
Popular Culture Matters

An INTERNATIONAL STUDIES QUARTERLY ONLINE symposium

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INTRODUCTION

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In an era of ‘post-truth’ politics, where reports of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ dominate the mass media, it is fitting that we should pay more attention to the role of fictional narratives in world politics. After all, if ‘facts’ and ‘news’ of choice can be disseminated with increasing ease by whichever regime is in power, and if aspects of the ‘public sphere’ are cultivated by corporations in ways that deliberately produce manipulative, distracting echo chambers, then it seems imperative for all scholars to have a handle on the relationship between politics, narration, truth and fiction.

We are therefore pleased to present an ISQ Online symposium on Daniel and Musgrave’s 2017 article [‘Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations’](#). The authors argue in this article that fictional narratives within popular culture can have a significant influence on elite and mass audiences through forms of cognitive interaction between fictional narratives and others. The piece explores this through the frame of ‘synthetic experiences’, suggesting that fiction may be frequently synthesised into cognition of particular situations, and thus play similar roles to academic knowledge in terms of helping policymakers interpret situations and courses of action. This is illustrated through an examination of the effect of Tom Clancy novels on the Reagan-Bush era foreign policy establishment.

The responses to the article, from scholars with expertise on questions of popular culture and foreign policy, open up a series of critical tensions that emerge from the article. Valerie Hudson welcomes the ‘cover’ for Foreign Policy Analysis specialists to engage further with fiction, but asks whether such cultural ‘touchstones’ continue to exist, and what it would mean for them to ‘influence’ world politics. Jutta Weldes offers a more sceptical reading of whether a more positivistic approach to reading popular culture would benefit an already heterodox subfield committed to studying Popular Culture in World Politics (PCWP), or potentially constrain it. Kathleen Brennan questions the depiction of ‘IR’ used in the article’s argument, and raises the active role of government actors themselves in shaping fictional narratives. David Sylvan interrogates the significance of ‘engrossment’ as a causal mechanism producing specific outcomes, and calls for a wider engagement with culture as a set of practices. Vineet Thakur suggests that fiction has a deeper power than creating narratives – that it creates identities and contours of personhood themselves, which also offers a means of engaging with politics from alternative standpoints. The authors finally respond on a wide range of issues.

The symposium overall demonstrates that differences of philosophical and methodological commitment are not necessarily resolved by an engagement with common objects of inquiry – in this case, popular culture. If anything, questions of causation, explanation and interpretation are challenged and made more complex in attempting to come to agreement over how and where popular culture matters, and what is required to study it.

CULTURE AND FOREIGN POLICY

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The field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has long embraced the proposition that there are important cultural influences on foreign policy (see, to give but two examples, Hudson, 1997; Sampson and Hudson, 1999). Culture can provide meaning, value preferences, and behavioral scripts to the foreign policy decisionmaker. Culture can make certain foreign policy moves more likely, and also entirely preclude others, for foreign policy itself can be analyzed in dramaturgical terms (Shih, 1993; Etheredge, 1992). And the sources of cultural influence are infinite—from prevalent childrearing practices to viral social media memes. The potential breadth and depth of the study of culture’s influence on foreign policy is simultaneously its great promise and its great headache.

On the one hand, then, it felt a bit odd to read Daniel and Musgrave’s piece, which puts forth the proposition that fictional immersive experiences can help shape foreign policy choice. Of course they can, and this is in line with decades of FPA scholarship probing the intersection of culture and foreign policy. Any story can influence; as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt puts it, “The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor. Everyone loves a good story; every culture bathes its children in stories.” (2013: 328). Even science and social science are, in a sense, also but methods of creating stories-that-explain. And every story we allow into our long-term memory is grist for the mill of metaphor and allusion, allowing stories to roam far beyond their original preserve (Khong, 1992).

What Daniel and Musgrave bring new to the table, I believe, is the idea that FPA should not only take historical stories and lived experience into account when studying culture’s effects on foreign policy, but popular, fictional stories as well. I thank them; it is useful for scholars to be offered “professional cover” for doing so. For example, I once witnessed a group of senior government analysts engage in an impromptu half hour passionate debate about which Marvel superhero was the best symbol of the contemporary United States (Iron Man won the day over Captain America and the Hulk). But there was no professional means for me to report and reflect on what I had heard, though I felt the discussion was noteworthy from an FPA standpoint. I hope Daniel and Musgrave’s work opens the door for such reflection.

The trick to establishing such study within the purview of the social scientific enterprise is, of course, methodological. Interpretation of stories is one thing, but demonstrating links to attitudes and behavior is another.

For example, to move from a psychobiographical element (‘Reagan enjoyed Clancy’s novels’) to the level of culture (‘Clancy’s novels influenced the foreign policy of the Reagan administration’), a story must be a cultural *touchstone*. That is, those in the culture must be able to assume that most others within the culture will know the referent. Without that touchstone status, the fictional story will be of little use in persuading others that a particular foreign policy should be pursued. The allusion will mean nothing to others; the metaphorical shorthand for a matrix of emotions, thoughts, estimates, and interpretations will be lost.

But the touchstone assumption has been irrevocably altered by the fire hydrant that is media today. While once if you had said, “No more Vietnams,” emotional resonance for that idea could have been assumed because we had all seen *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, now there is very little besides Marvel-type movies that provide such a touchstone within the US. Rumsfeld’s Pentagon had to host a special showing of the Battle of Algiers in 2003 in order to create mutuality because so few officers knew of the film (Kaufman, 2003). That same fire hydrant phenomenon has also made it easy to disconnect from non-fictional history; students today know far fewer true stories about human history than they know the history of the Marvelverse. I recently had a student ask me what the Cold War was, because he had never heard of it. How do we make the link to foreign policy attitudes and behavior when touchstones become more rare than they were in Reagan’s era?

In addition, what is the method of data collection and what is the method of inference for determining whether, how, and when “fictional inputs affect real-world behavior”? Given that fictional stories can be contradictory (*24* versus *Unbroken*, for example), how would the method of inference cope with such consumption of inconsistency? The authors themselves note, “any given text’s influence will likely prove slight when measured in aggregate terms or when considered in light of the multitude of conflicting messages.” Checking for factual errors traceable to fiction or collecting public admissions of influence, as the authors do, seem inadequate given all the many stories in any one 21st century individual’s head.

Consider also the body of scholarship asserting that watching violent media or pornography does not lead to violent or sexually assaultive behavior (Phillips, 2017; Castleman, 2016). While I myself think the jury is out, if after many decades of research psychologists are not sure whether consumption of these fictional stories leads to the predicted behavior, what are the methodological ramifications for the Daniel/Musgrave enterprise? “Quantifying this effect size would be difficult, but scholars should not assume it is null” is true, but does not a research programme inspire. All cultural studies share this set of methodological hurdles, and there have been many creative ways of clearing them devised in the larger FPA literature on culture and foreign policy which might be useful to survey. Those wishing to build this area of study will want to attend to these methodological tasks as the first order of business.

Despite the methodological minefields, the Daniel/Musgrave paper also raises some interesting questions about naïve consumption of fictional stories. Clearly such stories can be manipulated by their creators to purposefully promote a favored foreign policy viewpoint, as they note was done in Cole and Singer’s *Ghost Fleet*. What’s the good policymaker to do, then, in order to become a sophisticated consumer of immersive fiction, capable of resisting being “transported”? Or perhaps policymakers should eschew all such stories while in office? (Or should we be training Steve Walt to write screenplays and novels instead of textbooks and articles?) A related question is whether story creators should be held responsible for the cultural effects they cause. For example, to read that “*24*’s depiction of effective torture so strongly affected US military interrogators that the officials vainly beseeched the show’s producers to demonstrate ineffective torture” is quite chilling. But wouldn’t the quest for accountability take us into *Fahrenheit 451* territory?

Many thanks to Daniel and Musgrave for their thought-provoking article.

HOW POPULAR CULTURE MATTERS?

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Grounded in the suitably ‘scientific’ disciplines of cognitive science and psychology appreciated by what the authors call “mainstream” IR scholars, “Synthetic Experiences” sets out to demonstrate “How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations”. Addressing IR sceptics who assume that “fictional effects will be washed out by the pressures of the real world” (510), Daniel and Musgrave construct an argument on “respectable” (positivist, causal, individualist) terms to provide one specific explanation of how ‘ideas’ contained within ‘fictional texts’ – i.e., in popular culture – might matter to IR. The authors plausibly argue that something called “synthetic [cognitive] experiences” are created by fictional encounters (506) and that “narrative [cognitive] transportation” through engagement with fiction can thus change individual beliefs and ideas (508). They therefore conclude that “a lifetime’s worth of exposure to synthetic experiences” may lead to a range of causal effects, from “emphasizing (or de-emphasizing) issues” and “changing opinions about strategic effectiveness” to “reinforcing misapprehensions” and “helping to produce or reproduce identities relevant to action” (510). On their own terms, their narrative is succinctly and compellingly constructed.

While I hope that their story convinces some ‘mainstream’ sceptics that popular culture ‘matters for’ IR/ir and that “narratives in fiction and popular culture therefore deserve to take their place alongside respectable [sic] sources in the field” (503), I doubt it will. I doubt it because I do not think popular culture is ignored in IR mainly because mainstream IR assumes “that people can readily discern fact from fiction” (504) in their cognitive processing of knowledge claims about world politics. Instead, I think that the mainstream of IR rejects popular culture for two reasons. First, it does so because popular culture is considered trivial, its study frivolous and engagement with it is thus seen by definition to undermine IR’s status as a serious (scientific) discipline engaged with serious ‘high politics’. Second, it is rejected because most work on popular culture and world politics deploys critical theoretical approaches – e.g., post-structural, feminist, decolonial, Marxian – that are anathema to that same ‘mainstream’. We could test my hypothesis, applying Daniel and Musgrave’s model of IR scholars’ synthetic experiences of the idea of popular culture research!

But “Synthetic Experiences” did not convince me, a non-mainstream IR scholar, either. More accurately, as someone already persuaded that ‘popular culture matters’, their conclusion provided little that is new. *That* popular culture ‘influences’ beliefs and actions is already well established – indeed taken for granted – in Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) literature, although that knowledge is grounded in different – mainly critical and structural – theoretical assumptions. *How* popular culture matters is in many cases also quite well established: diverse, often discursive, mechanisms and practices – linguistic, visual, aural, kinetic, affective, etc. – have been and continue to be explored to great effect. From this angle, an argument justifying popular culture from the vantage point of individual cognition, while interesting, is perhaps unnecessary.

More worrisome are the constraining effects such an approach might engender. As someone who has worked, for decades now, in the increasingly well-established PCWP field, I was taken aback to see the question “how popular culture matters”, for images or otherwise, reduced – via a de facto, and perhaps unintended, form of logical positivism’s “intertheoretic reduction” (e.g., Friedman 1982) – from questions of social meanings, practices and structures to individual-level cognition and psychology (504). This reductive approach bucks the more expansive intellectual PCWP trend: it radically narrows what has traditionally been a wide-ranging, theoretically eclectic, trans-disciplinary, and fundamentally critical domain of inquiry. The long-standing question – “how *does* popular culture relate to world politics?” (Weldes and Rowley 2015; Grayson et al. 2009) – with which the PCWP community has grappled for decades, has generally been answered, collectively, by widening the theoretical, conceptual and empirical scope of inquiry, by looking for interconnections across the resulting protean terrain and, perhaps most importantly, by deploying this question to challenge the limited conceptions of ‘International Relations’ and ‘world politics’ from which it initially arose. This exciting intellectual terrain of possibility risks being erased by a reductive approach that insists we can explain ‘how popular culture matters’ by reducing the answer to individual cognition.

Even if we accept that such cognitive processes are centrally at work, once that has been established, we cannot remain there, but must instead return to the more expansive questions being asked from more critical theoretical perspectives within PCWP:

- In understanding how PC matters for ‘images of IR’, we are back to investigating complex relations between the encoding and decoding of meanings (e.g., Hall 1994), the latent meanings embedded in semiotic structures (e.g., Barthes 1967), the contesting meanings produced by differently intersectional reading positions (e.g., Ang 1985) and through diverse forms of intertextuality (e.g., Der Derian and Shapiro 1988; Weldes 2003).
- In understanding how PC matters beyond “images”, we are back to investigating a much wider range of PC texts and practices, beyond both *Star Trek* and *NCIS* (509). From tourist choreographies (e.g., Reeves 2018), to romantically gifted diamonds (e.g., Weldes and Rowley 2015, 21-24), to mega-sporting events (e.g., Schimmel 2012), to street harassment (e.g., Weldes 2018), a much wider array of popular cultural practices are intimately entwined in, dependent on, and even responsible for contemporary world politics practices and processes.
- In taking PC seriously, we are back to challenging mainstream understandings of IR/world politics. Constructing ‘popular culture’ and ‘IR/world politics’ such that one ‘matters’ to the other reifies fundamentally connected, even indistinguishable, social practices. As Daniel and Musgrave recognise (509), IR, like other fictions, tells stories (e.g., Kuusisto 2018; Weber 2010), and world politics too is based on ‘stories’: from the “Peaceful Atom” (e.g., Boyer 1994) to Jessica Lynch (e.g., Kumar 2004). Conversely, PC is always already part of world politics. PC is a place where deep thinking about world politics occurs (e.g., Shapiro 2016; Van Munster and Sylvest 2015); PC texts/artefacts/practices are industrial products of global corporations, traded, regulated and consumed internationally (e.g., Heller 2005); PC legitimates, challenges and resists world political practices, like torture (e.g., Adams 2016) and counter-terrorism (Van Veeren 2009).

It would be a shame to take a step backwards from all of this fruitful PCWP work, to re-ify problematic categories and to retreat from the expansive range of critical questions that PCWP has hitherto opened up.

POPULAR CULTURE MATTERS

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“Worlds ambiguously natural and crafted”

-Haraway, Cyborg Manifesto

In “Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations” Daniel and Musgrave argue that mainstream IR scholars are making a “bad bet” by ignoring the role of popular culture (PC) in IR (503). Daniel and Musgrave combine a comprehensive literature review of the study of PC in IR with their methodological approach based in cognitive science and psychology. In the closing section of their article they test their model of “synthetic experiences” through an examination of “the influence of the US novelist Tom Clancy on issues such as US relations with the Soviet Union and 9/11” (503). In thinking about this article in relation to the literature on Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) I found many aspects of the article to be quite intriguing.

As a scholar of PCWP I agree with Daniel and Musgrave that IR scholars ignore PC to their own detriment. For me, the value of studying the relationship between popular culture and politics lies in revealing that popular culture already is a productive part of politics whether we want to acknowledge it or not. In fact, politics is first and foremost about defining what gets to be part of the public sphere (what is part of the discussion), and, second, about who has the authority or the “capacity” to deal with these “objects” (Shapiro 2008, 94). Creating and enforcing the boundaries of what can count as political is the very stuff of politics. Popular culture texts are assumed to be apolitical in IR today because of current disciplinary norms, rather than any inherent aspect of their nature: “Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway 1991, 149). Thus, articles like this one from Daniel and Musgrave are important because they reveal the inherent absurdity of IR’s tendency to discount texts or creators simply because they are fictional or part of PC.

There are many laudable aspects to this article. First, it is a pleasure to see a piece on PC in ISQ. As a flagship journal in the discipline, ISQ has a large role to play in setting, and hopefully expanding, the remit of IR as a field of thought. Second, Daniel and Musgrave included a thoughtful literature review of both work that explicitly examines PC in IR but also work that more broadly examines the role of culture and ideas in IR. They do so, however, within the context of their argument that IR as a discipline continues to largely ignore this work. Third, I appreciated the way in which the authors explicitly stated that they were putting forward one way to study PC in IR rather than “assert[ing] the primacy of any ontological or methodological approach” (506). Finally, I believe that the argument they put forward, that understanding the role of popular authors like Tom Clancy helps explain the decision making of key figures in US foreign policy in the last few decades, makes a welcome contribution to the PCWP literature. One of the great strengths of PCWP as an intellectual community is the variety of approaches and methodologies that it includes, and Daniel and Musgrave add to that diversity.

There were, however, a few aspects of the article that I had questions about. One issue for me was the still highly reductionist picture that Daniel and Musgrave painted of IR as a discipline in which who and what we are meant to study is dominated by elite actors and questions of high politics. If IR is as they describe it, then my main take away message from the article is that IR is a discipline in which I am not interested in participating as a scholar of politics. This can be seen most clearly in their case study in which they focus on traditional IR actors (US presidents, the US Congress, and a few core media outlets), and incidences of high level foreign policy and war. I think that this form of reductionism can also be seen in their insistence that IR should focus on the most “popular” of PC (509), which re-imposes a hierarchy that they otherwise claim to challenge. While the circulation of a particular PC text is one way to show that it should have influence and is thus a valid reason to look for that influence, as a criterion it also introduces a selection bias in terms of the cases you choose to examine. To some extent, picking the lowest hanging fruit in this manner—examining only the most popular of PC as potential influencers in IR—also opens up the scholarship into PC in IR to the critique of only studying what we already know to be important.

I am also concerned by the extent to which Daniel and Musgrave rely on the notion that IR as a field has not taken up the study of PC more completely because IR scholars believe, naively, that trivial PC texts are not worthy of study. That popular culture is an important part of politics already appears to be a common sense, widely accepted idea. When Daniel and Musgrave put forward the notion that IR scholars should lobby to act as advisors to PC productions like scientists have in the past (512), I was surprised that they did not acknowledge the active, and well known, role of the US Department of Defense in US-based productions. Both internal coverage from sources like the *Armed Forces Press Service* and external mainstream media sources like *The Guardian* have for years covered the role of military liaisons in the production of Hollywood blockbusters like *The Transformers* series (Smith 2006; Rose 2009). A recent piece in *The Independent* included an in-depth study of the relationship between the US government and Hollywood, which revealed that “between 1911 and 2017, more than 800 feature films received support from the US Government’s Department of Defence...On television, [they] found over 1,100 titles received Pentagon backing—900 of them since 2005” (Alford 2017). Thus, I find it hard to believe that any IR scholars are actually naïve to the potential influence of popular culture texts in politics, and instead I think that IR scholars see and experience more prestige in studying other aspects of world politics. It is that sensation of prestige and hierarchy that I believe Daniel and Musgrave end up supporting rather than dismantling in their choice of case study.

I also worry about the praise that Daniel and Musgrave put forward for Cole and Singer’s novel, *Ghost Fleet* (512-513). If we are to believe that elite actors naively consume and are shaped by popular culture, then my response would not be that this is a magic button we should press with impunity. Rather, in line with Daniel and Musgrave’s discussion of the “transporting” effects of fictional narrative form I take it as a cautionary tale, a further proof of the power of such narratives. In examining the nuances of the power of narrative and the use of narrative as a way to do IR, I would also look to work published in the *Journal of Narrative Politics* which “is an interdisciplinary journal rooted in the study of global politics that explores narrative methods in research, writing, and pedagogy.” This particular journal was first published in 2014, and had its launch event at the 2014 ISA Annual Convention in Toronto.

The other issue I had, as I alluded to earlier, is their decision to focus on a very popular, best-selling author, who was already widely known to be particularly in vogue amongst

conservatives who were in power in the US during the time of their two key examples. As they noted, Clancy has been repeatedly “cited on the floor of Congress” and was called to comment on the 9/11 attacks almost immediately (511). Daniel and Musgrave use this popularity as one of their primary reasons for choosing this case to demonstrate the validity of their model, but the very conspicuousness of their case study makes their conclusions less compelling for me. Why do we need to study PC in IR if we are only reconfirming what we already know? I would be particularly interested to read their future work in this area if they are able to apply their model of synthetic experiences to cases in which the influence or power of a particular PC text or creator is less well documented.

In conclusion, I am excited to see work on PC in IR in *International Studies Quarterly*. I hope that other readers take this well-written article by Daniel and Musgrave as a great addition to the large, diverse, and growing area of scholarship on PCWP within IR and other related fields of thought.

HOW DISTINCTIVE ARE “NARRATIVE FICTIONS”?

David Sylvan

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The use of composed works of popular culture to account for “real actors’ behavior” is long-standing in accounts of international relations. Thucydides uses just-so stories about etymology and Homeric epic as historical facts; E.H. Carr cites Dostoevsky’s novels and George Bernard Shaw’s plays as evidence of how individuals and states behave (1941: 64, 99). In this sense, Daniel and Musgrave are plowing a well-tilled field.

That said, their work raises a series of issues. First, they claim that a fictional narrative can “engross a reader in its world” and thus that “influential fictions” are “taken as ‘real’” by elites who will, at least initially, “evaluate” and “respond to” unexpected events as if those events “resembled” events in fictional narratives. To support these propositions, Daniel and Musgrave discuss how political elites in the United States cited Tom Clancy’s novels as explaining certain “real-world” events or as supporting their policy proposals.

But what does it mean to be engrossed in a fictional world (does one have to spend a lot of time reading or rereading the books? does one have to talk to others, or dream about, or obsess about, those books?), or, in a noncircular way, for a fictional world to be “influential” or taken as real (does one expect to see characters in the world? or to find newspaper articles reporting the events in the world)? The extensive literature on video gaming, for example, suggests that spending many hours playing these games almost never translates into gamers thinking that mundane reality is reflective of the gaming world (Salen and Zimmerman 2003), nor even – although the evidence on this is more mixed – that gamers’ violent behavior in the latter carries over into the former (Zendle, Kudenko, and Cairns 2018). Although political elites need not compartmentalize as well as video gamers (see former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia’s references to *24’s* Jack Bauer), these points do indicate a lack of clarity in Daniel and Musgrave’s mechanism and hypotheses. Their methodology could also be strengthened considerably. The fact that various U.S. elites cited Clancy’s works does not mean that “audiences changed their beliefs because they read Clancy”; rather, those who read Clancy may have come to his works because they already held those beliefs. This selection bias is a serious design problem, one not obviated by references to “process tracing.”

A second point is conceptual. Daniel and Musgrave’s argument is about a particular aspect of “popular culture,” namely “fictional narratives.” Although undefined, these appear to be comprised of novels, feature films, and television series. Products of these genres are treated as telling vivid stories; this is why “narrative” is used and why readers and audiences are argued to be engrossed in those stories. “Fiction,” though, is counterposed to “real-world events”: the narratives are inventions (about persons, events, places...) which never occurred in the “real world.”

Numerous questions can be asked about this way of framing the argument. First, what is the relation between narrative and engrossment? Do certain vivid adventure plots

particularly engross certain categories of political elites, and if so, why (is it a matter of affective power? of being swept along in a narrative arc)? Are there not numerous elites engrossed by romantic plots, by comedies, or by particular scenes (the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg; the wedding cake in *Great Expectations*) or even lines of dialogue (“Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn”; “If you prick us, do we not bleed?”), and are there not other elites bored to tears or turned off by stories about James Bond or Jack Ryan? Second, how salient is the difference between consciously constructed fiction and the contouring of the real world (cf. Burke 1969: 32-35; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 1.1.7; Barthes 1957)? Aren’t narrative fictions themselves readings of the “real world,” every bit as much as historical, descriptive, or theoretical claims? One would be hard-pressed to see the predictable orations by which U.S. presidents announce and justify armed conflicts as more accurate accounts of the situation than “narrative fictions” such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Apocalypse Now*.

Lastly, consider “popular culture.” Daniel and Musgrave treat this mostly as narrative fictions. But popular culture is far broader, including genres from music to fashion. There is an extensive literature (e.g., Nye 1990; Davenport 2009) on how many of these forms affected international relations. Beyond that, popular culture stretches well beyond professionally composed or performed works, covering everything from rites of passage (debutante balls, weddings) to courtesies and forms of address. On these latter: the international relations of republican Rome were built around domestic cultural practices such as clientilism and patronage (Badian 1958), 18th and 19th century European diplomacy was permeated by aristocratic customs and norms (Otte 2008), and today’s international organizations are shot through with numerous elements of 20th century bureaucratic culture (Weaver and Nelson 2016). Should one not try to track analogous connections between contemporary cultural tropes such as coolness or non-ostentation and the various ways in which politicians and diplomats try to behave?

None of these points takes away from Daniel and Musgrave’s contribution. Rather, they situate it as one point of entry onto a large, indeed an enormous, field.

THE FUNCTION OF FICTION

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“Non-fiction can distort; facts can be realigned. But fiction never lies.”

-Naipaul (1981, 67)

In the age of Fox and Fake News, V.S. Naipaul’s pithy observation rings more true than ever. Within this context, Daniel and Musgrave’s intervention may seem counter-intuitive – for it is the character of fact, rather than fiction we ought to be probing. But, considering the range of disciplinary queries IR has limited itself to, it is an important intervention. By taking the specific case of Tom Clancy’s novels and how they ‘buttress[ed] the ideological edifice of Reagan-Bush era policies’, Daniel and Musgrave take us into the little-explored research question of how fiction influences international politics. However, that fiction shapes the world for us and around us is not an unusual claim to make – most other social science and humanities disciplines would indeed consider it fairly obvious. The assumed novelty of the authors’ arguments points more towards the pathologies of IR as a discipline – the American positivist version of it in particular – and this is what I will focus on.

Words of fiction are world-making in many ways. Think of Chinua Achebe (2009) who, as a child, hated the ‘guts’ of Africans. They spoil the adventures of his white hero every time he encountered them in his school-book stories by Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Joseph Conrad, among others. All the while he took ‘sides with the white man against those savages’, until it dawned on him that he was one of those savages. Or, consider that mildly-intoxicated African-American person who, after watching ‘Black Panther’ – the first ever Hollywood black superhero film – proclaimed: ‘Ah, this must be how white people feel like, every day!’ (Coates 2018)

Superheroes may be fictional characters, but the mass audiences’ ‘synthetic experience’ of these caped crusaders goes beyond Daniel and Musgrave’s argument that they change or reinforce beliefs; they also constitute individual and social identities. For instance, any effort to understand Rudyard Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’ by process tracing its reception in Roosevelt’s administration would fall short of assessing its real world-making function: that of constituting ‘whiteness’. Fiction makes people and their ideas of personhood – or, in the case of western fictions about colonial subjects, the lack thereof.

The turn to fiction is welcome for another reason, too: it opens the space for greater engagement with the non-western world. In violent (post)colonial contexts, fiction has provided the greatest scope for subversion. By escaping the compulsion to narrate facts, fiction writers have repeatedly chased the ‘truth’ in (post)colonial situations. Fiction has allowed such writers greater leeway to subvert state and sovereignty (only comparatively so,

of course – there is a long list of fiction writers jailed, exiled or killed for their work). Fictional detours have regularly fingered the constructed nature – if not outright fictionality – of the State (that we in IR take for granted), in a manner that academic writings in the Global South rarely have. By revealing the absurdity of the (post)colonial state, focusing on sensibilities ‘of touch, sight, hearing and smell’ rather than abstract data, fiction ‘captures the drama of the colonial and the anticolonial’ (Thiong’o 2012: 47). As the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o argues, it was ‘fiction [that] first gave us a theory of the colonial situation’ (p. 48).

The social function of fiction therefore is multi-layered. Fictions purport to create ‘sympolitical’ individuals, to use Benedetto Croce’s term – those who view the world through the lens of politics, not unpolitical ones. Hence to assume that fictions only transport individuals into the story world may not be doing full justice to their operations of power, for they also work to bring back individuals from a state of alienation into reality. To only focus on the belief-suspending notion of fictions is to rob them of their ‘history’-making character and strip them of their essentially political nature.

Even the State is aware of the politically charged nature of fictions and their ability to subversively approach reality: otherwise how does one explain the absurdity of the situation where the central character in Ngugi’s novel, *Matigari* – a revolutionary leader – was issued an arrest warrant by the Kenyan police! The archives of state brutality as well as anticolonial struggles are more wholly captured in works deemed fiction.

Finally, fiction also turns the gaze on the inhibitive rituals of academic labour. The producer-labour relationship of the knowledge economy of IR has ensured that non-western authors are only the native informers in the world of theory. How many non-western authors, who have studied in their home countries, have published in premier IR academic journals? Even an impressionistic eye would reveal to us that fiction writers have represented the non-west far better and more numerous than academic ones. When the tools of academic thinking are tied to resources and procedures naturally advantageous to the West, imagination is the most viable non-western resource. While this may point to the unequal world of academic knowledge production, it may not be so bad after all. As Achebe (1988: 149) says: ‘privilege is one of the great adversaries of the imagination; it spreads a thick layer of adipose tissue over our sensitivity’.

POPULAR CULTURE, SYNTHETIC EXPERIENCES, AND DARK MATTER: A RESPONSE TO RESPONSES

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We thank *International Studies Quarterly*, the contributors to this symposium, and especially Meera Sabaratnam for this opportunity to expand on our article “Synthetic Experiences” (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). This response proceeds in three parts: first, we clarify our argument; second, we engage with the symposium contributors; and, third, we conclude by laying out what our work means for students of international relations.

We wrote this article to provide a falsifiable theoretical mechanism about how popular culture could change mass and elite understandings of world politics. We encountered a difficulty analogous to that of theorists of dark matter in physics. Although “dark matter is thought to account for most matter in the universe, “dark” matter is hard to fit into theories derived observations of the world around us because it is difficult to detect with conventional instrumentation. This undetectability does not make it irrelevant: if dark matter did not exist, “calculations show that many galaxies would fly apart instead of rotating,” among other points. Understandably, many physicists long resisted the notion that matter we cannot see, feel, or detect plays a major role in the universe.

To apply the analogy to international relations: international-relations scholarship seems to have focused its observations, and consequently theorizing, about how knowledge and belief affects images of world politics (and thus *action* in world politics) on the “light matter” of prestigious or credentialed sources of knowledge—everything from off-the-record briefings at Chatham House to investigative journalism at *Caixin* to chatter on CNN and graduate seminars at Columbia University. These are easy to see, measure, and record, and audiences admit that their ideas stem from such respectable sources. Indeed, as Drezner (2017) has catalogued, there are fairly identifiable “industrial” sectors producing arguments that fit within this rubric.

Academics, whose work neatly fits within this vetted ecosystem, naturally incline toward theorizing that the contents of this observable category explain the bulk of what really matters for politics. This focus on vetted sources blinds scholars to the fact that even the most elite audiences have finite attention spans and ability to consume “properly” vetted knowledge. The “dark matter”, then, would be everything else—the disreputable, unnoticed, embarrassing, or stigmatized knowledge that nevertheless affects how people see their place in their world (Barkun 2013, 2016)—including, of course, popular culture, along with conspiracy theories, popular histories, and anything else that is difficult for academics to detect. The potentially profound influences of such texts would pass undetected by the academic fitted with a worldview and equipment that assumed non-serious sources could not have any relevance for the serious business of world politics.

As we continued our research, we discovered that we were far from the only people to have guessed that popular culture might prove important for international relations. A broad literature had already grappled with the role of popular culture in politics. This literature did, however, seem to us not to answer what we saw as the most pressing question about the relationship between “facts” and “fictions,” between audience and texts: *why* could fiction influence the real world? It might be meaningful to talk about *Star Trek* and Cold War liberalism, but *how much* did it do, under *what* circumstances, and *who* was most affected? Moreover, why wouldn’t fictional presentations “stay in their lane”? Shouldn’t serious, factual, and credentialed information about the world—like, say, our course lectures—guide audiences’ beliefs about the world rather than the frippery of popular culture? Why should we think that the effect of a *Star Trek* episode wouldn’t be reversed by a Walter Cronkite broadcast about the U.S. quagmire in Vietnam?

Our answer, the notion of “synthetic experiences,” resulted from our attempt to theorize and measure the influence of this “dark matter”—to find theories that would explain those anomalies and predict observable implications that other theories would leave unexplained. In doing so, we hoped to bridge the gulf between different intellectual communities, not widen it, by showing that even “elite” audiences performing core features of statehood and security dialogues were affected by these dynamics, as the popular-culture literature had long suggested. We wanted to give the mainstream—even researchers like realists and security scholars, who might be resistant to these claims—a shove toward the serious study of popular culture. And we hoped to show that studying popular culture did not require methodologies unfamiliar to the mainstream—that there were theoretical and methodological connections that could be made without changing the object of study.

That’s why our article presents a hard case, not to persuade the popular-culture studies crowd, but rather to convince what we imagine as being the most skeptical group of IR scholars: realists, foreign-policy process experts, and security-studies students. We thus aim to show that we can demonstrate evidence consistent with our mechanism’s operation even where the elements for popular culture’s influence should be—by these skeptics’ lights—*least* likely to be found: at the highest levels of government and the media on the core issues of state survival and security. Falsifying that null hypothesis would not only provide a boost to the credibility of our claims but also to the broader community of popular-culture studies.

Responses to the Symposium

We are convinced that we succeeded pretty well in our goals. Still, no article is perfectly persuasive. Of course, our attempt can, and should, be critiqued and refined. (Purists can and should criticize our leap from dual-process models to transportation theory, for instance.) Beyond that form of engagement, however, we have found that the reaction of different scholars (in this symposium and elsewhere) to our argument maps relatively cleanly onto the preexisting divisions toward the study of popular culture and world politics. A fair proportion of scholars who have been doing popular-culture work—some, for a long time—appear skeptical, even hostile, to our work at least partly because they think we are claiming novelty where we claim none. On the other hand, many scholars who do more “mainstream” work find our article interesting but do not engage with the larger literature on popular culture. The responses to our article in this symposium range from Weldes’ position that our work is unoriginal and perhaps even harmful, to Hudson’s constructive skepticism about how to construct a research project that would test our claims more generally. We are grateful for the chance to engage with these critics.

Thakur argues that the need for our article shows the pathologies of positivist American IR, given that “most other social science and humanities disciplines would consider [our claim] fairly obvious.” We think there may be something to this, but Thakur’s critique also confuses our *broad* goal—of helping IR and political science take popular culture seriously—with our *specific* theory. Even if political science was well on the way to taking popular culture as seriously as Thakur thinks other disciplines already do (and we would disagree, especially given the hegemony of economics within social science), there would still be room for exploring mechanisms and setting bounds on the potential impact of popular culture.

We concur emphatically, however, with Thakur’s call to use our article as a springboard to investigating the influence of narratives in—and, we would add, *on*—the Global South. We think our work provides additional ways to investigate the relationship between fiction and politics in different societies. Thakur’s critique would again benefit from separating our mechanism from the panoply of mechanisms through which fiction operates on readers. One can appreciate narrative transportation without claiming this mechanism “strip[s] [stories] of their essentially political nature.” Thakur’s description of specific plot points would similarly benefit by taking on board not just our theories but others: was *Matigari* important to the Kenyan government because it provided a new symbol or because the transporting effect of the narrative changed minds?

Sylvan’s critique raises important points regarding future applications of political science meta-theory. Some, such as what it means to be engrossed in a fictional world, are explored in depth in the original article and the voluminous specialist literature we reference. We appreciate, and concur with, his suggestion that our approach should be incorporated into a broader discussion of how popular culture shapes norms and actions across a wide range of times, places, and agents. By providing a testable set of hypotheses about how these fictions can shape action, we encourage Sylvan and others to adapt our methodology to expand upon the broader field.

We thank Brennan for welcoming us into the popular culture and world politics community. But we differ on a few points. First, we do not “praise” *Ghost Fleet*, but merely describe its reception and suggest it may play a role analogous to that of earlier “next-war” novels like *The Battle of Dorking*. Second, Brennan appears to believe that we subscribe to a “highly reductionist picture” of international relations, even though our theorizing repeatedly refers to mass audiences; there is no reason the theory could not be applied to understand the dynamics of participants in world politics far removed from the Oval Office or Number 10. Third, journalistic accounts about the role of the Defense Department in movie production does establish that someone thinks that popular culture matters (and we have recommended many of the same articles to others), but it does not establish that “most” or “mainstream” IR scholars know about this involvement or—more critically—think it affects the actual practice of world politics. It is also premature to think that popular culture’s importance is commonsensical for most international-relations theorists.

Weldes appears to believe we dismiss the importance of other works in the field or that we aim to shut down other avenues by which these subjects can be investigated. That claim contradicts the spirit and text of our article, as we describe above. A more fruitful discussion about bringing together different forms of inquiry would proceed from questions like how our mechanism, and other more precise claims, could aid scholars who have long toiled in these fields or how our findings about texts’ influence on elites could be combined with other arguments for clarifying the field’s importance to scholars who are dismissive of them. We look forward to future chances to make these connections.

We thank Hudson for appreciating our appreciating the “professional cover” we provide future scholars to engage in PCWP and foreign policy analysis. We agree with her observation that the kaleidoscopic nature of media complicates the simplistic transmission models used by previous generations of scholars, producers, and consumers—there is unlikely to be another Tom Clancy (although, as she notes, corporate properties like the Marvel Cinematic Universe may form new focal points).

We think, however, that the development of a more varied media ecosystem opens more doors than it closes. In observational studies, the burgeoning number of fictional presentations (a product of “Peak TV”, YouTube, and the Internet) should make it easier to identify variations in transportation by audience. A media ecosystem that allows *The Americans*, *NCLIS*, and *Homeland* to find audiences lets us say more about who believes what in fiction than the three-network (U.S.) ecosystem of the 1960s.

Hudson raises an important question about an implication of our work (and the broader universe of claims that popular culture wields influence in a way that scholarship may not): why haven’t Stephen Walt—or Valerie Hudson!—written screenplays instead of journal articles? Or, if fiction can be so persuasive and misleading, why not ban fiction? The latter is, of course, historically widespread: authoritarian and illiberal governments from Maoist China to the [Boston city government](#) have banned subversive, or “unwholesome,” fictions precisely because of fears of political unrest or cultural change. We do not approve of these efforts but we do take them as the tribute of vice to our theory’s virtues. As to the former question, we do think (as Brennan notes) that efforts through venues like “Bridging the Gap” should include connecting scholars to Hollywood as well as to Capitol Hill.

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? Hudson’s comment that our modest descriptions of our findings “does not a research programme inspire” is well-taken, as is her point (echoed by Brennan, Thakur, and Weldes) that many other scholars have already found ways to conduct ambitious research enterprises. We think that the synthetic-experiences project can contribute to international-relations and other enterprises in two ways.

The first could come from extending and refining the synthetic experiences mechanism, given its foundations in the psychological and other literatures. Does a fictional narrative that invokes overtly political themes activate mechanisms different from those activated by non-political narratives? Do audiences high in political knowledge find different kinds of narratives transporting than those low in political knowledge? Are synthetic experiences cosmopolitan, able to be evoked in narratives about political environments otherwise unfamiliar to audiences, or are they so parochial that Americans really only find American-style politics (as Saudi Arabians find Saudi-style politics) convincing? Experimental and observational studies could be employed to build out these elements of the theory.

The second could come from using synthetic experience theorizing to set bounds on the effect sizes of various synthetic experiences. If [op-ed articles](#), [satirical shows](#), and [infotainment programming](#) can persuade large numbers of people, then perhaps similar investigations could establish the persuasive effects of novels, short stories, television episodes, or films (Coppock, Ekins, and Kirby 2018; Young 2013; Baum 2002). The notion of synthetic experiences also suggests that separable elements of narratives should also matter; testing audiences’ reception of tropes that are purely fictional but familiar with unfamiliar but accurate nonfictional sources could establish the degree to which such elements circulate (mis)information. The former set would put this research more in

conversation with political communications and political psychology; the latter with more applied and macro fields such as international-relations theory or voter behavior.

We greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss and debate our article with a broad range of our colleagues. Although our model is imperfect, we believe that it provides a testable framework for demonstrating the impact of popular culture on foreign policy. Much work remains to be done to expand upon this project, but we believe the strength and diversity of the comments provided here help improve our arguments as well as expose them to a broader audience. We hope the field of international relations will be richer and more precise discipline for these efforts.

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