through their interaction, as visual politics rarely operates through any single dimension in isolation. Images acquire political significance through the interplay of these dimensions, as processes of meaning-making, visibility, emotion, and authority reinforce or destabilise one another within specific cultural, communicative, and institutional settings. The political force of images thus emerges not from isolated visual effects but from the cumulative and relational dynamics through which images are produced, circulated, encountered, and evaluated.

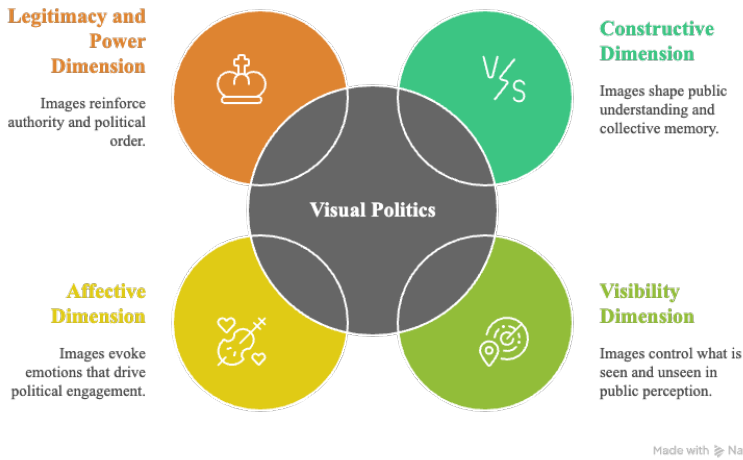
An image that shapes political reality (the constructive dimension) typically does so because it also structures what is rendered visible or invisible (the visibility dimension). Crucially, the interpretive power of a photograph depends not only on what it shows but also on what it withholds, and such selective framing determines whether particular actors, grievances, or narratives enter public consciousness. These regimes of visibility, in turn, condition the affective responses images invite. Strong emotional reactions, such as shock, empathy, or indignation, often arise from the tension between

appearance and exclusion, illustrating how affective dynamics build upon and intensify the politics of visibility.

The emotional force of images further feeds into questions of legitimacy and authority. Images that mobilise collective feeling can consolidate political orders by affirming shared values and stabilising claims to authority, or conversely, expose ruptures in public trust by visualising vulnerability, failure, or abuse. The legitimacy dimension thus emerges from the interaction of affective resonance, symbolic construction, and authoritative visibility. Political power becomes intelligible and persuasive not through any single visual operation, but through the interdependent alignment of meaning, emotion, and recognition.

In contemporary media environments, these interactions increasingly unfold within algorithmically mediated systems of circulation and governance. None of the four dimensions operates outside such environments. Processes of meaning-making, for instance, are shaped by algorithmic recombination and prioritisation; visibility is governed through ranking, recommendation, and moderation; affect is amplified through engagement-driven feedback loops; and legitimacy is negotiated under conditions of distributed authorship and heightened uncertainty. The figure below conceptualises these dynamics not as a static model, but as a relational framework through which visual politics operates across hybrid human-machine assemblages.

Figure 1. A Four-Dimensional Conceptual Model of Visual Politics in Algorithmically Mediated Environments



Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conceptual framework developed in this article.

Understanding visual politics therefore requires an integrated analytical approach attentive to how these dimensions interact under contemporary conditions. A multidimensional framework enables researchers to trace how images move across cultural, technological, and political contexts, activating different dimensions at different moments. It also clarifies why the same image may stabilise one political configuration while destabilising another, depending on how processes of meaning-making, visibility, affect, and legitimacy are articulated within algorithmically mediated environments. Recognising these interactions provides a more comprehensive account of the political labour images perform and establishes the conceptual foundation for the case analyses that follow.

Case Analyses: Demonstrating the Framework

Saigon Execution (1968): Constructing a Political Reality Through Shock

Figure 2. Eddie Adams, Saigon Execution (1968)



Source: Associated Press (AP Photo/Eddie Adams).

The photograph commonly known as *Saigon Execution*, taken by Eddie Adams on 1 February 1968, has become one of the most widely circulated visual documents of the Vietnam War. Instead of functioning merely as a record of a single moment of violence, the image came to symbolise broader tensions surrounding the moral and political legitimacy of the conflict. Its significance lies not only in the event it depicts, but in the interpretive frameworks, cultural narratives, and public emotions that crystallised around it over time.

Constructive dimension

The image rapidly became a reference point in emerging critiques of the U.S. war effort. Scholars and commentators have frequently interpreted it as contributing to shifts in how American publics imagined the conflict, condensing complex geopolitical dynamics into a single, morally unsettling scene. In this sense, the photograph exemplifies Mitchell's and Campbell's claims that images participate in shaping political realities by reconfiguring the symbolic and affective conditions under which events become intelligible (Mitchell, 1994; Campbell, 2003). Its iconicity does not derive from informational value but from its capacity to anchor powerful narratives about brutality, ambiguity, and the ethical stakes of war.

Visibility dimension

The visual structure of the image foregrounds certain actors while leaving crucial contextual details outside the frame. This selective visibility aligns with Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, in which political meaning arises from the organisation of appearance and disappearance. Azoulay's emphasis on the politics of the frame further clarifies how the absence of background information, including the circumstances leading to the execution and the identities of those involved, shaped the photograph's long afterlife, enabling it to circulate as a symbolic condensation rather than a documentary explanation (Azoulay, 2008).

Affective dimension

The emotional jolt produced by *Saigon Execution* played a central role in its cultural circulation. Scholars such as Hariman and Lucaites (2016) have shown that iconic images generate shared affective environments in which dispersed publics momentarily converge. The shock, disorientation, and moral discomfort triggered by the photograph allowed it to resonate across ideological boundaries, becoming a touchstone in public debates about violence, responsibility, and the human cost of war.

Legitimacy and authority

The image also became entangled in negotiations over political authority. By making visible an act of violence committed by an allied general, the photograph unsettled dominant narratives that framed the conflict in terms of strategic necessity or moral clarity. The photograph did not directly cause political change; instead, it provided a visual vocabulary through which scepticism, anger, and ethical questioning could be articulated. Its continued use in textbooks, museum exhibitions, and documentary films demonstrates how the image has shaped cultural memory, becoming part of a long-standing discourse on war, representation, and accountability.

Saigon Execution illustrates a regime of visual politics in which political meaning, affect, and legitimacy were produced through editorial circulation, print journalism, and historically situated interpretation. These conditions establish an important baseline for understanding how visual politics operated prior to the emergence of platform-driven visibility and algorithmic amplification examined later in this article.

*Falling Man (2001): The Politics of the Unshown***Figure 3. Richard Drew, *Falling Man* (2001)**

Source: Associated Press (AP photo/Richard Drew).

Richard Drew's *Falling Man* occupies a distinctive place in the visual history of 9/11. Briefly circulated on the day of the attacks before being withdrawn by many U.S. news organisations, the image became emblematic not of what was widely seen, but of what was rendered unseeable. Its trajectory illuminates the politics of visibility, taboo, and national mourning that shaped how the attacks were publicly remembered and emotionally processed.

Constructive dimension

Even in its partial circulation, the image introduced a representational possibility that stood in tension with emergent narratives of heroism, resilience, and

collective unity. Scholars have noted that *Falling Man* became an inadvertent counterpoint to official discourses, quietly haunting cultural imagination despite its absence from mainstream news coverage. Its later reappearances in literature, art, and documentary film suggest that the image continued to shape interpretive frameworks long after its initial suppression, functioning as a latent visual reference for experiences of vulnerability and loss that could not be fully accommodated within dominant narratives.

Visibility dimension

The withdrawal of the photograph exemplifies the cultural management of visibility in moments of national crisis. Decisions not to publish were framed as gestures of respect and sensitivity, yet they simultaneously stabilised a discourse of mourning in which certain forms of suffering, particularly those associated with desperation, fear, or ambiguity, were rendered unacceptable for public display. Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible helps explain how such omissions contribute to the formation of collective memory by delimiting the emotional and symbolic boundaries of what may be seen and acknowledged. Azoulay's concept of the "missing people of photography" further clarifies how those excluded from representation nonetheless remain central to the political meaning of the event, haunting public memory through their very absence (Azoulay, 2008).

Affective dimension

The emotional intensity of *Falling Man* was a key factor in its disappearance from public circulation. Its stark portrayal of individual vulnerability disrupted predominant affective registers of heroism, resolve, and national strength that quickly came to dominate visual narratives of 9/11. As Bleiker and Hansen suggest, images that generate affective dissonance are often perceived as incompatible with stabilising political narratives, prompting their removal from public space (Bleiker, 2009; Hansen, 2015). In this sense, *Falling Man* illustrates not only how

affect circulates but how emotional responses are actively regulated, managed, and selectively excluded within visual regimes of crisis.

Legitimacy and authority

The suppression of *Falling Man* also played a role in shaping the legitimacy of the political responses that followed the attacks. By narrowing the visual field to images that affirmed unity, resilience, and moral clarity, media institutions contributed to the stabilisation of narratives that underpinned emerging security agendas and military interventions. Yet the image's later recirculation, particularly in cultural and artistic contexts, reveals enduring tensions over how authority, vulnerability, and national identity are visually articulated. Its afterlife underscores the long-term cultural negotiation of grief, trauma, and the politics of remembrance.

Falling Man exemplifies a historically specific regime of visual politics in which visibility and absence were governed primarily through editorial judgement, professional norms, and culturally embedded expectations of propriety and sensitivity. This case demonstrates how political meaning and legitimacy can be shaped as much by what is withheld from view as by what is displayed, providing an important historical reference point for understanding later transformations in the governance of visibility addressed elsewhere in this article.

Alan Kurdi (2015): Global Affective Shock and the Recalibration of Responsibility

Figure 4. Nilüfer Demir, Alan Kurdi (2015)



Source: Associated Press/DHA (AP Photo/ Nilüfer Demir).

The photograph of Alan Kurdi, taken by Nilüfer Demir in 2015, rapidly became one of the most widely recognised images of the Syrian refugee crisis. Its impact illustrates how visual politics operates across transnational media environments in which meaning, emotion, and responsibility are negotiated among diverse publics. Unlike images whose circulation was confined primarily to national media systems, the photograph of Alan Kurdi travelled swiftly across borders, platforms, and interpretive communities, acquiring political significance through its global visibility and emotional resonance.

Constructive dimension

The image intervened in dominant European framings of migration, which had largely revolved around security, regulation, and demographic anxiety. Scholars and commentators have interpreted the photograph as reshaping the discursive landscape by shifting attention from abstract categories such as “flows” or “burdens” to a singular, embodied human tragedy. In Campbell’s terms, the image offered an alternative way of imagining the crisis, reconfiguring narratives and moral vocabularies through which “the refugee” became publicly understood (Campbell, 2003). Political meaning emerged less from policy argumentation than from the condensation of complex geopolitical conditions into an emotionally charged visual encounter.

Visibility dimension

The photograph made visible forms of suffering that had long remained structurally marginal within European public discourse. Thousands of people had died in the Mediterranean prior to Alan Kurdi, yet such deaths rarely entered the visual field of European publics. By foregrounding a child’s body in a peaceful, almost serene setting, the image disrupted established tropes of disorder, threat, or illegality commonly associated with migration. In doing so, it reconfigured the distribution of the sensible by bringing vulnerable bodies into public visibility and reframing the moral terms under which the refugee crisis was recognised.

Affective dimension

The global affective response to the photograph was immediate and intense. Widespread sharing on social media, front-page newspaper coverage, and a surge in charitable initiatives followed its circulation. The image mobilised a collective emotional shock that temporarily reshaped public conversation through affective immediacy, with limited engagement in sustained deliberation or policy analysis. As Hansen’s and Bleiker’s accounts of affective activation suggest, the photograph condensed complex political and humanitarian issues into

a singular emotional encounter, aligning dispersed publics through shared feelings of grief, empathy, and moral urgency (Hansen, 2015; Bleiker, 2009).

Legitimacy and political authority

The image was frequently invoked in political commentary and public debate and has been linked to short-term shifts in policy discourse and refugee commitments, particularly in countries such as Germany and Canada. Hariman and Lucaites' concept of civic spectatorship is useful here, as viewers were positioned not as distant observers but as ethical participants addressed by the scene. At the same time, responses varied across cultural and national contexts. In parts of Western Europe, the image catalysed compassion and calls for responsibility; in parts of Eastern Europe, it provoked anxieties about national identity; and in other regions it circulated within narratives of regional suffering and geopolitical abandonment. These divergent receptions underscore how the political meaning of images is negotiated across culturally specific interpretive frameworks.

The photograph of Alan Kurdi exemplifies a transitional moment in visual politics. Its circulation relied on both traditional journalistic infrastructures and emerging social media platforms, combining editorial selection with rapid peer-to-peer dissemination. The image demonstrates how affective mobilisation and civic address operated within a media environment that was increasingly networked but not yet fully governed by algorithmic amplification. As such, it provides an important historical bridge between earlier regimes of editorial visibility and the algorithmically mediated visual politics examined in the following section.

Pentagon Explosion AI Image (2023): Algorithmic Visibility and Provisional Legitimacy

Figure 4. AI-generated image falsely depicting an explosion near the Pentagon (2023)



Source: Social media circulation; analysed with reference to Clayton (2023).

The rapid circulation of an AI-generated image falsely depicting an explosion near the Pentagon in May 2023 provides a revealing empirical test of the proposed framework. Although the image lacked any documentary referent and was rapidly debunked in subsequent reporting, its dissemination through multiple verified social media accounts generated immediate political and economic effects, including automated news alerts, international media pickup, and a short-lived dip in U.S. stock markets (Clayton, 2023). Under algorithmically mediated conditions, political meaning and authority may emerge independently of representation, authorship, or institutional validation, as this episode makes visible. Visibility itself can function as a provisional source of legitimacy, as algorithmic amplification and platform trust signals enable images to produce real-world consequences before processes of interpretation, verification, or ethical judgment can intervene. The case therefore exposes the fragility of established regimes of visual authority in environments where circulation, credibility, and response are increasingly organised through computational infrastructures.

Constructive dimension

In this case, political meaning was activated without any stable referential grounding. In contrast to the historical images examined earlier in this article, whose political force emerged through their embedding in specific events and discursive contexts, the Pentagon image produced meaning procedurally. The image generated the assumption that an event had occurred. Meaning arose from patterns of circulation, platform cues, and inferential logics, with symbolic framing operating under severe time constraints and often lagging behind circulation. The constructive power of the image thus resided in algorithmically mediated inference: within platformed publics, if an image is rapidly circulating across trusted platforms, it is provisionally treated as meaningful and potentially true. This form of constructive meaning-making illustrates a shift from symbolic condensation to procedural activation within contemporary visual politics.

Visibility dimension

The visibility of the Pentagon image emerged through platform-driven amplification, bypassing editorial selection and institutional validation. Verification badges, real-time cross-platform circulation, and repetition within automated aggregation systems combined to produce a regime of visibility structured by platform infrastructures alongside institutional signals of authority. The image achieved large-scale exposure prior to any sustained verification, allowing visibility itself to operate as a provisional source of legitimacy. Authority in this configuration emerged from speed, reach, and platform-mediated trust cues, as algorithmic circulation elevated the image's political relevance ahead of journalistic or governmental stabilisation. Here, circulation functions as a practical condition through which political relevance is initially recognised.

Affective dimension

The affective force of the image was generated less through emotional identification than through temporal compression and uncertainty. The sudden

appearance of a visually plausible image depicting a major security incident produced a momentary shock rooted in ambiguity and urgency rather than empathy. Unlike the affective mobilisation associated with images such as the photograph of Alan Kurdi, which relied on compassion and moral appeal, the Pentagon image activated affect through acceleration. The rapid succession of alerts, reposts, and media pickups compressed reaction time, producing a short-lived affective environment characterised by anxiety and immediacy. In algorithmically mediated contexts, affect is increasingly structured by speed and simultaneity, as automated circulation intensifies emotional response before reflective judgment becomes possible.

Legitimacy and power

The most consequential implication of the case concerns a reconfiguration of legitimacy under algorithmic conditions. Political and economic effects unfolded before verification, institutional response, or ethical evaluation could stabilise interpretation, indicating a form of legitimacy that was contingent, reversible, and sustained through algorithmically produced visibility. The episode illustrates how political power can be exercised through machine-mediated visual performance, in which infrastructural signals generate authoritative effects at a pace that exceeds deliberative and regulatory processes.

Reconfiguring the Four Dimensions under Algorithmic Conditions

The Pentagon image illustrates how the operative logic of visual politics is reconfigured under algorithmic conditions, instead of indicating the emergence of an entirely new form. The core mechanisms identified throughout this article, constructive meaning-making, regimes of visibility, affective mobilisation, and the performance of legitimacy, remain analytically recognisable in this case. What changes is their sequencing, speed, and source of authority. Historical cases illustrate how visual politics operated through symbolic condensation, editorial governance, and culturally mediated affect. The contemporary case shows how these same mechanisms are reconfigured within algorithmic

regimes in which visibility is produced first, affect follows immediately, and legitimacy is provisionally assigned before interpretation or verification can occur. This reordering clarifies how visual politics unfolds within hybrid human and machine assemblages, where computational infrastructures participate directly in shaping political meaning, authority, and response.

Discussion

Conceptual Contributions

The four-dimensional approach articulated in this article brings together theoretical strands that have often been treated in isolation within the study of visual politics. The model shows how their insights address distinct yet interrelated mechanisms through which images acquire political force. This perspective suggests that visual politics is best understood through a constellation of discursive operations (constructing meaning, organising visibility, mobilising affect, and performing legitimacy) that unfold simultaneously across cultural, media, and institutional environments. The framework also clarifies how images function as forms of argument and discursive intervention, particularly under conditions of algorithmic amplification. By foregrounding these operations, the article shifts analytical attention from images as discrete objects to the practices and conditions that enable them to circulate, resonate, and matter politically. This move helps clarify a field in which terminologies and analytical emphases have developed unevenly, and it provides a shared vocabulary for examining how visual meaning, authority, and emotional response are produced across different domains of political communication.

The framework also extends existing theories of visual politics by situating these operations within contemporary environments increasingly shaped by algorithmic mediation. Meaning-making, visibility, affective resonance, and claims to legitimacy are no longer produced solely through human authorship or institutional control, but emerge from hybrid assemblages involving platforms, algorithms, and automated systems of circulation and amplification. The model

shows how the core insights of established visual theory remain analytically productive when re-read in light of distributed agency and computational governance. In this sense, the four-dimensional framework offers a robust and adaptable architecture for analysing visual politics under contemporary conditions, without reducing political imagery to either technological determinism or representational analysis alone.

The four-dimensional framework proposed in this article is formulated as a general model of visual politics and is not limited to AI-generated or algorithmically produced imagery. In this study, empirical claims about algorithmic mediation are grounded primarily in the contemporary case of platform-circulated synthetic imagery surrounding the Pentagon misinformation episode. The historical photographs are analysed within their own media regimes to establish baseline configurations of visual politics, enabling comparison without projecting contemporary platform dynamics back onto historical cases.

Cultural Implications

For cultural analysis, the proposed model highlights how images function as sites in which meaning, memory, and collective identity are negotiated through ongoing discursive activity. Visual materials do not simply illustrate cultural values; they participate in shaping the symbolic boundaries through which communities understand belonging, trauma, responsibility, and authority. Attention to the constructive, visibility, affective, and legitimising dimensions therefore helps clarify how images operate both as aesthetic forms and as social actors within cultural discourse.

This perspective also foregrounds the interpretive labour of audiences. Viewers do not passively receive images, but actively reframe, contest, and re-embed them within existing cultural narratives and shared repertoires of meaning. Such practices of reception are central to understanding how visual significance becomes stabilised or unsettled over time, particularly as images circulate across different cultural contexts, media platforms, and communicative settings. Cultural meaning emerges through iterative processes of circulation,

interpretation, and recontextualisation that extend beyond the moment of production.

In digitally mediated cultural environments, these processes are increasingly shaped by platform infrastructures that influence how images are encountered, ranked, and rendered salient. Cultural memory, affective resonance, and symbolic visibility are increasingly organised through the combined influence of editorial practices, collective tradition, and computational systems that privilege circulation, engagement, and repetition. As a result, cultural negotiation around images unfolds within environments marked by uneven distributions of visibility and resonance, in which some visual narratives are amplified while others remain marginal.

For scholars working at the intersection of culture and communication, the framework therefore opens analytical space for examining how visibility structures intercultural understanding, cross-community dialogue, and the ethics of witnessing in digitally mediated environments. This approach situates algorithmic systems within cultural analysis, treating them as constitutive conditions under which cultural meaning, memory, and identification are produced and contested through images.

Implications for Political Analysis

From a political perspective, the proposed framework draws attention to the sensory, symbolic, and affective environments within which authority is articulated, recognised, and contested. This approach emphasises the discursive conditions through which political actors, institutions, and publics recognise certain forms of power as legitimate, intelligible, or emotionally compelling. Visual politics, in this sense, operates through the alignment of meaning, visibility, affect, and authority within shared fields of perception.

This perspective helps clarify how visual materials shape political debates and public narratives not through linear causation, but by organising the interpretive cues, emotional tonalities, and regimes of visibility through which political questions become thinkable. Images influence political outcomes by directing attention, structuring affective response, and supplying symbolic

resources that guide judgment and collective orientation. Treating visibility as a constitutive element of political life therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of how power is enacted and contested across media systems and institutional settings.

These political dynamics are increasingly conditioned by computational systems that participate in governing visibility, circulation, and response in platform-based political communication. Platform algorithms, automated curation, and recommendation systems shape which images gain prominence, the speed at which they circulate, and the affective registers they activate. Political authority and legitimacy are thus negotiated within hybrid assemblages in which human actors, institutional practices, and algorithmic processes jointly structure the conditions of recognition and response.

These developments also complicate established notions of authorship, responsibility, and accountability in political communication. When images are generated, altered, or amplified through algorithmic systems, political agency can no longer be located solely in identifiable speakers or institutions. Authority instead emerges through distributed processes of circulation and validation that may outpace deliberation, verification, or ethical judgment. The framework therefore offers analytical tools for examining how political power is exercised and contested in environments where visibility, credibility, and affect are shaped by computational governance alongside human intention.

Applicability Beyond Western Contexts

Although much foundational scholarship on visual politics has emerged from Euro-American contexts, the analytical lens developed in this article is not confined to any single cultural or political tradition. The four-dimensional framework can be adapted to political environments shaped by distinct media systems, symbolic repertoires, and historical trajectories. In many non-Western contexts, regimes of visibility are strongly influenced by state-curated imagery, ritualised performances of authority, and culturally specific norms governing emotional expression and public appearance. These settings demonstrate that the same visual mechanisms (constructing meaning, organising visibility,

mobilising affect, and articulating legitimacy) operate through different discursive logics and institutional arrangements.

As Vassileva (2021) notes, “it is dominant ideologies that shape and determine modes of discourse” (p. 73), a reminder that the interpretation of political images is always regulated by culturally embedded frameworks of meaning. Comparative analysis thus reveals the intercultural dynamics of visual politics: images that invite empathy, critique, or dissent in one context may reinforce hierarchy, unity, or national identity in another. Visual power is mediated through local histories, cultural conventions, and political expectations, producing variable effects across contexts.

A brief illustration can be found in Vietnam, where political imagery frequently foregrounds ritual, symbolism, and collective solidarity. These visual grammars of authority diverge from liberal-democratic aesthetics while remaining no less structured by visibility and affect. Read through the present framework, such practices can be analysed not as anomalies, but as culturally specific configurations of visual politics in which legitimacy is performed and recognised through distinct symbolic forms.

The era of globally circulating platforms and algorithmic infrastructures requires closer attention to how these dynamics intersect unevenly across regions. While digital systems introduce shared technical conditions of circulation, their political and cultural effects remain uneven, shaped by local media ecologies and regulatory contexts. Applying the framework across diverse settings thus highlights its flexibility as an analytical approach, enabling researchers to examine how visual politics is re-articulated at the intersection of global media technologies and culturally situated practices of meaning, visibility, and authority.

Conclusion

This article has examined the expanding significance of visual politics in contemporary public life and proposed a conceptual framework for analysing how images participate in the production of political meaning. While scholarship across visual culture, political theory, international relations, and media and

communication studies has long demonstrated that images shape what can be perceived, felt, and acted upon, these contributions have often remained analytically dispersed. By synthesising insights from Mitchell, Campbell, Hansen, Azoulay, Bleiker, and Hariman and Lucaites, the article has articulated a four-dimensional model that captures the principal mechanisms through which images become politically consequential.

The proposed framework (comprising the constructive, visibility, affective, and legitimacy dimensions) offers a systematic way to conceptualise the political agency of images. The model highlights images as active forces in political life, emphasising their capacity to structure interpretations of reality, organise regimes of visibility, mobilise collective emotions, and provide sites for the performance and recognition of political authority. The case analyses of *Saigon Execution*, *Falling Man*, and the photograph of Alan Kurdi illustrate how these dimensions operate in combination, revealing the layered nature of visual power and the diverse pathways through which images shape public sentiment, memory, and judgment.

At the same time, the article shows that these dynamics must now be understood within environments increasingly shaped by algorithmic mediation. Contemporary visual politics unfolds not only through human authorship, institutional framing, or representational content, but through hybrid assemblages in which algorithms participate in generating, circulating, amplifying, and legitimising visual forms. Under such conditions, high-velocity visibility can function as a provisional source of authority, affective resonance can be intensified through computational amplification, and questions of authorship, responsibility, and accountability become more difficult to locate.

By integrating classical visual theory with explicit attention to algorithmic mediation, the four-dimensional framework contributes to interdisciplinary debates on culture, communication, and politics while remaining adaptable across different empirical and cultural contexts. It provides a shared analytical vocabulary for examining how meaning, visibility, affect, and legitimacy are negotiated in visual cultures shaped by both human and computational agency. This perspective is particularly relevant beyond Western settings, where global

platform infrastructures intersect with locally specific media ecologies, symbolic traditions, and political imaginaries.

Future research may extend this framework to address emerging challenges such as AI-generated imagery, algorithmic regimes of visibility, digital memorialisation, and the evolving aesthetics of political leadership under conditions of synthetic media. These developments point less to the emergence of an entirely new form of visual politics than to a transformation in its operative logic. Visual politics today can be understood as a dynamic and processual field in which political meaning, authority, and responsibility are continuously negotiated at the shifting boundary between human and machine agency, as platform-mediated episodes of synthetic circulation render the conditions of visibility and legitimacy increasingly unstable.

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