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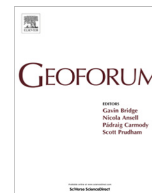

Remote sensing place: Satellite images as visual spatial imaginaries

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ABSTRACT

How do people come to know the world? How do they get a sense of place and space? Arguably, one of the ways in which they do this is through the practice of remote sensing, among which satellite imagery is one of the most widespread and potent tools of engaging, representing and constructing space. This paper argues that satellite imagery is not only a powerful means of gathering geographical and geopolitical information – for instance through overhead surveillance and the reconnaissance of sites considered suspicious – but is also decisive in producing geographical and geopolitical imaginations. Based on a discussion of the iconic satellite picture of the Korean Peninsula by night, this article shows how satellite imagery constructs – seemingly by itself – North Korea as a distant, foreign and secluded other place in world politics. Referred to in the paper as 'visual spatial imaginaries', remote sensing shapes how we imagine places, spaces and sites in what is widely believed to be a terra incognita of the world.

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1. Introduction

The practice of remote sensing is widespread in contemporary global politics. Literally meaning the acquisition of information about an object, place or phenomenon on the Earth's surface by means of distant observation, remote sensing – or what can also be called 'remote seeing' – is used by a range of actors including governments, militaries, international organizations, civil society groups, companies, scholars, journalists and artists. Images taken from (cameras and sensors mounted on) balloons, drones, planes and satellites are assumed to provide insights for purposes of, for instance, military surveillance and reconnaissance, environmental analysis and humanitarian operations. While these instruments of observation differ in their applicability, they reveal how the production of knowledge – be it military, geographical or environmental – is connected to, and created by, particular practices of looking. In other words, images taken from overhead devices are not illustrative, and therefore secondary, to knowledge but actually constitute knowledge in their own right. In this way, they participate in constructing both geographical information and geographical imagination.[1]

One of the most powerful and widespread tools of remote sensing is satellite imagery. Originally produced and used exclusively by nation-states, satellite images are now becoming increasingly available in the public domain. Regularly cited in news media around the world and made popular through, for instance, geospatial information services such as Google Maps and Google Earth, satellite imagery has entered the realm of everyday life. These images are, therefore, both powerful means of engaging (with) the world and an integral part of the processes of how we come to know spaces, places and sites. Satellite images, hence, are cases of what is called here 'visual spatial imaginaries', because they participate in the shaping of our awareness of areas, locations and territories.

A good example of this is the (satellite) photographs of Earth seen in Fig. 1. Such images of Earth have not only established a new practice of looking – the view from outer space (cf. Sachs, 1994; see also, Cosgrove, 1994) – but have also created and sustained the iconography of what is now known as the 'Blue Planet'. Based on visual data obtained by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which began producing and circulating pictures of what it has called the 'Blue Marble' since the 1960s, (satellite) images have been a central part of popular imaginations about the Earth as a fragile place of a unitary biosphere and coherent ecological system (cf. Siemer, 2007). It is no coincidence that, according to NASA, the image of the Blue Marble is the most popular and most downloaded item on its website – in contrast to, say, the specific climate- and/or environment-related imagery that forms part of NASA's main scientific portfolio (NASA Earth Observatory, 2012). The enormous popularity of the Blue Marble points to the effects that it unfolds: it does not necessarily produce geographical knowledge for people but rather fuels their geographical imaginations about a particular place: the globe.

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[1] The way in which the term 'geographical imagination' is used here not only evokes David Harvey's thinking – thus acknowledging the significance of space and place in the constitution of human life – but also rests on a broader notion which recognizes the processes of how people approach and appraise the world and its spaces (see also Schwartz and Ryan, 2003).

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Fig. 1. The Blue Marble – East. Image courtesy of NASA/Earth Observatory.

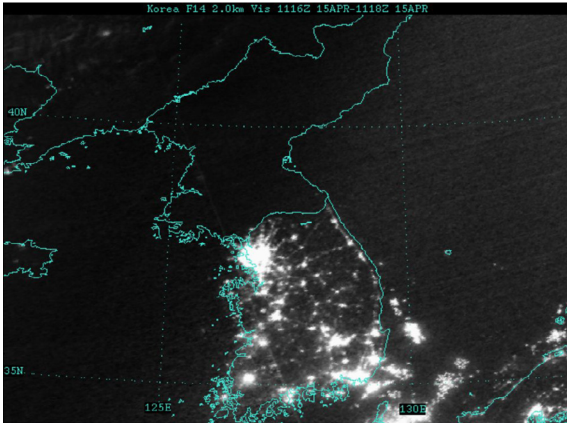

Fig. 2. A satellite image taken of the Korean Peninsula by night, I. Image courtesy of GlobalSecurity.org/John Pike.

This paper is driven by certain core questions: how do people get an idea of the world and its places, and how are our notions or senses of space and place constructed? It will be argued that satellite images are a crucial part of these processes. Furthermore, the spatial authority that they provide to 'speak' (about) places and spaces is arguably greatly enhanced vis-à-vis sites that are deemed secluded, concealed and obscure – none more so than in the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly known as North Korea. The vision provided by a satellite helps us to see and, therefore, to *know* how supposedly obscure places, sites and life 'really' look like on the ground. Against this backdrop, the paper will discuss one of the image motifs that plays a central role in shaping imaginative geographies about the country and its people: the satellite shot of the Korean peninsula by night (Fig. 2).

The following section explains what is unique and special about the case presented here. In doing so it engages with the relevant literature; it makes sense, as part of this, to turn in particular to – and build on – the similarly themed special issue of *Geoforum* from 2009 because therein, like in the present paper, questions of spatial politics and the imaginative dimension of the satellite gaze are brought to the fore (cf. Dodge and Perkins, 2009; see also, Aday and Livingston, 2009; Crutcher and Zook, 2009; Kingsbury and Jones, 2009; Parks, 2009; Perkins and Dodge, 2009). However, the analysis provided here goes beyond the scope of this special edition in that it takes the site of the image more seriously. Put simply, while the contributions to the themed issue treat satellite images rather as carriers of the message, this paper scrutinizes satellite images as the message itself. It asks what effect the image in question – that is, the night time representation of Korea – has as a result of being portrayed in this way. This has implications, elaborated in the concluding section, for geographers' use of satellite images, as such an approach raises the question of whether these pictures can be recognized and incorporated into one's own research as a distinct mode of meaning in their own right or whether they are nothing more than supplements, and therefore subordinate, to verbal or written texts. The following part also introduces the methodological criteria for discussing images, which are based on an interpretive analysis of both the image and its accompanying text.

2. North Korea: terra incognita sui generis

There are seemingly few states like North Korea in the contemporary geopolitical order. Often described as a 'mystery' (Scalapino, 1997), 'terra incognita' (Solarz, 1999) or 'enigma' (Halliday, 1981), North Korea captures people's geographical imaginations like no other country in the world. Because North Korea is (widely believed to be) politically unmapped, economically cut off and culturally secluded, articulations of difference play an important role in describing the spaces and spatialities of what is also commonly known as the most isolated place on Earth. Therefore North Korea appears to be a terra incognita sui generis; an uncharted land all of its own.

With that said, it seems a little bit surprising that (critical) geographers neglect this subject, turning instead and sometimes confining their academic interest solely to the United States' 'War on Terror' (see, for example, Amoore, 2007; Anderson, 2010; Dodds, 2007) or to the war in Iraq (see, for example, Gregory, 2010; Hyndman, 2007; Tuathail, 2003). Critical engagements with the subject of North Korea are currently virtually non-existent in geography/geopolitics studies. This paper is a first step towards remedying this disciplinary deficit.

One of the most recent examples of how North Korea remains unknown – or is rather unknowable – to the outside world are the statements made by high-ranking US government officials. During a session of the US Senate Armed Forces Services Committee in September 2010, Kurt Campbell, then Assistant Secretary of State, admitted that North Korea is a 'black box' and 'probably the hardest target we [the United States government] face in the global arena' (cited in Stewart (2010)). In April 2013, James R. Clapper, head of the US intelligence agencies, similarly confessed to the US government's lack of knowledge regarding North Korea. Reflecting a division in the appraisal of the US intelligence community about whether Pyongyang would be capable of shrinking a nuclear warhead to a size where it could be mounted onto a missile warhead, Clapper bluntly acknowledged in his testimony before the committee that the agencies 'lack uniform agreement on assessing many things in North Korea' (cited in Sanger and Choe (2013)).

What has become clear is that North Korea appears to be a place that defies closer scrutiny; representing something of a 'black hole' in contemporary geopolitics. Indeed, North Korea has been labeled in this way on many different occasions and in multiple contexts: it is a 'black hole' in terms of communication (Zeller, 2006), of its economy (Noland, 2012), of energy (Kim MK, 2009) and, as indicated above especially, of available intelligence (Sanger and Choe, 2013). It is no coincidence then that visual references pervade the various actors' approaches to North Korea: it remains unseen and is, moreover, hidden from view.

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