FROM SOFT POWER AND POPULAR CULTURE TO
POPULAR CULTURE AND WORLD POLITICS

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Abstract:

Popular cultural texts, institutions and practices, whether news media, sports, film or tourism, are often singled out as significant soft power assets. However, most accounts of soft power do not interrogate in any depth the mechanisms through which these popular cultural resources (allegedly) exert influence, a gap that is symptomatic of a deeper neglect of popular culture in International Relations (IR). In this paper we seek to remedy this neglect by offering a more detailed theorization of popular culture and world politics. We interrogate examples of the deployment of popular culture in the soft power literature both to illustrate the opening to popular culture that it offers IR and to highlight the limitations of this opening to popular culture. In response to these limitations, we propose a more complex theorization of popular culture and world politics that 1) takes seriously the complexity of the causal claims about popular culture asserted in the soft power literature, 2) operates with a more nuanced understanding of meaning making and communication, and 3) foregrounds the constitutive role of popular culture in world politics. Such a theorization recognizes that popular cultural texts, institutions and practices are world politics and so should be central to its empirical and theoretical analysis. We illustrate our arguments by examining some fundamental entanglements of popular culture, soldiering, and torture.
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Introduction

Analyses of ‘soft power’ have created a potentially fruitful opening in International Relations (IR) for the study of popular culture. As far back as 1990, Joseph Nye highlighted popular culture’s importance, arguing that American [U.S.] popular culture, embodied in products and communications, has widespread appeal. ... Soviet teenagers wear blue jeans and seek American recordings, and Chinese students used a symbol modelled on the Statue of Liberty during the 1989 uprisings. (1990a: 168-9, 1990b: 193-4)

This popular cultural “appeal” allowed the United States “more opportunities to get its messages across and to affect the preferences of others” (Nye 1990a: 169, 1990b: 194). As a result, popular culture helped the United States “to achieve important foreign policy goals”: for example, it “contributed” to both “the democratic reconstruction of Europe after World War II” (2004b: 48) and “victory in the Cold War” (49). The latter was made possible because “the years-long transmission of images of the popular culture of the West had breached the [Berlin] Wall before it fell” (49). According to Nye, “rock-and-roll music played a part” (49) – “Lennon trumped Lenin” (50) – as did “Western films”, such as Dr. Strangelove (1964) or On the Beach (1959), which could have “devastating political effects”, whether by clarifying the reciprocal impact of nuclear war or by showing that “people in the West did not have to stand in long lines to purchase food, did not live in communal apartments, and owned their own cars” (49).

More recently, popular culture has played a prominent soft power role in U.S. public diplomacy in the ‘War on Terror’. As Laura Mills (2014) has shown, the U.S. State Department, for instance, has made extensive use of sports (e.g., SportsUnited), film (e.g., Film Forward: Advancing Cultural Dialogue), and cultural exchanges (e.g., the Youth Exchange and Study Programme, which focused on students from “the Muslim world” [77]), in its attempts to create ‘good’ neoliberal cosmopolitan citizens worldwide. The increasingly prevalent soft power practice of ‘nation branding’ also relies
heavily on popular culture. For instance, the ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign associated with UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in the 1990s invoked 1960s popular culture, including Britpop and 1960s fashion, to signify Britain’s, and specifically London’s, centrality to modern global culture in order, among other things, to increase inward economic investment (Weldes and Rowley 2015: 14; van Ham 2001).

Nonetheless, despite recognizing popular culture’s significance in state projections of ‘soft power’, the space opened by the soft power literature for analyses of popular culture in IR has been empirically, theoretically and conceptually limited. What strikes us quite forcefully is how much mainstream IR continues to neglect, misunderstand, and thereby underestimate the power of popular culture in creating and sustaining, as well as potentially challenging and transforming, processes and practices of world politics. In this paper we seize the opportunity provided by soft power’s limited opening to popular culture, not to improve the analysis of soft power, but to argue for taking popular culture seriously in IR.

The paper is thus structured as follows. In the first section we briefly outline the opening to popular culture offered by analyses of soft power. In the second section, we unpack and critique the limited conceptualization of popular culture in those analyses. We consider what it means to take popular culture seriously in the third section. We argue for more robust analyses of the causal relations between popular culture and world politics and stress the centrality of constitutive relations between popular culture and world politics. In the fourth section, we illustrate the significance of popular culture in soldiering and in torture, mainstream domains of world politics/IR. In conclusion, we argue that, without a sustained engagement with popular culture on its own terms, our understandings of world politics remain partial, constrained by a limited conception of what IR is and what it can and should be.

**Soft Power and Popular Culture**

Nye defined soft power as “the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own” (1990a: 168). Soft power is thus “about mobilizing cooperation from others without threats or payments” (2004b: 60),

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1 Thanks to Cynthia Enloe (1996), the inspiration for this formulation of our research problem.
2 We adhere to established convention in using ‘IR’ for the discipline and ‘world politics’ for the practice.
offering states “the ability to get what you want through attraction” (2004a: 256) rather than through conventional forms of hard power, “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will” (2003). This concept of soft power has been quite widely deployed in mainstream scholarly\(^4\) and policy\(^5\) arenas. Considerable empirical attention has, unsurprisingly, been paid to U.S. soft power (e.g., Parmar and Cox 2010), for instance to its role in combating negative Arab perceptions of the United States both before and after 9/11 (e.g., Rugh 2006). The putative rise of Chinese soft power has also sparked considerable interest (e.g., Suzuki 2009), as has soft power’s deployment by other states, like Japan (e.g., Otmazgin 2008) and in “new public diplomacy” (Melissen 2005). Even non-state actors – the European Union (Michalski 2005) and NGOs (Zaharna 2007) – are argued to pursue soft power.

In this literature, soft power is conceptualized as a political asset provided by a variety of “soft power resources” (Nye 1990a: 167).\(^6\) Nye, on whom this literature generally relies for definitions, argues (tautologically) that soft power “tends to arise from such resources as cultural and ideological attraction as well as rules and institutions of international regimes” (1990a: 168, 1990b: 188), and “from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies” (2004a: 256, 2009: 161). For the United States, on this argument, “American culture is” a “relatively inexpensive and useful soft power resource” (Nye 2009: 168).

Cultural institutions and practices feature prominently in this conceptualization. Analyses of soft power highlight, generally without theorizing, various aspects of culture and cultural institutions,\(^7\) including, diversely, “cultural diplomacy” (Schneider 2005), media technologies (Warren 2014) and media “framing” practices (Hayden 2012), “networked” mass communications (Zaharna 2007), and

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3 Nye later argued that states really need “smart power”, the judicious combination of soft and hard power (Nye 2009).
4 Scholars from critical traditions also discuss and/or deploy ‘soft power’ (e.g., Bially Mattern 2005; Leheny 2006; Watanabe and McConnell 2008; Hayden 2012; Solomon 2014). Our concern here, however, is the opening to popular culture made by, and the limitations of, conventional approaches to soft power.
5 Cf. Eriksson and Norman (2011), who have questioned soft power’s actual policy ‘impact’.
6 In fact, as many critics have noted (e.g., Stone 2015: 16-23; Bially Mattern 2005), the concept of soft power is both imprecise and ambiguous – is it a behaviour, a form of power, a power resource, or all of these at once? And where precisely is ‘soft power’ located? Who can create and ‘wield’ it? These are not merely ‘academic’ questions: states put significant resources into developing and wielding soft power with little knowledge of what it is or how it operates.
7 This focus on ‘cultural institutions’ is spectacularly under-theorized in comparison to, for instance, Frankfurt School analyses of the “culture industries” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2006 [1944]), Althusser’s analysis of the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), or Gramsci’s analysis of “the state and civil society” (1971), and their successors.

While ‘soft power’ creates a useful opening for considering popular culture in world politics, much of the literature avoids making popular culture the substantive topic of its analyses, and the rest of mainstream IR generally ignores popular culture altogether. For instance, in a brief survey of top-ranked (mostly U.S.-based) IR journals – Foreign Affairs, International Organization, International Security, ISQ, Journal of Peace Research, Marine Policy, and World Politics – using the search term “popular culture”, for all years, we found only a few articles that involved popular cultural texts, institutions, and practices in their analyses (see Goff 2000; van Ham 2001; Williams 2003; Yadgar 2006; Bleiker and Kay 2007; Compas et al., 2007; Manjikian 2010; Shirky 2011). That said, the analytical limitations of soft power studies of popular culture are more significant than their small number. Such studies, as we argue in the next section, tend to ask a narrow range of questions and to theorize the role of popular culture – if it is theorized at all – in overly restrictive ways.

An Opening to Popular Culture?

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8 ‘Popular culture’ is a political and thus contested concept (Storey 2012: 5-14) made up of equally contested components – ‘popular’ and ‘culture’. For the purposes of this paper we define it inclusively as both mass-produced, commercial mass culture and culture produced and practiced by people.

9 Exceptions include Hayashi and Lee 2007; Hayden 2012: chapter 3; Schneider 2005; Thussu 2013 and chapters in Watanabe and McConnell (2008) – although these latter contributions are located not in IR but in cultural anthropology, communications, history and other disciplines.

10 We identified the top five IR journals when ranked by “impact factor” and by “5-year impact factor” in the Thomson-Reuters Journal Citations Reports. We added ISQ, although it ranks slightly lower. While not capturing all relevant articles, this sample highlights the paucity of popular cultural studies in these journals.

11 Less ‘mainstream’ IR approaches have produced many more popular cultural analyses over a much longer timespan (e.g., among the oldest are chapters in Der Derian and Shapiro 1989). For numerous examples from the last twenty years and from less mainstream IR journals, see Rowley (2010: 20-21 and notes 16, 17).
The opening to popular culture that soft power affords is limited in at least four distinct ways. 1) Explicit causal claims about popular culture are neither explicated nor substantiated and frequently rest on unexamined implicit causal claims. 2) An oversimplified model of how meaning is made and communicated is assumed. 3) The constitutive power of popular culture is obscured by a focus only on causal relations. 4) Popular culture is limited to the role of a tool wielded by states/elites. We discuss each limitation in turn, before offering an expanded conceptualization of popular culture and world politics in response.

First, while causal claims are common in the soft power literature, they are often left unexplicated and unsubstantiated and/or rest on other, implicit causal claims. Nye in particular frequently makes causal claims about the soft power effects of popular culture. For instance, he quotes a “young Chinese activist” explaining that “we’ve seen a lot of Hollywood movies – they feature weddings, funerals and going to court. So now we think it’s only natural to go to court a few times in your life” (Nye 2004b: 12). The underlying causal logic is that seeing litigious practices in U.S. movies causes Chinese people to have beliefs that, in turn, cause them also to behave litigiously. Similarly, as we noted above, Nye credits Western popular culture with “contributing to” – the ‘causally’ is implicit – “victory” in the Cold War (2004b: 49-50) by causing Eastern European and Soviet populations to (want to) emulate Western practices: “[l]ong before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it had been pierced by movies and television. The hammers and bulldozers would not have worked without the years-long transmission of images of the popular culture of the West that breached the Wall before it fell” (2004b: 49).

These arguments are problematic because, while they have a common-sense plausibility, they fail to unpack the causal claims being asserted. They rely on the tacit assumption that images are simply injected into people’s heads by popular cultural texts and institutions and that, once so injected, people both want to and do act in accordance with them. These tacit causal claims, however, are left both theoretically implicit and empirically unsubstantiated. A more rigorous approach to the study of popular culture and world politics, one that actively acknowledges rather than obscures the complexity of the processes at work, would make explicit and investigate the causal claims on which soft power invocations of popular culture depend.

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12 This can alternatively be interpreted as a constitutive claim. In that case, Nye’s analysis offers a more expanded opening to the study of popular culture than we have suggested. However, since Nye never engages with this constitutive aspect in his discussion, it is unlikely that this opening is intentional.
Second, soft power scholars often oversimplify how meaning is made and communicated in popular culture. In T. Camber Warren’s (2014) empirical analysis of “soft power, mass media and the production of state sovereignty”, for example, he claims that “mass media infrastructure represents one of the most powerful forces for peace and stability yet observed in the modern world, producing more than a tenfold decrease in a country’s likelihood of experiencing the onset of civil war” (113). Warren claims (implicitly) that the ideas contained in the messages conveyed by mass media institutions cause their audience(s) to behave in particular ways, specifically, to uphold state sovereignty and to reject civil war. As with Nye’s assertion that Western popular culture “breached” the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, Warren’s analysis relies on an implicit model that equates “communication” with transmission. Warren thus says: “TV screens cannot transmit bullets, and they cannot transmit dollars; they can only transmit symbols”, in his case messages (assumed to be) about “state loyalty and national unity” (122, original emphasis). This ‘transmission’ model invokes a “conduit” metaphor (Reddy 1993), arguably “the dominant metaphor in Anglo-American cultures for understanding communication” (Laffey and Weldes 1997: 208). This conduit metaphor understands ‘ideas’ as “objects that you can put into” messages, which function as “a channel of communication to someone else who then extracts the ideas” (Lakoff 1995: 116). This logic entails a set of analytical assumptions that presuppose, amongst other things, that meanings are straightforwardly “transmitted” in “messages”, that the meanings inserted in the messages by states/elites are understood by the audience as intended, and that all members of an audience understand the message in the same way.

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13 Warren conducts a statistical analysis of “mass media transmission capabilities” in 177 countries between 1945 and 1999 in relation to the onset of civil war in those same years. The paper establishes a negative relationship between the density of mass media infrastructure in a country – measured by an index of the number of television and radio receivers and the circulation of daily newspapers – and the onset of civil war in a particular year (2014: 124-5).

14 The “conduit” is also a dominant metaphor for language more generally, particularly in empiricist epistemology; see De Man (1978) on John Locke.

15 In Soft Power, Nye recognizes in passing both that “potential power resources do not always translate into realized power in the sense of achieving desired outcomes” and that states can have “high unattractiveness ratings” (2004b: 34). However, having recognized that “messages are ‘downloaded’ and interpreted with different effects by different receivers in different settings” (44), Nye immediately shuts down this avenue of inquiry into audience reception by moving directly to a discussion of the sources of soft power (44-55), without any theorization or analysis of either audience’s readings or their subsequent actions.
Each element of this conduit model of communication is flawed. Most simply, meanings about anything, including “state loyalty and national unity” (Warren 2014: 112), are entailed in all sorts of representations, not just in media ‘messages’ sent by states/elites. To demonstrate the causal effectiveness of these particular messages, the analyst would need to demonstrate that they are not outweighed by – or indeed that the specified causal effects are not produced by – meanings contained elsewhere. A classic example might be the long standing and unsuccessful U.S. ‘War on Drugs’ (Carrier and Klantschnig 2012). While the United States and other states have flooded their populations with media messages intoning ‘just say no’ (buttressed by threats like ‘three strikes’ legislation), other forms of popular culture, including films, popular music, festivals and raves, have persistently insisted that ‘drugs are cool’ (e.g., Buggle 2013). Clearly, for many the latter message trumps the former. Relatedly, one cannot assume that print media, television and radio, to use Warren’s examples, are all controlled by the same elites and/or that they contain the same messages. In the contemporary United States, for instance, Fox News and the New York Times are controlled by (sometimes) competing elites and transmit (sometimes) competing messages, just as do the conservative Telegraph and the more liberal/left-leaning Guardian in the UK, or the English-language Times of India and the Hindi-language Dainik Jagran in India (Neyazi 2010). Finally, as the drug war example indicates, different audiences can and do respond to the same messages in decidedly different ways: some ‘just say no’, others don’t. A more robust approach to the study of popular culture and world politics would not stop at a simplistic conduit model of communication but would instead deploy a more complex analysis of where and how meaning is produced – including, crucially, in a wide range of (competing) popular cultural texts, institutions and practices.

Third, the constitutive power of popular culture is obscured when causal relations are analytically privileged. Warren’s analysis, for example, conceptualizes ‘ideas’ and symbolic or meaning-making institutions as variables that should be investigated in the pursuit of overtly causal theories and claims. Warren explicitly argues that states “rely on emotionally charged messages to induce voluntary compliance with state rule” (2014: 112, original emphasis). The ideas literature on which Warren draws also explicitly treats ideas as causal variables: its main question was “Do ideas have an impact on political outcomes, and if so, under what conditions?” (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 11). The same causal focus is evident in Nye’s discussions of soft power, which stresses the ability of

16 Actually, the simplest flaw is that most of these analyses ignore ‘meaning’ as an analytical concept altogether. We weave a discussion of meaning into the rest of our critique.
17 Thanks to Andrew Wyatt for this last example.
states to attract and persuade other publics and thus to produce (i.e., cause) successful foreign policy outcomes.

An emphasis on *causal* claims about ideas and symbolic/meaning-making institutions and practices obscures the crucial *constitutive* role of ‘ideas’. Reducing our ways of understanding the world to the search for causal relations precludes analysis of the constitution – the prior construction as meaningful phenomena – of the subjects and objects, identities and interests, agents and structures taken as given, and as exogenous to, most causal theorizing.\(^{18}\) Warren and Nye, for example, take as given the categories constitutive of conventional IR – states and state sovereignty, national interests, power politics, the Cold War, and so on. A more comprehensive approach to the study of popular culture and world politics would allow us to ask how such phenomena are constituted to begin with and how popular culture contributes to this constitution.

Fourth, the “tool” metaphor, common in analyses of soft power, limits popular culture analytically to a tool wielded by states/elites. Nye, for example, treats both hard and soft power as foreign policy “tools” (2009: 160) that are “wield[ed]” (2004a: 258) to produce desired foreign policy outcomes. For Cynthia Schneider, cultural diplomacy – a “prime example” of soft power – can be “one of the most effective tools in any diplomatic toolbox” (2005: 147). On the grounds of public diplomacy’s success during the Cold War, she argues that the United States should have deployed cultural diplomacy more widely in the early ‘War on Terror’ (148). Warren’s analysis, too, treats popular culture instrumentally, as a tool to be wielded by states/political elites: “mass media technologies”, he argues, “allow political elites to broadly and publicly disseminate political messages to their citizenry” (2014: 112). These “messages” are “mechanisms available to states for the production of influence” (136).

The use of a ‘tool’ metaphor is problematic in (at least) two respects. First, as part of a causal logic, the tool metaphor reinforces the privileging of causal, at the expense of constitutive, theorizations of popular culture (Shapiro 1985-86: 200-1). Second, a focus on state uses of popular culture reifies the state as the central actor in world politics and renders state officials and political elites the ‘natural’ audience for IR analyses. Most of the soft power literature is articulated for state

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\(^{18}\) We do not expand on this critique here since it, along with the importance of constitutive theorizing, has a long history in social theory (classic is Foucault, e.g., 1977 [1975]), in IR (e.g., Campbell 1992; Doty 1993; Weldes 1999), and in many other disciplines.
actors/elites to serve state interests and expand state power (cf. Cox 1981: 128). This stance occludes the possibility that IR scholarship could/should provide analyses of popular culture for other audiences and purposes, and with other political effects (Watanabe and McConnell 2008: xx). A more inclusive approach to the study of popular culture and world politics would work with an expanded repertoire of actors and audiences of both popular culture and IR, allowing for an expanded and potentially more critical politics. We discuss the first three critiques in the next section and return to the fourth in the conclusion.

**Taking Popular Culture Seriously**

In response to these critiques of extant soft power invocations of popular culture, in this section we propose more complex analyses of both the causal and the constitutive, meaning-making roles of popular culture in world politics.

*Causal Analyses of Popular Culture and World Politics*

As we demonstrated above, a more thorough-going approach to popular culture should 1) more rigorously unpack and substantiate the causal claims being made about popular culture’s role in world politics and 2) robustly consider the multiplicity, complexity and directionality of possible causal claims.

On the first point: it cannot simply be assumed, as we noted above, that ‘ideas’ and ‘messages’ in popular culture cause behavioural change. Instead, such causal claims need to be explicated theoretically and substantiated empirically; we need to investigate whether or not, in what ways, and under what circumstances, such causation actually occurs. We thus need to explain, for instance, *whether, how and when* images of litigiousness in Hollywood films cause young Chinese people to go to court or even to consider it, let alone to see it as normal. Answering such questions in turn requires, among other things, evidence about a) the proportion of young Chinese viewing Hollywood movies containing litigiousness and b) the frequency with which they subject themselves to such messages; c) evidence of increased litigiousness by the aforementioned young Chinese people; and d) since correlation is not causation, some precise and plausible causal mechanism that
links the two, such as, say, “cultivation theory” (e.g., Podlas 2004), which argues (problematically\textsuperscript{19}) that “the more people watch television [or other forms of popular culture], the more they tend to think that the real world resembles” the popular cultural one (Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005: 101). In addition, the causal picture remains incomplete without a thorough investigation ruling out alternative causes of the increase in Chinese litigiousness, such as the availability of a legal regime that makes such litigiousness possible, and profitable. Moreover, since this increased litigiousness and the consumption of Hollywood movies could be connected by a confounding variable (e.g., personal income), such alternative explanations would need to be ruled out as well. In short, much more theoretical and empirical work needs to be done properly to substantiate what are often casual causal claims about the behavioural effects of popular culture in world politics.

On the second point: popular culture is causally implicated in world politics in diverse ways beyond being wielded by states as ‘soft power’. These causal relations have not been well-explored by mainstream IR. For example, given the amount of time that many people, as children and as adults, spend immersed in various popular cultural texts and practices – e.g., TV, films, music, tourism, novels, news and social media, sports, digital games – their foreign policy and other political beliefs and consequent behaviours are likely to be influenced by, perhaps even to be the product of, those texts, institutions and practices. As a result, we might focus more explicitly not just on how states use popular culture but how popular culture influences state and non-state actors. We might, for example, further investigate U.S. Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan’s concern that the hit TV show 24 significantly influenced the attitudes of West Point Cadets towards the effectiveness, and thus the necessity and legitimacy, of torture in the ‘War on Terror’ (Mayer 2007). Similarly, we might investigate the causal influence that Hollywood constructions of Arabs and Muslims (e.g., Shaheen 2001) has on popular perceptions of geopolitics and how these perceptions, in turn, influence both policy makers’ and publics’ views on foreign policy and world politics. One of the few forms of popular culture taken seriously in conventional analyses of world politics is news media (e.g., Peksen, Peterson, and Drury 2014; Rioux and Van Belle 2005). Examples include debates over the precise causal significance, or not, of the ‘CNN effect’ (Livingston 1997) on both public opinion and foreign policy (Robinson 2002) and the cause and effects of “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999), the desensitization of news media audiences to the suffering of victims of war, famine and other catastrophes. As these examples indicate, a focus on popular culture’s effects on popular and/or

\textsuperscript{19} This claim is problematic because it ignores, inter alia, diverse audience reading positions (e.g., Ang 1985).
elite understandings of world politics requires that quite complex causal claims be theorized and investigated empirically.

Moreover, popular culture is causally implicated in world politics beyond just influencing the beliefs and behaviours of policy makers and publics. The diamond engagement ring – an “ostensibly frivolous, and highly gendered, symbol of tradition and romance” (Weldes and Rowley 2015: 21) – throws up surprisingly diverse causal questions about the implications of popular culture in world politics. The diamond engagement ring, now a ‘traditional’ Western popular cultural artefact and practice, was invented by the De Beers diamond cartel, largely through their famous 1947 slogan ‘Diamonds are forever’ (see also the James Bond franchise), in order to revitalize a flagging U.S. diamond market and later transplanted to Asia to expand that market overseas (Harris and Cai 2002). One might, then, investigate the effects of the increasing popular ‘romantic’ demand for diamonds on the creation of the illicit trade in ‘blood diamonds’ that have financed and so fuelled wars in a variety of African states (Jacobi 2013). One might also investigate how this illicit trade led, in turn, to the development of international processes and organizations for the regulation of mining labour, of health and safety in diamond mines and, through the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, of the sourcing of diamonds globally. The diamond engagement ring is thus potentially causally significant to diverse world political processes, e.g., political economy, international security, trade and labour regimes, international organizations. In short, taking popular culture seriously in world politics leads to, and indeed can require, a wide range of complex causal analyses.

Meaning Making and Constitutive Analyses of Popular Culture and World Politics

Thoroughly appreciating popular culture’s role in world politics also requires a sophisticated analysis of meaning making that acknowledges and examines the constitutive relations generally taken for granted in causal arguments. More productive than the metaphor of the ‘conduit’, with its assumption that ‘meaning’ is unproblematically ‘transmitted’ in ‘messages’, is the metaphor of ‘the text’ as the locus of meaning making. The text metaphor (or discourse metaphor more widely) has at least three advantages. First and most simply, it opens up the untheorized black box of the soft power ‘message’. Second, it underlines that meaning is made not only in linguistic practices, but also

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20 This paragraph draws on a more extended example that implicates even more aspects of world politics in ‘the diamond engagement ring’ (Weldes and Rowley 2015: 11-33).
21 The textual metaphor, like all metaphors, also has analytical limitations (e.g., Shapiro 1985-86).
in visual, auditory, gestural, institutional, indeed in all practices that can be ‘read’ like a text. Third, it draws attention to three separate but interconnected sites of meaning, in texts’ production, consumption, and internal structures (Lutz and Collins 1993: 11-14).

The production of texts can be analysed as social practices that create meaning as they allocate power and privilege. Popular culture is produced in various institutions with their own agendas, and struggles over them, with significant effects on world politics. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (1988) analysis of the privately-owned U.S. news media’s manufacturing of consent to U.S. foreign policy is one classic case in point. Struggles, or not, between the Pentagon and Hollywood over the content of films and their depiction of the U.S. military and its missions are another. As David Robb has shown, the Pentagon has significantly influenced the content of many Hollywood films (and TV shows) since the 1940s, even where these were not overtly about war or the military (e.g., The Mickey Mouse Club).

The consumption of texts can be analysed for the meanings that readers/audiences make of them. David Machin and Usama Suleiman (2006) compare U.S. and Hezbollah “computer war games” – Delta Force and Special Force respectively – examining, for instance, how players make sense of them and what sense they make. In particular, they investigate what players think constitutes ‘realism’ in these war games, how ‘realistic’ they think the games are, and how this helps to constitute players’ understandings of ‘real’ armed conflicts. Similarly, Anthony Swofford’s (2004) memoir Jarhead, about his experiences as a U.S. Marine preparing for the 1991 Gulf War, vividly demonstrates that films like Apocalypse Now (1979) and Full Metal Jacket (1987) can be interpreted very differently by civilian and military audiences. While civilians may read them as anti-war films, for soldiers they are “military pornography” (5-7), providing powerful motivations to fight. Either reading – as anti-war film or military pornography – illuminates popular culture’s importance to the making of world political meanings.

“Textual poaching” combines practices of production and consumption (Jenkins 1992). It occurs when new texts and meanings are produced using resources gleaned from the consumption of extant popular culture. Fanzines and fan fiction are examples of textual poaching, as are spoofing, parodying and satirizing. For instance, the idyllic representation of Australia as a tourism destination presented in the 2006 Australian Tourism advertisement “Where the bloody hell are you?” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn0lwGk4u9o) was quickly satirized in a spoof commercial
posted on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=411ueiat2sY). The spoof foregrounded negative aspects of Australian politics and history actively ignored in the tourism ad, including homophobia, racism and the repressive treatment of asylum seekers and indigenous people.

The content and structure of texts – the “attributes of the cultural products” themselves (Lutz and Collins 1993: 12) – can also be analyzed for diverse meanings (both within and across texts). Structural features such as genre and binary oppositions constitute meanings about world politics. So, the generic structure of many Vietnam war films as Westerns allows that war to be read as an instance of the U.S. myth of “regeneration through violence” (Slotkin 1973; Rowley 2010), while a starkly binarised construction of “the US” and “the USSR” as radical enemies, as ‘us versus them’ in Readers’ Digest, contributed to the (re)production of the dominant U.S. Cold War discourse (Sharp 2000). Moreover, a text’s absences and/or silences signal its ideological shape and meaning just as much as does its explicit content (e.g., Althusser and Balibar 1979). Initial U.S. media coverage of the ‘War on Terror,’ for example, occasionally debated whether the 9/11 terrorist attacks were acts of war or crimes, but never debated whether they might have been direct responses to previous acts of U.S. foreign policy, an absence of considerable significance to the boundaries of possible responses to the 9/11 attacks and the consequent shape of the ‘War on Terror’ (e.g., Sardar and Davies 2002).

In contrast to the conduit metaphor, then, the text metaphor emphasizes the complexity of meaning making. Texts are not simply endowed with meaning by ‘The Author’ (whether states, elites or others) and sent as ‘messages’ that are automatically or passively received by ‘The Reader’ (whether citizens, foreign publics or others). As has been widely demonstrated in cultural studies and elsewhere22 – including in studies of public opinion (e.g., Page and Barabas 2000) – once meanings are encoded, control over those meanings shifts from their authors/producers to their readers/consumers. Readers actively decode or interpret the texts they encounter, in part because the cultural resources they bring to their readings do not necessarily align with the meanings intended by the authors (e.g., Hall 1994). No matter how often Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and others in the Bush Jr administration insisted that what became known as “enhanced” interrogation (Mayer 2009: 266) was not torture and therefore did not violate U.S. or international law, thus constituting these techniques as legal and legitimate, many Americans and non-Americans nonetheless read those practices as ‘torture’ and just as doggedly constituted them as criminal and

22 These arguments, prominent in many literatures and any form of post-structuralism, are particularly well-developed in audience reception theory (e.g., Jenkins 1992; Ang 1985).
illegitimate (e.g., Sands 2008). To complicate matters further, there is no singular audience. Through a variety of mechanisms and for a variety of reasons (including different social and cultural contexts, experiences and resources) readers occupy diverse positions, from which they interpret texts and construct meanings differently (e.g., Ang 1985). Thus, even among people who agreed that U.S. interrogation practices really were ‘torture’, some (perhaps with a little help from Jack Bauer and 24 [Van Veeren 2009]) understood these practices to be a necessary and effective, if unsavoury, weapon in the ‘War on Terror’, while others continued to read them as unnecessary, as un- or even counter-productive, and/or as morally reprehensible.

These meaning-making practices in popular culture – neglected in IR, obscured by the conduit metaphor deployed in soft power analyses, but foregrounded by the text metaphor – help to constitute the fundamental components of world politics (e.g., the subjects and objects, identities and interests, agents and structures) that tend to remain unproblematised by, and thus the taken-for-granted of, most causal IR theorising. The text metaphor has (at least) two further significant implications. First, as some of our examples have already indicated, meanings are made not just in ‘fictional’ (‘cultural’) texts such as film, news media, and video games. Rather, all texts – including ‘real world’ (‘political’) policy documents, speeches, treaties, satellite imagery, wire-tapped conversations, International Criminal Court tribunals, *ad infinitum* – can be read in the same ways for meaning making in and about world politics. Second, the text metaphor alerts us to the fact that analytical reading strategies can be applied to practices more generally, rather than only to documents and other artefacts that are literally ‘read’. We can use mechanisms of textual analysis to examine such world political processes and practices as foreign policy (Campbell 1992), colonization (Todorov 1984 [1982]), or the political economy of the “globetrotting sneaker” (Enloe 2004: 43-56).

**Popular Culture and World Politics: Illustrations from Soldiering and Torture**

Popular culture is ubiquitous in world politics. We could have begun by choosing any form of popular culture, or any aspect of world politics, to illustrate their interrelations. In this section, we illustrate popular culture’s importance to world politics by examining some of the entanglements between (primarily but not only) music and digital games (popular culture), and soldiering and torture (world political practices) in specifically U.S. contexts. We illustrate the diversity and significance of these
relationships – causal, constitutive, and both at once – and conclude by suggesting some wider implications.  

**Popular Culture and Soldiering**

Soldiering has long been at the heart of world politics, and popular culture – despite its neglect in IR – is implicated in diverse aspects of soldiering and thus in the conduct of militaries, with implications for, e.g., military success, foreign policy outcomes and militarization. Music has a long history of providing “inspiration for combat” (Pieslak 2007: 125) and fulfilling assorted and changing roles in warfare. During the American Revolution, for example, companies depended on their “fifers and drummers for communicating orders during battle, regulating camp formations and duties, and providing music for marching, ceremonies and morale” (Howe 1999: 87). Both Union and Confederate armies in the American Civil War “valued music” and the military bands that provided it because “[t]roops needed motivation and confidence, not only to prevent them from desiring but also to ensure they performed well once a battle started” (Davis 2010: 144). Music was everywhere: historians suggest that military bands, drawing on “patriotic airs” like the “Star Spangled Banner”, the “inspiring” popular ditty “Yankee Doodle” (150) or anthems like “Dixie”, could “calm the nerves and distract the troops from the combat to come” (146), lead their units “right up to the edge of the fighting” (145), provide a “surge of adrenaline when attacking” (150), and either “lead troops in pursuit of the enemy” or “help soldiers withdraw” after a battle (145).

As evidenced in several documentaries – Gunner Palace (2004), Occupation: Dreamland (2005), Soundtrack to War (2006) – music was ubiquitous in the recent U.S. war in Iraq as well, “permeat[ing] the experiences of American troops fighting” there (Gilman 2010). Particular genres, notably heavy metal and gangsta rap, were embedded in central routine military practices like suiting up, going on patrol and completing missions (Pieslak 2007: 126-128). U.S. soldiers often listened to music as a group, just as they watched the “military pornography” described by Swofford, to get “pumped up”. As one soldier explained:

> ... sometimes your motivation is down and you’re like, I don’t want to play soldier today, I don’t want to do this. But then you hear “The Good, Bad and the Ugly” theme

23 Although we critique the making of ‘casual causal’ claims above, in this section we are highlighting the potential causal claims that could and should be investigated further, rather than making these claims.
song and you’re like fuck yeah, hell yeah, I’ll go out on a mission today. (in Pieslak 2007: 137)

Heavy metal – e.g., Metallica’s “Seek and Destroy” – is arguably ideally suited to this task, both in its ideology of power/empowerment, manifested in sound through amplification and screaming vocal articulations (e.g., Weinstein 1991), and in its chaos-themed lyrics of “war, mayhem, death and destruction” (Pieslak, 2007: 139). The “survival of the fittest”24 ideology of gangsta rap – e.g., Lil’ John’s “I Don’t Give a Fuck” – serves similar functions, notably allowing soldiers to “transform” themselves to do what one tactical intelligence sergeant described as “inhuman things” like “shooting a weapon in the direction of a living person” (in Pieslak 2007: 142).25 Causally, then, music may function to make soldiers (more) aggressive and help them to want to ‘play soldier’, while, at the same time, it functions constitutively to construct them as soldiers, as able to kill, to do the ‘inhuman thing’, to begin with. In enabling soldiers to carry out various military tasks, music has direct implications for world politics, not least in enabling states (and other militarized actors) to pursue and achieve their military objectives.

Digital games26 are also entangled in practices of soldiering: in recruiting, training, possibly harming, and treating them. America’s Army – a free (U.S. tax-payer-sponsored) online, multi-player, “first person action PC game series” (U.S. Army 2015) – was launched in 2002 as a recruitment tool, particularly targeting teenagers.27 Col. Casey Wardynski of the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, responsible for developing the game, explained that “We want kids to come into the Army and feel like they’ve already been there” (White 2005).28 The website (www.americasarmy.com)

24 In this context meaning not Darwinian selection but survival of the strongest, of those able to engage in violence.
25 We simplify this argument to make a point. Pieslak’s analysis of these processes, and those of his informants, are more nuanced, as is Gilman’s (2010), who argues that listening to heavy metal and (gangsta) rap involves negotiating the contradictions between soldiers’ very real institutional powerlessness – e.g., to determine where they live, and who, when and how they fight – and the “necessity of being confident and physically dominant” precisely as soldiers.
26 This encompasses online, video, computer and other electronic games.
27 America’s Army has had various iterations/expansions, most recently in 2015. Other forays into aggressive teen advertising included America’s Army: The Graphic Novel online (2009) and the U.S. Navy’s graphic novel Bravo Zulu (2009) targeting minority and female students, and the intimate ties linking America’s Army to NASCAR (Susca 2012).
28 Of course, the games radically sanitize war, avoiding realistic representations of combat injuries and fatalities, to maintain their T (Teen) rating. As an Army spokesperson noted, the designers were “very careful on the blood thing” (in Holmes 2009).
prominently displays a link to the GoArmy recruitment site and military recruiters frequent America’s Army gaming tournaments (White 2005; Cowlishaw 2005).

America’s Army is “not shy about its dual role as both a propaganda tool for recruitment and a platform for teaching doctrine, tactics, and combat skills to enlisted soldiers” (Allen 2012: 83). Games and gaming technology have long been used to train soldiers. The early SIMNET, a virtual war simulation developed by DARPA in the mid-1980s, taught “connectivity”, coordination and networking. The adaptation of the 1980s Atari game, Battlezone, was used for training tank pilots (Galloway 2004) and the U.S. Marines modified the commercial games Doom and Doom II as Marine Doom in the 1990s for training in diverse combat scenarios (Lenoir 2000: 322-4). Theatre of war simulators of the 21st Century, like Virtual Battlespace 2, train “entire companies of soldiers” to react to “IED explosions, ambushes, medical evacuations” (Shaban 2013).

Soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and “other psychosocial health conditions” (Rizzo et al. 2013: 48) are offered digital games, in the form of immersive “virtual reality [VR] exposure therapy”, as treatment for the memories, emotions and problematic behaviors brought on by traumatic combat experiences. These therapeutic treatments are thought to be successful, in part, because the “current generation of young military SMs [Service Members] and veterans, many having grown up with digital gaming technology, may be more attracted to and comfortable with participation in a VR therapy approach” (Rizzo et al. 2015: 262). Success in treating PTSD through virtual reality, in turn, has led to a further evolution in the application of digital gaming to combat training: VR exposure therapy is now being used for “stress resilience training prior to deployment” (Rizzo et al. 2013: 51) with the aim of preventing PTSD and related problems by enhancing “soldier fitness”, defined as psychological resilience in the face of combat-induced stress (Casey 2011).

Digital games are also sites of subversion, resistance and opposition. In a form of textual poaching, game-modifying (modding) allows users to transform games, providing a vehicle for critique and/or protest. Nick Robinson tells of the academic who regularly logged into America’s Army, subversively posting the names of U.S. military personnel killed in action in Iraq (2012: 513). Conventional American games have been modified to challenge U.S. discourse. One reconstruction of Battlefield 2, for instance, inverts the usual scenario, portraying “a man in Arab headdress carrying an automatic

29 According to the Serious Games at Work website, “an impressive 28% of America’s Army players click through the link to the GoArmy site” (Grant 2014).
weapon into combat with American invaders” (Power 2009: 209). In response to such modding, the U.S. Department of Defense warned of “a global propaganda campaign by Islamic militants to exhort Muslim youths to take up arms against the U.S.” (ibid.). Alternative discourses are also produced in games constructed from scratch. In This War of Mine, from Polish developer 11 bit studios [sic], gamers play civilians hiding, scavenging and sacrificing to survive in a besieged city, thus challenging the celebration of militarism built into conventional military shooter games.\(^{30}\) Under Siege and Under Ash (produced by the Syrian gaming company Dar al-Fikr) and Special Force and Special Force 2 (produced in Lebanon by Hezbollah) have constituted alternative visions of conflict in the Middle East, challenging U.S. and Israeli representations. In Under Ash, the player is a young Palestinian in the Second Intifada who must “reach the Al-Aqsa mosque”, “evacuate injured Palestinians”, “infiltrate an Israeli settlement, raise a Palestinian flag”, and finally take part in “a guerrilla attack against an Israeli radar position” (Souri 2007: 538).\(^{31}\)

These multiple and ineluctable causal and constitutive relations between soldiering and digital games affects the ability of militaries and states to secure military objectives. At the same time, these relations contribute (causally and constitutively) to the achievement of foreign policy outcomes. Many contemporary military shooter games are based on actual combat theatres (e.g., photographic and video images shot in Iraq and Afghanistan) and “transport the gamer into immersive, gut wrenching virtual battlefields” (Cowlishaw 2005: 1), where they fight overtly racialized enemies (e.g., Taliban, generic ‘Arabs’, Iranians) based on contemporaneous U.S. conflicts. Such games legitimate U.S. interventions and interventionism, producing and reproducing very specific “geopolitical discourses of war and security” (Power 2007: 274), most recently those of the U.S. ‘War on Terror’. The digital game industry also foregrounds and is thus implicated in the constitution of foreign policy problems as specifically military problems requiring military solutions. This, plus the popularity of military shooter games, in turn contributes to the wider militarization of society, sanitizing warfare and putting a “friendly, hospitable face on the military” (278). Games are thus complicit in romanticizing militaries and war and “embedding support for militarisation” (Robinson 2012: 505) and the “culture of permanent war” (e.g., Power 2007, 2009).\(^{32}\)

\(^{30}\) [http://www.11bitstudios.com/games/16/this-war-of-mine](http://www.11bitstudios.com/games/16/this-war-of-mine) [accessed 6 May 2016].

\(^{31}\) Interestingly, “[p]oints can be lost or the game can end if civilians on either side – Palestinian or Israeli – are killed” (Souri 2007: 539).

\(^{32}\) Many forms of popular culture both benefit from and contribute to militarization in these ways – e.g., the fashion industry’s deployment of militarized fabrics and designs (camouflage, epaulettes, bomber jackets).
Examining the tight symbiotic relationship between soldiering and gaming highlights as well the broader institutional entanglements of the U.S. military and the gaming industry in a “military-entertainment complex” (Lenoir 2000) that, as noted above, also encompass a close relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon. These, in turn, alert us to the involvement of other popular culture industries, institutions and practices in what Der Derian (2001) called the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) , building on Cold War invocations of the military industrial complex. Contemporary news media practices, including the military embedding of journalists and the privileging of military experts and footage as authoritative information sources, are other prominent examples of these interconnections. It is also increasingly clear that these institutional entanglements are globalised and globalising, illustrated by ISIS’s use of Twitter and YouTube in carefully orchestrated campaigns for recruitment and public relations.

Popular Culture and Torture

Since 2001, various forms of popular culture have been significant to the development and execution of torture in the ‘War on Terror’. As we noted above, 24 became notorious for concerns expressed by the Dean of West Point about the show’s palpable effects on the attitudes of U.S. Army Cadets towards torture’s efficacy and legitimacy (Mayer 2007). Similarly, according to a retired U.S. military leader, positive popular cultural depictions of torture have had “‘a significant impact on how interrogations are conducted in the field. U.S. soldiers are imitating the techniques they have seen on television – because they think such tactics work’” (cited in Moynihan 2009). Despite the fact that both interrogators and scientists have demonstrated that torture does not, in fact, work (e.g., O’Mara 2015), negative causal claims and evidence tend to fall by the wayside in popular culture, which persists – perhaps because it is seen as ‘merely entertainment’? – in constituting torture as effective and legitimate, regardless of the evidence. These popular cultural (mis)representations pass – seemingly unproblematically – into the political realm. Thus, 24 could be invoked by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in defense of U.S. torture practices. Scalia insisted to fellow judges at a Canadian law conference in 2007 that “Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles. … He saved hundreds of thousands of lives. … Are you going to convict Jack Bauer? … Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don’t think so” (in Benen 2014).

24 was, of course, not alone. After 9/11 and the initiation of a ‘War on Terror’, U.S. popular culture increasingly contained explicit images of torture. Television programs, including *Alias* (2001-6), *Lost*
(2004-10), Homeland (2011-), Scandal (2012-), The Blacklist (2013-), Chicago P.D. (2014-) and State of Affairs (2014-), routinely depict and normalize torture. The U.S. Parents Television Council (2008) counted 836 torture scenes on primetime U.S. television between 2002 and 2007, a huge increase over the 110 torture scenes from 1995-2001. At the same time, the torturers were transformed: while previously only bad guys tortured, thereby delegitimizing the practice, torture after 9/11 was perpetrated by “heroic American characters” on the grounds that torture is “necessary, effective, and even patriotic” (Human Rights First, n.d.). These shows constitute torture as rational; it is necessary (due to the ‘ticking time bomb’ logic), successful (in producing vital and accurate information), and thus legitimate and normalized (in the sense of frequent, unremarkable and a norm).

Popular culture has normalized torture in other ways. In a form of “torture chic” (Martin and Steueter 2010: 154-158), in 2008, British fashion designer John Galliano invoked Abu Ghraib – models black-hooded, noosed, apparently blood-smeared and bruised – to debut his menswear collection on the Paris Fashion Week runway (Vogue 2008). Similarly, Vogue Italia’s 2006 “terror porn” (Douglas 2007) fashion spread by fashion photographer Steven Meisel, entitled “State of Emergency”, overtly combined torture and pornography. In both cases, fashion elevated torture to haute couture. The proliferation of ‘9/11 kitsch’ has also normalized torture, but on a ‘lower’ register. The mass customization platform CafePress, for instance, offers “a series of objects in celebration of waterboarding” (Potts 2012: 242). One can purchase such ‘banal’ “Waterboarding Presents & Gifts” as baby onesies with “Waterboarding Works” superimposed on bin Laden’s visage, ‘I ♥ Waterboarding’ mugs and bumper stickers, and pajamas extolling us to ‘Waterboard liberals’ (see http://www.cafepress.co.uk/+waterboarding+gifts). While at some level these popular cultural practices – whether haute or banal – are intended to shock, they simultaneously normalize torture, rendering it progressively unremarkable. Even the conventional ‘trade-off’ posited between liberty, democracy and human rights, on the one hand, and security, on the other, and touted as necessary by proponents of torture, is itself constituted in part through popular culture (24 is a classic example).³³

³³ The existence of such a trade-off is not unproblematic: If security is impossible without peace, which is in turn predicated on justice being done and being seen to be done, then it becomes nonsensical to posit this trade-off.
The Abu Ghraib torture photographs illustrate additional complex, and highly U.S.-specific, connections between popular culture and world politics. The photographic practices deployed by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere draw upon existing popular cultural tropes and practices, notably the souvenir ‘snapshot’. The Abu Ghraib photos invoke familiar snapshots documenting party or fraternity ‘high jinks’ for posterity. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense, James Schlesinger, referred to Abu Ghraib as “‘Animal House on the night shift’” (in Kaufman-Osborn 2005: 605), for instance, and a caller to Rush Limbaugh’s radio show described U.S. soldiers’ behaviour at Abu Ghraib as “‘like a college fraternity prank’”, to which Limbaugh responded “‘Exactly!’” (in Sontag 2004). As one of the perpetrators and ‘stars’ of the photographs, Lynndie England, explained: “‘We thought it looked funny ... so pictures were taken’” (in Kaufman-Osborn 2005: 612). While Kaufman-Osborn correctly notes that comparing Abu Ghraib to “reprehensible behaviour on the part of intoxicated undergraduates at a fraternity bash” is highly problematic (2005: 605), it remains the case that this practice was made possible and subsequently rendered intelligible to U.S. publics, precisely because of their familiarity with these visual tropes. The Abu Ghraib photos invoke a different kind of souvenir snapshot as well. Susan Sontag painfully reminded us of the semiotic link to an older U.S. popular cultural practice, namely to “lynching photographs”. Lynching “trophies” or “souvenirs” typically depicted “Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree” (Sontag 2004). On either reading, the poses created at Abu Ghraib demand to be captured for posterity: “there would be something missing if, after stacking the naked men, you couldn’t take a picture of them” (Sontag 2004). Thus, popular culture does not just normalize and legitimize practices of torture. Rather, it constitutes some of the very methods through which torture occurs. These torture practices cannot be fully understood without grasping the specific popular cultural texts and practices that render them both possible and intelligible.

Popular music has also played a significant part in torture and in psychological combat operations. On the battlefield, music has been deployed directly – causally – as an “acoustic weapon” (Cusick 2006) designed to disempower the enemy, on the dual assumptions that loud Western popular music prevents sleep and is culturally offensive and thus irritating. In describing the use of hard rock, heavy metal and rap in the U.S. campaign to retake Fallujah in 2004, a U.S. Army psy ops

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34 U.S. military practices in Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989 are an important precursor (Pieslak 2007: 129). For part of the rock/heavy metal playlist aimed at blasting the opera-loving Noriega out of the Papal Nuncio’s residence in Panama City, see http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/DOKUMENT/950206.htm.
spokesman explained that “‘Western music is not the Iraqis’ thing’” (in DeGregory 2004). Unpalatable popular music is argued to degrade enemies’ ability to fight and perhaps even to induce the enemy to “surrender without engaging in combat” (Pieslak 2007: 130). On this argument, part of the value of weaponizing music in this way is explicitly cultural – i.e., Western music would be tactically less effective if aimed at U.S. citizens.

Popular music has also been deployed to carry out the “acoustical torture” of prisoners in U.S. “black site” detention facilities globally (Cusick and Brenden 2011: 8). Music as diverse as heavy metal and Barney’s “I love you” are used as “a condition of detention” (8),35 to prepare prisoners for interrogation (Pieslak 2007: 132; Piore 2003), to deny them the right to privacy, to deprive them of sensory experiences, concentration and, crucially, sleep, and so fundamentally to destroy their identity and subjectivity (Cusick 2008: §9, 11, 14). In these ways, music is a key component of “no touch torture” techniques (McCoy 2006) that – like photography – “leave no visible marks on the fleshy surface of a human body” (Cusick 2006).36 These techniques are purportedly much more efficient and effective than physical violence in achieving their desired aims because, through “induced regression (to infantile behaviour) or induced schizophrenia”, they cause a detainee’s “identity to disintegrate” (Cusick 2006), thereby producing “the dissolution of resistance and the inculcation of dependence” (U.S. CIA 1963: 41).

Popular culture’s legitimization and normalization of torture, and its deployment in torture practices themselves, is significant even if these torture policies and practices are unsuccessful in their stated narrow aim of generating intelligence. From one perspective, these practices might be seen as having ‘positive’ outcomes. Their political ‘benefits’ might include increased U.S. public morale and public support for the incumbent administration, for military campaigns, for wider foreign policy objectives, and for homeland security policies and practices. From a different perspective, of course, popular culture’s implication in torture – in its legitimization and its execution – has ‘negative’ consequences. Particularly important is what Chalmers Johnson (2000) popularized as ‘blowback’, a sort of inverse soft power. The legitimization and normalization of torture helped to constitute a world in which the Abu Ghraib atrocities became possible, with resulting damage to the U.S.’s standing in worldwide public opinion. Both immediate and longer-term blowback effects could

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35 Thus legally taking it out of the category of torture per se (Cusick and Branden 2011: 8)
36 These techniques, resuscitated by the Bush administration, were developed during the Vietnam War and institutionalized in the CIA’s *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual (U.S. CIA 1963).
plausibly have arisen from such practices and the surrounding publicity. These include terrorist reprisals that are explicitly connected (in terrorist rhetoric) with Abu Ghraib, other detention practices, and other examples of U.S. foreign policy. They also include increases in anti-U.S. sentiment and protests among wider populations and the intensification of radicalization and recruitment to organizations like ISIS. Blowback from torture and its representation may also include states, groups and individuals being more reluctant to cooperate with U.S. military operations and foreign policy objectives in future.

Conclusion

In writing this paper it has, at times, been difficult to know where to begin or how to express our argument, knowing that anything we say about the importance of popular culture to world politics is likely to elicit dismissive, marginalizing responses. One marginalizing response excludes popular culture by resorting to (arbitrary) disciplinary boundaries. On this logic, the study of war films, for example, is appropriately left to cultural or film studies rather than seen as a legitimate focus of IR research. Another marginalizing response focuses on individual research agendas, rather than disciplinary boundaries. It excludes questions of popular culture and world politics by arguing that ‘I’m not interested in that dimension’ or ‘someone else can deal with that’. On both arguments, we are not encouraged, as IR scholars, to take popular culture seriously. However, as we have argued throughout this paper, we cannot get a sufficiently nuanced or complex analysis of world politics without incorporating both causal and constitutive analyses of popular culture. Popular cultural texts, institutions and practices should therefore be recognized as legitimately within IR’s disciplinary remit.

If, as we have argued, popular culture is world politics, then as a community of scholars we currently ignore huge swathes of what is properly ‘our’ subject matter (and, when popular culture is mentioned, as soft power and other mainstream analyses sometimes do, it is in limited and restrictive ways). Many of the citations in this paper have necessarily been to literatures outside of IR, for precisely this reason. However, leaving popular cultural analysis to other disciplines is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it can result in such problems as Pieslak’s needing to learn from a female interviewee in 2006 that U.S. women were "officially not permitted to serve in direct

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37 As should be clear throughout the paper, we are arguing for greater transdisciplinarity, rather than wishing to simply re-inscribe slightly broader disciplinary boundaries.
combat” (2007, 127, note 10), or Robin Wood’s misreading of a key scene in *The Deer Hunter* due to a fundamental misunderstanding about where U.S. soldiers engaged in combat in the Vietnam War (Rowley 2010: 144-5). IR scholars conducting such research could potentially avoid such mistakes, based on their more complex understandings of the relevant world political contexts. Second, as Nick Robinson has argued about video games, if we leave the study of popular culture to other disciplines, or new (inter)disciplines such as ‘game studies’, the scope for IR “to make a lasting contribution might be constrained” (2012: 505), and the study of popular culture will continue to be dominated by other intellectual interests and agendas. To avoid this, while still recognising the importance of popular culture, therefore actively entails engaging with other disciplines. IR would benefit from more porous boundaries, and from incorporating other disciplinary approaches’ strengths particularly for understanding popular culture.

It should be clear, then, that we have transformed our understanding of what counts as world politics. All people – soldiers, video game players, movie-goers, TV audiences, torturers, policy makers, musicians, engaged couples – are immersed in popular culture and are actors on the world political stage in some way. People are (explicitly or implicitly) theorizing about and practicing world politics through the production, consumption and interpretation of popular cultural texts, whether they accept the meanings therein unproblematically, or challenge, resist or subvert them. They are engaging in popular cultural practices which are simultaneously (world) political, as demonstrated above. It is not “simply reasonable” (Enloe 1996: 188) to study the powerful – i.e., popular culture as primarily soft power for the state and/or elites. Omitting individuals, communities, non-state actors, texts and practices purely on the grounds that these are cultural and not political contributes significantly to the poverty of IR theory and its analyses of world politics.38 Cultural methods such as the constitutive approaches to textual analyses and to audience consumption outlined above, as well as ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation, offer fruitful ways to incorporate people’s concrete lived (cultural-political) experiences into IR. At the same time, and as a result (of taking popular culture seriously), IR should also provide analyses for this expanded range of (simultaneously cultural and political) actors. Instead of being solely in the service of the state, IR has the potential to become a more critical enterprise, and to speak on a much wider range of political issues, problems, debates and conflicts, to a much wider set of audiences.

38 Although we have noted that the popular cultural practices of state and other elites are also under-scrutinized and deserve scholarly attention.
References


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