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Visual communication has always been political

ABSTRACT

This article is an invitation to engage with the small 'p' politics of visual political communication by highlighting the importance of both culture and history, in order to gain greater understanding of how images and the visual more broadly may 'work' on us and contribute to our imaginaries as well as our understanding of political messages and political life as a whole. Specifically, the article aims to encourage scholars in this field to engage less with strategy and tactics or persuasion and effects to delve more deeply into why and how visual meanings become politically powerful over time and in particular contexts. In doing so, the article foregrounds the work of two major scholars of the visual, Stuart Hall and Michel Pastoureau, and promotes an approach focusing on the more seemingly mundane, taken-for-granted and everyday meanings and practices underlying visual political communication. To demonstrate this approach, the article offers an in-depth discussion of the photograph used in the 'Breaking Point' poster at the centre of the political campaign which was launched by UKIP leader Nigel Farage in the run-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum.

KEYWORDS

Brexit
Breaking Point poster
Stuart Hall
Michel Pastoureau
visual meaning-making
culture
history
migration

INTRODUCTION

The title of my contribution to the (re)launch of the *Journal of Visual Political Communication* is meant as a gentle provocation. According to some, visual political communication is an area of research and expertise that has only recently acquired its own distinctive contours, mostly thanks to a renewed and increasing interest in the visual dimensions of politics, particularly in the image-heavy contexts of digital media. The significance of this scholarly agenda is reflected in a growing string of excellent publications and research projects

on topics ranging from the visual dimensions of electoral politics and political decision-making to the role of news and social media images in protest and social movements. However, here I would like to highlight how the politics of visual communication and visual culture more broadly have always mattered and continue to matter to scholars who, like myself, consider all things visual to be, in fact, political – that is, always power-laden, grounded in quotidian ideology, and thus also able to contribute to shaping our material and social realities.

For this reason, I believe that we should not underestimate the importance of engaging with small 'p' politics, or better with the more seemingly mundane, taken-for-granted and ultimately also everyday meanings and practices underlying visual political communication. In particular, I would like to emphasize the importance of both culture and history, and of their nexus more specifically, to gain critical understanding of how images and the visual more broadly may 'work' on us and contribute to our imaginaries and therefore also to our understanding of political messages as well as political life as a whole. I would like to encourage scholars in this field to engage less with strategy and tactics or persuasion and effects in order to delve more deeply into why and how visual meanings become politically powerful over time and in particular contexts. I will return to a discussion of what I consider to be some of the key tenets of this general view, specifically through the lens of the work of two major scholars of the visual, Stuart Hall and Michel Pastoureau, whose ideas and methodologies can also offer important critical instruments for research on visual political communication.

Here I specifically want to turn our attention to an image that became highly politicized, quite suddenly so, in the run-up to the 2016 UK European Union membership referendum, also commonly referred to as the 'Brexit' referendum – namely, the photograph used in the 'Breaking Point' poster that was unveiled by then UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage on 16 June 2016 outside the European Commission's London headquarters in Westminster (Figure 1). My contention is that the political 'power' of this

Figure 1: Nigel Farage in front of the 'Breaking Point' poster on 16 June 2016 Photograph credit: Jack Taylor/Getty Images.

image is to be examined not so much in relation to a pointedly strategic use of specific icons or motifs, but rather in relation to the cultural and historical meanings that have shaped the rhetoric that the image, combined with its layout and captioning, is able to communicate in an almost visceral manner.

UNDERSTANDING THE SMALL 'P' POLITICS OF VISUAL IMAGES: THE 2016 'BREXIT' CAMPAIGN'S 'BREAKING POINT' POSTER

The poster, taking up the entire side of a 'Leave.EU' campaign van, depicted a long queue of mostly male Muslim migrants and refugees with the slogan 'Breaking Point: the EU has failed us all' and a lower bar of superimposed text running across three quarters of the length of the billboard which read 'We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders'. The remaining quarter of this length was covered by a white box with the text 'Leave the European Union on 23 June' and a reproduction of a hand-traced cross within a smaller box. 'Breaking Point' was rendered in large red block letters and the remaining text in a smaller white font. The original photograph (Figure 2) was shot by Jeff Mitchell, a long-standing staff photographer at Getty Images, and portrayed a large group of Syrian and Afghan refugees crossing the border between Croatia and Slovenia to reach the Brežice refugee camp in 2015, at the height of the so-called refugee 'crisis' that prompted German Chancellor Angela Merkel to open the doors of her country to over 1 million refugees and asylum-seekers. After being licensed from the Getty Images website, the

Figure 2: 'Migrants cross into Slovenia', photograph shot by Jeff J. Mitchell for Getty Images on 23 October 2015 in Rigonce, on the border between Croatia and Slovenia. Photograph credit: Jeff J. Mitchell/Getty Images.

photograph had been cropped and the lower bar with text had been positioned in such a way that the only visibly white subject in the original image had disappeared from the frame. More important, although the image had not been 'doctored', as Farage himself went to great pains to explain (Channel 4 News 2016), it had however been completely decontextualized. In combination with the text accompanying it, the original function of the image had been displaced and, as a consequence, its meaning had 'shifted' from photojournalistic representation to political 'connotations of racialised otherness in relation to immigration' (Faulkner et al. 2021: 202).

It thus goes without saying that Farage's 'Breaking Point' poster was a strategically crafted message: even though it was not part of the official 'Vote Leave' Brexit campaign, which included the now infamous NHS bus, the poster was nevertheless part of a £100,000 campaign devised by the Edinburgh-based advertising firm Family Advertising Ltd (Hutcheon 2017; also cf. Shipman 2017). However, I would also argue that its 'strategic' message was not orchestrated or fabricated in a particularly sophisticated manner. Instead, it relied on a somewhat quick and dirty set of stereotypes and tropes that were readily available to the general public's collective imaginary in matters of immigration. I will return to this point in a moment. It is also important to mention that, from a strictly political point of view, the 'Breaking Point' poster was not 'effective' – unlike the 'Vote Leave' campaign's NHS bus, which drew in voters by promising that money spent on EU membership would be used to dramatically increase funding for the United Kingdom's ailing universal healthcare system.

In fact, UKIP's 'Breaking Point' poster backlashed, as Farage's choice of language and imagery was decried as grossly racist both from left and right. Trade unionist Dave Prentis reported the poster to the Metropolitan Police, describing it as a 'blatant attempt to incite racial hatred' (Stewart and Mason 2016: n.pag.). Meanwhile, George Osborne, a member of the Conservative Party who at the time was also First Secretary of State in the pro-EU government led by David Cameron, said that the poster was 'vile' and had 'echoes of literature used in the 1930s' (BBC News 2016: n.pag.). Other prominent politicians, including Nicola Sturgeon and Jeremy Corbyn but also Leave supporters like Michael Gove and Boris Johnson were vocal in criticizing Farage's message. The poster was compared to imagery from Nazi propaganda by Twitter users (Stewart and Mason 2016) and nearly 40,000 people signed an online petition that was handed in to a north London police station with the claim that the increase in hate crimes in the wake of the referendum was 'a direct consequence' of UKIP's inflammatory campaign rhetoric (Micklethwaite 2016). Furthermore, just hours after Farage had unveiled the 'Breaking Point' poster, Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered in the street by a far-right extremist, who shouted 'Britain first' and 'keep Britain independent' as he shot and stabbed her repeatedly – an event that contributed to reinforcing public criticism of Farage's xenophobic rhetoric.

Amidst the general outcry caused by the 'Breaking Point' poster, even Getty Images felt compelled to release a statement about its use in Farage's campaign, but the same statement also stressed that Jeff Mitchell's image had been 'licensed legitimately' (Stewart and Mason 2016). We know that Getty photographer Mitchell had shot this image with a sympathetic attitude towards the plight of migrants and refugees, but also that he did so by visually emphasizing the sheer number of people waiting to cross the border. In an interview with *The Guardian* less than a week after the poster had been

unveiled, Mitchell described the process leading to the making of his photograph in the following way:

> It was a very flat walk, so I scoped out a bridge to shoot from. I knew exactly what lens I was going to use, to compress the group, to show how many people were there. I could have walked with them the whole length, photographing how people were struggling, but you can sum it all up in one picture.
>
> (Beaumont-Thomas 2016: n.pag.)

In the light of UKIP's 'Leave.EU' campaign's actions and the criticisms that followed, the 'Breaking Point' poster has been rightfully defined as 'disinformation' (Faulkner et al. 2021) and 'hateful speech' (Reid 2019). As Faulkner et al. (2021: 203) explain, it is important to move beyond verification approaches about the 'truthfulness' or 'falseness' of journalistic content to understand how the 'Breaking Point' image was made to shift its meanings from those that were inherent to a documentary understanding of what it portrayed to meanings grounded in 'racialised notions of nationhood' that were typical of the 'specific socio-political conditions' of British right-wing populism. These researchers claim that this is an approach that can help us also understand why and how this particular example of visual disinformation 'was produced and had harmful effects'. Along the same lines, Reid (2019: 631) highlights that, unlike the NHS bus poster, the 'Breaking Point' poster warranted sanction because it could cause its targets, namely migrants, to lose 'effective political voice' and therefore also suffer 'an epistemic injustice'. He then goes on to explain that, rather than having a specific effect on a particular vote, '[p]ersistent use of imagery like the "Breaking Point" poster by those in positions of relative authority can cause a shift in public perceptions that leads to some groups not being taken seriously in political deliberation' (Reid 2019: 631), thus also undermining the democratic process as a whole. In the light of these compelling analyses, which focus eminently on the campaign poster's ideologies and effects in relation to political power, I believe that it would also be important to take a step back to examine and foreground some of the ways in which the more mundane, rather than more 'strategic' or even just 'intentional', representational and contextual features of the 'Breaking Point' image may have contributed to its implications in the political arena of Brexit Britain.

In other words, it is important to look into how Mitchell's photograph and any other image, 'has always been political' – prior to its use by those with political power. What I mean by this statement is that I think that we should also, if not first and foremost, interrogate the image itself in relation to how it was produced and distributed together with the visual resources that it deployed. First of all, the 'Breaking Point' image was originally embedded in a 'visual economy', that of editorial stock photography, which is set apart by a set of 'social relations, practices and institutions' (Rose 2010: 62) typical of what Paul Frosh has defined as 'an industrialized system of image production' (2003: 3). Regardless of its photojournalistic or documentary status, this image was and still is available to be licensed for a variety of purposes, including commercial and promotional ones, and without the need to reference the image's original context or purpose. This also entails that, regardless of its 'specific' photojournalistic or documentary value, Mitchell's photograph was always also meant to be licensed as 'generic' visual content. Tellingly, in his interview with *The Guardian*, Mitchell also pointed out that images are

sometimes used 'in the wrong context', not only by political organizations but also by newspapers and that therefore his work as a photographer is done insofar as the ways in which they are picked up is out of his hands (Beaumont-Thomas 2016). Ultimately, the photograph itself is the product of a broader context of production and distribution that contributes to shaping its potential political meanings prior to its use as a political tool.

Secondly, the photograph's own representational features are grounded in tropes, if not stereotypes, which may transcend the photographer's sympathetic attitude towards his subjects. In my previous research with documentary photographers from the Magnum Photo Agency, I found that photographers documenting countries that had just entered the European Union, of which they had little prior knowledge, often prioritized visual choices that might have been rewarded in an increasingly digitalized and aestheticized marketplace of documentary photography, but which also led them to 'other' their subjects – for example, by showing portrayed individuals as 'types' or by emphasizing contrasts between a 'local' and 'global' culture and economy by means of visual juxtaposition (Aiello 2012). Along the same lines, Mitchell's image mobilizes visual resources that contribute to other its subjects, namely immigrants, despite his stated intentions. A major feature of this image is Mitchell's choice to 'compress the group' to 'sum it all up in one picture' (Beaumont-Thomas 2016: n.pag.), which is aesthetically motivated by the demands of contemporary editorial photography, but which also works to stereotype refugees by foregrounding and even exaggerating their sameness rather than grounding their portrayal in a more complex set of similarities and differences (van Leeuwen 2001). In addition, Ross and Bathia note that this image can be seen as portraying immigrants flooding into the country, as its curved shape resembles 'the bends of a river' and its framing implies that 'the dam wall is about to break' – thus supporting 'the commonly observed water metaphor in migration discourse', which is often used to symbolize the loss of control over immigration (2021: 198).

Regardless of its later decontextualization (from specific to generic image), recontextualization (from documentary to political campaign image) and anchoring (to anti-immigrant statements), this photograph does political work which is grounded in the specific contextual and representational features described above. Overall, then it is also the small 'p' politics of this image, prior to its strategic use in Farage's UKIP campaign, that matters in an analysis of the 'Breaking Point' poster as a form of visual political communication. What becomes particularly significant in this regard is that the 'power' of this image needs to be found not only in how it may have been (mis)used by authoritative political figures, but also in the cultural and historical factors that have contributed to shaping its meaning potentials. I am not claiming that there is no research on visual political communication doing work of this kind, and in fact critical discourse scholars have long been involved in analysing the ideologies underlying political narratives, including visual ones (see Forchtner et al. 2013). I am however convinced that a broader approach to analysing political imagery grounded in cultural and historical inquiry about the visual would benefit the field of political communication greatly.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE COMPLEXITY OF VISUAL MEANING-MAKING: A FOCUS ON MICHEL PASTOUREAU AND STUART HALL

As I mentioned earlier, I would like to suggest that the work of two specific scholars, namely Stuart Hall and Michel Pastoureau, may help us think, both

critically and empirically, of visual communication as always political, while also giving us the means to research how and why it is so. Most recently, Theo van Leeuwen and I have suggested that the work of medieval historian Pastoureau, who is best known for his cultural histories of colour and other visual motifs, can contribute some instruments to link concrete details about how meanings develop and change over time to the rise, fall or revival of specific ideologies in given eras and contexts (Aiello and van Leeuwen 2023). In particular, Pastoureau's methodology entails reconstructing the various ways in which the contemporary meaning potentials of particular visual resources were developed over time through an in-depth investigation of how these were used and talked about across different areas of everyday and political life alike. This is a multi-layered approach focusing on a single visual resource (e.g. colour) in relation to different time periods, aspects of material and institutional culture and social groups. For example, in his research on the colour blue, he notes that what is now perhaps the most widely used colour in 'Western' if not 'global' visual culture used to be unappreciated and even despised in Ancient Rome, as it was associated with 'the East and barbarians' (Pastoureau 2001: 22). Unlike red, white and black, there was very little vocabulary to describe blue as a colour in its own right in Ancient Greece and Rome alike, and it was not until the twelfth century that this now very successful hue started gaining status through the Church. Blue's status as 'institutional' was then fully established between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries across Europe, thanks to its uptake by royalty and then also the military. Pastoureau shows us how, nowadays, the colour blue is therefore used to communicate both moral and political qualities, while also still retaining some of its associations with earlier provenances tied to 'exotic' people and lands – blue was originally the colour of 'the Celts and the Germans, who used woad' and 'the ancient peoples of the Middle East, who imported indigo – another important source of dye, long unknown in the West – from Asia and Africa' (Pastoureau 2001: 17). It was only over several centuries and through its multiple provenances that this colour gained the meaning-making status that it currently holds in western and global visual culture.

In a similar fashion, Pastoureau reconstructs the material, technological and social changes that contributed to the wide range of meanings that have been associated with stripes since the Middle Ages and which can all still be activated, according to the contexts in which they are used:

> Stripes could remain diabolic (those by which prisoners in the death camps were ignominiously marked) or dangerous (those used for traffic signs and signals for example), [but also become] hygienic (those on sheets and underwear), playful (those on children's things), athletic (those found on leisure and sports clothes) or emblematic (those on uniforms, insignia and flags).
>
> (1991: 4)

Overall, through his approach Pastoureau helps us look for the 'origins and reasons' that contribute to the development of 'socially shaped' ways of seeing, which then often also become 'culturally given' (Pastoureau 1991: xiii). He does so by highlighting the complexity of meaning-making, as this is a process that works through 'the accumulation of multiple provenances that become significant over time and across practices and registers of culture' (Aiello and van Leeuwen 2023: 38). Our job as critical scholars of the visual is to identify the

key traces of these provenances to then examine the manifold ways in which visual resources may have been made to mean over time.

In his now iconic work on representation, which is undoubtedly also more familiar to media and communication scholars, Hall offers what I consider to be a complementary approach to Pastoureau's. This is because Hall looks into how particular meanings become 'fixed' via ideology over time (Hall 1997a), an approach that is encapsulated by his well-known definition of ideology as 'the power to signify events in a particular way' (Hall 1982: 69). Where Pastoureau teaches us how to investigate the instability and multi-layered nature of visual meaning, Hall interrogates power through the history of visual culture to understand how particular 'regimes of representation' emerge over time via the naturalization of certain meanings (e.g. racial stereotypes) over others – often at the hand of those institutions which have control over the means to produce and distribute popular media texts on a large scale. In doing so, he foregrounds the political nature of all representation, with an emphasis on popular media's intertextual relationships and the ways in which they contribute to reinforcing and therefore also fixing particular ways of seeing (Hall 1997b). As a whole, combining a focus on how meanings are established cumulatively through change and instability with an emphasis on how meanings are fixed through power and get reproduced over time helps us account for the complexity of meaning-making, insofar as meaning is not something that can be simply manipulated or mystified, but rather the result of multiple practices and their implications.

Going back to the 'Breaking Point' poster, then, in my view some of the questions that we should ask here are also about how and why Mitchell's image could mean in the way it did in UKIP's campaign. How could Mitchell's intent to portray refugees crossing the border in a sympathetic manner also result in image that could be compared and equated to Nazi propaganda? And why did the 'documentary' aesthetic of the image confer even more power to the campaign poster, regardless of its anchoring to 'incorrect' information about the events it portrayed? And how is it that a more obviously staged photograph would not have been able to have the same power? How and why can a photojournalistic image even be decontextualized to be used in a political campaign? These are all questions that entail deeper engagement with the representational and contextual features of Mitchell's image before, during and beyond its use in Farage's campaign. Ultimately, the main reason visual political communication research is so important for our field is precisely because visual communication has always been and always is political, regardless of whether – like in the case I have examined – visual imagery is mobilized and manipulated to prove a point as a form of strategic political communication.

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