

Popular Culture Matters: An Introduction

Written by Kyle Grayson and Nick Robinson

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Over the past two decades, the field of popular culture and world politics in international studies has diversified to rigorously examine the myriad ways in which the cultural and the political are intertwined in world politics (Grayson et al 2009; Kangas 2009; Robinson 2015; Dunn 2014; Carpenter 2016; Baker 2017; Saunders and Holland 2018). Concurrently, popular culture artefacts have become increasingly commonplace in the classroom and in the curriculum where their pedagogical value stems from being able to couch the possible unfamiliarity of international relations dynamics in the familiar medium of a film, tv series, or graphic novel (e.g., Salter 2014; Gilbert 2016; Juneau and Sucharov 2013). In these treatments, artefacts become a way of helping to explain otherwise abstract theories of international relations (Ruane and James 2008; Weber 2013) and/or to conduct thought experiments about the impacts of different approaches to world politics by drawing upon fictional worlds (Drezner 2014; Blanton 2013; Horn et al 2016). While these allegorical treatments of popular culture artefacts have pedagogical merit, the allegorical potential of popular cultural is but one way that the relationship between popular culture and world politics can be conceptualized. This diversity and richness has been captured across the specialist literature in the field and has included aesthetic approaches (Shapiro 2010; Shapiro 2013), inter-textual approaches (Weldes 1999; Weldes 2003), gender approaches (Griffin 2015; Shepherd 2012; Clapton and Shepherd 2017) causal approaches (Carpenter 2016), assemblage approaches (Grayson 2016), and everyday/sociological approaches (Weldes and Rowley 2012; Salter 2011); however, to date, claims about the role of popular culture in world politics have largely been targeted at selective audiences within international studies.

To initiate the process of reaching out to skeptical audiences within the discipline, a workshop was recently held at the International Studies Association Conference in San Francisco that brought together twenty leading scholars in the field of popular culture and world politics, representing eight different countries and both senior and early career scholars. During the workshop participants were asked to reflect upon a series of methodological, theoretical, and ethical questions which then guided discussions over the course of the day.

First, how can we know that popular culture matters to international relations? Second, if popular culture matters to international relations, when, where, why, and how does it matter? Rather than assuming connections between popular culture and international relations, participants were asked to specify them and the conditions under which they become manifest according to their theoretical and methodological approaches in relation to specific artefacts or area expertise. A range of methodological orientations were forwarded including pragmatic perspectives, constructivist perspectives, gender perspectives, post-structural perspectives, institutionalist perspectives, object-oriented perspectives, and aesthetic perspectives. There were also discussions across modes of media including video games, film, cartooning, television, art, music, food, memes, literature, and different types of praxis such as celebrity activism, gaming cultures, and multiculturalism. We also identified areas of the field that require sustained attention including a greater sensitivity to the role of affect, incorporating senses beyond the visual, the role of pleasure, and the reproduction of North-South asymmetries in terms of whose culture is understood as popular.

To move beyond the ephemeral nature of this discussion, and to continue our commitment to an ongoing dialogue across the IR community, we asked all participants to also think through answers to some of the issues in writing. Here we present what we believe to be an excellent and diverse set of cases for how popular culture matters in world politics, why international relations should take popular culture seriously, and how it might do so. Thus, we are very excited to be able to share with you over the coming weeks, a series of posts written by workshop participants

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related to these themes including identifying the politics in popular culture and world politics, how gendered representations of violence in popular culture shape world politics, and the power of popular culture through the failures of white feminism. Equal parts provocative, thoughtful, and innovative, we hope that you will enjoy them.

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