Screening Global Politics: Visual Culture and International Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/screening-global-politics-visual-culture-and-international-relations/

ALASDAIR MCKAY, OCT 15 2013

Images have become increasingly important in humanities and the social sciences. W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) famously argued that there has been a "pictorial turn" in contemporary culture and theory where images, pictures and the realm of the visual have been recognised as being as worthy of the same intense scrutiny as the concept of language. While the "linguistic turn" (Rorty 1967) called attention to the role of language in culture, theory, and everyday life, the notion of a "pictorial turn" signals the importance of images, and challenges us to be observant and informed critics of visual culture.

Regardless of whether one fully embraces all of Mitchell's ideas, very few people would refute that a large amount of our perception of the world is shaped by the powerful visual representations we see in movies and television. Scholars have suggested that this has considerable salience to the discipline of International Relations (IR). Cynthia Weber (2001: 9) noted that "Accessing visual culture, through popular films, allows us to consider the connections between IR theory and our everyday lives." Robert Gregg (1998: 23) proposes that films acts as "valuable windows to the reality of international relations."

Taking such thoughts into their stride, lecturers have also suggested that using films and television to teach IR has significant potential. Conceivably, showing appropriate films in classes can help display geopolitical themes to students, acquaint them with historical events and introduce them to schools of thought in IR such as neorealism, liberalism, constructivism and postmodernism. Charles Funderburk (1978: 111) wrote that "[t]he use of feature-length motion pictures in the classroom is a teaching resource of considerable potential for political scientists." Gregg (1999: 129) suggested that movies and films help students learn and enhance their knowledge about international politics. Whilst identifying that the approach can have its weaknesses, Weber (2001: 286) believes that "Posing critical questions about truths and learning how to politically engage with international politics through everyday cultural products are among the most important skills students take away from this presentation of IR theory. These are skills they will hopefully apply to IR theory and beyond."

Films have also been identified by scholars as being important ideological instruments. Jutta Weldes (1999: 119) argued that films "contribute to the reproduction of foreign policy discourses" and that they "produce consent for foreign policy." In today's post 9/11 environment, Weldes' views seem more relevant than ever. Since the 9/11 attacks, Hollywood has developed close ties with the ruling political elites. Indeed, shortly after the assaults on New York and Washington, President Bush's advisor Karl Rove met with Hollywood executives to consider how the motion picture industry might contribute to the War on Terror (Lisle and Pepper 2005; Robb 2004; Valantin 2005).

Historically, though, political leaders have always seen the power that films have to communicate their ideas to the masses. The 1930s and 40s, which saw the rise of totalitarian states and the Second World War, could be seen as a "Golden Age" of propaganda. Film was immediately recognized by the Bolsheviks as an essential tool for disseminating their message to the masses that occupied a vast and disconnected territory. The Nazis also understood cinema as a crucial way to wage a cultural and ideological onslaught on the German people. Many democratic states, too, have long seen the vital role that cinema can play in supporting ventures such as war efforts and constructing powerful national identities.

Yet moving pictures are not the sole reserve of political elites to use to deploy propaganda. Films have also offered a key medium to engage in biting critiques of the world we live in and offer a vessel for dissenting, rebellious viewpoints to be heard. Much cinema in the late 1960s became reflective of the era's politically charged zeitgeist. Films such as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) and Lynsey Anderson's *If…* (1968) caught the wave of the revolutionary spirit which rose in that decade. During the height of the Cold War tensions, Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* and Lumet's *Fail Safe* presented chilling satires on, and serious questions about, the attitudes which animated the minds of political elites who had the capacity to initiate nuclear Armageddon at the touch of a button. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the works of Oliver Stone, to an extent, continued the legacy of political cinema which had arguably saw its currency rise highest in the 1960s and 1970s. As we move further into the twenty-first century, cinema and television is focusing more and more on pressing geopolitical issues such as terrorism, war, religion, globalization, disease and health, the environment, world energy resources consumption, climate change, racism, and human rights.

Over the past three or so decades, much literature has gradually emerged which has endeavoured to excavate the geopolitical currents flowing through films and televisual genres. Recent works such as Dresner's (2011)*Theories of International Politics and Zombies* and Kiersey and Neumann's (2013) *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations* seem to be part of a growing trend. Given the popularity of such texts, this trend seems only likely to continue. "Cinematic IR" (Holden 2006) has become increasingly popular and it is now firmly established that "popular culture has much to offer to our contemporary understanding of international relations" (Debrix 2005: 553).

It is due to such developments in the field that e-International Relations is proud to announce the launch of its new series of articles "Screening Global Politics". The series aims to be the leading online thinking space for this intriguing subject matter. This project will function as a rolling series of posts exploring the relationship between global politics and visual culture.

e-IR welcomes submissions from those who specialize in this subject area. If you are interested in writing for the series please contact Al McKay at alasdair@e-ir.info

—

Al McKay *is an Editor-at-large of e-International Relations*

Notes

Debrix, Francois, (2007).Tabloid terror: war, culture and geopolitics. London: Routledge

Drezner, Daniel, (2011) Theories of International Politics and Zombies. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press

Funderburk, Charles (1978) 'Politics and the Movie', Teaching Political Science 6 (1): 111–116

Gregg, Robert W. (1998) International Relations on Film. London: Lynne Rienner.

Gregg, Robert W. (1999) 'The Ten Best Films about International Relations', World Policy Journal No. 16: 129–134. .

Holden, Gerard (2006) 'Cinematic IR, the Sublime, and the Indistinctness of Art', Millennium: Journal of International Studies 34 (3): 793–818.

Kiersey, Nicholas J. and Neumann, Iver B. (2013) Battlestar Galactica and International Relations (Popular Culture and World Politics), Oxford, Routledge.

Lisle, D., and Pepper, A. (2005). The new face of global Hollywood: Black Hawk Down and the politics of meta

sovereignty. Cultural Politics 1 (2), pp. 165–192

Mitchell, William J. Thomas (1994) Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Robb, D. (2004). Operation Hollywood. New York: Prometheus

Rorty, R. (1967) Metaphilosophical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy, in idem (ed.), The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method (With Two Retrospective Essays), the University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992: 139.

Valantin, J.M. (2005). Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington. London: Anthem Press.

Weber, Cynthia (2001) 'The Highs and Lows of Teaching IR Theory: Using Popular Films for Theoretical Critique', International Studies Perspective 2 (3): 281–287.

Weldes, Jutta (1999) 'Going Cultural: Star Trek, State Action, and Popular Culture', Millennium: Journal of International Studies 28 (1): 117–134.

About the author:

Alasdair McKay is Senior Editor at Oxford Research Group. He holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth. He has edited several books for E-International Relations, including *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).