

Imagery in International Relations: Analysing the Value in Absence

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Whilst the field of international relations (IR) scholarship of analysis of imagery has grown in recent years, a consideration of the benefit of absence has remained neglected. This article challenges this neglect to argue that the inclusion of absence is unavoidable for an accurate exploration of the socially constructed foundations of the international system. This is because absence both reveals relations of power and is itself an exercise of power. Accordingly, in an attempt to consolidate this scholarly void, this article will explore five sources to highlight how absence has served to spatialise international relations (IR) via hierarchical and binary relations of power and identity. Differentiating (and coining) the terms 'tacit' and 'deliberately' enforced absences, charitable advertising, in conjunction with an analysis of EU cartography reveals the curation of a West/Rest hierarchical binary. This has been aided by light/dark, parent/infant and, more broadly, self/other, binaries, and retains important political and academic implications. Not only does the recognition of these socially constructed relationships erode their legitimacy, challenging their corresponding claims for exclusionary policy, but it facilitates the scholarly challenge to conventional ontological and epistemological biases. Thus, this article argues that absence both reveals the underlying flows of power and is, itself, an agent in its perpetuation. Absence proves integral to the curation and maintenance of hierarchical and binary relations of identity and power.

1. INTRODUCTION

Distinguishing between, what this article coins, *tacit* and *deliberately* enforced absences, this article will argue that it is their inclusion in analysis that enables a holistic insight into the ways in which international relations (IR) are discursively constructed through informal, hierarchical binaries. '*Tacit*' absences relate to the foundations of a source, such as underlying power relations and the identity of those that exert influence over the source. '*Deliberate*' absences relate to the distortion of discourse through intentional omission. This novel distinction provides further insight into the socially constructed foundations of IR and greater evidence to engage with the discipline's Eurocentric epistemological bias. This complicates the notion of an 'objective truth' and gives credence to alternative critical theories. Beyond reflecting power, and in line with a poststructuralist ontology on the interrelation of knowledge and power, absences are a means of power themselves. Accordingly, the construction of imagery and choices over absences are both a reflection of the underlying flows of power and, themselves, an agent in its perpetuation.

Structurally, this article will analyse how absences have constructed hierarchical binaries, sculpting international identity and power relations. First, a Save the Children commercial will be explored through comparison to complementary sources. This will show that absences have spatially constructed relations and identity by curating iconographical self/other binaries. To stress, this article is not suggesting that the presence of such absences renders a source's content irrelevant or entirely untrustworthy. Instead, it argues that a holistic response to an analysis of a source requires a combined attention to both content and absences. Next, shifting towards official cartographical mediums, this article will analyse the EU's Frontex map, demonstrating how *deliberate* and *tacit* absences interlink in reinforcing IR's spatialisation.

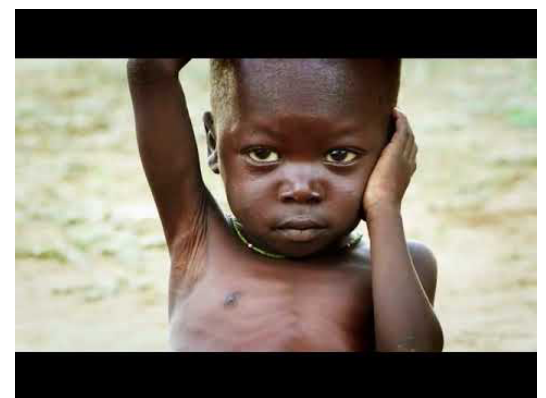
Therefore, responding to the traditional scholarly negation of an analysis of absence, this article's own differentiation between *tacit* and *deliberate* absences

aims to expand the currently limited breadth of available literature. This incorporation of absence, alongside included content, is integral to a holistic analysis of the socially engineered foundations of IR. This is because absence reflects power and, at the same time, is a means of power itself. By illustrating IR's constructed nature, conventional ontology can be challenged. On a scholarly level, this broadens the discipline. Politically, it gives rise to the possibility of less exclusionary policies.

2. CHARITABLE IMAGERY: BENIGN HUMANITY?

2.1 PARENT/INFANT

Produced by Save the Children in 2015, **Source 1** demonstrates the importance of visual sources in reflecting and influencing relations of power. The source, written as a television advert (and part of a larger media campaign), focuses on an emaciated child named John. Yet, and as will be delved into below, the lack of explanatory context, compounded by the inclusion of other unidentified African children 'like John', creates a homogenised narrative. This generalisation negates specific context, conveying a sense of continental

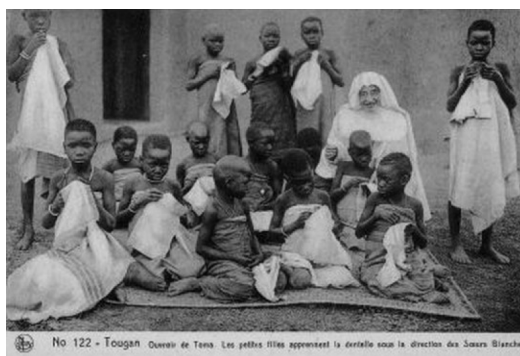


Source 1 | Thumbnail of a Save the Children TV commercial from 2015. From isis ariadne (2018). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kA6TLQn8U7s>

ubiquity. Perceived as a 'period of dependency' (Burman 1994, p. 239), the almost exclusive focus on children iconographically relays a sense of vulnerability (Mills & Lefrançois 2018, p. 503). This is reinforced through the visual depiction of 'bloated bellies'—an image traditionally used throughout famine coverage. Despite reflecting the source's purpose of eliciting sympathy, to encourage donation, the metaphorical infantilism has come to represent the wider African continent, as contemporary journalistic and charitable coverage focuses almost exclusively on such imagery. This reinforces racialised historical precedents such as colonialist Cecil Rhodes' argument that 'the native [was] to be treated as a child' (*ibid.*, p. 508). Accordingly, as will subsequently be developed, visual depictions of infants have created informal racial hierarchies, to the detriment of African people's agency. It is only through the visual absence of adults that such connotations can be relayed. As infants are understood to depend upon adults, deliberate omission of the latter pronounces vulnerability for the former. As Andersen and Möller valuably affirm, absences activate the imagination (2013, p. 206). By excluding clarification over the broader context, such as the parents' whereabouts and respective ability to offer protection, the depicted threat is exacerbated. This combination of vulnerable children and absent adults reveals that, for a contextually informed analysis, attention to content and absences should occur together.

Alongside the implicit infantilisation, parental absence appropriates responsibility to the children depicted in **Source 1**. This negates any specific and informing contextual information, exonerating alternatively liable parties. As such, solutions presented in charitable appeals are superficial as they respond to the symptoms, not the cause. Put another way, depicting only starved infants to incentivise aid donations, whilst necessary, negates the underlying political and economic causal factors. Such 'parachute journalism' perpetuates the problematic trope of 'African incapability' to ensure stability and absolves the target audience of historical responsibility. It can be argued that the need for wider contextual knowledge limits the acknowledgement of absences' practical value as this requires additional research and secondary sources. Ironically, this provides merit to the argument for a need to thoroughly analyse absence. By highlighting that omission deliberately distorts causes and events, an informed and holistic analysis can only arise through an exploration of these aforementioned absences. Accordingly, whilst scholars such as Bucy and Joo (2021) argue that visual sources' merit stems from their accessibility to be fully and clearly understood, this negates that a comprehensive understanding must incorporate a focus on the broader context.

Despite being absent from many sources' implicit depictions of causation, images of Western involvement in solutions are widespread. This perpetuates the myth of the white saviour which misguidedly depicts the African continent as passive recipients of Western benevolence. **Sources 2** and **3** illustrate that imagery has helped to create and perpetuate this myth. Following the relative subsiding of colonial conquest in the nineteenth century, visual sources shifted from depicting the 'Rest' as a threat. Instead, as Pieterse (1992, p. 88) illustrates, Western-centric imagery sought to justify a 'civilising mission' by presenting a sense of dependency. **Source**



Source 2 | Photograph from 1930 titled 'Embroidery and the White Sisters', depicting a Christian missionary group teaching lace making to Burkinabè children lace-making. From Textile Research Centre (TRC) (2017). Available at: <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/regional-traditions/middle-east-and-north-africa/pre-modern-middle-east-and-north-africa/embroidery-and-the-white-sisters>

2—a photograph depicting a missionary nun teaching embroidery in Burkina Faso—visually confirms the white saviour, with a lone white adult amongst multiple naked or near-naked Burkinabè children. The dichotomy in dress reflected a traditional justification of empire as a 'civilising mission', with nudity conflated with 'savageness'. The lessons in embroidery reflect the conferring of dress (alongside its civilisational attachments) onto the children. Moreover, given that the photograph was taken in 1930, a comparison with **Source 3** elucidates change and, more importantly, continuity. **Source 3**, published by Comic Relief in 2017, shows British singer Ed Sheeran playing with Liberian children and wearing the traditional Comic Relief red nose. Despite altering the preferred visual medium (from photography to videography) and moving away from religious imagery, changes proved nominal. Intended as part of a charitable campaign, Sheeran's 'celebrity humanitarianism'—a term which refers to the phenomena whereby celebrities champion human rights, representing an ultimate antithesis of wealth and power—illustrates the myth's continued prominence (Bleiker 2018a, p. 82). Much like **Source 2**, this collates white Europeans with the solution. Indeed,



Source 3 | Photograph of Ed Sheeran posing with Liberian children for Comic Relief in 2017. From Gleisner (2020) in Utblick Magazine. Available at: <https://www.utblick.org/2020/11/26/moving-away-from-the-white-saviour-complex/>

whilst **Source 1** depicts the problem through partially naked children and no white adults, **Source 3**, showing Sheeran with laughing (and fully clothed) children, is deemed the solution and the product of charitable giving. Thus, imaginations informed by historical tropes can be seen to shape contemporary visual imagery. The sources propagate a racialised hierarchy, with the connoted dependency centred towards an individual, white adult. Pieterse recognises this, yet their analysis fails to incorporate the value of absence. This negation is constitutive of a broader, mainstream scholarly dismissal of absence. The intended effect relies on the absence of white adults from depictions of the 'problem'. Equally, it leans on the absence of autonomous adults from 'solutions'.

Source 1 alone does not explicitly perpetuate this narrative. However, when taken alongside the additional sources, the construction of the parent-infant relationship is illuminated, with the 'West' assuming the parental role in the absence of adults from the 'Rest'. This counters Bleiker's suggestion that, because visual sources are non-verbal, studying absences is too interpretive (2018a, p. 28). The idea, that once absences are incorporated, the possibility for tenuous extrapolation increases, has led to an omission of specific literature on the sub-topic that is detrimental to accurate analysis of visual sources, despite their increasing popularity. Irrespectively, the previous amalgamation of sources counters the lack of available information surrounding **Source 1**'s creation and substantiates the prospective merits of an 'interpretative' analysis. By revealing that hierarchy guides IR, the traditional realist notion of international anarchic equality is challenged. Valuably, this has the potential to deepen scholarly debate and conveying ontological alternatives, detached from mainstream IR theories. Therefore, the inclusion of absences, alongside content, reveals the implicit power dynamics that shape informal hierarchies and, more broadly, IR.

Beyond the revelation that absences exist, attention should be paid to how such absences are a means of exerting and perpetuating power. Just as **Source 2** connoted dependency to justify a 'necessary mission', contemporary visual imagery has served to legitimise neo-colonial action. Peacekeeping missions, sanctioned by the UN Security Council in response to famine, have arisen in, for example, Somalia. These actions were legitimised to the public through the visual entrenchment of alleged dependency, enabling the violation of postcolonial state sovereignty and, subsequently, the possibility of exploitative politico-economic restructuring. As a result, visual sources, constructed through political mediums, have shaped binaries over relative dependency. Again, these arose just as much through absences as through content. If adults were depicted as present for both the 'West' and the 'Rest', then notions of hierarchical dependency would depreciate. To stress, this is not to entirely eradicate individual agency from the equation. Instead, the accumulation of notions of dependency, materialising through multifaceted visual avenues, strengthens, to a greater extent, the collective historical imagination. Thus, attention to absences enables reflection on the relative agency of different international actors, revealing informal hierarchies to challenge concepts in traditional scholarship.

2.2. A CAVEAT

To qualify how visual imagery is influenced by political mediums and to analyse their foundational role in exerting power, it is necessary to briefly diverge from the source-led analysis and explore visual discourse theory. Understanding this as an assessment of meaning, based on their intended impact, visual sources act as systems of meaning-production. This echoes the poststructuralist argument of the interrelation between knowledge and power, as it depicts the ability of images, as a source of knowledge, to represent, produce and reproduce power (Rose 2016, p. 187–190). Moreover, this reflects how visual sources are a politically influenced medium, as their wider provenance, shaped by power, is undetachable from their creation. Accordingly, choices on what to include and what to omit are not only shaped by *tacit* absences, including the contextual discourse in which they operate, but they contribute to shaping that same discourse.

Whilst this focus on discourse may be criticised for downplaying material reality and negating the role of 'practice', it is these discourses that enable image creation and practical action (Ó Tuathail & Agnew 1992, p. 191). For example, whilst this article is not critiquing the desired charitable purposes, Save the Children's late-colonial British origin suggests that the imagery's construction of dependency was, at least partially, shaped by its wider provenance. Employing vulnerable infants, the source echoes the discursively conventional means of evoking sympathy, whilst consequentially reproducing the discipline's wider doxa. More broadly, despite being freelance, photojournalists need to sell their images. This tailoring to contemporary norms indirectly prescribes their focus. By demonstrating that, not only are decisions over *deliberate* absences interrelated with *tacit* absences but that they shape narratives, their inclusion into analysis reflects the discursive construction of IR. Furthermore, visual analysis has become increasingly important. Despite always retaining geopolitical influence as a mechanism for sharing distant information (Campbell 2007, p. 358), digitalisation has exacerbated this trend. Accordingly, the influence of images and inferably, absences, has exponentially increased following their diversification and increased interconnective speed (Bleiker 2018b).

Mirroring the acknowledgement that discursive power influences the creation of representative visual sources, Roland Bleiker argues that this power peaks when representation can disguise its subjectivity (2001, p. 515). This 'illusion of authenticity' (Bleiker 2018a, p. 30) is shown in each of the explored sources as, unlike, for example, satirical political cartoons, they appear to present objective 'live action'. This conveys an air of realism. Thus, having traditionally been condemned for proving 'mute witnesses', by, amongst others, Peter Burke (2001, p. 18), this illusion, in itself, advances analysis by revealing how alleged 'muteness' acts as an enablement for influencing IR. The increased employment of imagery corresponds with technological advancement. The deconstruction of 'objective sources' enables an exploration of foundational power dynamics, credentialing critical theories that challenge mainstream ontology. This study both provides an inlet into analysing *tacit* absences and demonstrates that the interlink between underlying discursive construction and *deliberate* omissions acts as a means of power.



Source 4 | Photograph by Sebastião Salgado as part of his (Leica Oskar Barnack) award-winning *Ethiopian Hunger* series (1985). Available at: <https://www.leica-oskar-barnack-award.com/en/winners/winner-1985-sebastiao-salgado.html>

Combined, these absences, alongside included content, have discursively constructed hierarchies, contributing to the production and reproduction of both power and knowledge within IR.

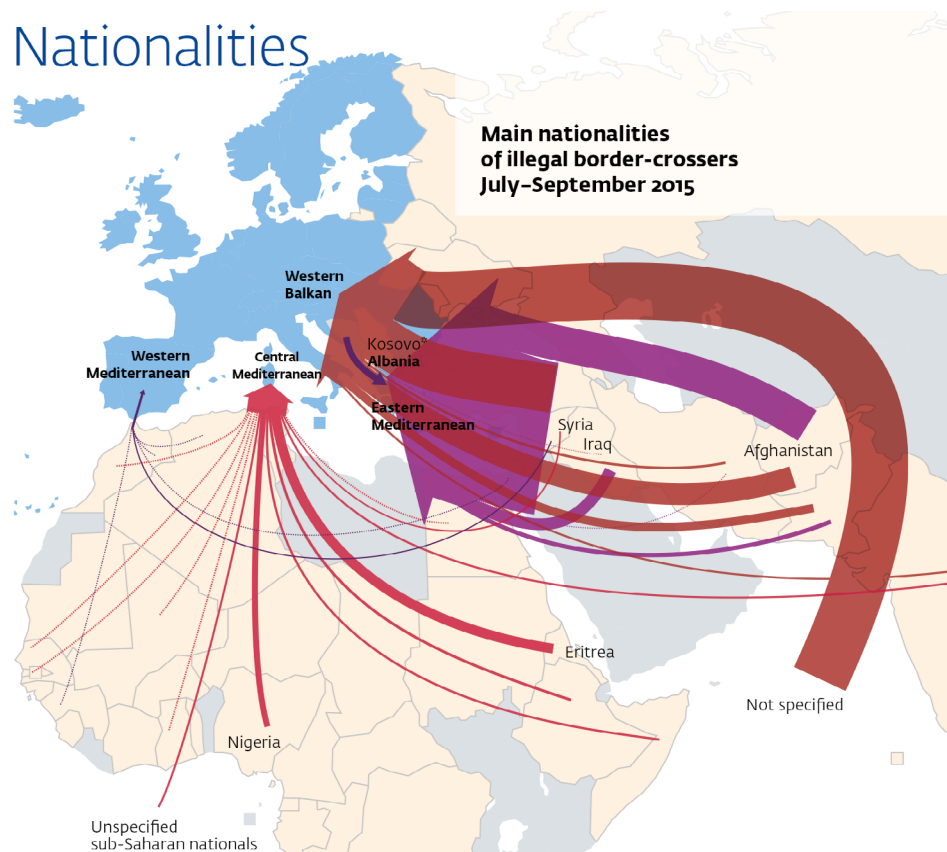
Accordingly, the sources' hierarchical division between infants and adults has contributed to the fundamental West/Rest binary, or, more broadly, the distinction between the self and the other. These divisions relationally position subjects within IR. Indeed, it is in defining the other that, through the illustration of difference, a sense of self can be affirmed (Reinke de Buitrago 2012). Similarly, childhood relies upon the bounded definition of adulthood (Burman 1994, p. 241). The *deliberate* absences in visual sources, that reflect and shape the adult/infant distinction, contribute to the creation of identity within IR along the self/other binary. Notably, these constructions are reliant on a romanticised Western concept of childhood (*ibid.*, p. 239). This demonstrates that underlying discursive construction is intertextually bounded to other discourses. The reliance on meanings explored in other images, by definition, requires an analysis of absences, moving beyond the visual source in question, to the wider background. It is hoped that an improved analysis, which appreciates that the 'othering process' is a multi-discursive construction (Reinke de Buitrago 2012), will enable greater inclusivity of different 'groups' and narratives, at a scholarly and polity level. Therefore, the deliberate omission of certain adults, as developed previously, has both reflected on and contributed to, the creation of identity and relationships within IR. Having shown that, not only are images discursively constructed but that they operate within multiple layers of discourse, it is clear that this article's analysis of *tacit* and *deliberate* absences is necessary to accurately explore sources' wider contexts.

2.3. LIGHT/DARK

One particular affirmation of the self/other binary is through the metaphorical distinction between light and dark. Historically described as the 'dark continent', African imagery, within Western-centric discourse, aided the affirmation of the Western self. This is because it was deemed to contrast the 'enlightened', 'light' and 'civilised' Europe. Sebastião Salgado's award-winning photojournalist series (Source 4), depicting the Ethiopian famine (1983–1985), provides a valuable example of employing the traditional notions of darkness. An absence of infrastructure and modern transportation compliments the included depiction of desolate landscapes, sculpted with cracked ground. The voidness of natural growth paradoxically arises in an image framed within nature. Moreover, the only artificial constructions shown are makeshift camps and distant huts. The characters' movement away from these structures alludes to their insufficiency. Ultimately, this lifelessness serves to reinforce notions of darkness. This echoes the colonial tropes that depicted the continent as failed and primitive (MacDonald, Hughes & Dodds 2010, p. 169). Again, this relies on Western constructs of modernity, with famine imagery associated with a 'pre-modern era' (*ibid.*, p. 185). This hierarchy reaffirms binary distinctions, with the 'West' presented to have overcome pre-modern difficulties. On a superficial level, this is reinforced through the *deliberate* absence of colour, with the monochromatic depiction constructing a 'mono-reality' (Bleiker 2018a, p. 120). Accordingly, including absences in analysis enables an appreciation of both their impact in the metaphorical construction of IR and their intrinsic value in this process.

Not only does Source 4 deliberately omit Ethiopian culture in general, contributing to the sense of 'civilisational backwardness', but the image presents the

Nationalities



Source 4 | Map depicting the main nationalities of illegal border-crossings for the third quarter of 2015 (right). From the FRAN Q3 report. Frontex (2015). Available at: https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Fran_Q3_2015.pdf

population as a homogenised mass, negating uniqueness in the reaffirmation of binary distinctions. Depicted with increasingly unrecognisable facial features (Azevedo et al. 2021, p. 2), the migrating group disappears into a dehumanised and indistinctive conglomeration. Although the source may be critiqued for being out of date, when viewed alongside Source 1, continuity is exposed. Beyond acknowledging that both images employ similar tropes of vulnerable infants, often without clothes, the Save the Children advert fails to provide any information about their image's specific location and context. This deliberately avoids an appreciation of regional differences, contributing to cultural homogenisation. The denial of heterogeneity within Western 'pan-African imagery' compounds the self/other binary (Young 2012). Resultantly, taking multiple sources together reveals, through absences, that a central Eurocentric discourse remains dominant. This illuminates that *deliberate* absences remain salient techniques in constructing discursive binaries and, correspondingly, prove a useful tool in critically engaging with mainstream IR's Eurocentric epistemological substructure (Fonseca 2019, p. 53).

It is important to briefly note that visual sources can challenge, as well as perpetuate, discourses. Again, this is particularly true in lieu of digitalisation and the rise of social media. Having diversified sources and, implicitly, agency, greater opportunities to challenge the existing narrative have manifested. For example, #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou went viral on Instagram in 2015. This visual trend, originating amongst Ghanaian

teenagers, spread across the continent and constituted a generational challenge to the notion of 'absent civilisation'. Retweets and posts focused on nature, culture and technological innovation. By countering ideas of homogeneity and 'darkness' through the offering of alternative perspectives, the distinct binaries of identity that propagate informal hierarchical relations were undermined. Whilst these challenges have proved, as of yet, unable to completely dislodge damaging binaries, they nevertheless reveal that discursive construction is malleable. Discreetly, the increasing ease of challenging discourse via social media highlights that the aforementioned absences are 'important' in reaffirming against such 'challenges'. Their contribution to archetypes of the dominant discourse perpetuates the narrative against IR's discursive competition.

Thus, absences are revealed to be a direct means of exerting power, informing analysis into the construction of IR. Having recognised that discourse is multifaceted, this article's second half will delve further into the reasoning behind Eurocentric discourse's continued primacy. In doing so, an analysis of the spatialisation of relations and absences within cartography, as a particular substring of visual imagery, will occur through the EU's 'Frontex map' (Source 5). Its provenance, as a map (on migratory routes to Europe) and an official source of policy, presents it as possessing intellectually objective authority.

3. A TURN TO CARTOGRAPHY

Employing iconographic metaphors and symbolism, the Frontex map, as will be explored below, exemplifies

the influence of 'geopolitical cartography', which combines traditional cartographic features and geometric representational shapes (Boria 2008, p. 280), with *deliberate* omissions. Although these absences fail to relay the complexity of the migratory situation, the apparent simplicity serves to present an unambiguous image (*ibid.*, p. 282). Indeed, it is this failure that again merits the focus on absences, as these omissions misconstrue 'realities', moulding relations by expanding an internal sense of Europeanism, and, at the same time, carrying out a process of 'othering', in a deliberate fashion that is discussed below.

Firstly, although the source reflected fears of a 'migration crisis', spurred by events specific to the Middle East, the use of arrows is largely indistinguishable. Usefully described by van Houtum and Bueno Lacy (2020, p. 199) as 'cartographic cleansing', the *deliberate* absence of distinction, compounded through the included label of 'unspecified sub-Saharan nationals', contributes to homogenising the 'other', reaffirming the West/Rest binary. Further, the near absence of internal border distinctions within the EU contributes to the binary through notions of 'Western' similarity and unity. This contrasts the clear colour difference between the EU and its surroundings, echoing Anderson's (1991) argument that maps create a 'totalising classification'. Ultimately, the combination of absences and inclusion has constructed arbitrary binary divisions, informing imaginations of community to the detriment of heterogeneous identity. By including both in analysis, this article holistically appreciates that cartography has spatially constructed relations, in support of 'identity-difference' (Shapiro 2009, p. 19). Notably, this impact, facilitated via *deliberate* absence, is further explained through *tacit* absences, reflecting the EU's attempt to reaffirm its alleged primacy and further its desired internal sense of Europeanism. Just like photography, this is especially significant due to maps popularly presumed authoritative objectivity. Henrikson (1998, p. 96) describes this as '*cartohypnosis*', whereby many view the presented information without scepticism or critique (Bueno Lacy & van Houtum 2015, p. 494). However, visual sources are not apolitical. Frontex's *deliberate* absences are shaped by the creator's subjectivity and the relations of power that prescribe their specification (Harley 2008, p. 129, p. 135). Consequently, cartography both reflects on IR and acts as a means of shaping it. By presenting socially constructed binaries as reality, the likelihood of their perpetuation is increased. As consistently alluded to, it is only through the inclusion of *tacit* motivations and power relations, alongside *deliberate* absences that their constructive ability is revealed. Put differently, the inclusion of absence (and the distinction between *tacit* and *deliberate*) enables an insight into the views of the creators and a holistic analysis of the mechanistic workings of IR.

Specifically, these revelations enable an insightful analysis of international policy. The use of arrows, traditionally employed in military cartography (Walters 2010, p. 178), connotes a purposeful invasion. This is exacerbated given that the arrows appear to be converging from all directions and mirrors Source 4's depiction of a massive conglomeration (van Houtum & Bueno Lacy 2020, p. 205). By connoting an invasive threat, a sense of criminality is conferred onto the migrants (Black 2003, p. 47). This is a *deliberate* political construct, reinforced

through visual imagery. The deliberate absence of both the benefits of migrants and the contextual reasoning behind their desire to flee is integral to their delegitimation. Consequently, an analysis of the employment of absences to justify an exclusionary border policy reflects the source's provenance. More specific than the EU's foundational goals, Frontex, as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, is defined to 'reduce [the] vulnerability of the external borders' (Frontex n.d.), showing that *deliberate* omissions stem from their purpose. A perceived migration crisis would increase the political will toward enhancing funding for the agency. Indeed, curated by the source of authority itself, the *tacit* absences of the Frontex map prove more direct than the previous images. Given that the European shift rightwards coincided with the production of this source, a study of *tacit* absences reveals the interlink between underlying power relations and the source's mode of production and *deliberate* omissions. To stress, this is not to suggest that Frontex has propagated the migration crisis itself. Nor is it rejecting the existence of potentially destabilising migratory transitions to the EU. Rather, it is highlighting how the choice of cartographical inclusion and absence is not only reflective of a broader political context but that it shapes the context itself.

Although mainstream IR scholars focus more on empirical methodology, and discourse scholars reject such workings (Milliken 1999, p. 226), this article argues that a study of visual sources can and should combine both. For instance, computing the number of times migrants are depicted as criminals would qualify 'interpretative' analysis and, subsequently, bridge tensions within the discipline. This empirical coupling is especially necessary for cartography, as scales require qualification to counteract distortions. Thus, the inclusion of absences, cartographic content and statistics are all necessary for a substantiated analysis.

Through comparison with the earlier legitimisation of peacekeeping forces, the exclusionary border policy appears hypocritical, failing to offer protection to vulnerable migrants. This highlights that, fundamentally, the previous policy served to maintain spatially distinct relations, preventing migratory interconnection. Accordingly, through this analysis, the underlying motivations of internationally orientated policy can be obtained, with the desire to entrench binary divisions of paramount importance.

Finally, alongside entrenching binary relations, cartography specifically perpetuates the associated hierarchy. A further function of the arrows is to directionally suggest Europe as the desired endpoint. Coupled with an understanding of the exclusionary border policy, a sense of exclusivity constructs Europe as hierarchically superior. Needless to say, this reflects an EU agency focusing on the EU in fulfilment of their 'border-security' brief. Yet, at the same time, the *deliberate* absence of alternative migratory destinations hyperbolises the scale of the issue and the extent to which Europe is the desired endpoint. Indeed, the suggestion of linear and homogenised migration negates that 73 percent of refugees settle in the nearest 'safe' nation-state (British Red Cross n.d.).

The cartographical analysis of the Frontex map illustrates how absences within visual sources, through their contribution to the discursive construction of

hierarchical binary distinctions, have created and entrenched the spatialisation of relations, moulding international politics. Beyond ensuring a comprehensive reflection of the mechanisms that influence IR, an analysis of underlying *tacit* absences offers a partial explanation for *deliberate* absences.

4. CONCLUSION

Seeking to counter the current void of literature, a focus on absences provides a holistic insight into the relational structure of IR. Without neglecting included content, absences have contributed to the discursive construction of hierarchical binaries, engineered along racial and spatially determined axes. In lieu of visual-discourse theory, *tacit* and *deliberate* absences are themselves, a means of perpetuating and entrenching knowledge and power. This is particularly important given that notions of realism, in photography and cartography alike, lend them disproportional influence. Charitable imagery has perpetuated historical, colonial tropes of light/dark and parent/infant divisions. Ultimately, the distinction of the 'self' in contrast to the 'other' has shaped relations and identity, with engineered hierarchies of dependency negating causal responsibility and providing the guise for neo-colonial intervention. Without absences, this distinction's clarity would subside. Correspondingly, their incorporation into future analysis is integral to eroding the apparently 'objective' binary sense of difference. This facilitates the discipline's broadening at both

a scholarly and polity level to challenge conventional ontology and epistemological bias, and support less exclusionary policies. More deliberately, geopolitical cartography, including the Frontex map, has entrenched the spatialisation of tiered binary relations. Beyond respectively homogenising both sides, Europe was centrally positioned with alternative migratory destinations *deliberately* omitted. This deliberateness was moulded by *tacit* absences, emphasising the interconnection of underlying flows of power and the source's content. Accordingly, just as content and absences should be employed together, so too should *tacit* and *deliberate* strands. Indeed, *tacit* restraints and the reliance on symbols, beyond the visual source, definitionally require a focus on the absent, broader context.

Thus, furthering the currently limited literature and providing an evaluative framework through a novel *tacit/deliberate* distinction, this article has demonstrated that it is only through the combination of content with absence that the foundations of IR can be substantively relayed. The combination of *tacit* and *deliberate* does, itself, facilitate a holistic exploration into an image's various informing (yet potentially obscured) dynamics. This reveals how socially engineered, hierarchical binaries have guided structural relations of power and identity; and it is this revelation that can facilitate greater disciplinary breadth at a scholarly and political level.

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