

# Pop Culture, huh, What Is It Good for? A Lot of Things, Actually

Written by Cahir O'Doherty

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CAHIR O'DOHERTY, OCT 25 2013

Popular culture has become an increasingly important and visible site for examining International Relations (IR). Dan Drezner's *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* and Cynthia Weber's *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* are just two of the most prominent examples of how popular culture is being utilised in theorizing IR. A recent article by Matt Davies explores the pedagogical potentials of using popular culture in teaching IR. This research area, often referred to as World Politics and Popular Culture, is attracting the interest of a growing number of IR scholars and students. Newcastle University has dedicated a Master's programme to it, and a book series and a yearly conference have been established to provide academic forums. The sixth World Politics and Popular Culture conference took place in Stockholm in September featuring thirty-seven people from several countries and from disciplines including Politics, Media Studies, Cultural Studies as well as cultural practitioners.

The benefits and importance of approaching popular culture when talking about world politics are multiplex. It can be used to make theory more accessible to students (instead of going in to the theoretical reasons behind Realism, you can say 'you know how in *Game of Thrones* the Lannisters use the anarchy of Westeros to maximise their power?'). It has been used as a tool to deepen securitisation theory;<sup>[1]</sup> and as a way of understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs and the close co-operation between the entertainment industry and the military<sup>[2]</sup>. It is functional in exemplifying how national identities are culturally constructed, and are reflected and shaped in mass produced and consumed cultural artefacts.

For instance, Dittmer uses the *Captain America* comic series to explore how American identity is culturally constructed, arguing that the character of Captain America literally embodies the common identity of the US.<sup>[3]</sup> In the recent cinematic incarnation of Captain America in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) we see that this identity construction process is still at work. Not only does the Captain embody the American spirit, but he also represents that narratives, ideals and iconography of America: from his star spangled uniform to the 'melting pot' group of allies that he constructs around himself.

War documentaries have been conceptualised as a way public opinion about war is constructed by creating 'public spheres' in which debates about a particular war can be articulated.<sup>[4]</sup> Documentaries further act as a medium in which images of war are disseminated.<sup>[5]</sup>

Further, increasing consumption of cultural media is a method used by protestors to convey their message to a wider audience. Paul Virilio argues that 'with their placards written in English, the protestors or Tiananmen Square or Red Square present the demonstration to us. And we, sitting and home, demonstrate with them.'<sup>[6]</sup> In his seminal article on the aesthetic turn in IR, Roland Bleiker contends that global politics is no longer the domain of state action, and that high politics is no longer prescribed by scholarly conventions<sup>[7]</sup>. This has influenced more recent turns towards understanding the symbiotic nature of popular culture and world politics. The aesthetic approach that Bleiker proposes does not merely seek to look at how culture has represented politics in a mimetic way, but rather recognises 'that the difference between the represented and representation is the very location of politics.'<sup>[8]</sup>

The idea that there is a difference between represented and representation that constitutes the very location of

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politics should not lead us to endorse a false dichotomy between world politics and popular culture, or what Matt Davies called 'the "real" politics / "imaginary" culture divide'. In a recent blog post Davies explores how it is easy to fall into the trap of imbuing politics with the seriousness of reality while simultaneously denigrating popular culture to a mere 'mirror' in which this reality is represented. Davies argues that this is 'an unhelpful and outdated understanding of culture as well as of international politics.'<sup>[9]</sup> This example demonstrates how 'imaginary' popular culture does not merely reflect the 'reality' of world politics, but rather that popular culture and world politics can be thought of as existing in a symbiotic relationship with one another.<sup>[10]</sup> Just as popular culture is dependent on political events which it can exploit for its narratives, so too is world politics dependent on popular culture as a source of tropes, narratives, imagery and language.

If we take it that culture function not merely as a mirror in which political events are narrativised and enacted in popular imaginations, but as a medium that, in itself, influences the way world politics is constructed, presented, and conducted, then we begin to open up really interesting avenues of understanding and research. Yet, in order to do so we have to take popular culture more seriously as a field of research in its own right. While anyone can watch a film, enjoy it (depending on the film), and get some degree of political sentiment out of it, it is not the case that everyone is naturally equipped with the tools, skills, and knowledge to fully 'read' cultural artefacts such as film. This echoes Monaco's assertion in the excellent book *How to Read a Film* that while 'it is not necessary to acquire an intellectual understanding of film in order to appreciate it – at least on the most basic level – an education in the quasi-language of film opens up greater potential meaning for the observer.'<sup>[11]</sup>

A useful approach that will help to overcome the problem of not necessarily having the skills to 'read' cultural artefacts is to engage more closely with the academic and critical literature on film theory and genre history. By equipping ourselves (political geographers and IR theorists and researchers) with the tools needed to analyse artefacts from a cultural point of view, we are much more able to exploit those cultural artefacts to their full extent. To take cinema as an example, understanding how a particular genre has evolved over time helps to situate contemporary artefacts within a broader tradition. By looking at the history of the war film, for example, we can perceive that contemporary films set in the War on Terror, such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008) do not always fit into the established generic conventions of a war film. Rather, it appears that action films such as the Marvel comic adaptations (*Captain America*, *Iron Man*, *Thor* etc.) contain more conventions that evolved from the war film, such as a mixed group of recruits, or a noble sacrifice, or military iconography, than films that are merely set during war time. While it is certainly possible to politically analyse films in isolation from their cultural-historic contexts, awareness of such contexts allows researchers to utilise cultural artefacts to their full potential. If we are aware of the historical conflicts that influenced current foreign policy decisions, why not also, as scholars of culture and politics, be aware of the historical films that influenced contemporary cinema?

Popular Culture and World Politics is beginning to emerge more in the discipline of IR, as demonstrated by the fact that popular culture is being taken more seriously by many academics as a way to conceptualise, discuss, and teach the political environment we live in today. However, in order to fully understand the cultural aspects of the study of Popular Culture and World Politics, it seems that the next stage is to engage critically and academically with cultural artefacts, cultural theory, and cultural history.

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**Cahir O'Doherty** is a second year PhD student in the Politics department at Newcastle University under the supervision of Dr Kyle Grayson and Dr Simon Philpott. The (provisional) title of his thesis is 'Conflict, Culture and Closure: The Intertext between Popular Culture and Security at the End of Wars.' His research seeks to answer the question 'how do political leaders use the tropes, narratives, and imagery of popular culture to create a sense of ending for conflicts whose end points are open to contestation' using the War in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, and the 2011 NATO Intervention in Libya as well as contemporary cinema.

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[1]Michael C. Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 525.

[2]James Der Derian, *Virtuous War : Mapping the Military-industrial-media-entertainment Network* (London: Routledge, 2009), 165; Georg Löffmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the Cinematic Production of National Security," *Critical Studies on Security* (2013): 1–15, doi:10.1080/21624887.2013.820015.

[3]Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 627; Weber also provides an excellent and more detailed analysis of how culture helps construct identity in Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[4]Patricia. Aufderheide, "Your Country, My Country: How Films About The Iraq War Construct Publics," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48, no. 2 (2007): 56, doi:10.1353/frm.2007.0010.

[5]Aufderheide, "Your Country, My Country."

[6]Paul Virilio, *Desert Screen*, trans. Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2002), 32.

[7]Roland Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (December 1, 2001): 524, doi:10.1177/03058298010300031001.

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[8]Ibid., 512.

[9]Matt Davies, "Teaching IR with Popular Culture," *e-International Relations*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/06/26/teaching-ir-with-popular-culture/>.

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[11]James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia: Language, History, Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 152.

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