

'How to Train Your Dragon 2' and IR Theory

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, FEB 15 2015

As the 87th Academy Awards ceremony looms, those of us in IR naturally cast our gaze towards the field of nominees to see which films engage the discipline. For those of us interested in popular culture's impact on international relations, we might even indulge in a bit navel-gazing about which these 'important' movies might produce long term impacts on global affairs. Certainly, there are a number of much-talked about motion pictures which could fit the bill. First and foremost is Clint Eastwood's adaptation of U.S. Navy Seal Chris Kyle's autobiography *American Sniper*. With more than 160 confirmed kills and a career that links the East Africa embassy bombings, 9/11, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the film's (fictionalized) plot knowingly engages key issues in IR, especially terrorism and Islamist insurgency, while glorifying the U.S. mission in the Middle East. A number of other films address IR in historical ways. The Alan Turing biopic *The Imitation Game* hinges on military-technological prowess in World War II and touches on wartime Western-Soviet espionage, while Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* nostalgically interrogates Habsburg imperial paranoia and even taps into the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

However, the most relevant IR nominee this year is not to be found among those up for Best Picture, but instead in the category of Animated Feature Film. *How to Train Your Dragon 2*, despite its unwieldy (and off-putting) title provides a sophisticated, substantive, and sustained treatment of multiple IR theories, juxtaposed against one another in a way that belies the film's description as children's fare.

For those readers not familiar with the *How to Train Your Dragon* 3D computer-animated action-fantasy franchise, the first instalment premiered in 2010. In it, Hiccup (Jay Baruchel), the ne'er-do-well son of a burly Viking chieftain, Stoick the Vast (Gerard Butler), wounds a dragon attacking his village. Subsequently, he befriends the creature and eventually rallies his dragon-fearing friends and family to join into an alliance with the beasts against an existential foe (a cannibalistic behemoth that poses a threat to humans and dragons alike). While the first film was beautifully rendered and well-received, it was morally simplistic and followed a hackneyed pattern of 'parents just don't understand', righteous rebellion, and parent-child reconciliation. However, the second film, as a number of critics pointed out, takes a darker, more serious turn. Five years after the events of the first movie, Hiccup has turned his settlement into a glorious realm of Viking-dragon cooperation, girded by mutual respect and benefit, a medieval utopia. However, the 'peace'—a major theme of the narrative—is shattered when Hiccup tangles with a mercenary band of dragon-catchers while (imperial) surveying new lands astride his trusty dragon, Toothless. We discover these trappers work for the power-hungry Drago Bludvist (Djimon Hounsou), who is building an army of monsters.

Hiccup, an unyielding and self-actualized advocate of (post-)liberalism, articulates a plan for ensuring the peace through dialogue with Drago, while his father responds to the security dilemma in strictly realist terms, ordering an immediate lock-down of the settlement with no one coming in or going out. We discover that the dragon-master Bludvist had long ago wiped out a band of Viking leaders who not submit to his will, with Stoick alone escaping the carnage. He dourly intones: 'A man who kills without reason cannot be reasoned with', echoing the all-too-familiar discourse of contemporary realist orientations towards North Korea, Syria, ISIL, etc.

Predictably, Hiccup flees before his father's reactionary securitization scheme can be realized, surrendering himself to the dragon-catcher Eret (Kit Harington), who espouses as pessimistic neo-Marxist worldview based on systems, economic interests, and the incontestable power of elites. Shortly thereafter, Hiccup is reunited with his mother, Valka (Cate Blanchett), thought dead for 20 years, discovering that she is a dragon-master in her own right. She

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informs her son that she had championed the cause of the dragons against the phobic hatred of her fellow Vikings, and when confronted with the choice of killing a dragon to save her infant son (Hiccup), she chose instead to reject violence and joined a sort of dragon commune far from the realm of human conflict. In classic feminist IR fashion, she eschews both the (interstate) behaviour of warring factions and the biological differences of this 'queer' species of highly intelligent reptiles. Her abdication of her 'motherly duties' in support of dragon-kind seems not to have weighed on her at all, though she eventually does ask Hiccup to 'begin again' once she sees in him a kindred spirit (drawn in stark opposition to her memory of her husband's dragon-slaying *über*-masculinity). However, she will not countenance 'negotiations' with Bludvist, thus situating the (American-voiced) protagonist Hiccup in an isolated position of idealism, trapped between a realist and a feminist (both voiced by non-American, but Anglophone actors).

Eventually, we meet (the West African-voiced) Drago, who eerily resembles a dreadlocked Muammar Qaddafi. He is the first person of colour to be introduced in the film series, thus insouciantly producing an East-West distortion of the narrative. In classical Orientalist fashion, Bludvist wears animal skins, abuses his toadies, and has unexplained magical powers: he has tamed a gargantuan 'Bewilderbeast' that can manipulate other dragons through mind control (thus blending the hoary fear of totalitarianism with the dangerous 'Eastern mastermind'). Following a scene in which Toothless is mentally enslaved by the forces of evil, Hiccup is transformed into an avenging liberal, protecting 'his people' from the forces of blind destruction. Faced with challenges from all sides, the 'negotiator-in-chief' Hiccup transforms into an idealist warrior-king, returning his land to peace and prosperity so dragons and humans can again live side-by-side. What could be more American than that (particularly given the puissant metaphor of the dragon-as-nuclear-weapon)?

While this analysis may smack of an 'over-reading' of a rather innocent text, I would argue that animated films, particularly Disney and Pixar movies, have a long history of trading in subtle political messaging. If one thus accepts that popular culture is politics then what should we take away from HTTYD-2? At the very least that Hollywood—at nearly every turn—seeks to reinforce the notion of American military might as a force for good in the world, even when things get ugly. Whether it involves a sniper's rifle or a dragon's fireball, American power is righteous, honourable, and final.

About the author:

Dr. Robert A. Saunders is a Professor in the Department of History, Politics and Geography at Farmingdale State College-SUNY. He is the author of four books, including *Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm* (Routledge, 2017). His research explores the changing nature of national, religious, and political identity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.