



# Chasing Giants: Simulation and the United Nations' Trompe l'oeil Games

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines how François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* "revisions global politics" and complicates scholarship in international relations and human geography by situating his analysis at the level of simulation, conceptualizing United Nations peacekeeping efforts as trompe l'oeil games that "fool the eye." Specifically, it analyzes how Debrix's analysis pushes the borderlines of scholarship in human geography by going beyond the critique of Cartesian perspectivalism with its attendant masculine mind/body dualism that is often levied at mainstream geographical discourses by critical and feminist geographers. After doing this, this essay outlines how *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* casts a critical light on the foreign policy analyses disseminated by scholars such as Samantha Power and Thomas Weiss, who ascribe specific "moralizing intentions" to international institutions like the UN. This essay ultimately argues that Debrix's analysis of the "New World Order" and disciplinary neoliberalism is increasingly relevant in the contemporary setting, where YouTube and TikTok videos and images contribute to the proliferation of individualizing empty frames.

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Jean Baudrillard writes that “Today the trompe l’oeil is no longer within the realm of painting. Like stucco, its contemporary, it can do anything, mimic anything, parody anything.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Baudrillard argues that the trompe l’oeil blurs the very “boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture.”<sup>2</sup> In *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*, François Debrix demonstrates that the trompe l’oeil also blurs the boundaries between the realm of objective, “real representation” and the virtual world.<sup>3</sup> To practically illustrate this blurring, Debrix points to the United Nations (UN), arguing that it is an architectural and ideological fixture, a postmodern leviathan that employs trompe l’oeil strategies that “fool the eye”<sup>4</sup> by reordering both names and images in a way that simulates its continued legitimacy and relevance.<sup>5</sup> Reminiscent of a piece of graffiti left by Dutch peacekeepers at a UN outpost in Srebrenica that reads “UN: United Nothing,”<sup>6</sup> Debrix demonstrates that, as a trompe l’oeil, the UN is an empty sign, a “structure without depth.”<sup>7</sup> To borrow from Michel Foucault’s description of *Don Quixote*, when viewed through Debrix’s theoretical lens, the UN is the institutional knight of La Mancha, as it “becom[es] the book that contains [its] truth....resemb[ing] all those signs whose ineffaceable imprint [it] has left behind [it].”<sup>8</sup> As a trompe l’oeil, the UN is always already the ideological book of names and images that contains its reality; it is a “system of objects” that disciplinary neoliberalism animates.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to scholars such as Roxanne Doty (1996) and Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996), whose work was featured in previous volumes in the University of Minnesota Press’s *Borderlines* series, Debrix does not focus on the ways that specific intellectuals of statecraft “geo-graph”<sup>10</sup> the world through representational practices that script global space according to the strategic, economic, and political interests of Western powers. Instead of highlighting the writing of “imaginative geographies,”<sup>11</sup> Debrix follows Baudrillard in order to emphasize that signs and models like the UN are themselves reality (“more real than real itself”),<sup>12</sup> as no singular “doer”<sup>13</sup> or “actor [lies] behind the façade, behind the walls of the UN building.”<sup>14</sup> No agent retains causal primacy in international relations, or is simply manipulating a set of objective “facts” for their own selfish purposes by disseminating inaccurate representations of geographical areas or world events. The windmill is a giant; the UN is international order. The trompe l’oeil becomes reality, as there is “no way for the human eye to distinguish between a trompe l’oeil scene, a mediatically constructed visual/virtual reality, and a so-called real representation.”<sup>15</sup> After examining how Debrix “revision[s] global politics”<sup>16</sup> and complicates scholarship in international relations and human geography by situating his analysis at the level of simulation, this essay outlines how *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* casts a critical light on the foreign policy analyses

1 Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 155 & 158.

2 Ibid.

3 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 14.

4 Ibid, 13. Debrix indicates that “trompe l’oeil” literally means “fooling of the eye.”

5 Ibid, 58.

6 See photographs taken by Tarik Samarah for reference: Tarik Samarah, “*Tariksamarah.Com* – Photographer Website,” accessed October 2020, <https://tariksamarah.com/en>.

7 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 5.

8 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Illustrated edition (New York NY: Vintage, 1994), 53.

9 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 6.

10 Gearóid O’Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 1st edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 154, and also see Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 2.

11 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage, 1979), 49.

12 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 12; Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard*, 154.

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1989), 45.

14 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 13.

15 Ibid, 14.

16 “Borderlines,” *University of Minnesota Press*. <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/series/borderlines> Debrix’s book appeared in the *Borderlines* series edited by David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro, and the stated aim of this series is to “address international issues with the goal of revising global politics.”

disseminated by scholars such as Samantha Power and Thomas Weiss, who ascribe specific “moralizing intentions”<sup>17</sup> to international institutions like the UN.

Debrix’s intervention into the interdisciplinary realm of critical world order studies specifically pushed (and continues to push) the “borderlines” of scholarship in human geography as well as the subfield of critical geopolitics. More precisely, Debrix’s argument that “the Cartesian cogito has truly been superseded”<sup>18</sup> adds theoretical nuance to, and goes beyond, the critique of Cartesian perspectivalism with its attendant masculine mind/body dualism that is often levied at mainstream geographical discourses by critical and feminist geographers. For example, Gillian Rose (1993) specifically highlights that knowledge-production within the field of human geography is permeated by social-scientific and aesthetic forms of masculinity, which place an epistemological premium on Cartesian scientific rationality and perpetuate the idea that disembodied, neutral objectivity legitimizes geographical knowledge-production.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Ó Tuathail (1996) demonstrates how the geopolitical gaze and the writing of space is contingent upon Cartesian perspectivalism, which differentiates “visual (sight) from the textual (cite),” and naturalizes a firm ontological boundary between active (masculine) subjects who can “see,” and passive (often portrayed as the feminine “Other”)<sup>20</sup> objects of observation who are defined and imbued with meaning (as “sites”).<sup>21</sup> Ó Tuathail’s historical analysis of the Balkan conflict de-centers the dominant Cartesian narrative that is promoted by Western foreign policy elites that portray Bosnia in particular as a passive “site” in need of external guidance. In this regard, Ó Tuathail argues that foreign policy “authorities of delimitation”<sup>22</sup> within the United States constructed two different scripts to represent Bosnia and disseminated each script at the respective temporal points in which the script most effectively served to justify both non-intervention (i.e., “the social production of distance by quagmire”) and intervention (i.e., “the social production of proximity by holocaust”).<sup>23</sup>

Debrix builds upon, and transcends, Ó Tuathail’s theorization of these representational strategies to argue that Bosnia was not simply scripted as a “quagmire” or “holocaust” for the purpose of US foreign policy aims. Instead, this scripting occurred at the level of simulation, as UN peacekeeping is simply a form of hyperreal diplomacy without a representational referent; it is a “self-generated force.”<sup>24</sup> In the postmodern setting, the ghost in the machine is replaced by deterrence machines, as simulation is “another tactical move mobilized to retrieve the real of representation which, however, has no other choice but to rely on machines and media, on a visual system of objects, to find meaning.”<sup>25</sup> As an illustration of this, Debrix maintains that UN peacekeeping has been displaced to other apparatuses like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Doctors Without Borders when necessary (to maintain the play of appearances when UN peacekeeping efforts “fail”), and he points to the Rwandan humanitarian crisis of 1994 as a prominent example of this process.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, in relation to the Balkan conflict, Debrix argues that the Serbs “had never really fallen for the UN’s trompe l’oeil games,” as demonstrated by their targeted destruction of safe zones in Bosnia.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on Timothy W. Luke and Ó Tuathail’s (1997) description of international governmental organizations (IGO) as “Ideological Governmentality Organizations,”<sup>28</sup> Debrix posits that institutional displacement illustrates how international organizations are interchangeable empty frameworks that both

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17 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 149.

18 Ibid, 210.

19 Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, 1st edition (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 17, 56 & 58.

20 Ibid, 56.

21 Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, 71.

22 Ibid, 88.

23 Ibid, 222.

24 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 21.

25 Ibid, 25.

26 Ibid, 158–159 & 215.

27 Ibid, 160.

28 Ibid, 123. Debrix cites Timothy W. Luke and Gearóid Ó Tuathail, “On Videocamerality: The Geopolitics of Failed States, the CNN International and (UN)Governmentality,” *Review of International Political Economy* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 709–33.

imagine and *image* global order, deferring attention away from the thoroughly constructed, virtual nature of “reality” through trompe l’oeil mechanisms like UN peacekeeping forces.<sup>29</sup> The UN operates at the level of simulation, as it is always already beyond responsibility, always already in a quest to recover a fictional “reality.”

By examining UN peacekeeping operations in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda, as well as surveillance strategies in North Korea and Iraq, Debrix demonstrates through a novel complication and application of the writings of Thomas Hobbes to international relations that in the post-Cold War era of international relations, a “New World Order” predicated on the “hegemonic discourse of neoliberal globalization” was formulated through a reordering of definitions and images that portray world politics as a realm driven by chaotic individual, atomistic choices – or a sum of particular wills – that requires an ordering mechanism to train these “atoms” (or state actors) how to manage themselves responsibly; a knight of La Mancha to tame the disorderly giants and model how they should govern themselves.<sup>30</sup> This reordering reinforces the marketizing logic of disciplinary neoliberalism and facilitates a process Byung-Chul Han refers to as the “smoothing”<sup>31</sup> of contemporary media, which “accelerates the circulation of information, communication and capital.”<sup>32</sup> As Hobbes argues, when the sovereign (“Leviathan”) aligns (or smoothens) and names the many, disparate interpretations of sensory stimuli by establishing common definitions, the possibility for conflict is minimized, since for Hobbes, the primary source of conflict and war stems from the poisonous root of misinterpretation.<sup>33</sup> As one of the virtual leviathans possessing a “will to UN-iformity”<sup>34</sup> in a seemingly “endless search for global order,”<sup>35</sup> the UN simulates definitions and images that coalesce into a smooth, “peaceful” plane of communication. Indeed, Debrix writes that “UN peacekeeping simulates a real landscape of ordered international politics, a New World Order,” through the multiplication of “the scenes of peaceful intervention and humanitarian assistance throughout the mediatically envisioned domain of international politics.”<sup>36</sup>

In relation to the “moralizing intentions” disseminated by international relations theory and US foreign policy scholars more broadly, Debrix problematizes Slavoj Žižek’s application of a Lacanian framework to the analysis of the Bosnian victim’s gaze. Specifically, Debrix argues that through this lens of the gaze of the victim, “it is always too late for the West, and the West goes on to carry the omnipresent burden of its inadequacies toward Bosnia.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Debrix writes that Žižek conveniently applies this Lacanian framework for the purpose of serving his own “moralizing intentions.” Different iterations of these moralizing intentions still characterize much of the scholarship on the US and Western Europe’s involvement (or lack thereof) in the Balkan conflict, as demonstrated by the writings of authors such as Samantha Power and Thomas Weiss. Power and Weiss continue to claim that the “failure” of the US and Western Europe to intervene in Bosnia instantiates the relative weakness of international institutions.<sup>38</sup> They argue that, initially, the US did not intervene because it had no vested interest in the region. Both scholars maintain that US intervention is explained by the international community’s production of shame-based commitments through the creation and normalization of the humanitarian responsibility to protect (R2P). Additionally, Power claims that NATO only intervened at the behest of the US after R2P emerged. Ultimately, these interventionist scholars hold that state sovereignty should be superseded by the responsibility of external actors such as the US to prevent human suffering.

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29 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 9.

30 Ibid, 58.

31 Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty*, trans. Daniel Steuer, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), 2.

32 Ibid, 10.

33 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 35.

34 Ibid, 57.

35 Ibid, 56.

36 Ibid, 21.

37 Ibid, 143.

38 See Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012) for reference.

In contrast to these interventionist, moralizing discourses in genocide and peacekeeping studies, there is also a burgeoning critical scholarship that acknowledges the role of ideology. However, this acknowledgment is often enmeshed within an economic framework that reduces ideology to a function of dominant class interests. Many scholars within this economic framework usefully highlight the material impact of simulation and *trompe l'oeil* games, and they argue that the United States' intervention in the former Yugoslavia (following the "failure" of the UN) was not purely driven by humanitarian concerns.<sup>39</sup> More specifically, scholars such as David Gibbs and Andrew Bacevich stipulate that US foreign policy elites instrumentalized the rhetorical façade of humanitarian intervention to solidify the US's position as a global hegemon and to justify the continued relevance of NATO in the post-Cold War era.<sup>40</sup> Though Bacevich in particular offers a compelling analysis of the impact of popular culture on the perpetuation of US militarism, US foreign policy scholars, more broadly, often do not fully account for the overarching role of disciplinary neoliberalism in gaining control over simulation through a play of appearances that facilitates institutional displacement from one empty framework to the next; from the UN peacekeepers to the US military to NATO.<sup>41</sup> As Debrix insightfully notes, this play of appearances is, in fact, not solely driven by the instrumental economic and political aims of any one country or group. Rather, UN peacekeeping and the smoothed production of world peace and order by other national and international institutional configurations are visual projections that are completely self-referential, as they "simulate a real landscape of ordered international politics" that is "more universal than superpowers' hegemonic schemes, more powerful than power politics itself."<sup>42</sup>

Debrix ultimately contends that disciplinary neoliberalism is the ignored dimension of simulation. By building on the writings of Louis Althusser, Debrix argues that "the simulated regime of UN peacekeeping is an 'interpellating' technique that hails sovereign states and other international organizations and individuals and business corporations into adhering to the mandates of disciplinary neoliberalism."<sup>43</sup> Today, the interpellating techniques and "post-warring" simulation strategies of disciplinary neoliberalism can be readily witnessed in the global mediascape with the proliferation of drone warfare and the YouTube videos that have emerged documenting these targeted killings, which have garnered millions of views.<sup>44</sup> These videos normalize drone warfare as a legitimate ordering force, and image the power of the US in a way that "smoothens" mass perception by going viral. Additionally, as demonstrated by the emergence of videos created by TikTok application users who pretend to be Holocaust victims who died at Auschwitz, the atomizing, marketizing logic of disciplinary neoliberalism constitutes individuals who rely on and define themselves in relation to images, even attempting to "simulate a situation [based on historical images]...to get views and go viral."<sup>45</sup> The virtual is still a visual force.

In regard to the state of critical world order studies and genocide studies, these research programmes continue to operate almost entirely at the level of representation and referentiality. If they do conceptualize ideology, it is through an economic frame that ignores how disciplinary neoliberalism is fundamentally intertwined with simulation. Perhaps, Matthew Sparke's *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State* most closely follows the impetus Debrix sets forth, at least within the *Borderlines* series, as

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39 See David Gibbs, *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009) and Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

40 Gibbs, *First Do No Harm*, 7.

41 Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 116–117.

42 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 21.

43 Ibid, 25.

44 Ibid, 14 & 21. This point was drawn from Jasbir Puar's discussion of drone warfare. In addition to her analysis of drone airstrikes in Palestine, Puar points to the writings of medical anthropologist Omar Dewachi, and specifically highlights the decimation of a Doctors Without Borders hospital in Afghanistan by U.S. drone airstrike. The decimation of this hospital demonstrates the fleeting nature of ordering institutional frameworks. See Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017), 91–92. Additionally, Derek Gregory speaks to the relationship between visuality and drone warfare. See Derek Gregory, "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7–8 (2011): 188–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027>.

45 Nicole Froio, "We Asked TikTokers Why They're Pretending to Be Holocaust Victims," *Wired UK*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/tiktok-holocaust-pov>.

Sparke critiques prominent post-foundationalist scholars for their hypocritical essentialization of geographical space.<sup>46</sup> Overall, there appears to be a continuation of idealist, functionalist, and neofunctionalist institutional discourses. Thus, Debrix's intervention remains compelling and relevant in a contemporary international environment that is rife with trite claims of "fake news." Such claims ring increasingly hollow in their desperation, and through increased frequency, only expose the futility of differentiating the real from the fictional; "Don Quixote has achieved his reality."<sup>47</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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46 See Matthew Sparke, *In the Space of Theory: Postfoundational Geographies of the Nation-State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

47 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 54.

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