Active looking: images in peace mediation

Rasmus Bellmer & Frank Möller

To cite this article: Rasmus Bellmer & Frank Möller (2022): Active looking: images in peace mediation, Peacebuilding, DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2022.2152971

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2022.2152971

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 07 Dec 2022.
Active looking: images in peace mediation

Rasmus Bellmer and Frank Möller

Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

ABSTRACT
In this article, we explore the potential contributions of visual images to international peace mediation. Inspired by the concept of active listening and narrative approaches to mediation, we advance the notion of active looking in peace mediation: a visual-discursive mediation practice that includes images as a mode of expression and contribution to meaning-making processes, capitalising on specific characteristics of images, especially as regards their relationship to verbal language, which we explore in terms of ineffability, approximation, elusiveness, and commonalities. We propose active looking as both an approach to conflict mediation and a mediation skill derived from an understanding of conflict transformation that – instead of aiming at problem-solving based on sameness – appreciates openness, difference, and ambiguity. Ideally, through image-generated evolution, re-complexification, and re-authoring of narratives, the conflict parties, by means of active looking skills embodied in and promoted by the mediator, move closer to a conflict’s transformation.

Introduction

Research in international relations, peace research, and security studies increasingly acknowledges the importance of visual images in national, international, and global dynamics. In this literature, there is a strong focus on the relationship between images and violence. As images – and discourses on images – ‘reinforce the invisibility of some
things by overtly focusing on others’,

3 it is arguable that the focus on violence in much of the literature on visuality, important as it is, also explains in part the absence of peace from visual representation and discourses. To be sure, ‘[t]hroughout its history, photography has had an intimate relationship with violence’ but focusing on this relationship tends to make us blind to photography’s equally ‘important role in civic life and democratic struggle’. 4 Because the concept – any concept – that we use tends to ‘preselect’ our answers, 5 yet another rehearsal of the substantial literature on the relationship between the visual and violence would produce little insights into the relationship between the visual and peace. We, therefore, deliberately choose a different starting point, utilising insights generated in or epistemologically connected with visual peace research which highlight the peace potentialities of visual images. 6 In addition to this literature, we consult visual and cultural studies to unearth some of images’ peace potentialities that the specialised literature on violence tends to obscure. By taking one step back to the general (some may say: basic) literature on visuality while simultaneously being aware of the literature on violence, we put ourselves in a heuristic position from which we can traverse the less frequently explored path – the path to peace.

In the article, we explore conditions for an applied visual peace research and elaborate on images’ potential impact on and relevance in conflict transformation and peace mediation. Many practitioners deem mediation in crisis, arguing that it is less effective today than it used to be. 7 While practitioners and academics call for innovative approaches, the study of international peace mediation has hitherto ignored challenges and opportunities of visual images – despite profound theoretical and conceptual knowledge produced in visual peace research. Mediation disregards a particularly promising path to innovation given the extent to which global politics is nowadays shaped by visual images and ignores one of the most powerful trends in current politics and societies, especially if thought of in connection with digitisation, social media, and the Internet. We, therefore, suggest starting a peace-politically fruitful dialog between academic discourses and the practical mediation level which will help practitioners understand how images operate and academics increase their work’s political relevance and social impact. It will especially speak to younger mediators who have grown up with and are accustomed to visual images in their daily


communication and help them comprehend how images shape conflict perceptions, making some options possible while excluding others.

The article – exploring the relevance of visual peace research beyond theories and concepts by translating theoretical debates into more practical suggestions thus serving as a starting point for a discussion among academic (visual) peace researchers and mediation practitioners – clearly and deliberately focusses on the opportunities the visual offers for improving mediation (without disregarding challenges). Based on narrative approaches to peace mediation and inspired by the principle of active listening, we advance the concept of active looking in regard to conflict transformation involving a third-party in general and peace mediation in particular. We understand active looking as tool from which mediators in all sorts of conflict transformation processes can benefit (and not only those engaged in processes officially designated as mediation). By active looking, we mean a visual-discursive practice that includes images as a mode of expression and contribution to meaning-making capitalising on specific characteristics of images as specified below.

We first briefly review the existing mediation literature that is relevant in our context and elaborate on the narrative tradition in mediation with emphasis on active listening. We then sketch the intricacies involved in trying to represent peace visually. Visual representations of peace are marginalised in mediation, photojournalism, and the arts; we want to understand why this is so. Afterwards, analysing the word–image relationship, we proceed to active looking in peace mediation as both an approach to conflict mediation and a mediation skill derived from an understanding of conflict transformation that, rather than aiming at problem-solving based on sameness, appreciates openness, difference, and ambiguity. Active looking does not necessitate peace images but knowledge on peace images helps mediators instigate conversations among the conflict parties with the aim of acknowledging difference rather than finding consensus. In sum, we develop preconditions for a theoretically informed applied visual peace research relevant for peace researchers and mediation practitioners.

**Narratives in mediation: beyond consensus-as-sameness**

The *United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation* define mediation as ‘a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements’. More broadly and detached from agreements, Kleiboer describes mediation as ‘a form of conflict management in which a third party assists two or more contending parties to find a solution without resorting to force’. Conflict transformation, as Kriesberg and Kleiboer specify with regard to mediation, aspires to ‘help[] adversaries communicate with each other, even when they are engaged in deadly conflict’ with the aim of ‘re-establishing social relationships’. More modestly, it tries to prevent social relationships

---


from collapsing totally. Peace mediation’s effectiveness in today’s conflicts is debated.  
Mediation is accused of neglecting conflicts’ complexity and disregarding the diversity of cultural practices by, for instance, prioritising the rational over the emotional as a result of which ‘not only the conflict ... becomes intractable, but also the mediation process itself’. Scholars and practitioners increasingly look for innovative ideas, concepts, and methods to strengthen mediation’s effectiveness and to refine understanding of what ‘effectiveness’ is supposed to mean in this context in the first place.

Said to be at the core of many mediation theories and practices, ‘consensus-assameness’ refers to an understanding of conflict transformation as ‘a “shared” experience, as though the sameness of experience, the reduction of differences, would be the venue for the evolution of relationships’. Western peace mediation has ‘emphasised consensus, commonality, and unity rather than difference’, which is why many mediation processes ‘presume that conflicts can be resolved via changes in attitudes or via meeting needs/interests as a function of negotiated settlements’. Such approaches based on ‘resolution-as-agreement’, however, might be counterproductive or even harmful, ‘reproducing the conflict rather than transform[ing] it because the parties discuss their “interests” encased in narratives that delegitimise their Others’ (or cultivate their Others as negative reference points to legitimise their own narratives). Either way, conflict transformation is unlikely.

In addition to interest-focused problem-solving approaches, a more transformative approach assumes that ‘people are concerned with their self-interests, but they are also simultaneously and pervasively concerned with their connection with others’. Several scholars analyse the process of meaning-making itself, particularly the narratives expressed by the conflict parties. Conflict transformation appears as ‘the poetic process of strengthening the narratives people tell, so that, paradoxically, they can be free to be human beings, being human’. Transforming violent conflict towards peace requires engaging with narratives. A narrative is ‘a foundational building block for organizing meaning in life’ both individually and collectively that tends to collapse in violent circumstances: ‘violence breaks not only relations, but it also breaks the narrative logic

---

14 Cobb, Speaking of Violence, 235–236.
16 Cobb, Speaking of Violence, 11.
17 Ibid., 72 (both quotations).
20 Cobb, Speaking of Violence, 284.
itself because persons are not able to make sense of the violence’. Alternately, they try to make sense of violence by simplifying their narrative such that it appears meaningful to them although it often inadequately represents the overall patterns within which violence occurs.

Importantly, ‘narratives are both productive of conflict and a resource for its resolution’. Critical to conflict resolution is the ‘evolution of meaning’ in Cobb’s or ‘plot evolution’ in Winslade and Monk’s terms. In conflicts, however, narratives tend to lose complexity and become simple and schematic, stressing what went wrong in a relationship (conflict) rather than what worked well (cooperation). Complex narratives turn into ‘narrative “short cuts” – events in the main plot line become “dense” with meaning’ or even into narrative closure. Which is why a narrative approach to mediation assumes that narratives must evolve thus regaining complexity to allow people to move closer to a conflict’s resolution. Trying to take advantage of all possibilities a narrative offers, a narrative approach ‘consider[s] the possibility of something different’ inherent in every narrative. It emphasises ‘the effort to re-author the relationship story first before facilitating the negotiation of resolution in the spirit of this relationship narrative’.

To achieve such re-authoring, Cobb argues, presenting narratives to one another is necessary but insufficient as the narrative’s evolution ‘depends on the conditions under which it is told’. Furthermore, conflict-affected people might get ‘caught in narratives they did not make by themselves and cannot change by themselves’. This is why ‘narrative transformation is unlikely from within the narrative structuration process’ thus requiring ‘help in destabilizing the narrative structures (plots, characters, moral frames) that contribute to maintain their exclusion of the Other’. Hence, regardless of sensitive issues pertaining to legitimacy, agency, power, self-interests, and ethics, third-party involvement is required to help the conflict parties complexify their narratives as a step towards conflict transformation.

**Active listening: de-hierarchising narratives**

In narrative-based mediation, different narratives coexist; they are presented such that they appear equally valuable (within a selected narrative frame; see below) instead of being hierarchically ordered. Such mediation requires a fundamental sense of narrative equality. Narrative-based approaches assume ‘that people are always situated within multiple story lines. […] We do not have a bias in favor of integrating a person’s multiple

---


25See Winslade, ‘Narrative Mediation of Family Conflict’.

26Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 51, 86.

27Winslade, ‘Narrative Mediation of Family Conflict’, 89.

28Ibid., 87.

29Cobb, *Speaking of Violence* 24, 67, 52 and 222, respectively.
story lines into a singular or congruent whole’.\(^3^0\) Narrative mediation, then, is interested in the relationship between different people (or different narratives) and their evolution; it focusses on ‘re-authoring the relationship story in order to address a problem issue, rather than addressing a problem issue in order to allow the relationship to go forward’.\(^3^1\) Successful mediation results in increasing complexity of the conflict parties’ narratives (while it is difficult to establish beforehand at what point narratives are considered sufficiently complex).

Increase in narrative complexity and evolution of meaning can be achieved through active listening, understood by mediation scholars and practitioners as one of a mediator’s most crucial skills.\(^3^2\) Active – or careful, ‘reflective’, \(^3^3\) ‘sensitive’\(^3^4\) or ‘empathic’ or, simply, ‘good’\(^3^5\) – listening refers to a high level of attentiveness to the interlocutors on the mediators’ part including priority given to listening to others rather than speaking themselves.\(^3^6\) Active listening includes double listening ‘assum[ing] that what a person says is selective and that there are multiple readings to be made of any conflict story’.\(^3^7\) Mediators morph into acknowledgers, recognising, accepting, and making others accept the plurality of readings that, put together, constitute the story. In such situations, mediators need ‘sensuous perception’\(^3^8\) – ‘an aesthetic sensibility’ enabling them to achieve ‘a state of receptivity, an appreciation of the many levels on which the words, sentences, images and metaphors convey meaning’.\(^3^9\) Receptivity requires the capability of deciphering words, silences, and dynamics of silencing,\(^4^0\) appreciating what is said straightforwardly, routinely, hesitantly, in metaphors, implicitly or not at all.

Active listeners want to learn how the conflict parties see things and why they do so, ideally establishing a non-hierarchical conversation among equals. This implies that active listeners must (learn to) cope with a plurality of narratives which may support, overlap, supplement, contradict, or exist rather independently of one another. While the traditional mediation literature tends to treat positions, interests, and needs\(^4^1\) as manifestations of an essentialized character or identity, we understand them as developed

---


\(^3^1\)Winlslade and Monk, ‘Does the Model Overarch the Narrative Stream?’ 223.


\(^3^3\)Småberg, ‘Witnessing the Unbearable’, 116.


\(^3^7\)Winslade, ‘Narrative Mediation of Family Conflict’, 89.


\(^4^0\)Stephen Chan, ‘Conclusion: Mediating the Mediation with Difference’, *Mediating across Difference*, 270–274.

\(^4^1\)See, for example, Fisher and Ury, *Getting to YES*, 42, 50.
through discourse, embedded in and constituted by narratives. Following a non-essentialist viewpoint, ‘how’ and ‘why’ are socially-discursively constructed and ‘there is no underlying essence that can be referenced as more trustworthy than its “surface” manifestation’.  

Digital media facilitate speaking in one’s own voice but even today ‘individuals are spoken for, much more than they speak in their own name – and they are not necessarily spoken for accurately’.

The question of accurateness deserves some attention in our context, especially if one equates accuracy with the establishment of facts. Facts eliminate ambivalence. Such elimination may be desired in some but not in all contexts: the search for accurateness-as-facts may worsen the conditions in which mediation takes place, infringing upon the very mediation situation the negotiator seeks to improve. However, mediators and participants will always want to ensure that they understand the narratives presented as intended by the speaker. Thus, accuracy in the sense of ‘This is the way I/we see things’ differs from accuracy in the fact-oriented sense of ‘This is the way things are’. In narrative-based approaches to mediation, the first dimension is more important than the second one, hence the focus on understanding divergent and potentially conflicting narratives. Even if the conflict parties disagree on how social reality should best be narrated, it is important to understand why they disagree. Narrative openness can help achieve such understanding. It is probably painful for the participants (more so than for the mediator) being exposed to positions they reject or find insulting. Mediation reflects and follows conflict, occasionally violent conflict, but is itself also a conflict often including narrative incompatibility.

Yet, all conflicts have social functions, to be identified by the mediator: conflict can be ‘positively functional’, improving social relations, if all participants accept ‘the basic assumptions upon which the relation is founded’. Mediators must establish these assumptions before or during mediation; the conflict parties must agree upon them.

Mediation based on active listening, while cultivating narrative openness within a certain frame, must define the borders of this frame. According to the UN, for example, mediators should ‘be clear that they cannot endorse peace agreements that provide for amnesties for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or gross violations of human rights, including sexual and gender-based violence’. Thus, narratives denying or justifying war crimes cross the boundaries of the acceptable framework. Active listening, then, is a conversation technique that should be equated neither with moral judgement (that there is only one ‘truth’) nor with moral indifference (accepting all narratives as equally valuable). Evaluating narratives for their compliance with the established frame is a powerful, difficult, and possibly dangerous task; it can be perceived as an act of silencing and censoring. Provided that the mediator and the parties succeed in defining such a frame, however, diverging perspectives can stand side-by-side,

---

42 Winslade and Monk, ‘Does the Model Overarch the Narrative Stream?’ 221.
46 UNDP, Guidance for Effective Mediation, 17.
different narratives resulting from varying lifeworlds and reflecting different contexts – personal, regional, local, or historically distant contexts – can co-exist. Some narratives ‘are local in their sphere of circulation and some are pervasive discourses about, for example, gender, class, and race’.  

As different participants are likely to interpret (what, from a neutral perspective, seems to be) the same context differently, mediators must treat the stories they are exposed to without assigning priority to any of them; they need to exhibit equal distance towards and equal empathy with all narrators, regardless of whether they agree or sympathise with individual stories and storytellers. Active listening, then, means enduring ambivalences and contradictions, at least for the duration of the mediation. Clear-cut categories based on binaries may help structure a conversation, but they regularly fail to adequately capture the dynamics of social reality and can be dangerous if mediators forget that they are socially constructed; if pre-formulated, guiding a conversation from the outset, they may even prevent a conversation from evolving.

Narrative-based mediations are highly convoluted scenarios. In what follows, we explore how they can be improved by including visual images so as to strengthen the characteristics of active listening as sketched above. We refer to such inclusion of visual images as active looking, aiming at a visual-discursive re-complexification of narratives. We argue that active looking provides visual peace research with an applied dimension beyond conceptual and theoretical considerations thus increasing the applicability of the knowledge produced in visual peace research to conflict transformation processes. We suspect that our approach appeals especially to the younger generation of mediators used to the operation of images in their daily lives in a ‘world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images’.  As noted above, we emphasise the opportunities that visual images present.

**Active looking: images in peace mediation**

While having as yet little to say about images in mediation, visual peace research does include discussion of the peace potentialities of both images and discourses revolving around images, exploring their possible contributions to peace. While active looking need not be based on peace images, knowledge on peace images facilitates active looking. While some authors argue that the visual is inextricably linked with violence, their work nevertheless offers relevant starting points for an exploration of images’ peace potentialities. Azoulay, for example, connects ‘the image, the artist/creator, the referent, and the spectator’ in order ‘to create a political space’ within which civil imagination can evolve. Mirzoeff, while regarding violence as ‘the standard operating procedure of visuality’, explores how people insisting on the right to look can confront this violence. Roberts identifies the photographic archive as a place for the discursive reconstruction of meaning assigned to photographs.  Epistemologically closer connected with visual peace research, Ritchin explores how photojournalism, rather than merely documenting

---

violence, can pro-actively help prevent it. Allan and Sliwinski analyse the contribution of visual images to human rights discourses and practices. Fairey explores citizen photography as a contribution to community building and peace. Möller and Shim look at images at the microlevel of peace, exploring peace conceptions at the individual and quotidian level of the international, and Möller suggests new ways of seeing peace which may – or may not – lead to new politics of peace. Visual peace research creates new visual perspectives on peace thus exploring new ways of seeing peace and, ultimately, new politics of peace.

Images of peace, however, are ‘hard to sell’. They are marginalised due to a powerful photojournalistic tradition emphasising war, destruction, and human suffering while referencing peace mainly by showing its absence. Consequently, the peace potentialities of images often remain unseen and unexplored, awaiting discursive rediscovery. ‘Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death’ but photography – to the chagrin of photojournalists in search of ‘great shots’ – has also always kept company with democracy, equality, and – by implication – peace. Yet even books dedicated to the visualisation of peace often confirm rather conventional visual narratives referencing peace negatively. It is almost impossible to make a career as a peace photographer – compare the media attention devoted to the World Press Photo Award with the lack of such attention devoted to the Global Peace Photo Award – and peace is difficult to visualise: Different kinds of peace require different forms of visual representation; competing understandings of peace condition whether observers see or do not see peace; different stages of a peace process and similar stages of different peace processes require different forms of visualisation.

Images ‘constantly reiterate the general forms in which the particular is contained’, alerting viewers to the general and the particular but also to the relationship between the general and the particular. As such, the visual gives us a sense of the complexity of the scene depicted – any scene, even a seemingly simple and obvious one. Complexity inherent in the visual and in its relation to the reality it (cl)aims to depict implies that different people interpret the same scene and the same image differently. Differences in interpretation may be so big that the very idea of the same image or the same scenario appears doubtful. In a narrative-based approach to mediation, it is the mediator’s task to acknowledge and utilise images’ plurality of meaning. Because mediation commonly revolves around language and because language is never politically neutral and often

---


connected with violence, it is particularly important to reflect upon the word–image relationship in order to specify what we mean by active looking.

While various peace visualisations and visual paths to peace (including mutually exclusive ones) coexist, visual documentation as such does not normally tell the mediator which interpretation of a given image is the ‘correct’ one. Photojournalism assigns the task of establishing truth to language which reduces the plurality of meaning all images carry with them. ‘Normally’, Sontag acknowledges, ‘if there is any distance from the subject, what a photograph “says” can be read in several ways’. But even if, initially, words are absent, ‘one day captions will be needed’. That she adds ‘of course’ tells us more about the power of photojournalistic discourses than about the potentialities of images.57 Linfield, for example, strongly condemns photojournalistic work based on segregation of text and pictures as it allegedly inhibits understanding and action.60 Yet, Sontag knows (just as Linfield does) that ‘even an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached’.61 Despite the frequent use of a ‘positivist notion of evidence as indisputable facts’62 in politico-aesthetic discourses on forensic photography which is so in vogue currently,63 the establishment of ‘facts’ by visual means alone is difficult indeed. Luckily, accuracy-as-facts is not what our approach to mediation is primarily about.

While we would not want to agree entirely with Emerling that ‘[a]ll images … require … language as a necessary supplement of the visual’64 – it is indeed one of our points below that such supplementation is neither always necessary nor possible – it is equally crucial to acknowledge, as Mitchell does, that ‘“language” (in some form) usually enters the experience of viewing photography or of viewing anything else’,65 including in the context of conflict transformation. Translating images into words and assigning meaning to images by means of language take place within established discursive patterns regulating what is permissible in a given context and what is not,66 in ‘scopic regime[s]’ as ‘ensemble[s] of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality, and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing’.67 What is correct and permissible is, to a large extent, defined by what Rancière, rather vaguely, calls ‘the dominant media’, removing from images ‘anything that might exceed the simple superfluous illustration of their meaning’.68 For example, the interpretation as an image of peace of the photograph showing the last US soldier stepping on board a transport plane to leave Afghanistan would hardly be permissible in western media; instead, the photograph is said to show the ‘Last man out’,69 anticipating disorder.

---

57Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 29.
60Linfield, The Cruel Radiance, 217.
66Butler, Frames of War, 71–74.
Converting the seeable into the sayable always means discussing images both ‘in terms other than their own’ and in terms of what can be said in a given language and cultural context. These are severe limitations. While it may be difficult to identify images’ own terms, translating accounts of human existence produced by means of images into words reduces what images can tell us to what words can tell us about images. Yet, rather than only ‘tell[ing] us things differently’, images and written texts ‘tell us different things’.

It is the mediators’ task to initiate conversations about images so that both the individual narratives and the overall story, i.e. the sum of the individual narratives, appear more complex than before. Some of the limitations involved in talking about images cannot be avoided entirely. Images, too, are – and serve – narratives; they cannot be completely separated from the language that supplements them, enters the experience of viewing them, or operates in tandem with them. Thus, if mediators decide to use visual images, they must familiarise themselves with the intricacies of both images and the word–image relationship. Furthermore, mediators, too, operate within scopic regimes (see above) that, in turn, operate on them. However, the mediators’ awareness of these intricacies helps them capitalise on images and their inherent ‘excess meaning’, avoid visual-verbal pitfalls, and develop active looking skills. Instead of suppressing some of the meaning images carry with them (for example, in search of accurateness-as-facts), mediation could capitalise on images’ plurality of meaning without establishing narrative hierarchies. In the remainder of the article, we engage with active looking as a mediation practice and a mediator’s skill utilising those characteristics of images that point towards appreciation of difference and ambiguity thus contributing to the re-complexification of narratives. We suggest paying attention to four (partially overlapping) concepts: ineffability (of both situations and images), approximation, elusiveness, and commonalities, all of which help us appreciate and, consequently, capitalise on narrative plurality, ambiguity, and lack of assurance thus complexifying the experience.

**Ineffability (as regards situations)**

As noted above (following Cobb), violent conflict tends to interrupt the narrative logic; such an interruption often results in an inability to speak. In a mediation process, participants will encounter situations where they cannot articulate in words what they want to describe or where words seem to be inadequate. Pain is a case in point, often said to be inexpressible or unrepresentable, or anger, emotions, feelings, all of which emerge as consequences of violent conflict. An inability to speak renders active listening difficult. In such situations, images can help if participants, rather than addressing the image by means of words, address it visually, *taking it in*, and letting it speak for itself. In such a situation, silence can be understood as agentive rather than passive. Sensuous perception indeed

---

70 Möller, Visual Peace, 33.
72 MacDougall, Transcultural Cinema, 257.
73 Ibid., 68.
74 Whether or not such re-complexification contributes, in the long term, to peace is an empirical question beyond the scope of this article.
77 This is an intriguing suggestion by one of our reviewers. Limited space prevents us from exploring it in detail. In a slightly different context, see Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar, eds., Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in
refers to ‘the fuller range of senses, which includes but goes beyond the world of words’. Refraining from talking, rather than signifying passivity, might indicate heightened awareness; taking an image in may lead to taking something out of the image – something other than that which words evoke. Allowing images to unfold their own narratives may also mobilise connotations that those participants who decided to show them were not themselves aware of, thus complexifying their experience. Images will evoke different things in different people, recognition of which is precisely what active looking wishes to establish.

**Ineffability (as regards images)**

Images, at least some images, also possess something that we cannot grasp by means of words: how do we describe how an image affects us emotionally and how we feel when we regard an image, especially one triggering traumatic memories? How do we express the importance we assign to a specific visual representation of (parts of) our or others’ lives? There is something in images ‘that resists or eludes every effort to fix meaning through language’. That this ‘something’ might invite misinterpretation does not bother us as fixing meaning is not our aim. Indeed, the notion of misinterpretation is alien to active looking because it requires consensus on the correct interpretation of an image – consensus that we neither aspire nor absolutize. Here, again, establishing a frame from which certain (visual) positions are excluded is important – otherwise an image’s ineffability can threaten a peaceful conversation. This frame must deviate from the scopic regimes (see above) that the conflict parties bring with them to the negotiation lest active looking merely confirm them by reiterating established, exclusionary ‘“telling” practices’ often derived from or connected with violence serving as ‘organizer of the politically visible’. This is one of the reasons why mediating active looking is so difficult and potentially dangerous.

**Approximation**

Benjamin interpreted Atget’s photographs of deserted Paris streets around 1900 as ‘pieces of evidence in the historical process’ to which ‘[f]ree-floating contemplation’ would no longer be appropriate. Instead, inscription was required to fix meaning and to prevent photographs from ‘getting stuck in the approximate’. Equating Atget’s photographs with photographs of crime scenes, Benjamin introduced a positivist understanding of photographs as evidence but instead of locating evidence in the image, he found it in the accompanying inscription which he elevated to a photograph’s ‘most essential

---


79There is an emerging, fascinating literature on emotions and affect (suggested by the reviewer) which also goes beyond what we can do here. It is easy to understand that images trigger emotions but how to deal with these emotions in the context of mediation is a different question entirely. On emotions, see Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, ‘Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics’, *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 51 (2008): 115–135, and Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, ‘Theorizing Emotions in World Politics’, *International Theory* 6, no. 3 (2013): 491–514.


83Benjamin, ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’, *Das Kunstwerk*, 64, our translation.
component’. Benjamin, thus, anticipated today’s standard approach to photojournalism (see above): images’ plurality of meaning tamed by language eradicating the approximate and fixing meaning thus not only informing spectators but also enabling action. Contrariwise, it is exactly the approximate that active looking wishes to capitalise on, recognising that we never exactly know what a picture ‘really’ shows and that we can domesticate images’ ‘instability of meaning’ only at the peril of failing to take full advantage of what visuality offers to peace researchers and mediators.

Writing about ‘an intellectual stereoscopic effect’, Gilgen presents a more sophisticated approach: ‘the image gains in profile through the verbal information conveyed in the caption; from the accompanying image this information gains persuasive power’. Yet his approach, too, echoes Benjamin’s scepticism of the approximate which must be eradicated by textual information. Furthermore, the image, merely accompanying the text, seems subordinated to text thus confirming Ritchin’s suspicion that picture editors ‘represent[] a medium which is almost everywhere considered secondary to the text’. Hence, the focus in the literature on discourses revolving around or meanings assigned to images which reveals uneasiness characteristic of western approaches to visual culture. Images’ very visible ambiguity, interpretive openness, and plurality of meaning often make western audiences fear a loss of ‘control of meaning’. Such uneasiness coexists with fascination bordering, in social media, upon obsession largely without reflection. In contrast, active looking as a mediation tool is not afraid of images and it does reflect upon them: it appreciates the approximate, invigorates images’ ambiguities, and re-discovers discursively marginalised meanings such as peace.

**Elusiveness**

Images are elusive. As Wenders and Zournazi submit, they ‘don’t “mean” . . . ! They “imply”, “suggest”, “hint” or whatever’. ‘It is not clear’, Mitchell assists, ‘that [images] actually “say” anything’ but rather ‘convey nondiscursive, nonverbal information that is often quite ambiguous with regard to any statement’. Photography, thus, ‘allows for the existence of a multiplicity of narrations and storylines without privileging a single one by referring to some pre-defined notion of “truth”’. Instead of ‘superimposing an externally perceived image, it seeks to bring out multiplicities and ambiguities’. We appeal to images’ plurality of meaning including ‘unintended sites of connotation’ with its

---

inherent ‘potential for political agency which depends on the possibility of a multitude of interpretations, ambiguities and differences’.

In contrast to ineffability, then, elusiveness does not refer to verbal limitations but rather to the plurality of verbalisable and equally valuable interpretations that images always invite and that should not be reduced to one binding narrative. All of these interpretations, however, are approximations à la Benjamin. Exactly because of their inherent ambiguities and their surplus of meaning, images are apt vehicles to communicate diverse narratives thus introducing new levels of complexity into mediation conversations. In sum, then, two components of the visual which are conventionally regarded as liabilities – first, that ‘the visual is too open to misinterpretation’ and, secondly, ‘that it is too seductive’ or ‘too engaging’ – turn out to be merits in the context of narrative-based approaches to mediation. That the visual is seductive implies that ‘it draws the viewer into an interpretive relationship that bypasses professional mediation’. Ironically, then, it asks the mediator to dispense with mediation in search of consensus and to prioritise acknowledgement of differences. Knowledge on the visualisation of peace facilitates this task.

**Commonalities**

In verbal language, we take the general for granted and emphasise the particular. Visual images also show the particular but often embedded within the general, co-representing the general and the particular, the central and the peripheral, differences and commonalities including ‘the commonalities of being human’ that usually disappear from written accounts.

Likewise, when talking about an image people tend to emphasise the particular rather than the general: as ‘photographs manifestly contain visible images of people and their physical characteristics, people sometimes say less than they might otherwise do about those things, because there seems to be no real imperative to explain them’ – they are visible anyway. In consequence, the commonalities of being human escape attention.

In narrative mediation, however, acknowledging these commonalities is extremely important: it helps understand that however much seems to separate one group from another, there is always something that all groups have in common. Such understanding helps prevent the transformation of alterity into Otherness, the transformation of other people into the – ontological – Other with whom agreement is impossible. Mediators can use the display in images of human commonalities to bridge the gap between different groups and to work towards partial identification with one another. In this approach to mediation, groups of people do not have to identify with one another entirely but only partially; disagreement in some areas does not render impossible agreement in other areas on the basis of which the contested areas can subsequently be re-tackled.

We would neither expect the four above concepts to appear equally in all mediation conversations involving images nor would we expect all of them to appear in all conversations. The mediator decides which concept to prioritise in a given situation

---

96MacDougall, Transcultural Cinema, 68 (all quotations).
97Ibid.
98Ibid., 246.
and this depends for example on the degree of visual socialisation the conflict parties bring with them to the conversation or the cultural context within which the conversation takes place. Active looking must be learned and this applies to both the mediator and the conflict parties. But the aim of active looking should be clear: rather than establishing consensus-as-sameness, active looking aims at consensus-as-different-ness, capitalising on difference as articulated in complex, image-generated narratives without establishing narrative hierarchies. Individual narratives must be liberated from shortcuts and closure and the overall story, i.e. the sum of all individual narratives, must be allowed a greater degree of complexity than could be observed at the beginning of the conversation. Ultimately and ideally, then, through image-generated evolution, re-complexification, and re-authoring of narratives, the conflict parties, by means of active looking skills embodied in and promoted by the mediator, move closer to a conflict’s transformation.

**Conclusion**

We ask peacebuilding practitioners to be open towards the inclusion of images in their work, to believe in the peace potentialities of images, and to use images’ inherent ambiguities to produce more complex narratives. Peace workers should enable people to tell their stories through and with images. How this should be done is context-specific and hardly generalisable. However, all mediators, being aware of the above discussion and possessing active looking skills, could invite participants in a narrative-based mediation setting to share images with the participants on a specific theme, chosen by the mediator. Alternatively, participants may themselves decide what images they want to share with others because they deem them important in the context. Whole meetings can put images in the centre; exhibitions or social media content on the subject matter discussed in the mediation process can be discursively engaged with. Rather than limiting such engagement to visual images in a narrow sense (photographs, paintings, or film), it should also include other means of visual representation such as dance and performance. It is, however, important to note that participants and mediators can define images as inappropriate, thus establishing a frame within which narrative openness is appreciated and beyond which it is not. Normative judgements may be necessary but norms such as decency and taste can always serve a limiting purpose, depending on the authority used to justify them.100

While images become more and more present as important (f)actors in international politics, peace mediation, until now, widely ignores them thus also neglecting their potential contributions to peace processes. In this article, we argued that some qualities of images make images suitable to assist peace processes. We highlighted the role of ineffability, elusiveness, and ambiguity, enabling individuals to express – and to deal with – complexity in both their and others’ narratives. While images’ ambiguity is an asset for those who want to emphasise a situation’s openness, it is a liability for those who promote strict and rigid policies. We acknowledge ‘that any narrative, any model, must leave some things out, distort some things, privilege some things over others, and squeeze some things into categories where they fit uncomfortably, simply in order to maintain coherence’.101 Our narrative is no exception. The way we emphasise complexity,

---

100 See Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 68.
101 Winslade and Monk, Practicing Narrative Mediation, 219.
narrative openness, and difference reflects our lifeworld, based on which we ‘seek ways to rethink’ current mediation practices. Both these practices and our reflections are enmeshed in a variety of ontological and epistemological assumptions that limited space prevents us from elaborating on. While this article suggests a new perspective on mediation and the role of images in social processes that challenges currently common mediation conceptualisations, it also offers points of connection for practitioners to think about our ideas’ value in their respective work. Thus, we consider this paper a starting point, an open-ended contribution to an evolving repertoire of thinking about and conducting peace mediation through images.

Acknowledgments

An earlier and very different version of this article appeared, in Finnish, as ‘Soveltava visuaalinen rauhantutkimus: Kuvat, rauhanvälitys ja aktiivinen katsominen’ in Kosmopolis: Rauhan-, Konfliktin- ja Maailman-politiikan Tutkimuksen Aikakauslehti (21:4, 2021). As to the present version, we gratefully acknowledge very constructive and thoughtful comments from reviewers and editors which helped us complexify our own narrative. Research for this article was generously supported by Kone Foundation for which we are also very grateful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Koneen Säätiö.

Notes on contributors

Rasmus Bellmer is a Kone Foundation grantee (Peace Videography, 2020–2022) and Project Researcher at the Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University, Finland. Bellmer holds an MA in Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research and a BA in Political Science and Economics.

Frank Möller is a Kone Foundation grantee (project leader Peace Videography, 2020–2022) and Project Researcher at the Tampere Peace Research Institute, Tampere University, Finland. Holding a PhD in Political Science, Möller is Docent (Adjunct Professor) in Peace and Conflict Research and in Political Sciences at Tampere University and the University of Jyväskylä, respectively. More information about the authors’ work is available at www.imageandpeace.com, a website dedicated to the visualization of peace.

ORCID

Rasmus Bellmer http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6350-2292
Frank Möller http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1964-4669