

The Audience in Popular Culture and World Politics

Written by Louise Pears

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LOUISE PEARS, JUN 25 2016

You might be familiar with the old adage: 'If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?' This question is meant as a philosophical prompt, to ask us to think about the ideas of reality and knowledge. So, let me expand this question (and ruin its poetic simplicity a bit) by asking: If nobody watches/reads/plays with popular culture, is it still popular culture? Is it still meaningful? And can it still contribute to the creation of the 'common sense' of world politics? I ask these questions to draw attention to the importance of the audience to the study of the relationship between popular culture and world politics.

One approach to the study of popular culture and International Relations focuses on how popular culture contributes to the creation of meaning for world politics. It investigates how the images, stories, sounds, and sights of popular culture help to create the common sense of International Relations. These works have shown how popular culture constructs national interests, creates ideas of belonging that delineate 'us' from 'them', and makes sense of world events.

I take this approach, and my own research explores how terrorism, gender and race are mutually constituted in terrorism television. Most recently, I investigated how the show *Homeland* contributes to meaning for terrorism and counter-terrorism and so works to construct (or challenge) the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate violence. The first step of my research was to perform a discourse analysis of the show, to deconstruct how it is retelling a terrorism story, and look at what meanings, references, tropes and identities it relies upon and reuses to make sense. But, if I wanted to understand how the show makes meanings, looking at the text alone was not enough. I also needed to ask how *Homeland* is consumed, and what this consumption does to the meanings that are produced. I wanted to know what people thought of the show: did they accept the meanings as shown, and if not, what were they critical of, and how? We have all sat around talking about the latest episode of a TV show with friends. I know that audiences aren't just sponges absorbing meanings, nor are they simply blank slates who approach each new text without any pre-existing ideas, identities, or knowledges.

Put another way, if I found racist representations of the Middle East in *Homeland*, does that mean that everyone watches it takes away racist understandings of the Middle East? If *Homeland* tells a story that supports counter-terrorism violence, does that mean that it creates support of the CIA? The producer of *Homeland* Alex Gansa has said: 'The goal is to pose the question and have the conversation take place among an audience'. I needed to explore these conversations to ask how meaning is negotiated by people that watch the show.

I am not the first person to take an interest in the role of the audience in the relationship between popular culture and world politics. Indeed, Jason Dittmer and Kyle Grayson have both written blogs on E-IR that talk about the potential of audience studies. Dittmer reminds us that 'popular culture is a *doing*. It is what we do, in common, with others'. Nor am I the first person to be interested in studying television audiences. There is a considerable body of literature to draw upon from Cultural Studies and from Television Studies. This branch of audience studies sought to move away from the simple model of television as an all-powerful distributor of dominant meanings, one that assumed the audience were passive, undiscriminating, and homogenous. Much of this work builds on the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall. According to Hall's model, the meaning of a text is formed through both the encoding of the text in its production and the decoding practices of readers. The text cannot fully control its final meaning because different people will read it differently, drawing on their own various cultural, social and personal situations. Hall

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theorised this in terms of codes, whereby readers can read in line with the text (which Hall called a hegemonic position); they can take a negotiated code, where they have some opposition to the preferred meaning; or they can take an oppositional reading, where they read against the text. This is the model of the active audience, who do not simply passively absorb television. This prompted a range of audience studies in the 1980s and early 1990s, with analyses of the series *Dallas* being particularly fecund. Although this branch of reception studies has become established within Cultural Studies, this work has not yet been integrated with Security Studies, though it has much to offer in the understanding of how security becomes meaningful, discourses of terrorism become dominant, and in/security discourses relate to people's lives.

To explore the audience interaction with the meaning in *Homeland*, I held focus groups with people who had watched the show. In these pizza-fuelled discussions, we talked about the show, their thoughts on the representations of the CIA, terrorists, race, gender, the main characters, and how they relate the show to political events. Unsurprisingly, the people I spoke to had different and complicated thoughts about the show. Yes, some people thought the CIA was portrayed sympathetically and found themselves siding with the difficult decisions made by Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) and her colleagues, whilst others thought that the CIA came across badly, and reflected on the problematic nature of surveillance and drones. Yes, some viewers talked about the evils of terrorism and the tropes used in the show of the vulnerable individual 'turned' to terrorism by an evil and calculating terrorists, but some participants showed a level of sympathy for the terrorist violence in the show that was outside my reading of the show, and in fact, two participants said that they hoped the terrorist would go through with his plot to kill the vice-president. There were examples in my focus groups or times that the viewers challenged racist depictions in the show, or reflected in the representation of Islam. This matters because it shows how meaning and messages are negotiated by viewers. They don't always accept all of the meaning that is implied in a show – although, of course, their thoughts and reflections on terrorism are shaped by it. What this means is that studies which are interested in how popular culture creates meaning for world politics can be strengthened by an interaction with audience interpretations of the text.

This shows how, in the words of Jutta Weldes, 'Consumption is inextricably linked to the production and re-production of meanings – the maintenance of some, the transformation of others (whether through subversion, overt challenge or gradual change)'. Paying attention to the way that meaning is negotiated can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between popular culture and world politics. It shows how popular culture can act as site where political meaning is constituted, but also challenged. It shows how taking on learning, methods and theories from other disciplines that also engage with culture, meaning and identity can add to the development of popular culture and world politics as a discipline.

About the author:

Louise Pears is an Associate Professor in Global Security and Gender in the School of Politics and International Studies at Leeds University, UK. Her research interests are in feminist security studies, popular culture and world politics, race and postcolonial international relations, critical terrorism studies, and research methods. What underlies all of these areas is an interest in the everyday practices of world politics.