Popular Culture and Political Identity

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/05/02/popular-culture-and-political-identity/

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**This article is an excerpt from E-IR's Edited Collection, Popular Culture and World Politics.
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A shocking video depicting the beheading of kidnapped journalist Stephen Sotloff appeared in September 2014, uploaded online by Islamic State (ISIS). Propaganda videos, even those depicting violent death, have meanwhile become a common tool for terrorist organisations. ISIS in particular has relied on such videos to confront a global audience and recruit potential combatants. The Western response to ISIS has been significantly shaped – not to say provoked – by such manifestations of extreme violence. The sensibilities of Western civilisation were so comprehensively incensed by these videos that they managed, almost single-handedly, to throw the Western military machine into action. The only rational response appears to be a complete annihilation of ISIS. But this swift and determined action also silenced discussion of the circumstances surrounding the growth of this terrorist organisation.

A remarkable feature stands out: the ISIS beheading video, 'A Second Message to America', displayed striking parallels with the popular US television series *Homeland*. The style and format is almost identical. *Homeland* starts with a background image of a maze interspersed with rough-cut footage from television, news coverage and official US statements. Fading Arabic subtitles and images of the Middle East oscillate with President Obama stating that 'we must and we will remain vigilant at home and abroad' (De Graaf and Boyle 2014; see also YouTube).[1] The ISIS video, likewise, uses fading Arabic subtitles and special effects to distort the image of President Obama as he declares that 'we will be vigilant and we will be relentless' (De Graaf and Boyle 2014; *Inside Edition* 2014).

Terrorism experts suggest that the visual 'mimicry' of the ISIS videos serves as both a recruitment tool and an attempt to intimidate the American public (De Graaf and Boyle 2014; *Inside Edition* 2014). In either case, the desired emotional impact is one of fear and anxiety. Here too, parallels abound. The disjointed directorial style of the opening sequence of *Homeland* presents the post-9/11 world as one of uncertainty, misinformation and violence – all metaphorically underlined by the mental illness of the show's central character, Carrie. By mirroring the format of those images, the ISIS video plays on the same feelings of doubt to generate a viewer's mistrust in authority, a fear that the US can no longer protect or provide security for its citizens.

How, then, can we understand these links between popular culture and politics? Particularly important, we suggest, is the power of popular culture to shape political identities and the narratives that sustain them. Popular culture unites 'us' through narratives that delineate who 'we' are and what separates 'us' from others. Linking popular culture and political identity is, of course, not new; there is a bourgeoning body of literature that examines the 'popular culture-world politics continuum' (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009, p. 156). The consensus here is that popular culture is far more than an escape from everyday life, a brief respite from the reality in which 'the political' traditionally takes place. Popular culture has political power precisely because it is so closely intertwined with consumerism.

In this contribution, we aim at showing how popular culture can both entrench and challenge prevailing identities. There is little doubt that popular culture displays a high level of complicity in the power positioning of traditional political and economic orders. Some scholars also stress how political practitioners are influenced by the visual world that television, film, and online media produce (Carver 2010, p. 426). At the same time, much has been made about the role of political leaders and governments in manufacturing the line between fiction and reality through film (see

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Der Derian 2009; Carver 2010; Dodds 2014; Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009). The political economy of film is, indeed, intertwined with the needs and desires of political leaders, and yet it also provides the framework within which these needs and desires emerge. But there are also opportunities for dissent and rupture. Film and television, for instance, can offer subversive messages: moments when prevailing identities are challenged and new forms of political narratives emerge. Politics and popular culture are thus co-constituted.

This brings us to the main point we want to make in this short commentary: that this co-constitution is particularly shaped by the role that visuality and emotions play. More attention thus needs to be paid to the visual and emotional dimensions of popular culture, as in the above-mentioned parallels between *Homeland* and the ISIS beheading video. Both are inherently visual phenomena and both are deeply emotional in origin, nature and impact. The axis between visuality and emotions is essential to understanding why ISIS videos created such an immediate and decisive public and political response.

Entrenching Political Identities

Using the example of US national identity, we start by outlining very briefly how popular culture – film and television in particular – can sustain prevailing political narratives. Hollywood is, of course, known to use stereotypes and glorify national values: narratives of national cohesion are visualised in films, and the emotional pull they create for the audience helps to strengthen particular conceptions of identity. However, the issues at stake are, we contend, subtler than this.

Consider the role of 'superheroes' in US popular culture. They can be said to represent stereotypical American values by dramatising the personality traits of rugged individualism, courage, persistence, moral virtue and love of nation (Gabilliet 2010, p. 309; Campbell and Kean 1997, p. 26; Merelman, Streich and Martin 1998, p. 784; Dittmer 2005, p. 633). Captain America is a good example of a popular superhero that embodies US state identity and provides an exalted, idealised figure symbolising the American dream and defending the state structures that make this dream possible (Dittmer 2005, p. 627). His costume – a red, white and blue star-spangled uniform – makes direct reference to the US flag. He represents the 'best aspects of America: courage and honesty' (Dittmer 2005, p. 629). With this comes a broader geopolitical narrative that presents the US as a defensive, not offensive, nation. US moral virtue is reaffirmed through this narrative that presents the US as both a universal model and, at the same time, as peaceful and exceptional. This notion of US exceptionalism and the associated 'us versus them' dynamic is represented in numerous movies: *Captain America* (1990), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014) (see Dittmer 2005, pp. 629-30).

Television entrenches political identities just as movies do. Look at how the American Ad Council's 'I Am An American'[2] advertising campaign created an emotional connection between audience and nation: a sense of safety and contentment with the nation was then juxtaposed with feeling of fear about 'others'. Launched ten days after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the campaign sought to overcome the anxiety caused by the attacks through narratives of national togetherness (Weber 2010, p. 81). The campaign theme was one of reaching unity through diversity, reflecting the prevailing US identity narrative: a united and harmonious nation is forged out of people from a great number of different ethnic and racial origins. While undoubtedly inclusive on many accounts, such a narrative nevertheless excludes all of those who are not part of the American national unit (Weber 2010, p. 81). By coalescing the diversity of the nation into a single unit, the campaign implicitly suggested togetherness could only be created in opposition to a non-American Other.

Popular culture, then, is political in the most fundamental sense: it creates and entrenches a politics of identity. Representations of who 'we' are engender an emotional response that reinforces a narrative of national togetherness. How we feel about being part of a greater political community, even if we cannot possibly know every single person in it, is both contingent upon and reflected by the images we hold of ourselves and of those around us. Movies and television shows and even television advertising campaigns play an important role in presenting identity such that we feel happiness, pride, and even love for our nation.

Destabilising Political Identities

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While undoubtedly entrenching political identities, popular culture can also destabilise and reconstitute these very identities. Here too, we offer only a very short example, taken from the more recent rupture and reassessment of American values in the post-9/11 era.

The War on Terror has become a particularly prominent theme in popular culture; consider films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Syriana* (2005), *The Kingdom* (2007), *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Redacted* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and television shows like *Homeland* and *Generation Kill*. They all explore and reflect on questions about US behaviour in the War on Terror. They all deal with issues of inclusion and exclusion, of us versus them (Dodds 2008, p. 1621; Philpott 2010, p. 328; Der Derian 2005, p. 34). These visual engagements with 'American values' are reinforced through both media coverage and an increasingly large number of personal films made and circulated through ever more sophisticated and widely available technologies (Philpott 2010, pp. 328-329).

Particularly prominent are visual metaphors associated with Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay and the theatres of war in the Middle East. Images of captive submissiveness, the paternalism of community engagement, and cultural differences confront the viewer as part of the increasing trauma of 'witnessing' the War on Terror. These visual threads also hark back to the earlier mentioned role of the 'superhero'. But he or she now takes on a slightly different role, one that is far more vulnerable than the invincible adventures of Batman and Superman. Look at the new heroes of Jason Bourne in the *Bourne* series, Carrie Mathison in *Homeland*, Jack Bauer in *24*, Bob Barnes in *Syriana* and Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*. They are all driven by a belief in what America represents. Yet they do not have the boundless energy and optimism of their predecessors. The new heroes are tired, dirty and damaged. They are afflicted by the knowledge of what they have done and what they will have to do to protect America. Jason Bourne's amnesia, Carrie Mathison's bipolar disorder, Bob Barnes' missing fingernails, Maya's tearful emptiness, and even Jack Bauer's lament that 'this is the longest day of my life' are all embodiments on screen of the suffering for and of the American nation. Most importantly, the challenges that these new heroes face are not just the physical challenges that the old superheroes had to encounter and overcome. Our new heroes confront far more difficult personal and emotional demons: the fear, anger, and anxiety of the post-9/11 world is transposed into the very bodies of these compromised heroes. We feel for how these lead characters suffer because we too live in the post 9-11 era and we too experience the associated anxieties.

The new and more complex notion of post-9/11 heroism has significant political consequences. The contours of different political narratives and identities have become more visible. Many film and television renderings of the War on Terror no longer follow the traditional narrative arc of good versus evil. The hero no longer saves the world. The grand finale of the respective films and television shows often raises more questions about the US role in the world than it solves.

Ambiguity has become a key part of both popular culture and the popular response to it. While many viewers reacted positively to the questions brought up in films about the US role and responsibility in the War on Terror, others responded with outrage and hostility. Films such as *Redacted* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for instance, were strongly attacked by the influential TV host and commentator Bill O'Reilly, who dismissed the former film as 'vile' and the latter as 'Leni Riefenstahl Third Reich Propaganda' (O'Reilly 2007; Der Derian 2005, p. 34; Philpott 2010, p. 326). The conservative Citizens United even labelled *Fahrenheit 9/11* 'a violation of federal election law' (Der Derian 2005, p. 34; Bronfen 2006, p. 37). These critiques are representative of a wider conservative audience that expected a different response to 9/11, one that should have been more in line with traditional heroic narratives that categorically defend and justify 'American values'. Here, our new and more fragile heroes are met mostly with anger, disbelief, and resentment – reminding us that the seemingly homogenous American identity is much more fractured and delicate than the uniform certainty that was upheld in traditional popular culture narratives.

In short, popular culture can engender positive emotional responses that trigger feelings of national togetherness. But it can do the opposite, too; film and television can destabilise the security of identity and evoke a confused or weakened state. Suggesting that foreign policy behaviour is not quite as honourable or exceptional as previously thought can produce feelings of anger, anxiety, and insecurity. Disbelief is an inevitable first reaction to narratives that contradict long-held stories told about past and present behaviour. However, these forms of popular

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destabilisations are also essential to debates about reassessing and reconstituting identities in the wake of traumatic experiences, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Challenging Political Identities

We now take one further step and illustrate how non-Western popular cultures resist and challenge prevailing identities. Rather than being set up in opposition to traditional filmmaking style, non-Western movies often follow a similar narrative structure. However, this structure is then used to present a narrative of resistance to hegemonic Western discourses about the non-West. A key part of this narrative strategy is emotions, in particular shame and resentment, humiliation and love.

Feelings of shame and resentment about Western dismissals of particular non-Western identities are frequently explored through film and television, particularly in terms of triumphing over these emotions to reassert identity. One good example of resistance to dominant identity frames and the emotional context of shame on which it is built can be found in the popular Turkish film *Valley of the Wolves*, which follows the formula of a Hollywood action thriller. The film images a confrontation between a Turkish secret agent and a US officer responsible for capturing Turkish forces in northern Iraq, visually representing a similarly 'deeply resented incident' between US and Turkish forces in 2003 (Dodds 2008, p. 1623). The key difference between it and Hollywood action-thriller films, however, is that instead of the heroic US agent battling against a violent foe, the film relies on the reversal of those roles and it is the Turkish secret agent who triumphs (Dodds 2008, pp. 1623-1624). The film visualises the Turkish experience of overcoming shame in the face of a greater US power. Turkish identity is then positively reconstituted through visually defeating feelings of shame and resentment that had been tied to US-Turkish relations.

The non-West resistance to Western identity narratives is narrated through a triumph over the feelings of humiliation. Bollywood films are a good example of this dynamic: visual representations of India and Indians are used to explore the return to modern-traditional values and the rejection of both Western lifestyles and Western representations of India that are often demeaning (Kaur 2002, p. 207). Popular film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) explored these themes of absence and return through a romantic comedy storyline that some suggested was a 'Hollywood clone, except that the actors were Indian' (Kaur 2002, p. 208). While the genre fit the generalised parameters of a rom com, much like *Valley of the Wolves* fit the action thriller genre, the importance of films such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* is the emotional connection to the visual representations on screen. While Western visual representations of India – most often involving mysticism, famine, drought or, more recently, call centres – can elicit feelings of humiliation, the Bollywood images of India inspire a positive affect relating to a sense of pride in how India and its values and traditions are being portrayed in film (Kaur 2002, p. 208).

Love is another emotion that is used to explore non-Western identity narratives challenging hegemonic Western discourses. This is particularly the case in South Korean films that deal with the topic of political crises surrounding the North-South Korea divide. While Western films generally portray North Korea as an irrational, brutal, poverty-stricken security problem to be 'solved' by South Korea and the international community (Choi 2013, p. 1), some South Korean films have explored this political dynamic through the emotional context of love. The emotive narrative of love – togetherness, intimacy, conquering all – as part of the drive towards national unification is evident not only within popular films such as *Shiri* (1999) and *JSA* (2000) but also as a political practice in its own right (Choi 2013, pp. 1-2). South Korean policy towards the North is thus imbued with emotion that both extends from and is reflected in the politicised visual representations inherent in Korean popular culture.

Conclusion: The Crucial Role of Images and Emotions

Popular culture matters to world politics. It is a significant identity marker that tells us who we are and how we should feel about both 'us' and 'them'. Drawing on an increasingly bourgeoning and sophisticated body of literature, we have highlighted how film and television shows can entrench political identities, but we also pointed out how popular culture can destabilise and even challenge these identities.

The co-constituted relationship between popular culture and political identity hinges on two particularly crucial

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features: the powerful visual dimensions of film and television, and the inherently emotional reactions they trigger. Popular culture is, to a large degree, visual culture, and it has a strong affective component that arises through people's experience of positive and negative representations of their identity.

More work thus needs to be done on how the politics of popular culture interacts with visual and emotional factors. There is, meanwhile, an extensive body of literature on both visual politics and on the links between emotions and politics – so much so that we cannot even begin to list, yet alone summarise, the respective contributions. There is something inherently unique about the visual part of popular culture. Images – still or moving – work differently to words. That is their very nature. They are visceral. They evoke strong reactions in viewers. And a big part of these reactions is of an emotional nature. The shocking nature of the ISIS videos – as well as their political significance – cannot be appreciated without understanding their visual nature and the deeply emotional impact they have. Likewise, films and television shows that deal with war and identity do so through images that are intensely emotional and create intensely emotional reactions and attachments in viewers. Images and emotions are, indeed, everywhere in politics, and yet they have only recently become a serious and systematic topic of investigation. This is why the political study of popular culture would profit greatly from a more sustained engagement with these debates that deal with both images and emotions.

Notes

[1] 'Homeland Main Title Sequence', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRRpeGKNP5Y>.

[2] 'I Am An American [Ad Council], *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPIXLUrIjXg>.

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