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Teaching IR with Popular Culture

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MATT DAVIES, JUN 26 2013

It is a safe bet that the film version of *World War Z*, opening in theatres in June 2013, will occasion some reflection on zombies in studies of International Relations. After all, zombies have been fodder for quite a bit of writing on the relations between politics, especially international politics, and popular culture, from Daniel Drezner's *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, or his blog posts in *Foreign Policy*, to various articles and blogs here on the e-IR website (see Berger or Grayson) and elsewhere (see Gaston Gordillo's excellent post). Max Brooks asserts that his book, on which the film is based, was the result of extensive research into geopolitical issues, government emergency response plans, and military tactics and weapons – rendering the novel a contribution to thinking about International Relations in its own right.

Many of the studies of popular culture and international politics – not just Daniel Drezner's influential book, but also Cynthia Weber's important text book on International Relations theory – set out with a pedagogical intent. They assume, explicitly or implicitly, that students are fluent in the vernacular of popular culture and that translating specialist, arcane versions of International Theory into that vernacular gives students a better chance of making sense of the background assumptions and the stakes involved in theorizing international politics.

The idea that “real” international relations could be reflected in the mirror of popular culture rests on an unhelpful and outdated understanding of culture as well as of international politics – at least, that's what Kyle Grayson, Simon Philpott, and I argued in our 2009 article, “Pop Goes IR?” We found that the tendency to assume that international politics and popular culture are separate and that international politics has priority and more gravitas was shared by most of the proliferating studies in IR that have looked to popular culture. We argued instead that international relations and popular culture lie along a continuum and that to treat artefacts of popular culture as illustrations of international politics strips the popular and the cultural of the politics they produce and express.

This approach – to treat popular culture as a specific way of theorizing world politics that yields specific and different insights into international relations – lay behind our establishing a postgraduate course at Newcastle University, an MA in World Politics and Popular Culture. However, in our own practice, we were then faced with an immediate problem: how would we teach international politics without falling into the “real” politics / “imaginary” culture divide that we had criticised? We could, and did, put aside the assumption that students are fluent in popular culture and assumed instead that they needed to develop critical analytical skills to understand what popular culture is and how it works. I think this was a better starting point but in effect we rendered popular culture into an arcane discourse as impenetrable to the uninitiated as IR theory can be.

We were, and remain, happy with the syllabus, which sets out to read the international as a kind of ordering of social and political life in the laws and the bodies at play in cricket, in the visual and aural content of rap music and punk rock, in the organisation of urban space by memorials, and so on. Students have found the material challenging and entertaining. But the analytical distance we created had reduced the students' fluency in the material, at least in seminar settings, and thus made the *practices* of world politics that we wanted them to recognise in their own lives more difficult to see and understand.

We began to work on a solution to this pedagogical problem with David Mutimer at York University. With the cooperation of our respective institutions, David organised and presented a cognate seminar to ours and we

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scheduled our respective seminars so that they could be held jointly, via video-link. Students from York and students from Newcastle worked together on presentations and projects and discussed assigned material together each week in open discussions during our seminars. We all found that, perhaps due to the extra effort needed to communicate across five time zones in and out of seminar, the students all raised their games and gave a good deal to each other and to the seminars, which may have helped make difficult ideas more accessible. But crucially, the fact that the students were practically engaged in international relations through the video-linking of the seminars themselves was not lost on them.

The pedagogical and theoretical issues raised by teaching international relations through popular culture remain pressing matters for us. Connecting students from different university settings in the framework of close, focused seminar discussions has helped to highlight some of the practical connections between theory and pedagogy in world politics and popular culture. Given the growing popularity (!) of the use of popular culture artefacts in studies of IR and in the teaching of IR, we would be keen to hear about your experiences – successful as well as those experiments that have not worked out – in the comments below.

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