

# The 'Cultural Turn' in International Relations: Making Sense of World Politics

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ES VAN VEEREN, MAY 10 2009

What do the Miss Universe competition, *Sesame Street's* Elmo, and Fox's television show *24* have in common? Aside from being phenomenally successful American cultural products, they can also offer us insight into the workings of world politics, in this case through their connections to the US military detention facilities at Joint Task Force Guantánamo. More specifically, these cultural artefacts reveal how Guantánamo is not only a site of world politics in the more conventional sense – its involvement in the war on terror, its position as a long-standing US military base, the contests over its international legal status, and its foreign policy implications – but is a site where political meaning is produced and reproduced in and through popular culture as the competition over its representation, framing, and memorialisation plays out. In short, these artefacts are part of an ongoing effort to determine how Guantánamo, and therefore world politics, comes to be understood.

As International relations has broadened and deepened over the last two decades, due in part to a 'cultural turn' in the discipline, the role of culture and cultural artefacts – practices and objects that we imbue with significance – has revealed more complex webs of power than the more traditional focus on states, state leaders, or state militaries. Whether culture is defined narrowly in terms of a collective identity along religious, racial, ethnic, gender or class lines, or more broadly in terms of the 'webs of significance' where meaning emerges from the connections made between objects, actions and people[1], international relations scholars are increasingly drawing on interdisciplinary sources for a deeper understanding of how culture helps to make the world go round. Crossovers with sociology, cultural and literary theory, media studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, history and anthropology have meant that new actors (such as military wives, celebrities, and activists), evidence (including videogames, photographs, blogs, and music), new methodologies (for example visual analysis) and therefore new questions have emerged that shed light on the complexities of the operations of power in international relations. In so doing, rather than the traditional top-down approach that focuses on the conference table or battlefield, cultural approaches to world politics have revealed the operations of power 'in the margins, silences, and bottom rungs'.[2] Culture and its associated practices and identities – from the way they are organized spatially, the material practices with which they are associated, and their articulations with other objects and ideas – are part of the fabric of our everyday lives and therefore both shape and are shaped by world politics. By focusing here on how three cultural artefacts have become part of the fabric of how we understand Guantánamo – in particular celebrity tourism, a children's television character, and the narrative trope of a ticking time bomb – how culture and world politics interconnect becomes clearer. These truths however are not limited to the discussion here, but of course apply more broadly to other aspects of culture and world politics.[3]

### Miss Universe: Celebrity Tourism and Representation

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, Miss Universe, accompanied by Miss USA, traveled to USN Guantánamo as part of a USO tour to entertain the troops and families stationed there.[4] In the course of her 5-day visit, Miss Universe was granted access to a tour of the facilities, posed for photographs, signed autographs and then blogged about it on the internet. In so doing, she engaged in a form of celebrity or diplomatic tourism: she was able to see, be seen, and then report back on the facilities in the same way that journalists and Congressional representatives have been doing since

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shortly after the facilities opened.[5]

Dayana Mendoza, Miss Universe 2008, and Crystle Stewart, Miss USA 2008, tour Joint Task Force Guantanamo's Camp 6, March 24, 2009. Source: JTF-Guantánamo, [www.jftgmo.southcom.mil](http://www.jftgmo.southcom.mil) [accessed 2 April 2009].

Like most visits to Guantánamo, this elite form of tourism was tightly controlled by the US military, consisting of a pre-programmed guided tour with stops at the hospital, a viewing site outside Camp 4 (to see but not speak to the 'compliant' detainees), the now disused Camp X-Ray site ('to see the weeds growing') and a 'tour cell' (a demonstration cell used exclusively for visits).[6] Through these escorted visits, what visitors are permitted to see, photograph and therefore (re)produce for those outside 'the wire' is strictly controlled in order to present Guantánamo as a modern, humane and transparent detention facility.

In other words, studying in this case tourist practices allows us to better understand and see the power at work to construct and promote particular representations of the site, and by extension the US military and the US as a whole.[7] This active construction of a particular representation of the US through 'cultural' practices is not unique to the war on terror however, but is an important part of the construction of any foreign policy 'reality' as others have shown with regards to the Cold War, including how Hollywood was used to help create an image of America as 'the leader of the free world' against the dangers of communism.[8] While the production, control and promotion of particular representations of Guantánamo and the war on terror – and therefore relevant to our understandings of world politics more broadly – these representations are also subject to challenge, and this is where Elmo becomes important.

## Elmo/Gitmo: Satire and Remediation

In June 2008, Elmo, a particularly beloved character from children's television show *Sesame Street*, underwent a transformation. Around the same time that the military commission was set to commence for Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the now infamous Al Qaeda operative who was tortured (specifically waterboarded) while in the custody of US forces at Guantánamo, a toy Elmo appeared on Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* (an immensely popular satirical news show in the US) as 'Gitmo', their 'man inside the wire' to report on what was happening. Aside from the potentially over-the-top racialisation of Gitmo, which some have taken offence to, Gitmo has been enormously popular and continues to return to the show.

Source: *The Daily Show*, 2008, [www.thedailyshow.com](http://www.thedailyshow.com) [accessed 2 April 2009].

What Gitmo does, as a clever remediation on the Sesame Street character Elmo, is to help change the ways in which Guantánamo is memorialized. While the US military and administration have focused significant resources on constructing Guantánamo, the war on terror, and the US in a particular light, this satirical move, using the juxtaposition of a cultural icon with the harsh conditions of the detention facility, creates the ridiculous.[9] In so doing, Elmo/Gitmo becomes part of the social context in which official representations must work, in which the utterances and actions of decision-makers must 'make sense'. Satire and other forms of remediation, such as anti-Guantánamo street protest theatre, guerilla art by artists such as Banksy, and films such as *Harold and Kumar*

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*Escape from Guantánamo Bay* produce and reproduce Guantánamo. They also become things we think with and think through in order to make sense of the world, adding to the overall contest over how we understand the politics of the site.

## The Ticking Time Bomb: Intertextuality and the Production of Common Sense

Finally, Fox television's hit show, *24*, has become associated with Guantánamo, the war on terror, and world politics, not necessarily through celebrity visits to the site or through remediations but through important moments of intertextuality between the 'fiction' of the show and the 'reality' of the war on terror. In particular, the show which was made famous for its graphic and frequent depictions of torture was cited as a direct source of inspiration for harsh interrogation methods used on detainees.[10]

Promotional poster for Season 7 of *24*, 2009. Source: Fox Television, [www.fox.com](http://www.fox.com) {accessed 3 April 2009}.

But more than that, by looking more closely at the discourses associated with *24* and with the war on terror, the interconnections operate in a number of ways on a number of different levels: including through explicit references from one set of texts to another (former Department of Justice Lawyer John Yoo who authored the 'torture memo' cited an example from *24* as justification for torture); and through the existence of common narratives or tropes used in the texts (the 'ticking time bomb' scenario which is used to justify torture is a common feature of both texts). The interrelated representations produced by these texts therefore interact to constitute a frame of meaning which, through repetition, comes to be identified as 'common sense'. [11] In this case, rendition, torture, indefinite detention, or 'whatever it takes' as associated with Guantánamo became normalised to the point where their use was advocated publicly by US officials.

By both constituting and drawing on the same (re)presentations of 'reality', the intertextuality of popular culture and world politics helps to make the world intelligible, pre-orienting consumers and allowing them to make meanings, to read and therefore respond 'in some ways rather than others.' [12] The same argument can be made with regards to the current financial crisis. Culture – whether corporate advertising, news media, real estate brochures, or television shows – have helped produce a common sense when it comes to financial matters that cannot be explained by traditional state-centric International Relations alone. [13]

As Jutta Weldes has argued the 'low data' of culture should be considered as relevant to the study of international

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relations as the 'high politics' of states as they are all part of the construction, promotion, contestation and transformation of world politics, providing a backdrop of meaning 'for elites and public alike'.<sup>[14]</sup> Whether watching television, reading about favourite celebrities, or touring whilst on holiday, the interconnections of these action with world politics are inescapable. Meaningful politics is produced in a variety of sites and the extent of this must be appreciated for a better understanding of the complexities of world politics.

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[1] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973) p. 4.

[2] Enloe, Cynthia. 'Margins, Silences, and Bottom Rungs: How to Overcome the Underestimation of Power in Study of International Relations', in *The Curious Feminist*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 19-42.

[3] Even the humble bar of soap, and the associated practice of cleaning, is often produced internationally, infused with a brand, most often exotic, and inescapably tied to notions of civilization. See discussions in Ashenberg, Katherine. *Clean: An Unsanitised History of Washing* (London: Profile Books, 2008); Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002); McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[4] The politics of the USO and of the Miss Universe competition are of themselves also interesting as sites of world politics, not limited to the politics of militarization at gender at work.

[5] While in this case of diplomatic tourism encouraged by the US military led to substantial controversy as the Miss Universe/Miss USA visit prompted more questions over the rights of the detainees not to be paraded for "public curiosity" under the Geneva Conventions.

[6] Journalist David Rose described his experience of these guided tours as Potemkin-like. Rose, David. *Guantánamo: America's War on*

*Human Rights*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p.55. See also extensive coverage by *Miami Herald* reporter, Carol Rosenberg.

[7] Debbie Lisle in particular has written extensively on the politics of tourist practices. See for example: 'Humanitarian Travels: Ethical Communication in Lonely Planet Guidebooks', *Review of International Studies*, Special Issue on 'Cultures and Politics of Global Communication', 34, 2008, pp. 155-172; *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); 'Gazing at Ground Zero: Tourism, Voyeurism and Spectacle', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 8:1, January 2004, pp. 3-21; 'Site Specific: Medi(t)ations at the Airport' in Cynthia Weber and Francois Debrix, eds., *Rituals of Mediation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) pp. 3-29.

[8] Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Regan Era*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) and Fousek, John. *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Campbell, David. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Weldes, Jutta. *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999),

[9] Brassett, James. 'British irony, global justice: a pragmatic reading of Chris Brown, Banksy and Ricky Gervais.' *Review of International Studies*, 35:01, 2009, pp. 219-245. For discussions of remediation see Weber, Cynthia and

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Francois Debrix, eds., *Rituals of Mediation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and Weber, Cynthia. 'Popular visual language as global communication: the remediation of United Airlines Flight 93.' *Review of International Studies*, 34:S1, 2008, pp. 137-153.

[10] Sands, Philippe. 'Torture is illegal – and it never works: Jack Bauer and 24 were hugely popular with interrogators at Guantánamo. Let's hope the new series is more realistic', *The Guardian: Comment is Free*, 24 November 2008. Available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/nov/24/torture-jack-bauer-24-redemption>, [accessed 3 April 2009].

[11] In the Gramscian sense, see Rupert, Mark. "Antonio Gramsci" in Edkins, Jenny, and Nick Vaughan-Williams. *Critical Theorists and International Relations*. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 183.

[12] Weldes, Jutta. 'Globalisation is Science Fiction', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 30, 2001, p. 649.

[13] See for example Hooper, Charlotte. *Manly States*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) for a discussion of the interconnections between *The Economist*, international relations and identity.

[14] Weldes, Jutta. 'High Politics and Low Data: Globalization Discourses and Popular Culture,' in Dvora Yanow & Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds) *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2006) pp. 176-186; *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).