

Animal Politics? A Visual Provocation

*Elizabeth Dauphinee interviews Roland Bleiker**

ED: For some time now, I have been following the photography of Roland Bleiker on social media. He mainly photographs the animals that visit his backyard in Brisbane, Australia – birds, lizards, and the occasional marsupial. I read Roland’s work while a doctoral student at York University. My first introduction to his scholarship was the special issue of *Alternatives* that he edited in 2000, entitled ‘Poetic World Politics’. It was here where I first learned that other vocabularies existed through which to understand global politics. Put differently, his writing provided me with a way of being a scholar that could also reflect the multilayered nature of my own being-in-the-world. What he offered me was – to use his words – a ‘critique of language that opens up possibilities to gaze beyond the givenness of world politics’. The special issue dealt with poetry as a reflection of sociopolitical life. In the introduction, Roland wrote that ‘[p]oetry is ideally suited for rethinking world politics because it revolves around a recognition that (aesthetic) form and (political) substance cannot be separated.’ This sensibility had a staying power for me that carried well beyond my graduate studies. It also expanded how I thought about poetry. It suggested that there was more ‘poetry’ in the world than just the formal texts that we normally associate with poetic form. Indeed, poetic form expanded significantly for me in the context of Roland’s work. I began to see many things as ‘poetic’ – songs, silences, photographs. Yet, while I knew it to be true that one could not separate aesthetics and politics, I was not entirely sure how to understand their relationship. Even after writing *The Politics of Exile*, which I consider now to be a poetic work, I am still not sure how to navigate this intersection in a methodical or replicable way. I am still not sure whether everything is political, nor how to determine something’s political-ness, or lack thereof.

When I began noticing Roland’s photography on social media, I was strangely mesmerized by his images. No doubt this was at least in part because his work had been so influential in the development of my own thinking on non-academic forms of writing as legitimate scholarship. I have been reading Roland’s work since I was 26 years old (I’m 41 now). Yet, we have never met

*Roland Bleiker is Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland. His current research examines how images, and the emotions they engender, shape responses to humanitarian crises. Recent publications include *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Palgrave, 2009/2012) and, as co-editor with Emma Hutchison, a forum on ‘Emotions and World Politics’ in *International Theory* (Vol 3/2014). Elizabeth Dauphinee is Professor in the Department of Political Science at York University in Toronto.

in person. It was therefore striking to me that I should have this magical access to the things he saw from his own kitchen window. ‘Look at these birds that Roland Bleiker has in his backyard!’ I kept thinking excitedly. And, because they were not goldfinches or cardinals or robins or American crows, I had no clue what kind of birds they actually were. But it wasn’t just the novelty of seeing strange birds for which I had no names. And it wasn’t just that they were Roland Bleiker’s photographs and that he was a scholar whose work had profoundly influenced me. I was continually fascinated by these glimpses of the birds in his backyard and I lingered over them. The photographs were aesthetically alluring and beautifully composed. But that wasn’t all. Roland’s photos seemed to have a persistent unity that went beyond their artistry. While he occasionally photographed geckos, trees, and thunderstorms, his main subject matter was birds – birds in flight, birds on wires, birds interacting with other bird species. The way he composed them, it seemed to me that Roland’s birds were in some sort of communication with one another and with him (and, by extension, with me). I began to think of them as ‘Roland’s birds’. Why did he take these photos? How could he capture them so well? *Why birds?* Some sea creatures aside, birds are now recognized as the most enduring class of sentient life on the planet. They are classified today as a form of dinosaur (not what I learned in school). Was it this long, evolutionary quality that generated his interest? Was it the migratory nature of birds? – or their unexpected entrances? – or their adaptability?

Whatever the reasons for his interest in them, it seemed clear from the photographs that he wasn’t just testing out a good camera’s capacity to take a good action shot. Roland’s work on aesthetics and emotion seemed to leak into the concrete dimensionality of the photographs. There was a kind of fullness there between the birds and his scholarship that made me feel as though these photographs and their subject matter weren’t simply elements of ‘Roland’s private life’ in the way that my impromptu snapshots of beaches and babies were elements of mine. Whenever I saw the birds, I felt like Roland was communicating something about them. I saw in his photography a kind of poetry and, in this poetry, a kind of way-of-being or a way of seeing the world. In other words, I didn’t think that the photographs were a distraction from Roland’s scholarship, but were rather a part of it somehow. It was the non-randomness of the birds – their precise, orderly disorder – that seemed to bind these images together through more than just their objective subject matter or their pleasing aesthetic. When I looked at Roland’s birds, it was like reading one of his texts. When I walked away from them, they followed me. I got it stuck in my head that I should ask him about the birds. When I did, he was doubtful that there was anything political about them. But my sense that there was something happening here beyond the images – some poetic sociality that narrated a social intersection between him and them – persisted. And I began to discover the persistence of my own poorly articulated desire to learn more about how Roland navigated the intersections between aesthetics and politics in the fuller life both within and beyond his scholarship.

What follows is an interview with Roland that attempts to identify and bring into focus some of the contours of the intersections between writing, visibility, representation, and ... birds.

ED: Firstly, growing up in coastal New Jersey and now living in central Ontario, I have a very specific and limited repertoire of birds that I can recognize and name: seagulls, sandpipers, cardinals, robins, goldfinches, egrets, herons, and American crows in New Jersey; seagulls, cardinals, robins, herons, woodpeckers, blue jays, crows, and the occasional goldfinch in Ontario. Of course, sparrows and pigeons are everywhere. While working at the University of Manchester, I was impressed by the thuggish character of the English magpie and I missed it for a long time when I came home. Could you tell us a little bit about the birds that visit your backyard in Brisbane? What kind of birds are they? Do you have any favorites? Do they differ dramatically from the birds where you grew up?

RB: Please allow me to start, Elizabeth, by thanking you for the very generous introduction and for giving me the chance to express my views here. It is a privilege to be able to contribute to *The Journal of Narrative Politics*, which is rapidly establishing itself as an important alternative voice in scholarly debates on the political. But I also want to flag at the outset that I am, as you mentioned, slightly hesitant about my visual-textual collage, and this because I am not sure if 1) my bird photographs are actually political and 2) anyone really cares about them. Expressed in other words, I am apprehensive about being self-indulgent. This is why I would like to discuss my animal photos as a kind of provocation, as a trigger to generate debate about what exactly is political – and what is not – and what role we as writers, viewers, speakers, thinkers and listeners play in the production of political knowledge.

But first to ‘my’ birds. Before I moved to Australia they were as foreign to me as they seem to you. I grew up in Switzerland – the land of the grey birds, as I call it now – and then lived for a decade in France, Korea, Canada, and the US. When I first arrived in Australia to do a Ph.D. in Canberra two decades ago I was immediately struck by the birds: they were everywhere and they were exotic and they were loud and colorful and, not least, seemingly keen to interact with me. When I moved to sub-tropical Brisbane – for a position at the University of Queensland – I took with me my passion for birds. They are always around me. They wake me up every morning and they surround me for most of the day. The birds that visit my small urban backyard usually hang out in our trees and bushes or sit on our fence. They are cockatoos, currawongs, kookaburras, lorikeets, magpies, crows, king parrots, myna birds, butcherbirds, bush turkeys, ibis, galas, blue-faced-honey-eaters and willie-wagtails. Or at least these are the ones I see and know. I like them all but I have become particularly attached to three magpies because they visit every day and I ‘know’ them well by now. On my walk back from the office I occasionally meet them roaming around the neighborhood. They seem to recognize me and accompany me on my way home – admittedly, and here I am trying not to anthropomorphize them – not out of friendship but because they are expecting a scrap of something edible.

ED: Your interaction with these birds (rather than merely watching them through the lens) seems to be a key feature of what is powerful about your photography of them. As you suggest, the photographs seem to reflect a considered awareness of these birds not as mere objects in the world, but as full subjects whose activities and interactions you are actively documenting. Could you tell us something about what motivates you to photograph them?

RB: I photograph birds because I love birds and because I love photography. I have a passion – perhaps even a compulsion – to visualize the world around me. In particular, I want to show how mundane things can be special and beautiful – things that we might not even notice when we don't pay close attention to our surroundings. In this sense I am trying to emulate the Australian artist Jeffrey Smart, who painted everyday objects in a way that gave us the chance to slow down and look and contemplate objects that we usually do not even see, yet alone experience as beautiful: a bitumen road, a pile of old tires, a rusty road sign.

So, a couple of years ago I decided to set myself a challenge: come up with one decent photograph a week of an animal visiting my backyard and then post it on social media. This would, I thought, give me a more conscious way of engaging with my immediate environment and understand how we – as humans – interact with the animals around us. Besides birds I took photographs of bearded dragons, bees, geckos, crickets, possums, spiders, butterflies, toads, bats, crickets, ants; whoever lives in or visits our backyard.

But this gets me to my first problem: why should readers of a journal that deals with narrative politics care about my photographs of animals? They might be pleasing and interesting to look at, or so I hope, but are they really political? I am not sure, to be honest. I did not take these photographs with an explicitly political purpose. But, of course, this does not mean they cannot be political. So, here is my dilemma.

On the one hand, I have always argued for expanding the notion of the political beyond existing knowledge conventions. One of my first scholarly interventions was a little essay I wrote 20 years ago called 'Forget IR Theory'. I was frustrated by how narrow international relations scholarship was at the time. Only certain topics and only certain forms of inquiry and writing styles were considered legitimate: in essence, social scientific analyses of high politics; the things that states and statesmen do and care about and the things that a societal scientific mindset can reveal about them. I felt that there were so many other crucial political issues that warranted attention but were not really visible. For me, at the time, this was the role of protest movements that transgressed and challenged the very structures that international relations was built on. I felt that a more productive approach was to do what the feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe so convincingly argued for and did: to ignore disciplinary debates; to break free from how they have already set up the parameters of what is and is not visible and thinkable; to theorize the international from a range of different vantage points, including from the perspective of people at the margins of the political. Then a range of important political issues can come into view: the gendered and racial dimensions of existing power structures, for instance, or the suppression of migrants and the role of emotions in politics. On the other hand, and this is my more cautious side speaking, I am also aware that we need to prioritize when investigating the political. On some level everything is political in one way or another, but we cannot investigate everything. Where do we draw the boundaries?

ED: Do you see your photographs as political then?

RB: What exactly would it take for my photographs to be political? I could, for instance, have made a more concerted effort to depict my bird visitors in a certain light. I could have focused on

how they interact with the built environment in an effort to depict how humans and animals co-exist in urban contexts – a kind of visual politics of the anthropocene, as some would call it. Or I could have highlighted how my birds interact with each other and across different species, with the aim of showing us how animals coexist across far more diversity, and often far more peacefully, than we humans do. One could also see politics in the very act of me photographing: a privileged western academic who has the money to buy a camera and the leisure time to observe birds, take pictures of them and share these on the internet. Many other people around the world do not have such privileges. The structure that distributes those privileges is, of course, highly political in nature. So, in short, there is inevitably a politics to my photographs but I wonder if they contain enough of a political message to be of interest to others.

ED: Well, your work on aesthetics and emotion – specifically, the claim that there is a ‘different vocabulary’ through which to understand the sociopolitical world – refuses the conventional boundaries between our intellectual and emotional lives. This refusal has been evident in virtually your entire corpus of scholarship – from your work on ethics to your work on visuality, autoethnography, and poetry, to name just a few. You argue that – at a bare minimum – our own lives provide us with intellectual resources to understand the world. If your photography were to be understood as one of these resources, what might it communicate about how you see the world?

RB: I have come to academia late in life. I never went to high school and nobody in my family did, either. Long before I stumbled on universities and intellectual debates I was confronted with the contingent nature of knowledge and the need to challenge this contingency. When I started learning foreign languages in my 20s – French, English, and Korean – I quickly realized how much language conditions what we think and especially what is thinkable and what is not. Only much later did I read about all this in Nietzsche or in writers like Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault and Deleuze. I found that the concept of aesthetics offered me the best way to deal with the issues at stake. It highlighted for me that political issues today are far too serious not to employ the full register of human intelligence and sensibility to investigate them. Social science is simply not enough, important as it may well be. So I explored how literature, poetry, art, music, and a range of other ways of understanding and sensing the world can offer us insights into the political. Doing so inevitably entailed trying to find a different language – verbal and visual – to speak about and see the political; a language that allows us to break through the deeply entrenched web of meanings associated with existing power structures. This is why I got interested in poetics. Three of my favorite poets – Paul Celan, Anna Akhmatova, and Ko Un – were all about stretching existing language conventions such that it became possible to think and sense again, so that victims of past and present crimes could have a voice: for Celan this was in Germany after the horrors of the Nazi past; for Akhmatova it was during Stalin’s dictatorship; for Ko Un it was in Korea after the Japanese colonial occupation and the Korean War.

Carol Cohn’s essay, ‘Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,’ still remains one of the great texts that illustrates how prevailing ways of doing politics are inevitably intertwined with prevailing ways of speaking and thinking. Cohn’s essay is also a great example of how we can use our own personal experiences as a rich and important source of insight into the political. I tried to explore these issues a few years ago with my colleague Morgan Brigg. We

tried to address a rather puzzling situation: we, as scholars, are central to how we produce knowledge. We design a research project, investigate it and then write up the results. In the process, we make countless decisions about what to do and not to do, decisions that are arbitrary and have a lot to do with our personal interests and temperament. But, in the end, most of us tend to erase these traces of knowledge production from the text we publish. We present our research as if the facts had always been there from the very beginning, ready to be unveiled in their pristine original state, as if we had nothing to do with the production of knowledge. This is puzzling. We should lay bare the traces of our own doing and we should make much better use of our own personal experiences in our research. One of the very best examples of this are, of course, your own two books, *The Ethics of Researching War* and *The Politics of Exile*. They provide us with key political and ethical insights that directly come out of your experience and your own struggle with conducting research in a conflict environment. So, yes, the self is central. But, at the same time, Morgan and I warned of being self-indulgent. Not all of our own experiences are necessarily relevant when it comes to writing about politics. We made, in particular, a difference between autoethnography and autobiography. The former uses the self as a source of insight into politics, the latter is primarily about the self. It might or might not have political meaning. The self, in short, is only relevant if it helps us understand particular political problems. Otherwise it is just the self and best left at that – even though, as feminist scholars have long pointed out, the personal is always political.

But why should anyone care about my pictures of birds? Is this a form of autoethnography that reveals to the reader/viewer something that she or he would otherwise not see: a way of sensing the world that words alone cannot convey? Or is it just me being self-indulgent? I am not sure. To work properly the photographs would have to stand on their own; not because they do not interact with other photographs and texts, and not because I had nothing to do with their production, but because I – as the author and photographer – only matter when my own experiences add something that is of political relevance. If viewers like one of my photographs merely because they have read some of my texts and are curious about the birds I observe – then I have failed, politically, that is. What if I were an unpublished first year Ph.D. student writing this photo essay? Would people care the same way? They should if the essay has any kind of political value because my own self – and, again, I speak here as a scholar investigating political issues – only matters if I can illuminate something that is of political importance. I am, in any case, and with Roland Barthes, already dead as an author and photographer because I have inevitably lost control over this photo-essay: its meaning can never be reduced to and controlled by my intentions.

ED: Is it possible that the academic conception of what constitutes ‘the political’ here is too narrow? In your work, you show that the way we access the political should include a much wider range of texts (and I understand the self here as a ‘text’). But does this not also require a concurrent expansion of what we also consider as ‘political’? And might this also not address the worry about self-indulgence?

RB: Yes, I have no doubt that academic conceptions of the political are too narrow. Perhaps they are, by their very nature, always so. The most powerful practices of exclusion are those that are so entrenched and so naturalized that we do not even recognize them. Any form of politics

always includes and excludes. This is why we, as scholars – and as activist-citizens – should always try to be self-aware of the power-relations that surround and engulf us. We can never entirely step outside of them but we can try to be aware of who is profiting from an order and who and what is marginalized and left out.

Puzzle-driven research is a good way of addressing this issue, I think. This is something that Ian Shapiro proposed a few years ago. Although I disagree with aspects of his approach, the basic idea strikes me as very convincing: to start by identifying a fundamental political puzzle, such as the persistence of hunger despite there being enough food in the world to nourish everyone. Shapiro urges us to address the ‘great questions of the day’. This is, of course, one of the problems. Knowledge is always communal and communities have always already drawn boundaries around what is legitimate knowledge. The great questions of the day have often not yet been asked because they cannot be seen from prevailing ways of doing and understanding politics. This should motivate us to find the kind of puzzles that matter but have been written out of politics. You, Elaine Scarry, Lauren Wilcox, and others have done this, for instance, by showing how the body is crucial to the political even though it largely absent from prevailing ways of understanding – and conducting – politics.

The beauty of puzzle driven research for me is that it opens up opportunities for truly innovative work. Once you have a puzzle you can use any kind of knowledge source. The source could be of verbal, visual, aural nature, it could come from this or that discipline, from everyday life, from popular culture or from our own personal experiences – it is legitimate as long as the source of insight advances our understanding of the puzzle. So, yes, if I am using my own experiences and my personal insights to address such a political puzzle I would not be worried about being self-indulgent. The self then is, as you say, a text that is as important and reliable as any other. The question I would then ask: does the self help me see a political puzzle in a new light, does add something that other type of insights cannot?

ED: In your forthcoming collection, *Visual Global Politics*, you identify visual representation as a defining feature of sociopolitical memory. This invokes not only the ways in which visibility both represents and constitutes our perception of events, but also how the visual is received and curated – sometimes in ways that are neither intended nor anticipated – as you point out with your example of Barthes’ death of the author. This gap between author and reader (or between photographer and viewer) invites difference in ideas concerning how we identify and theorize the subjects of the political world. Most importantly, this gap invites us to identify ‘the political’ in unconventional places, and it allows us to explore the symbolics of different kinds of visual communication. This is the gap within which your intentions in the photographs and my experience of them emerge as difference. Birds, of course, can come to symbolize profound political failures. I recall the devastating iconic images of oil-slicked seabirds after the Exxon Valdez disaster, for example. At the same time, we cannot reduce our subjects to a mere resource for the expression of our own politics. Do you see in your photographs an invitation to examine other creaturely ways of being in the world? And aren’t these also ways of being ‘political’?

RB: I have worked on visual politics for a few years now and I think images play an increasingly important role in politics. At the very moment that we are having this conversation a major

refugee crisis is developing in Europe. One of the key public aspects of this tragedy is a photograph of a dead three-year-old boy from Syria, Alan Kurdi, washed onto a shore in Turkey. He died together with his mother and brother. Politicians and average people around the world reacted with shock and outrage to this photograph, which, in a mere few days, has become an icon of the refugee crises. This is unusual. One of the key texts on this topic suggests that it takes at least a decade for icons to form. But the photograph of Alan Kurdi triggered an unprecedented compassionate response: in Munich, for instance, people cheered refugees arriving by train. Banners welcomed them to Germany. These images stand in stark contrast to prevailing views of xenophobia spreading across Europe.

Together with my colleagues Emma Hutchison and David Campbell I have been examining the politics and ethics of such crisis imagery. It is, of course, impossible to reduce complex political dynamics to a couple of propositions but there are at least three important aspects. First, images matter. The refugee crisis is not new. But the shocking image of Alan Kurdi not only symbolized a major crisis emerging but also rattled the consciousness of many viewers across Europe. A major public debate emerged and this debate was often framed around the image in question. Images can clearly serve as political triggers. Here is another example: torture. It was common knowledge that torture was happening during the US rendition program. But only the shocking torture images of Abu Ghraib created public outcry and turned torture into a major topic of political debate. There is something unique about images, something that triggers profound emotional reactions in viewers. Second is that the type of image matters. The photograph of Alan Kurdi is linked to what some people call the identifiable victim effect. When we see individuals suffering, and know who they are and what their story is, viewers tend to react with greater empathy. They can imagine what it would feel like to be in that situation, impossible as it might seem. By contrast, photographs of masses of refugees tend to have very different effects on people. With every person added to the photograph the emotional distance between viewer and victims seems to grow. Third: photographs never stand on their own. We see them and inevitably compare them with other photographs we have seen and with the stories that surround them and provide meaning. W.J.T. Mitchell writes of 'image-text' constellations, of how images are always linked to words and how language itself is visual too.

So, yes, indeed, there are iconic animal photographs that symbolize a range of political issues. But it strikes me from the example you gave that they are often used as metaphors: oil-slicked seabirds to remind us of how we humans damage pristine nature; polar bears have come to symbolize global warming; whales and dolphins to represent environmental campaigns, or bears and bulls to flag the ups and downs of the stock market. This is, of course, one of the problems with photographs in general: some of them turn into icons and they are then used out of context to entrench a specific narrative about the world. In crisis photography, the mother-child metaphor has come to stand for all victims of trauma and suffering. This risks entrenching a neo-colonial narrative that depicts people affected by crises as passive victims, unable to help themselves and being dependent on western/northern power and benevolence. Perhaps this is where my private and seemingly apolitical animal photographs can have a politics: they do not fit into stereotypical visual-verbal narratives of how humans and animals relate. I think the work of Jacques Rancière is relevant here. He looks at how politics and power relations operate not only at the level of institutions and language but are also linked to how we perceive the world in a broader sensory

way. The content and contours of politics, then, become inevitably linked to how we – as cultural collectives – speak, visualize, and feel about ourselves and others and how we accept these often arbitrary conventions as natural and self-evident. In any period, such cultural practices frame what is thinkable and do-able and thus influence politics at its very core.

Photographs of animals – or any photographs – have the potential to challenge existing political narratives and push the boundaries of what can be seen, thought and done. They can, in Rancière's language, 'repartition the sensible'. Photographs do so if they can show us the world anew, whether it is a refugee crisis or an environmental catastrophe or how we, as humans, interact with the animals around us. Once we have a different verbal and visual vocabulary to sense and understand the world we also open up opportunities for political action.

I am not sure whether or not my photographs of animals have this politically transformative potential. I leave it up to others to decide. I agreed to share them here – against my strong initial apprehensions and perhaps also against my better judgment – in the hope to at least generate discussions about some fundamental questions. What is politics? Where is it? How do we see it? How do we know? All this comes down to trying to find a balance between two opposing poles: 1) We need to see and recognize political issues beyond the normal boundaries of knowledge and practice. We need new ways of visualizing and verbalizing politics so that we can see the things that matter. We need to stretch the notion of what politics is and recognize profound political issues that are happening in our everyday lives; 2) But we also need to decide what we investigate. The political might be everywhere, but we can't understand everything and give everything the same level of political priority. How do we, then, decide what is politically meaningful and worthy of investigating and what is not?

ED: Maybe only the fullness of time will determine this. I mean, if our own thinking is also bounded by prevailing conceptions of what is properly political, maybe the artifacts that we produce cannot really be judged now. Is it possible that only a future that you and I might not live long enough to see will decide on the meaningfulness of what we have left behind us? And, if that is the case, could that not be a reason to push those boundaries as far as we can?

RB: Absolutely, yes, we are never really able to step outside the webs of meaning spun around us. We can try to be self-aware and critical and sensitive to processes of inclusion and exclusion. But we can never entirely escape how language, cultural values and prevailing political discourses frame our thoughts. The text that comes to my mind here is Gerda Lerner's great book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. She explains why feminist ideas have existed for a long time but only took off in the 19th century. In the 12th century, Hildegard von Bingen advanced a powerful gender critique of the Bible. But this critique was written out of history because male historians deemed it irrelevant. Two centuries later, Christine de Pizan advanced similar and similarly powerful critiques, but she had to start from scratch because she had no access to previous work done on issues of gender and religion. This is why, for Lerner, it took so long for a feminist consciousness to emerge: men could 'stand on the shoulders of giants' and build knowledge; women who sought to advance gender critiques were written out of history and had to re-invent the wheel, time and again.

I am no Hildegard van Bingen. My ideas are unlikely to survive my physical demise. But, this is precisely why we should be bold and daring and take risks and push the boundaries of the thinkable. We should write in more experimental ways, visualize what cannot be seen and thought, question how we take far too many things for granted...