

# Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations

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### 33. Teaching international relations with film and literature: using non-traditional texts in the classroom

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#### INTRODUCTION

Does interstellar diplomacy belong on an international relations (IR) syllabus? How about little green men? If the answer to both questions is, as we suggest, ‘Yes’, then will *Mars Attacks!* serve just as well as *War of the Worlds*? These questions are plausible rather than ludicrous insofar as instructors are increasingly willing to use films, television shows and novels in the university classroom. This move represents not only a pedagogical strategy but also IR scholars’ growing acceptance of the use of popular culture as a resource for thinking through the discipline’s central questions (Weldes 2003; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Hunt 2007; Grayson et al. 2009).

Film and literature have always had the capacity to inform and instruct as well as entertain. While Hollywood blockbusters and graphic novels surely count as non-traditional texts in IR, we hold that they can be just as useful for understanding politics today as earlier pop culture artifacts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Birth of a Nation* and *The Jungle* were in their own time.

We also argue that courses built around popular culture texts as described in this chapter enhance student learning. As documented in Valeriano (2013), surveys and evaluations over the course of three years suggest that the film approach is at least as successful as conventional textbook-based introductions to international relations. Students in the film-based classes received higher average grades than their counterparts in the traditional entry-level class, and reported higher levels of retention and satisfaction as well.

In this chapter, we assess the scholarship concerning the place of popular culture texts in teaching IR, and reflect on our own experiences in teaching film- and literature-centric courses. We conclude with lessons from the field and a list of selected works that we recommend for classroom use.

#### NON-TRADITIONAL TEXTS IN THE IR CLASSROOM

Teachers of introductory-level courses face a perennial dilemma: how to engage students who demonstrate varying degrees of interest in and prior exposure to the subject matter. Political science and IR majors may sit alongside those who had simply needed to fulfill an elective requirement and were attracted by the course’s time-slot. Indeed, finding course material suitable for everyone from the self-taught expert in minor World War II battles to the 18-year-old with a vague grasp of history and little awareness of current events can be a challenge.

One approach to this problem is to supplement—or possibly even jettison—the traditionally assigned textbook in such courses. Even when textbooks are well written and attractively designed, they still lack the overarching dramatic narratives of novels and feature films. Thus we argue that it is the *stories*, and only incidentally the special effects or trendy genres, that make these non-traditional texts useful for teaching IR. Gregg (1998, p. 4) points to film in particular for its capacity ‘to dramatize the undramatic’ aspects of global politics by scaling abstract theories and concepts down to the level of individual characters and their stories. Simpson and Kaussler (2009, p. 425) concur by writing that films ‘encourage interest, help research, and illustrate aspects of international politics that may not be written in books or articles’.

We contend that this process of illustration is true of both novels and films. As we discuss below, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, for instance, deftly dramatizes the often subtle intricacies of cross-cultural communication and diplomacy through its tale of interplanetary envoy Genly Ai and his mission to establish first contact with two feuding states on a distant and isolated world. Much like the Star Trek television and movie franchise that scholars have recognized for addressing the challenges of liberal internationalism and other relevant topics too numerous to list here (see Weldes 1999; Neumann 2001; Jackson and Nexon 2003), Le Guin’s science fiction novels bring important theoretical debates to life for students who might otherwise find them irrelevant or inaccessible.

Stories, whether written in books or projected onto screens, serve as compelling points of entry to our discipline. Fiction, perversely, makes the stakes of global politics appear *real* to our students, and demonstrates why the study of IR is important and meaningful. Moreover, rather than ‘dumbing down’ the course or teaching to the lowest common denominator, our approach serves even those stellar students with a strong command of world history and passion for theory. In addition to drawing connections between fictional texts and the historical cases with which they are familiar, these students further benefit from being forced away from their known store of facts in order to reconsider their assumptions about how states and other international actors behave in various contexts. In the words of Nexon and Neumann (2006, p. 12), ‘Popular culture thus serves as a medium for what critical analysts of science fiction call “ontological displacement”. Such works invite us to step back from our ingrained suppositions about a certain phenomenon and our vested interests in ongoing debates to gain a different perspective upon our social world.

Do note that canonical expertise in science fiction, war movies or any other genre is not a prerequisite for success with using non-traditional texts to teach international relations and related subjects. Just as students benefit from the ontological displacement referred to above, so might the instructor delving into an unfamiliar niche of film or fiction.

## FILM IN THE IR CLASSROOM

George W. Bush was reportedly enamored with *High Noon* (1952), the classic Western in which a lone, formerly retired marshal must stand his ground against a band of outlaws. Media reports leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 were consequently quick

to portray both Bush and the country itself in the Gary Cooper role, an image seized upon by war supporters and detractors alike. As the popularity of *High Noon* metaphors for debating the scope of U.S. responsibilities to intervene across the globe illustrates, popular culture can provide a powerful medium for understanding foundational concepts and competing perspectives in world politics. This is as true in the classroom as in the Oval Office, and in this section we discuss our experiences incorporating film in particular within IR courses.

Valeriano first began teaching a film-based 'Introduction to International Relations' at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and has continued in various forms and formats for five years. Films are typically sandwiched between a half-hour pre-movie lecture and a half-hour post-movie wrap up and discussion. The pre-movie lecture is important because it allows the instructor to introduce concepts and to discuss facts about the screenwriter, director and historical context of the movie in order to prepare the viewer. Two hours are generally reserved for watching the movies during class. Time is reserved after the movie to reflect and discuss the implications of the viewing experience and the connection between the film and concept. This can either be done through normal discussion or group exercises where the students have to pick a part of the movie that illustrates a key concept. In explaining the concept to the class, the student is able to internalize the idea.

We hold that students should be encouraged to watch assigned movies with more attention to the illustration of course concepts than to acting prowess, special effects or irrelevant plot intricacies or, but this is a choice open to the instructor. The goal is not to dive into the subtext or hidden meanings of a film, but to use the film to illustrate concepts in more vivid ways than any text can. The instructor may then schedule a session for focused discussions of core concepts approximately every fourth or fifth class meeting in order to revisit and reinforce prior topics. A class such as this should focus on a dialogue between the concept and the illustration of the concept, reinforcing the understanding of abstract ideas in students who are often disconnected from history.

Generally, there are four areas to cover in a course that utilizes film to communicate lessons. The first section concerns morality, human nature and the roots of human behavior. *Lord of the Flies* (1963) famously addresses each of these topics, and provides an engaging and entertaining introduction to the course. Another useful film to examine is *The Fog of War* (2003), which covers critical lessons in the conduct of foreign policy, in addition to remorse, decision-making and the consequences of actions. Finally, this section can be wrapped up with an examination of the nature of death, killing and survival in the international system using *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). It is useful to have the students remember that we are often talking about life and death, real issues of consequence on the international sphere. Academia and IR theory can feel remote from the quotidian concerns of everyday people, and *All Quiet* helps remind us of the actual human beings who affect and are affected by global politics.

The next section of the course introduces realism, liberalism and alternative approaches to the study of IR. While Gregg (1998) finds that 'the realist school has been dominant in films about international relations' (p. 10), and points to the prevalence of state-centric portraits of conflict within an anarchic global system, one can find excellent illustrations of both alternative mainstream theories and critical theoretical perspectives nevertheless. Table 33.1 lists and discusses some popular choices (as does Valeriano 2013).

*Table 33.1 Films and IR*

Topic	Film	Date	Issues
Realism	300	2006	National Interest, Power
	Casablanca	1942	Sovereignty
	The Godfather	1972	Balance of Power
	Munich	2005	Power Politics, Remorse
Liberalism	Wilson	1944	Democracy, Institutions
	The Quiet American	2002	Colonialism, Intervention
Constructivism	Breaker Morant	1980	Law of War
	Judgement at Nuremberg	1961	Memory
	Hotel Rwanda	2004	Genocide, Culture
Alternatives	Battle of Algiers	1966	Terrorism, Insurgency, Culture
	Gandhi	1982	Ethics
	District 9	2009	Ethnic Conflict
	Wag the Dog	1997	Diversionary War

*Note:* 300 can also be used to discuss the influence of domestic politics and the importance of symbols. The use of 300 must come with warnings about its cultural insensitivity and bastardization of history.

Although we have largely refrained from suggesting documentaries, we find two that are especially noteworthy for their success in the classroom. The first, *The World According to Sesame Street* (2006), examines international co-productions of the children's television show, touching on issues that range from gender norms and human rights to nationalism and conflict resolution. The second, *The Invisible War* (2012), provides a powerful indictment of sexual assault in the U.S. military, and has already become required viewing for officers in the U.S. Army.

Once the major theories are introduced, instructors are free to delve into particular issue areas such as migration, environmental politics and international political economy, among many others. Those interested in nuclear strategy, for example, enjoy an embarrassment of riches, beginning with the phenomenal *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Additional options include another comedy co-starring Peter Sellers, *The Mouse That Roared* (1959), and *Thirteen Days* (2000), a dramatization of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

One important aspect of this pedagogical approach is to give the students freedom to engage a film and its relation to global politics on their own terms. The final project for the class asks students to choose from a list of key topics covered in most IR textbooks. Students are then responsible for identifying a film that helps to illustrate their topic, and writing a long paper that explains how they would use this film to communicate the lesson to their classmates. Most students jump at a chance to connect their topic to a favorite film, quickly finding the assignment is not as simple as they had thought. To help, the students are provided a long list of movies that potentially have a connection to international relations concepts.

Originality is highly valued in this assignment. The best papers are those that use movies that do seem to illustrate a concept very well at first glance, but constructing an argument, linking it to the film and then explaining this connection is a tough process

that in some ways makes the student understand the entire point of the class and the method used to teach the class. We have also found that this assignment encourages students to remain engaged to the very end of the course, while requiring them to demonstrate proficiency in understanding, applying and synthesizing the discipline's foundational concepts.

## SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE IN THE IR CLASSROOM

Novels—however thrilling the plot or beautiful the prose—are admittedly less attractive to many undergraduate students than the films discussed above. At the same time, our experiences and those of others who have taught similar literature-based courses demonstrate that this approach can work, particularly when students have the ability to self-select into the class based upon their own interests. Although works from any number of literary genres might profitably appear in the IR classroom, in this section we narrow our focus to science fiction in order to present a more cohesive set of recommendations and suggested texts. This choice also reflects what seems to be a growing cottage industry of IR scholars drawing upon the sometimes overlapping genres of science fiction and fantasy in both their research and their teaching (Weldes 2003; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Ruane and James 2008; Dixit 2012).

The notion that science fiction might provide insight into the study of political life is not as far-fetched as it initially sounds. Indeed, for a genre purportedly focused on the future, science fiction has long been recognized for its ability to speak to concerns of the present (Neumann 2001). At the same time, science fiction provides scholars and teachers of IR with more than just a mirror to reflect issues in the ‘real world’. As Dixit (2012) notes, ‘In popular culture, science fiction has a benefit of being considered “not real”, and as such, its representations of international relations and security can take on varied forms’ (p. 291).

Since 2012, Lobasz has taught a ‘Social/Science/Fiction’ seminar for first-year students in the Honors Program at the University of Delaware.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the course is to intersperse classic or otherwise well-regarded science fiction novels with social science articles in order to explore the challenges and possibilities entailed with alien encounter. ‘Aliens’ in this case refers not to the actual or potential existence of extraterrestrial life, but to a more prominent theme in IR: the Other. The course is structured such that students alternate reading journal articles and book chapters with six to seven science fiction novels. Like the film course discussed above, students should be encouraged to focus less on matters of plot and characterization, and more on the relevance that these novels have for exploring themes of the course. The idea is less ‘to seek out new worlds’ than to strive for a more nuanced understanding of our own, and of the fears and wonder that accompany, as astronomer and science fiction author Carl Sagan memorably titled his only novel, *Contact*.

The course begins with Hall (1996), and consideration of who (or what) ‘counts’ as an alien. The next two to three weeks focus on ‘Alien Attack’, and typically include *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells and *Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card. Read in conjunction with Lasswell (1941), students consider how states, intergovernmental organizations and non-state actors might relate to an unprecedented common external threat.

Both novels depict humanity as facing existential peril from aliens. Both also recognize humans themselves as fully capable of annihilating peoples and species, which can spark student discussion of circumstances in which mass killing and population removal is considered horrifying and those in which it appears unexceptional.

The next section, ‘Alien Anthropology’, pairs Geertz’s (1972) classic ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’ and a chapter on contrasting accounts of Captain Cook’s last voyage (Hacking 1999) with Card’s *Speaker for the Dead* and Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In *Speaker for the Dead*, set three millennia after the events of *Ender’s Game*, human colonization of the universe is overseen by the Starways Congress. The bulk of the relevant plotline concerns various species’ struggles toward mutual intelligibility. Interspecies relations in *The Left Hand of Darkness* are more advanced than those in *Speaker*, but they are no less regulated and with no fewer chasms in cross-cultural communication. Difference in *Left Hand* is not only political and cultural but also sexual and reproductive.<sup>2</sup> The novel suggests that genuine communication requires an understanding of the Other that is born through empathy and, ultimately, love. In addition to discussing the preconditions necessary for communicating across vast differences, students can also compare and contrast the foundational assumptions and policies of the Starways Congress versus those of its counterpart organization in Le Guin’s world, the Ekumen. Which approach is more ethical? More likely? What, if anything, do the two approaches lack?

‘Translations and Unknowable Aliens’ serves as the concluding theme, in which students read *Wild Seed* by Octavia Butler, *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, and *His Master’s Voice* by Stanislaw Lem in conjunction with Malgrem’s (1993) ‘Self and Other in SF: Alien Encounters’. *Wild Seed*, set in the era of the transatlantic slave trade, departs from previously assigned novels in that the main characters are alien but not extraterrestrial. One promising avenue for class discussion concerns the nature of power relations within the novel’s formal and informal modes of slavery and servitude. How should we understand the relationships between and among slaves, slave traders and owners, freed slaves and non-slaves? Students might also examine the role that race, gender, social class and ability play within systems of domination and subordination, and the degrees of communication and companionship possible therein.

If the immortal antagonist of *Wild Seed* is ultimately unknowable, as Butler suggests, so too is he incapable of truly understanding what it means to be human. *Watchmen*, widely regarded as a graphic novel masterpiece, includes a character faced with similar challenges.<sup>3</sup> In Moore and Gibbons’ alternate history set in 1985 New York, the U.S. has won the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon remains president, and the Cold War is on the verge of going nuclear. While all of the main characters experience alienation—a major theme of the book—Doctor Manhattan stands apart as the most alien. Indeed, as the Doomsday Clock counts down to nuclear Armageddon, the super-human Doctor Manhattan grows increasingly distant from his human origins, and from humanity itself. Class discussion at this point can return to the Hall (1996) chapter to revisit the question of what makes one human, and the extent to which shared identities and interests are prerequisites to understanding.

Finally, *His Master’s Voice* expands upon the issues raised by *Wild Seed* and *Watchmen* to ask what would happen if alien and human modes of communication were

radically incommensurable. The novel takes place at a secret government installation in the Nevada desert where the U.S. Department of Defense has sequestered a group of scientists, mathematicians and other academics to study and ultimately translate a message from outer space. While *His Master's Voice* is a challenging text, and many students are likely to miss Lem's dry humor, this richly philosophical account of a Manhattan Project-like endeavor helps to weave together a number of the threads that have been picked up and dropped throughout the course. Promising topics include threat construction, bureaucratic politics, research ethics and, most importantly, the prospect of encountering and the possibilities for communicating across radical difference.

As with more traditional discussion-based seminars, the success of such a course is largely dependent upon students' willingness to complete the assigned reading on time. Instructors should consider incorporating multiple strategies to reinforce timely completion of reading assignments such as requiring regular written response pieces and other short writing assignments and making class participation a significant component of students' final grades. Lobasz has had success with requiring students to post their reading responses to a shared class weblog, and to provide substantive comments to posts written by their peers. Each week the students had the choice of whether to respond to specific questions posted by the instructor, or to pursue their own avenues of inquiry. Given that the class blog was viewable by the public, read and commented upon by their peers and made up a significant portion of their grade for the course, the assignment provided a powerful incentive for students to keep up assigned reading.

Of course, care should also be taken to ensure that students are given enough time to read particularly challenging works. As students are working their way through a novel such as *His Master's Voice*, for example, instructors will want to limit class discussions to no more than three chapters at a time, and may even wish to build in time to watch a thematically relevant movie or television episode in order to give students a chance to catch up on their reading. Instructors might also consider being frank with students about the relative amount of effort and time likely to be demanded by each book. Students who begin *Speaker for the Dead* with the expectation that it will be as quick and easy to digest as its prequel, *Ender's Game*, will be unpleasantly surprised and unlikely to have budgeted a sufficient amount of time to complete their assignment.

Student response to this class has been overwhelmingly positive, with many students reporting in their formal course evaluations that it had 'opened [their] eyes', 'changed the way [they] think', and 'made [them] ask different kinds of questions'. Although classroom discussions of cultural and political difference and of the power relations attached to these differences can become emotionally and politically fraught in some contexts, we found that introducing these topics through fictional narratives and imagined aliens can help lessen both defensiveness and immediately polarized reactions.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Our enthusiasm does not come without reservations, and we offer the following recommendations based on our experiences teaching non-traditional material.

### Films and Novels should be Explicitly Tied to Course Themes and Objectives

Weber (2001, p. 282) cautions against a casual or loosely planned approach to incorporating popular films, which may leave students feeling bored or directionless. Tempting as it may be, instructors should resist the urge to assign a book or movie simply because it is popular, or a personal favorite. Relatedly, one should also resist attempts to turn classes into book clubs or film appreciation societies. As important and enjoyable as these texts are in their own rights, the point of incorporating fiction is not to conduct comprehensive literary or cinematic analyses but to provide students with another avenue for engaging with global politics. This is not the forum in which to get lost in plot nuances or character details. Students resent the waste of their time, and rightfully so. Instructors must come prepared to demonstrate, or to help students recognize, the text's relevance for understanding global politics.

One might deliver a brief introductory lecture, as described in the film section above, or circulate discussion questions prior to class so that students have a preliminary framework with which to appreciate the political elements of the text.

A simple checklist might be in order. Does the film or text communicate class concepts better than any lecture could? If I describe the use of the film to a lay person, would they question the film based on preconceived notions? (Put more simply, will someone laugh?) Could the tone or execution of the film or text overwhelm the students and distract them from focusing on the lesson? Is the connection between the text and the concept so clear that it might seem odd to teach the concept again without the aid of the text? Answering affirmative to these questions should help the instructor avoid clichés and traps.

### Avoid the Clichéd and Simplistic

Beware narratives that fail to offer more than a plucky group of misfits who must band together to defeat the enemy, for example, or that hew too closely to 'Great Man' accounts of history. There are few heroes in international relations, and heroic myths place undue emphasis upon individuals at the expense of the collective actors typically analyzed in IR courses.

Those who assign Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*, discussed in some detail above, must take care that students focus more on the important questions raised by the texts and less on the military and political genius of the 6-year-old protagonist. The same warning must be put forth for the Middle Earth movies or novels. Is the story so unrealistic and implausible that the lesson will be overwhelmed by the protagonist? If the answer is no, you have grounds to proceed. If not, reconsider.

### Encourage Critical Engagement

Instructors should take advantage of the fact that, as Weber (2001) found, students' 'critical analytical skills are often keenly developed when applied to visual media' (p. 282). These skills help students recognize that cultural artifacts not only represent but also participate in politics. To paraphrase Cox (1981, p. 128), film and literature are also for someone and for some purpose.<sup>4</sup> Classic examples of works with an explicit political message that we have already discussed include *Casablanca* (1942), meant to encourage

U.S. entry into World War II; *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), a satire of mutual assured destruction (MAD) and Cold War hysteria; and *The Fog of War* (2003), which presents 11 ‘lessons’ that former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believes should inform U.S. foreign policy.

Instructors might invite students to consider how and to what end a text elides the horrors of war, celebrates militarism, or features substantial military collaboration. Does it matter that *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) was vetted by and filmed with the assistance of the U.S. Navy, or that the Pentagon pulled out of *Thirteen Days* (2000), a docudrama about the Cuban Missile Crisis, due to its bellicose but historically accurate portrayal of Air Force General Curtis LeMay?

### **Encourage Cultural Engagement**

Film and literature provides a unique opportunity to transverse culture in a way a textbook cannot. These modes of communication can transport the student to a new location, time or planet, moving beyond the simple constructs of the textbook. We can expand past the limited connect of the major textbooks that largely are written and supported by Western white males. While the publishing and movie-making industry as also dominated by Western white males, the stranglehold this group has over pedagogy and knowledge is vast compared to the ability of movies and texts to overcome these challenges.

The *Ender’s Game* series, for example, explores the Universe and examines the impact of culture on extraterrestrial interactions with groups such as Indians, the Polish, Mayans and the Portuguese playing a key role in the novels. *Munich* is unique in its exploration of Israeli attitudes and concepts of revenge. *All Quiet on the Western Front* is entirely from the point of view of the Germans, a fact missed by many. Recent films like *District 9* and *Elysium* communicate a dystopian future through the perspective of South Africa or a multicultural Latino California.

## **CONCLUSION**

IR scholars are in the unique position to be able to use non-traditional films and novels over more conventional academic sources in order to engage and challenge their students. While textbooks have long held their place at the forefront of classroom learning material, we argue that supplementing these resources with film and literature can represent a more successful pedagogical strategy, offering an accessible platform for all levels of students to have a more thorough grasp of the discipline’s central questions. We are among the many in a growing circle of IR scholars who have used such methods to illustrate the field’s theoretical debates and further push the boundaries of student learning and comprehension.

Instructors who choose to incorporate non-traditional material would do well to keep our lessons from the field in mind. Texts should be explicitly tied to the course themes and objectives, clichés and simplicity should be avoided, and students’ critical engagement should be sought. Beyond this, the IR classroom represents possibility. Try something new and different in your courses. Explore the bounds of knowledge and student

engagement. Attempting these sorts of innovations might just revive your interest in teaching IR and engage your students in a new way of thinking that is both more inclusive and effective than traditional methods alone.

As with any classroom teaching, course curriculum and design are at the purview of the individual instructor, and as such, our methods and advice are by no means set in stone. The lesson should be the standard on which you seek to expand your instruction methods and reach. Remain true to the goal, but feel free to explore the sources you use to communicate lessons and create a renewed sense of engagement in the course material for students.

## NOTES

- \* We would like to thank Samantha Smith Kelley for her assistance.
- 1. The inspiration for this course, as well as the title, were drawn from a course first taught by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson at American University.
- 2. This is also true, to varying degrees, of *Speaker for the Dead* and *Wild Seed*.
- 3. Note that *Watchmen* is a remarkably rich and dense text, and that our treatment hardly scratches the surface of characters, plots, themes and visual motifs present.
- 4. On the constitutive role of popular culture within world politics, see Neumann and Nexon (2006, pp. 14–20).

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