Interview – Jason Dittmer

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Jason Dittmer is Professor of Political Geography at University College London. His previous research explored the role of popular culture in geopolitics, with projects on nationalist superheroes and American evangelical thought. His current research explores the role of materiality in geopolitics through assemblage theory, focusing on topics from military heritage to diplomacy to Gibraltar. His monographs include *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero* (Temple University Press, 2013) and *Diplomatic Material* (Duke University Press, 2017). His most recent book is the second edition of *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), co-authored with Daniel Bos.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Get into the sea. That's my advice. There is so much interesting work going on right now looking at the oceans, which have been long neglected in political geography and international relations. I'm particularly inspired by Kim Peters and Phil Steinberg on 'wet ontology', which asks us to think anew about politics, theorising it from the sea (looking towards land) rather than from the land (looking towards the sea). The materiality of the sea makes intelligible some of the more esoteric elements of new materialist thought (forces, currents, etc.) but also de-centres the terrestrial in a way that opens up other spaces for geopolitical consideration. For instance, my PhD student Will Stewart is thinking through the geopolitics of the International Space Station, working through the politics of zero-G spaces, and so on. So many horizons are opening up, and it's exciting to see where people will take them.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Well, I can think of two real big shifts in my mindset over the course of my career. I started out as a straightforward IR scholar, even at one point considering going into the U.S. State Department. But when I was in graduate school studying political geography (circa 2001), I read David Campbell's *Writing Security* and it blew my mind. I can still remember the place I was sitting when I read the introduction, and how it felt. This sent me down the path of discourse analysis, and eventually I discovered the project of Critical Geopolitics and I found my first home. Discovering Critical Geopolitics right around the time the War on Terror was beginning was such a key conjuncture for me; I was reading people like Gerard Toal, Jennifer Hyndman, Klaus Dodds, Jo Sharp, and Simon Dalby for my PhD work and then watching the news and seeing the relevance in real-time.

The other big shift in my thinking came at the end of my project on Captain America (circa 2013) and nationalist superheroes, which was the apotheosis of the thinking about discourse and representation I had begun in graduate school. I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the argument – then *de rigueur* in the battle of Critical Geopolitics against more environmentally determinist approaches to geopolitics – that geography was nothing but representation. While this of course was an important corrective, it sat oddly with contemporary debates around climate change, in which material processes were obviously crucial. It was around this time I started reading work by William Connolly, which foregrounded affect and materiality in ways that spoke to what I felt I was missing. I also came upon Manuel DeLanda, Elizabeth Grosz, and other new materialists at this time and those literatures wove together in a way that helped me think about what a geopolitics might look like that was both attentive to representation *and* incorporated materiality in ways that avoided the determinism of the past. And I'm still trying to

think that through today.

How can the study of international relations be informed or complemented by that of your main discipline, geography?

That is a big question. I want to start by saying that there is a lot of good work in IR that does the kinds of things I am now going to attribute to Geography. But what I think a geographic sensibility (whether wielded by a geographer or an IR scholar) brings to research is the genealogy of Geography as a field-based discipline. While Geography has most definitely got theoretical chops, there always remains an interest in how things occur *in situ*. Politics doesn't just happen, it unfolds in specific spaces and places and those spaces and places are integral to the politics. To be fair, IR frequently includes this kind of sensibility, most obviously in recent work on practices, for instance. It's also why I was drawn to Diplomacy Studies – it's one area where the state is approached in an empirical, grounded fashion. I'm sure there are others.

Your book *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* was the first textbook to survey the relationship between popular culture and international relations from a geographical perspective. What prompted this project?

Honestly, the story is pretty boring. I wanted to teach a class on popular culture and geopolitics because I thought students would really enjoy it, and there wasn't a textbook. I never expected anyone else to use it and I was surprised to see it find a niche afterwards. One of the most gratifying things about that book was the number of people from different disciplines who wrote to me to say that they were using it – Media Studies, IR, Geography, Cultural Studies, and so on. From that project I took the lesson that if you have a problem or are thinking through something, others probably are too, even if you haven't met them yet. So design a solution to your problem and with a publisher's help, you might solve someone else's problem too! When I originally wrote it, I had a little joke in there in that I started it with a 'Preface to the First Edition', a show of bravado that really masked my disbelief that I had a contract to write it at all. It was very gratifying to write the second edition with Daniel Bos, and to get to follow up with a 'Preface to the Second Edition'. That second edition also let us incorporate some of the more recent thinking on materiality and affect, which is so crucial to the politics of popular culture.

How has the relationship between popular culture and international relations evolved in recent years, and how do you think it will evolve in the coming decades?

That's another big question. It is possible to answer this in multiple ways, depending on what one means by 'popular' culture and of course also what you think 'international relations' means. I think my approach to answer would be to say that 'evolution' is an apt turn of phrase, because like evolution something new is always forming but the old often remains as well, at least for a while. I think there is a style of popular culture study – informed by Marxist views of culture, among other sources – which looks for hidden ideologies in popular culture texts, and tries to expose them to the light of day (and critique). In IR, this often takes the form of showing how pop culture 'reflects' this or that paradigm, or US hegemony, or whatever. That focus on *reflection*, however, undermines our understanding of how power circulates and is instantiated in any given place and time. If it merely reflects the 'real', then there is really no point in critiquing popular culture. Rather, if we understand those representations and affects as one of several circuits of power through which US hegemony, or whatever, is produced, then it becomes worthy of critique. By way of example, Captain America isn't just a symbol of American nationalism and so on but is a forum through which writers, artists, and fans negotiated the relationship between legitimate violence and American liberalism over time. This kind of work continues, and absolutely should. However, there is a danger of simply reiterating the same kinds of critiques about the same kinds of media.

More recently, I think we have seen a shift from a focus on media artefacts to a focus on everyday practices. That is, instead of thinking of popular culture in the sense of corporate products meant for mass consumption, we might think about popular culture as a set of doings, as the lifeways of everyday people. This opens up wholly new ideas about power, agency, and the 'where' of popular culture. That is, we are all doing it, all the time. A more rhizomatic, perpetually-in-flux world awaits our analysis, surging with affects and teeming with practices. The problem with this is

methodological; how do we get at this world? How do we analyse power in such a transversal environment? These are real challenges – I do not deny it – but they are necessary questions to answer. And questions like this often don't interest scholars who are drawn to the subject of popular culture by their own media pleasures and fandoms. So we shall see what the future holds – I certainly think there is room enough for scholarship that is media-centric and also scholarship that looks at the scale of the everyday as the basis of political life.

How do you define 'performative consumption' of popular media, and how does it impact our understanding and practice of international relations?

Well, this kind of gets at my last point. One stage in the evolution of popular culture studies is a shift from analysis of texts to analysis of audiences. The point of this shift is to recognise that meaning is not embedded in media, but is produced via practices of audiencing. It is a crucial point! Different people interpret texts differently, based on their own life experiences, the contexts of viewing, and so on. But performative consumption – a concept I learned about from Matt Hills – highlights that every act of media consumption is *also* a re-telling. That is, if I watch *Avengers: Endgame*, I am consuming it. But then when I talk about it later with someone, I am re-telling and re-mixing the story, adding in my own interpretations and so on. That person perhaps watches the film, with their viewing already shaped by my comments on it, and so on. So we shouldn't think of a specific act of audience reception as the endpoint of a media artefact, rather it is a lily pad on which processes of cultural production alight for a moment before moving on in a constant becoming otherwise. So where is power in this cultural economy? Is it Disney, the maker of *Avengers: Endgame*? Is it me, ruining my friend's future viewing through my spoilers and lame jokes about how you should never wear white time travel suits after Labor Day? The answer is yes, that is all power.

How does comic book visuality differ from other forms of media as a vessel of nationalism?

Well, I'm not sure it does. I've studied comic books as a nationalist medium because of my specific interest in the superhero as an embodiment of the nation, and the role that comic books had in the emergence of superheroes. To tell the story briefly, superheroes emerge in comic books because of the importance of the visual to the genre. The 1930s were the period (at least until recently) in which Western culture was most fixated with fascism and the cult of the Strong Man, both of which are clearly embedded in the formula of the superhero genre. And of course in the 1930s the special effects were not very special; drawing a man lifting a tank was a lot easier than trying to film one doing the same. So comic books become the preeminent venue (but not the only one, obviously) for telling superhero stories, at least until CGI really allows for superheroes to take over the box office in the early 2000s. There are of course many other types of stories that can be told in comic books besides superhero ones.

I have done some thinking about the specific visual form of graphic narratives, like comic books, and how they use juxtaposed spaces to produce narrative. I think some of the more experimental uses of the form – I'm thinking of artists like Chris Ware, for example – has real political potential, or at least pushes us to think of the world as fragmented and always in need of re-formation through our practices. But that is perhaps my most culturally esoteric research project thus far and perhaps the least interesting to IR scholars.

What is the impact of new media on distributions of power throughout societies?

Oh wow – you're hitting me with the big questions again. This is an almost impossible one for me to answer, in part because of my geographer's affinity for the grounded and the empirical. I think I would reply with questions of my own: Which media? Which societies? What kinds of power? There is a lot of punditry and scholarly commentary on the rise of populism, social media companies, algorithms, fragmentation and conflict, and so on. Certainly, I think those things have the ring of truth about them. But I also think that how power unfolds in a specific situation depends on a whole range of variables that are locally mediated. Is TikTok the same as Twitter? Nope. Do social media in China work the same way they do in the United States? Obviously not. If this sounds like I'm refusing to answer the question, you have excellent hearing. Within 'new media' exist a whole range of very unique assemblages, and my suggestion would be that anyone reading this should ignore whatever someone like me might say, pick one of those assemblages, and study it in its baroque specificity.

In your book *Diplomatic Material: Affect, Assemblage, and Foreign Policy*, you argue that the international community is less about a convergence of states than of media, things, people, and practices. In what context has this view emerged?

Well, I suppose you could say my line of approach there came from my focus on thinking about the impact of assemblage thinking on the political, and in particular on the state. There is a lot of work thinking about the state as an assemblage; it is very easy to envision a bureaucracy as an assemblage, especially when there is someone leading it. But I kept wondering why we stopped there. In fact, if we focus on the 'relations' in international relations it becomes very easy to imagine the world of states as a diplomatic assemblage, composed of various vectors, and surging with various forces. This is too a limiting focus – we should be bringing in the non-state, the quasi-state, the insurgent forces – but for one book it seemed enough. So I began with a thought experiment: leaving aside 'traditional' diplomacy, what are the ways in which states are constantly in relation with one another, in an everyday sense? What are the material infrastructures that they share, and which might serve as a vector for affects that shape foreign policy? In short, how could we take some of the insights about everyday geopolitics, media, and affect and apply them to the 'elite' context of foreign policy formulation? The answers I came up with – military interoperability, intelligence cooperation, diplomatic infrastructures of communication from paper to the secure video link – are surely just the tip of the iceberg. But I think they reveal a new way of thinking about international relations, one that doesn't displace traditional diplomacy, but rather lays it alongside all these other material and embodied relations that compose the world of states.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Don't lose your sense of humour. You're going to need it.