

Popular Geopolitics and the 'War on Terror'

Written by Klaus Dodds

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KLAUS DODDS, MAY 10 2015

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Within weeks of President George W. Bush announcing that the United States and its allies would initiate a 'War on Terror', academics and journalists were reflecting and speculating on what role the entertainment industry and popular culture might play in this enterprise. In November 2011, for example, a widely reported 'Beverly Hills Summit' was held in which it was suggested that representatives from film and television companies offered their assistance to presidential special advisor, Karl Rove (cited in Stockwell 2005). This 'offer', historically speaking, was not unusual in the sense that there is a long record of Hollywood acting (see Robb 2004), producing and promoting films either supportive of the United States and its material and ideational interests or collaborating closely with government departments such as Defense and the CIA on particular film projects (e.g. *The Longest Day* [1961] and *Animal Farm* [1954], respectively).

In the past, presidents, such as ex-Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan, appeared to understand that Cold War geopolitics could be assembled and reproduced in filmic terms. When President Reagan described[1] the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire' in 1983, commentators were swift to detect thinly disguised parallels with the *Star Wars* franchise. The Soviet leadership as proverbial 'Darth Vaders' and their armed forces represented as latter-day storm troopers (however awkward, given heavy Soviet losses against Nazi German forces in the Second World War) appeared to fit comfortably with a presidential narrative littered with references to 'freedom', 'forces of evil', and a 'struggle' for the future of the world. And to cap it all, a so-called Strategic Defence Initiative (involving a space-based weapons system) was termed 'star wars'. Reagan's dress, speech and demeanor were attuned and attentive to popular cultural references. He dressed and acted the part of statesman, cowboy, commander in chief and folksy everyday man. He quoted lines from Clint Eastwood movies and other films, including *Rambo: First Blood* (1982). Films such as *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Top Gun* (1986) can be identified as the archetypical Reagan movie fantasy – young, white, muscular, heterosexual American men (and all those characteristics matter) flying their technologically sophisticated planes and shooting down enemy pilots and/or rescuing missing Vietnam POWs.

When, in May 2003, President George W. Bush piloted a plane and landed on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, observers noted striking similarities with *Top Gun* (for a good summary, see Rich 2007). One reading of *Top Gun* and its ilk is that the 1980s techno-thriller was a popular geopolitical response to the humiliation of the 'failure' of Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Unable to defeat Vietcong forces in the jungles of South East Asia, these films and their actors with their 'hard bodies' (as Susan Jeffords 1994 noted many years ago) perform a redemptive role – a new generation of men battling and overcoming adversaries in new places such as the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and even South East Asia. After posing in his flying suit, President Bush changed into his dark suit and announced that combat operations were complete in Iraq, following an invasion in March 2003. Even if his pronouncement proved to be rather over-optimistic, the stagecraft and statecraft were intriguing; his landing and performance were timed to coincide with peak TV news hours and the aircraft carrier in question was stationed off the Californian coastline. And to add extra zest, a banner with 'mission accomplished' was hung from the control tower of the aircraft carrier.

So far, we have two themes running through this introduction – first, presidents and governments have encouraged a

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close relationship with public entertainment industries. Governments facilitate, fund and at times discipline producers of film, radio, television programmes. There is a political economy to the movie business, and writers such as James Der Derian (2009) have spoken of the military-industrial-media-entertainment network. Hollywood producers, writers and actors who bore the brunt of Cold War 'Red Scares' in the 1940s and 1950s could affirm the disciplinary role of the federal government, as they were humiliated, jailed and harassed for 'anti-American' activities (Robb 2004, Fattor 2014). But governments have also worked closely with the entertainment industry to produce and circulate sponsored films, television programmes and latterly video games (e.g. *America's Army*). More recently, states and governments can and do block internet search engines and monitor and regulate content of all sorts. Second, as our *Top Gun* example suggests, geopolitics might be understood in a more co-constitutive role; so rather than simply regarding popular culture including film as 'reflecting' or 'representing' the real-world of Cold War geopolitics, we might see it as having a more co-productive role. Should we think of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 as a quasi-war movie, and the then search and later killing of Osama Bin Laden as a 'quest' movie? And as scholars of film in particular understand, genre brings with it rules, norms and expectations in terms of characterisation, narrative arc and denouement.

What follows is a brief exposition of some of the intellectual underpinnings of this interest in how popular culture and world politics constitute one another. Relevant literature in critical geopolitics and IR is noted, as the article explores three themes that address this overarching concern, namely the representational logics of popular cultural texts, the emotional and affect-laden qualities of popular culture, and the intertextuality of sources. Finally, a brief mention is made of audience consumption and the varied ways in which texts are engaged with.

Popular Geopolitics

Over the last two decades, geopolitics has undergone a substantive transformation and a new academic field called 'critical geopolitics' has consolidated itself in the discipline of Geography and beyond. Strikingly, some of this literature bears similarities with a parallel endeavour in International Relations (IR) to explore, in particular, the relationship between popular culture and world politics (for example, Bleiker 2001, Weber 2006, Shepherd 2013). More recently, these strands have been brought into conversation with one another, and journals such as *Critical Studies on Security*, *E-IR*, *Geopolitics* and *Political Geography* have been important sites for these intellectual encounters. Recent articles by David Grondin (2014),^[2] Matt Davies (2013)^[3] and Cahir Doherty (2013)^[4] convey well some of the debates and even controversies regarding IR's engagement with popular culture.

Popular geopolitics owes a great deal to the pioneering work of political geographer Joanne Sharp – in particular, her study of *Reader's Digest* and the ways it constructed the Cold War Soviet Union as 'Other' (Sharp 2000). By focusing on the textual and visual elements of this monthly magazine, she considered how the Soviet Union was conceptualised as a particular kind of place governed by a series of Communist Party-led regimes, intent on spatial expansionism, the domination of place and ideological struggle across the globe. Much of the subsequent work, especially in the 1990s, was tackling the absolute neglect in traditional geopolitical research of the popular and the everyday. A distinction was drawn between what was termed the formal geopolitical reasoning and practices of academics, the practical geopolitics of governments and political leaders, and the popular geopolitics to be found in media outlets such as film and television. What dominated research proceedings was an interest in speeches and textual sources, with an abiding concern for how popular geopolitical sources ended up naturalising and legitimising the practical geopolitical narratives and identities of governments such as the United States.

Later work, mostly informed by feminist geopolitical scholarship (e.g. Weber 2006 and Shepherd 2013), has critiqued this focus on the textual and media sources such as Hollywood films and video games. Instead, emphasis was placed on other registers such as the everyday, the local, the household, the embodied, and the politics of emotion such as fear and hope (Moore and Shepherd 2010). This has encouraged a new generation of scholars in the 2000s onwards to re-direct the attention of popular geopolitics away from an interest in textual analysis per se towards a vein of research concerned with how individuals and communities are embedded and affected by geopolitical sites, relations, objects and networks (Dodds, Kuus, and Sharp 2013). Some of this might appear banal, mundane and barely noticed, but as some feminist scholars note, the declaration of a war on terror had profoundly different consequences for people depending on class, gender, race, sexuality, and so on (Puar 2007). A popular geopolitics

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of the war on terror would take account of the embodied experiences and the manner in which emotions such as fear have played in the past, and continue to play in the present, a vital role in creating and sustaining what we might call 'popular geopolitical atmospheres', in which some people are judged to be more suspicious, more dangerous and more worrisome than others. Popular sources such as film and television still play an important role in feeding and nourishing those geopolitical atmospheres and anxieties.

Televising and Filming the War on Terror

The 9/11 assault on New York and Washington DC, and even the ill-fated United 93 aircraft which crashed in Pennsylvania, proved to be fertile ground for popular cultural debates and interventions. The sheer scale of human loss and physical destruction on the one hand and the public declaration of intent by the United States government to destroy those responsible on the other hand proved irresistible. Highly televised, the co-constitutive nature of the 'attacks' started with citizens and journalists making references to disaster movies (Weber 2010), suggesting, in an uncanny sort of way, that cinema-watching audiences had witnessed such destruction before, especially in New York City. But unlike some of those disaster movies from the 1970s and even the 1990s, many of those trapped in the Twin Towers were not going to be rescued by fire fighters and police officers (see the Oliver Stone movie *World Trade Center* [2006]).

Such popular cultural references to the 'disaster movie' (Keane 2006), however, offer us an entry point into how movies and television programmes provide a source for interrogating the production and consumption of popular geopolitics (Carter and Dodds 2014). We might distinguish three aspects to this task: first, how do the representational logics of films operate with regard to depiction of places, people and politics? Are there dominant threads to be detected, such as how enemies are represented or the manner in which certain places are judged to be safe, dangerous, unstable, hellish, and so on? Second, how do films or other media outlets amplify affect during and after their release? We might be interested in the way in which films and other media contribute to a cultural politics of fear, hope, despair, pride, resurgence, and so on. Third, how might a film or television program be interpreted in relation to other popular cultural texts and world politics/affairs? While I will concentrate on these three aforementioned items, it is clearly possible to add a fourth, which revolves around audiences and their consumptive practices, and I touch a little on that later on in the article. In other words, how and in what ways do people consume, engage in and even ignore such media?

Representational Logics

The representational logics of film and television do matter, especially if there is a recurrent pattern of depicting some places, ideas and communities as deviant and dangerous and some others as righteous and legitimate. Some generic film types proved very popular at the cinema with audiences. Post 9/11, the superhero film rose in popularity as figures such as Batman and Superman, not to mention others such as Iron Man and Captain America, enjoyed positive box office returns (Dittmer 2011, Adey 2013). Interestingly, despite their popularity in the main, films such as *Man of Steel* [2013][5] were accused of trading in 'disaster porn' (Chang and Debruge 2013),[6] capitalising on the visual imagery associated with urban destruction and the resulting fear that engulfed those who witnessed events in New York either in person or via television cameras.

Perhaps the format of the standard Hollywood film is not the right place to offer such nuance. The television series *Homeland* (2011–present) is an acclaimed serial drama, which considers how the eventual return of a male US marine sergeant and the work of a female CIA agent coincide. It has been widely lauded for its complex and multi-layered story format. What drives the basic narrative forward is the realisation that the returning soldier might actually be a terrorist who has been 'turned' by Al-Qaeda operatives during his long period in captivity. As the series unfolds, the narrative arc and the development of characters depend on a series of place-based depictions shaped by axes of gender, sexuality and race (for a brief reflection, see Zalewski 2013). It matters, for instance, that Sergeant Nicholas Brody, the returning marine, had a family living in suburban America. Brody's household, while at times dysfunctional, represents a hetero-normative ideal of nuclear family (Puar 2007). This contrasts strongly with the fleeting references to Iraq, the Lebanon and Afghanistan, which are depicted as chaotic, noisy, dusty and seemingly far removed from the suburban civility of the United States.

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Homeland has been credited with being insightful with regards to the politics of surveillance, the fragile distinction between 'terrorist' and 'patriot', and the difficulty of pursuing the war on terror in the face of multiple sources of field-based and signals-led 'intelligence'. The serial narrative format allows for characters to be more richly depicted than in a film format, and, as a consequence, the depiction of friends and enemies within and beyond the CIA is complicated. As part of that complexity, it is also a deeply geographical serial drama, which suggests that the war on terror has an everyday quality to it, as CIA agents normalise the monitoring of the Brody family and try to ascertain whether Brody himself is actually a terrorist plotting to assassinate the president or a serving Congressional representative recovering from post-traumatic stress. The bedroom, living room, car, café and public square all become implicated in an ongoing operation led by CIA agents designed to scrutinise every aspect of his life. The impact on his family and military colleagues is shown to be deeply stressful and traumatic for the family members, as the war on terror is keenly felt on the home front too.

Other highly regarded serial dramas such as *The Wire* (2002–2008) also demonstrate well how the popular geopolitics of war on terror can challenge and unsettle dominant representational logics, especially those focusing on a simplistic distinction between a home front and dangerous others in places like Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen. By focusing on the everyday lives of criminals, police officers, city officials and others in Baltimore, the series suggests that the war on drugs and the war on terror shared something in common, especially in the area of surveillance. Whether attention was devoted to drug supplies or terror networks, police officers in particular resort to increasingly desperate, even exceptional, measures to disrupt those people, places and objects involved in drugs and terror operations. But the everyday consequences of such activities are disproportional in the sense of touching the lives of the poorest, ethnic minorities and others who exist on the proverbial margins of Baltimore's economy.

Affect

How might film and other popular media be caught up in what has been termed affective economies? Here we might consider not only the manner in which the film is amplified and intensified through affect, but also how we as viewers might be affected by a combination of lighting, dress, places and demeanour. To give an example, the film *Frozen River* (2008) is a story about two women (a white working-class mother and a single Mohawk Indian mother) brought together by freakish circumstances, which lead to them getting involved in an illegal people-smuggling operation. The movie opens with a lingering late winter shot of the gloomy and frozen St Lawrence River (the smuggling route from Canada to the United States), and the camera later lingers on the thin body and worn clothing of the white woman (named Ray) living in a decrepit mobile home in the US-Canadian borderlands. Almost immediately, as a viewer I felt sympathy, even pity, for her everyday life as she struggled to raise two children with little money and a husband who, we later discover, is a gambler. The presence of snow and ice only seem to further emphasise her precarious life (for a longer review, see Dodds 2013).

The filming and narrative arc of *Frozen River* invites, perhaps even elicits, affect, as we discover how Ray and her Mohawk Indian companion Lila seek to avoid arrest by police officers and violence from rival smugglers. The film generates subjectivity – we want, as viewers, to witness Ray and Lila's endurance, and are moved by their everyday struggles to combat poverty and, in Lila's case, racism and discrimination, against a backdrop of greater political anxieties about border security. In one poignant moment in the film, in the claustrophobic environment of their little car parked in the middle of the St Lawrence River late one night, one of the bags of a young Pakistani couple they have hidden in the back of their car becomes an object of suspicion. Ray decides that the bag is a security risk and dumps it on the frozen river. Later, she discovers to her evident horror that the bag contained a baby. The subsequent search for the bag is all the more affecting when we see the two women driving desperately in search of the bag in near darkness, save for the headlights of the vehicle.

While a distinction is made by scholars such as Brian Massumi (2002) between affect (the primary, pre-subjective intensive) and emotion (the conscious, descriptive and meaningful), film scholars and others interested in other media such as video games are drawing attention to how we might think about what it *feels* ('structures of feeling') like, for example, to be a poor white working-class woman or a Pakistani immigrant trying to negotiate the border security regimes of the United States and Canada. What makes *Frozen River* fascinating is the manner in which the border itself is shown to be intensely material (the snow and ice make it possible to cross the river boundary illegally)

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and complex in the sense that there is a Mohawk reservation, which lies across both the Canadian and American sides of the St Lawrence River. Tribal sovereignty co-exists with US and Canadian state sovereignty, and this creates opportunities for Mohawk women such as Lila to engage in smuggling operations that bypass the formal border controls between the two countries.

More generally, what the film achieves is to show how seemingly abstract notions such as the war on terror and neo-liberal globalisation find expression in the everyday lives of those living in the borderlands. What *Frozen River* does is show both the *effects* of heightened border security (e.g. border patrols, border posts, identity checks) and the *affects* of neoliberal globalisation and the war on terror (Dodds 2013). In Ray's case, her financial desperation drives her (literally) to take ever-greater risks as she endures the humiliation of struggling to give her children enough money to cover their school lunches. She worries every time a police officer gives her a passing glance and, as Lila tells her, this sense of being watched and evaluated is worse for her as a Mohawk Indian. The film does not appear to have the time or space to explore how you might feel to be trapped in the boot of a car and then trusting someone else to transport you across a frozen river to a place where you cannot possibly have much sense of what it might be like on arrival.

Intertextuality

The final area of interest is how films and television series might be understood alongside other popular cultural texts. The term 'intertextuality' highlights how each text exists in relation to others. Some texts, such as the *James Bond* film series, deliberately and knowingly connect with one another – indeed, the overlaps are considered an important part of audience pleasure, especially for fans. So audiences watching *Skyfall* (2012), for example, would have had the opportunity to detect allusions to other Bond films stretching all the way back to *Dr. No* (1962). Such allusions include the character of Bond as spy, his relationship with women, the role and significance of technology and gadgets, the use of violence and its connection to mission completion, and finally, the role of sites and spaces (e.g. M's office and 'exotic' locations such as Brazil, Egypt and Thailand).

Skyfall (2012), the third film starring Daniel Craig as James Bond, is profoundly intertextual, as audiences discover that the Skyfall is Bond's childhood home in Scotland. As Bond and M battle against a disgruntled former MI6 agent intent on terrorising London and MI6 itself, audiences are given insights into his childhood, especially in the aftermath of the death of his parents. The film is intensely geopolitical in the manner in which it reflects upon the relationship between terror, cyber-espionage and Britain's role in the world. Right at the start of the film, the focus is on tracking down a disc encrypted with secret information about UK spies. Bond's quest is both physical and virtual, however. He needs to recover the top-secret disk while at the same time he struggles to discover how the villain has cyber-hacked into MI6's computer networks. Travelling from Istanbul to Hong Kong/Shanghai and finally returning to London/Scotland, this Bond film is unusual in showing London's vulnerability to terrorist attack and Bond and MI6 battling against the evil genius without any help from their US allies.

The narrative arc also addresses the personal trajectories of Bond, M and the arch-villain Silva. But the film also addresses the role of loyalty and revenge in the covert world of the spy, as well as the capacity of men and women to 'bounce back' from physical and emotional trauma (Dodds 2014). While Bond's resilience is made possible by a combination of luck and support from his boss M, Silva's resilience provokes revulsion from M, even though she abandoned him to Chinese operatives when the UK gave up their hold on Hong Kong in 1997. M's deliberate amnesia ended up provoking Silva to take his revenge on her and MI6.

James Bond producers use and indeed exploit intertextuality in order to maintain audience interest in the film series. Making a Bond movie is big business with filming budgets running over \$100 million and a complex series of business transactions with governments, private companies, sponsors and of course the stars themselves. Prior to a Bond film launch, the movie studio undertakes a series of promotional activities, including releasing so-called 'teasers' or 'trailers', which give audiences a glimpse of what is to come in the new Bond film. Bond-related advertising, including product promotion, begins in earnest, and a range of items such as drinks, cars and places becoming enrolled in an intertextual exercise designed to generate audience anticipation and interest. Bond scriptwriters, moreover, understand that Bond fans enjoy and expect those intertextual references, so *Skyfall* (2012)

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follows the 'rules' by, for example, showing Bond driving the classic Aston Martin DB5 car (which was first seen in *Thunderball* [1965]).

Most dramatically, *Casino Royale* (2006) saw the James Bond franchise reboot the character. Bond, played by a blonde-haired Daniel Craig, provoked initial skepticism because journalists and some fans were unhappy that the new actor to play Bond looked 'different'. In the story, Bond is shown carrying out his first kill and eventually obtaining his revered 'Double O' status. Mindful of a post-9/11 geopolitical environment, danger and insecurity are shown to have a more mobile quality as a new terror-business organisation (Quantum Network) adroitly moves money, terror and influence via cyber-networks and secret partnerships. Unlike other Bond films, *Casino Royale* initiated a serial narrative, and the subsequent films (*Quantum of Solace* [2008] and *Skyfall* [2012]) appear to share some of the qualities of the *Batman* and *Jason Bourne* film series. All three follow a serial narrative, involving a spy or super-hero battling against cunning enemies and, at times, indifferent colleagues. Like Batman, James Bond is an orphan who is embittered by the death of a lover and invested with a renewed sense of purpose to confront those responsible. Reading James Bond intertextually thus would involve us being attentive to a range of intertextual references and contexts – something that is essential when we consider how popular cultural references inform and animate the US-led war on terror.

More broadly, the advantage of thinking and writing intertextually is that we make ourselves more alert to the multiple and complex ways in which issues such as terrorism, diplomacy and war are understood. One fertile area for study might be the intertextuality of presidential and prime-ministerial discourses, and the manner in which key events and processes such as 9/11 and the war on terror are enrolled in what Michel Foucault described as 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1988). This means that we need to think carefully how even single words like 'crusade' perform a great discursive work by positioning the US and its protagonist Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda in a religious-geopolitical struggle.

Conclusion

This short article cannot do justice to the ways in which popular geopolitics might productively contribute to how, what scholars such as James Der Derian and Michael Shapiro (1989) once noted, the reel and the real co-constitute one another. There are a number of ways in which we might engage with popular media, such as film and television, and the war on terror (for a wider review, see Holloway 2008). And there are many more films, television programmes, video games, toys and novels to mention, but a few that could be productively considered to be part of the popular geopolitics of the war on terror.

There is clearly a broader landscape to consider when it comes to thinking further how everyday lives are enrolled and enmeshed in popular cultural objects and circuits. I have highlighted three ways – representational logics, emotion and affect, and intertextuality. Each provides an approach that offers insights into how popular geopolitics connects to the war on terror – by asking us and others to consider how threats and danger get imagined, how we might feel about security and insecurity, and how we might even take pleasure from seeing superheroes and spies overwhelm those who would harm London, New York and even Gotham City. And finally, how we make sense (constantly) of individuals, events and processes by making reference to other texts and sources, including popular cultural ones.

Notes

[1] Reagan, R., "“Evil Empire” speech (8 March, 1983)", *Miller Center University of Virginia*, <<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3409>>.

[2] Grondin, D. (2014) 'Publicizing the US National Security State through Entertainment', *E-International Relations*, <<http://www.e-ir.info/2014/08/06/publicizing-the-us-national-security-state-through-entertainment>>.

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[4] O'Doherty, C. (2013) 'Pop Culture, huh, What Is It Good For? A Lot of Things, Actually', <<http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/25/pop-culture-huh-what-is-it-good-for-a-lot-of-things-actually/>>.

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About the author:

Klaus Dodds is Professor of Geopolitics in the department of Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. He has published widely on geopolitics and the polar regions, and plays a key role in the MSc in Geopolitics and Security. He is author of many books, including *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP 2014) and *International Politics and Film* (Columbia University Press 2014 with Sean Carter).