

Why IR Scholars Should Try to Write Fiction

Written by Daniel Clausen

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DANIEL CLAUSEN, SEP 17 2017

I often find that the strangest, most useful ideas come in the form of film and speculative fiction. Let me be clear, I don't take fiction – either in literature, film, or comics – to be texts for interpretation. Instead, I think of them as useful thought experiments. In other words, I treat fiction as “theory” in the two important senses that I know theory — on the one hand, as a way of bringing sense to the nonsense of the world, and on the other, as a force for destabilizing our comfortable understandings of the world.

The importance of creative speculation for understanding world politics might be posed this way – Has anything written in the field of International Relations been as remotely useful as speculative books and movies like *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, or even *V for Vendetta*? Those who have a thing for power-politics might cite something like *Game of Thrones* as their drug of choice. *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* are two shows that friends have recommended to me repeatedly but which I can't seem to get around to watching. I'm sure they are of supreme relevance. And on that note, the short-lived drama *Last Resort* was a terrifying and relevant thought experiment that I often suggest to others.

In the Trump era is any academic article as relevant as the B-movie *Idiocracy*?

There is another way we ought to be aware of popular culture and its influence on world politics. We should be aware of the ways in which real life can start to mirror genres or even the way politicians will shape politics to meet the rules of certain popular genres (and thus appeal to their core demographics).

Francois Debrix demonstrated how realism was made “tabloid” during the Bush administration, employing fear-inducing imagery and sensational language. No doubt some future scholar will point to how the antics of the Trump administration try to mirror the practices of reality TV, shock-jockeys, and pro-wrestling.

While this critical analysis is important, it is nowhere near as useful as fiction as theory. Fiction, in the form of films like *Idiocracy*, can actually show us how these realities might look. IR can be like fiction in that it can explore counterfactuals -- but it does so in highly circumscribed conditions and often under threat of censure from those who want to make IR conform to a narrow idea of good science. Thus, it can never feel creative and free enough to explore counterfactuals in the way fiction does.

Rather than fight the battle for a freer form of counterfactual analysis in the pages of academic journals or burden creative counterfactual analysis with extensive methodological justifications, it might be more opportune to just write fiction — and consume it freely.

With this in mind, here is my call to action: IR scholars of the world, dare to write great fiction!

About the author:

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