

# International Legal Sightseeing

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The phenomenon ‘international legal sightseeing’ denotes what we call the eventisation of international law.<sup>3</sup> We have become interested in how international law presents itself to ‘the public’, and in turn in what that public shows up for. We are struck by the participation of international courts and institutions in cultural activities and specifically in the presentation of international law’s institutional buildings as tourist attractions in their cities of residence. And we want to understand how international legal sightseeing fits with a managerial turn observed in law where justice becomes a product, citizens become consumers, and demands of transparency, accessibility and openness are translated into ‘logos, slogans, tags and mission and vision statements’.<sup>4</sup> International legal sightseeing as a distinctive phenomenon arises out of an exchange between audience and institution. We inquire into three components of this exchange: the spectacular, the everyday and the encounter.

As a spectacle, international law is presented both visually and dramatically. This component sits within a wider trend where ‘justice needs to be seen to be done’ to meet an appeal for legitimacy, accountability and transparency.<sup>5</sup> The spectacle of international law is as much a literal *seeing* of international law<sup>6</sup> as a dramatic invocation of ‘humanity’ as international law’s main constituency. International justice becomes sexy, glamorous.<sup>7</sup>

In juxtaposition to the spectacular, the everyday component draws attention to the mundane and trivial practices that legal sightseeing entails, both on the part of the institution and the audience. There is a growing interest in the everyday practices of

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<sup>3</sup> For some concrete examples, see [www.legalsightseeing.org](http://www.legalsightseeing.org).

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hutton, ‘Linguistic Landscape, Law and Reflexive Modernity’, in Wagner and Sherwin (eds), *Law, Culture and Visual Studies* (Springer 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Nobuo Hayashi and Cecilia M. Bailliet (eds), *The Legitimacy of International Criminal Tribunals* (CUP 2017); Andrea Bianchi and Anne Peters (eds) *Transparency in International Law* (CUP 2013); Jillian Dobson, ‘Mapping the Transparency Turn at the International Criminal Court’, (PhD thesis, VU Amsterdam forthcoming), on file with authors.

<sup>6</sup> Wouter Werner, ‘Justice on Screen: A Study on Four Advocacy Documentaries on the ICC’ (2016), 29 *Leiden Journal of International Law* 1043.

<sup>7</sup> Immi Tallgren, ‘Stardust of Justice? Celebrity in and by International Law’, research paper prepared for the Law and Society Association Annual Meeting 2018, on file with authors; Payam Akhavan, ‘Making Human Rights Sexy: Authenticity in Glamorous Times’ (*Harvard Human Rights Journal Blog*, 9 November 2012) <<http://harvardhrj.com/2012/11/making-human-rights-sexy-authenticity-in-glamorous-times/>> accessed on 25 June 2018.

international law and courts.<sup>8</sup> Their work entails more than producing legal documents and decisions but also includes, for example, organising formal and informal network events and marketing and communication activities. Of interest to this article is the daily practice of accommodating visitors. Visitors in turn use the space of legal sightseeing to display any variation of (un)expected practices, from gathering information for study assignments to taking selfies.

As an encounter, legal sightseeing entertains a physical component, where an audience journeys to meet an institution.<sup>9</sup> Institutions attract a multiplicity of audiences with different motivations for visiting an international legal site. Some visitors will attend a hearing with an interest in a specific case, while others might be largely unaware of what the legal work of their destination entails. Nor will all visitors be receptive to the efforts of institutions to communicate with them. We are interested in the (mis)match between intention and perception. To study legal sightseeing is to analyse a material interface between law and culture on which a hotchpotch of legal and non-legal actors engage and where the boundary between law and non-law fades.<sup>10</sup>

By studying the dynamics between visitors and institutions, we aim to get a better grasp of the international legal sightseeing phenomenon. The main question we ask ourselves is how legal sightseeing practices (re)produce and contribute to ‘popular’ narratives about international law. How do international legal institutions present their story to the public, how do they ‘brand’ themselves?<sup>11</sup> What do they (aim to) gain from this interaction? What do they hope visitors take away from their visit? And conversely, why do tourists go to such places? How do they experience their visit? How does it affect their view on international law? In this short article, we make a start in further articulating these questions by observing and describing one specific site of international legal sightseeing: the Peace Palace grounds in The Hague.

## I. The Peace Palace: A Legal Institution as Cultural Actor

The Peace Palace is the seat of the International Court of Justice (“ICJ”) and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. But besides its function as office and courtroom, many other things happen at this site. Recent activities include lectures, concerts,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ronald Niezen and Maria Sapignoli (eds) *Palaces of Hope: The Anthropology of Global Organizations* (CUP 2017); Tanja Aalberts and Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen (eds) *The Changing Practices of International Law* (CUP 2018); Jessie Hohmann and Daniel Joyce (eds) *International Law’s Objects: Emergence, Encounter and Erasure through Object and Image* (OUP 2018, forthcoming); Lianne Boer and Sofia Stolk (eds), *Backstage Practices of Transnational Law* (Routledge 2019, forthcoming); Sarah-Jane Koulen, ‘“Opaque Transparency”: Ethnographic fieldwork and International Criminal Justice’ (2018), paper on file with authors.

<sup>9</sup> See also Renske Vos ‘A Walk Along the Rue de la Loi: EU Facades as Front- and Backstage of Transnational Legal Practice’ in Boer and Stolk (eds), *Backstage Practices of Transnational Law* (Routledge 2019, forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> On this (fading) boundary, see Fleur Johns, *Non-Legality in International Law: Unruly Law* (CUP 2013); Luis Eslava, *Local Space, Global Life* (CUP 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Christine Schwöbel-Patel, ‘The Rule of Law as Marketing Tool: The International Criminal Court and the Brand of Global Justice’ in May and Winchester (eds), *Research Handbook on the Rule of Law* (Edward Elgar 2018).

nightly illuminated tours of the Peace Palace<sup>12</sup>, visits from high officials such as UN Secretary General António Guterres, and the filming of a Dutch TV programme ‘College Tour’, in which Guterres was interviewed by students.<sup>13</sup> During the annual ‘Just Peace’ festival, the Peace Palace is the setting for many activities celebrating international justice and its institutions, including ‘Hague Talks’<sup>14</sup>; an open-air screening of the film ‘Land of Mine’ in the palace gardens; tours during the ‘International Open Day’; and a daily carillon concert playing songs of peace by, among others, Händel and John Lennon. These activities are public in many ways. Events can be attended but can also be followed through live Tweets, live-streaming or recordings on YouTube and Facebook. The content of these activities are a mix between law, history and (popular) culture that is not easily disentangled.

Besides these special events, everyday life around the Peace Palace is partly public too. Tourists gather at the entrance gate to take pictures of the palace itself and to sit on the walls of the exterior garden to watch the site and eat an icecream. On the left, there is a door to the Visitor Centre, where one finds the security entrance to the garden, library, conference hall and palace (the official entrance gate only opens for authorised cars and special occasions), an information desk, a gift shop, and an exhibition space. Downstairs there are toilets, lockers and a wardrobe. Next to the entrance of the visitor centre, one can tie a personal wish for peace around a branch of a Wish Tree.

In the Visitor Centre, a free audio-tour available in ten languages<sup>15</sup> takes you through an exhibition of nine themed panels that display the history, present and future of the Peace Palace and the institutions that reside in its building. In the summer and winter, during recess, the Peace Palace itself as well as its gardens can be visited with a (paid) guided tour. The exhibition in the Visitor Centre and accompanying audio-tour and the dynamics of visual knowledge production at play<sup>16</sup> merit a separate article, but, briefly, phrases as ‘impressive books’, ‘beautiful seals’, ‘prestigious project’, and a ‘building as majestic as the idea of world peace’ stand out. One line from a video notes that the ‘greatest enforcement of this court is public opinion’, which is exactly what this exhibition attempts to influence. The information provided to visitors about these institutions in visual and textual forms contributes to the construction and distribution of a specific narrative about what international law is and does. Seemingly ‘trivial’ practices of institutions, such as providing guided tours and participating in cultural events, communicate and reproduce international law’s legitimacy claims. The other side of the coin is the reception and perception by the audiences, to which we now turn.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Past event: Peace Palace by Night’ (*Peace Palace*) <<https://www.vredespaleis.nl/peace-palace-by-night/?lang=en>> accessed 29 October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> ‘College Tour with Guterres’ (*Peace Palace*) <<https://www.vredespaleis.nl/college-tour-with-guterres/?lang=en>> accessed 29 October 2018.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Hague Talks: Setting Peace and Justice in Motion’ (*Hague Talks*) <<http://www.haguetaalks.com>> accessed 29 October 2018.

<sup>15</sup> English, Dutch, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Italian, Portuguese and German.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Ristovska, ‘Tackling Visual Knowledge: The Story of the Yale Visual Law Project’ (2017) 2 *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies* 145.

## II. Audience

While the Peace Palace is slightly removed from the centre of The Hague, it is a well-visited site featuring on many tourist guides' 'must-see' lists.<sup>17</sup> The website of the municipality even describes it as 'the most photographed building in The Hague'. The Palace is promoted not only as beautiful, but also as important and informative. The Peace Palace square is almost always crowded and many guides and websites advise to book tours well in advance. In sum, the Peace Palace is a popular tourist attraction. But how do visitors evaluate their experiences? And how does the socio-legal interaction take shape?

Visitors arrive in large groups by tour bus or by themselves on foot. Most visitors take a stroll around the small square in front of the palace and walk up to the gate. Almost all visitors take photographs. Only a segment of these visitors ventures inside into the Visitor Centre. Still, the lady at the reception desk estimates about 200000 visitors visit the Visitor Centre each year. Of which she guesses almost half opt for the audio tour or take interest in the exhibition. She further shares that visitors are extremely diverse and that some are actually unaware of the function of the Peace Palace, instead taking it to be a royal palace or a church.

The people that we encounter around the site are similarly diverse: retired couples, families, tour groups, young travellers, and incidental passers-by. A mother and daughter from India are interested to see the place for real that has featured in the news about the India v. Pakistan case before the ICJ. A girl from Moscow walked by this beautiful building by coincidence and stopped to take a photo; she asks what the building is. A young man has arrived too early for his first day at his new job across the road and is killing time by reading the information signs around the square. Two guys visiting from Greece are diligently taking photos of the Wish Tree and praise the audio guide that 'covers all the basics' in a short span of time, which is just as well as they plan to visit two more cities later today. Not a few visitors lament the impossibility of entering the Peace Palace during sessions.

An easy way to gain a quick overview of visitor experiences is to check online reviews. The Peace Palace stars a 4,5 out of 5 on TripAdvisor based on 1100 reviews.<sup>18</sup> A preliminary analysis of the 548 reviews written in English include the words 'beautiful' (201), 'impressive' (66) or 'amazing' (35) but also words as 'important' (58) 'informative' (42) and 'interesting' (147). Another recurring theme concerns references to its 'historic value' (223). And many visitors appreciated the fact that the exhibition was 'free' (149). Only a few negative responses mention that the visit was 'boring' (5), 'not worth it' (3), or 'can be skipped' (2).

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. 'Top 10 must-see van Den Haag' (*Den Haag*) <<https://denhaag.com/nl/must-see>>; 'Top things to do' (*Lonely Planet*) <<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/the-netherlands/the-hague/top-things-to-do/a/poi/360849>> both accessed 29 October 2018; Ineke Mahieu and Ad van Gaalen, *The Hague Highlights* (Seapress 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Retrieved from 'Peace Palace' (*TripAdvisor*) <[https://www.tripadvisor.nl/Attraction\\_Review-g188633-d319466-Reviews-Peace\\_Palace-The\\_Hague\\_South\\_Holland\\_Province.html](https://www.tripadvisor.nl/Attraction_Review-g188633-d319466-Reviews-Peace_Palace-The_Hague_South_Holland_Province.html)> accessed 10 January 2018.

While the building is praised for its beauty, fewer references are made to its legal function. ‘Law’ is mentioned 77 times. The comment that the palace is interesting for those who are interested in law recurs frequently, both in positive and negative ways. Where a user from Colombo notes that ‘[n]ot only to the law professionals, all of us should visit this place to understand the dynamics when it comes to states and state relations’, a reviewer from London mentions that ‘[t]his is only worth doing if you have an interest in law and want to see the rooms where the international court of justice sits.’

### III. Concluding Remarks

The interaction between international law and society has always been one that is both crucial and abstract to the project of international justice. Institutions such as the ICJ are endowed with a public function of serving a global community and they claim to foster and create internationally shared norms and values. This only makes sense if the work of these institutions is visible to this community; an ideal that is reflected by the institutions’ repeated commitment to transparency, outreach activities, and justice that is ‘seen to be done’. On the other hand, sites of international law are places where people work and where the visibility of institutions is produced and enacted through mundane practices and interactions. Areas of legal sightseeing provide a space for encounter between the abstract grand narrative of international law, its physical appearance and its audiences. But how much does the audience get to see, what is offered by the institution, and what is really seen? While this paper cannot provide the answers, it opens up opportunities for socio-legal research that take these interactions between international institutions and the public seriously.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For similar socio-legal approaches to international institutions, see for example Mikael Madsen, ‘Sociological Approaches to International Courts’, in Romano et al (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of International Adjudication* (OUP 2015); Sarah Nouwen, ‘As You Set out for Ithaka’: Practical, Epistemological, Ethical, and Existential Questions about Socio-Legal Empirical Research in Conflict’ (2017) 27 *LJIL* 227.