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**THE CURRENCY OF FANTASY:
DISCOURSES OF POPULAR CULTURE
IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

ABSTRACT: The “facts” of international politics constitute the first-order representations of political life and can be reflected in popular entertainment as second-order or fictional representations. This article demonstrates that discourses of popular culture are powerful and implicated in International Relations (IR) studies. The article makes two correlated claims: the first is that the humanist and anthropological methodology often used to analyse pop culture could also be used to analyse international issues, if appropriately contextualized; the second claim is that a nation can manifest its ‘discourse’ in international politics via its popular culture, as soft power.

KEY WORDS: Popular Culture, Discourse, International Relations, Harry Potter.

Introduction

Nexon and Neumann contend that popular culture intersects with international politics in essentially four ways that are of direct interest to scholars: (1) as a cause or outcome in international relations; (2) as a mirror or medium to illuminate various concepts and processes from IR that helps communicate ideas, for example, about how foreign policy decisions are made; (3) as data or evidence about dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs in a particular state, society or region; and (4) as a phenomenon that actually constitutes norms, values, identities and ideas about international politics, with determining,

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informing, naturalizing and enabling effects.¹ International relations are implicated in, and inter-textual with, popular culture, whose study should not be merely self-confined to the traditional dominant discourses, such as realism and its various offshoots (neo-liberalism and rationalism). Conflicts and cooperation among nations can be observed from heterogeneous perspectives. The writings of scholars such as R. B. J. Walker, Richard Ashley, Michael Shapiro, James Der Derian and Robert Cox have encouraged a deliberate shift to the epistemological premises of the discipline, and resulted in some attention to the issues of representation, discourse, textuality/narrative and culture (Paolini, Elliott, Moran 31). This article provides insight into the images and social systems relayed in pop cultural contexts, and attempts to outline how study of pop culture can offer inter-textual readings of international relations.

Popular Culture: High Data or Low Data?

Popular culture is generally known as “mass culture,” “people’s culture” or “common culture.” It includes popular music, Hollywood blockbusters, soap operas, large-circulation books or magazines, and so forth. It also includes diverse beliefs, practices and objects that are part of everyday traditions, evoking universal enjoyment among different cultural communities. Compared with official documents, data, and statistics, or the speeches and biographies of statesmen or other public figures, popular culture is usually regarded as mere entertainment—low data. It was once seen as an inappropriate source for assessing various social relations on the grounds that such ‘low data’ were empty, arbitrary and subjective. But, without ‘low data’, the meaning and significance of ‘high data’ is difficult to fully comprehend.

Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, there is a growing and marked increase in interest to expand the analysis of popular culture and explore its international dimensions. This development is seen as a new avenue for IR studies and much work promises to be empirically based (Reeves 162).² In recent

¹ See the Preface of *Harry Potter and International Relations* 6-27.

² Jutta Weldes (1999), who associates *Star Trek* with American foreign policy, is a good example.

years, some analysts have observed that elite cultures cannot now totally dominate a country's social and cultural processes because popular culture has advanced on an unprecedented scale and submerged the elite culture (Yu 205).

In noting this subversive shift (the ascendancy of popular culture), it is worth recalling a paradigm of feminist discourse (a broader branch of postmodernism), the attempt to overturn patriarchy (elite culture), as well as the deep-rooted notion that popular culture merely belongs to "low brow," "grass-root" or "low data." Common culture is gradually coming to dominate discourse in public affairs. Now, not only has there been a growing literature on the importance of common attitudes for predicting economic behaviour (Kreps 359-364), but there has also been an increasing interest in the relationship between popular culture and international politics (Nexon and Neumann 6-27). The "facts" of international politics constituting the first-order representations of political life, are reflected in popular entertainment as a second-order or fictional representation. In other words, for several decades, popular culture, apart from merely being entertainment, has also been employed to build consensus, transmit social norms, establish social boundaries and reflect global relations. Popular culture has the potential to offer deeper understanding and amelioration of relations between cultures (Craig 101-105), as well as the opposite.³

Take for example, *South Park* (SP), an American cartoon TV series, which is considered as a cynical discourse in the post-ideological era (Weinstock 113-127).⁴ It satirizes diverse US domestic and international affairs, and lampoons politicians, celebrities and public icons. The show is filled with irony, parody and dark humour. Since its debut, plots and commentary made in episodes have been interpreted in the framework of popular philosophical, theological, social and political ideas (Hanley 2007). Political commentator Andrew Sullivan has dubbed the growing population of—mostly young—centre-right leaning viewers of the

³ Take karaoke, for example; its merits as a form of entertainment as well as a tool for doing business in Japan is gaining recognition in the US and Europe, and it is no exaggeration to say karaoke, as part of global popular culture, holds out the promise of improving relations between two civilizations.

⁴ The postmodern cynicism is established by the micro-political identity in *South Park*, neither politically correct nor incorrect, taking advantage of the heterogeneity of late capitalism with the American version of egalitarianism: treat everyone the same.

show South Park Republicans, or South Park Conservatives, and has argued that these people are “extremely sceptical of political correctness but also are socially liberal on many issues,” while Brian C. Anderson describes the group as “generally characterized by holding strong libertarian beliefs and rejecting more conservative social policy,” and notes that although the show makes “wicked fun of conservatives,” it is “at the forefront of a conservative revolt against liberal media” (Johnson-Woods 89-103).

In the episodes, it employs carnivalesque and absurdist techniques to satirise various international issues (Toni 89-103). Nearly all the episodes have some relevant current affairs commentary. In Season 13 Episode 11, *Whale Whores*, it shows, in an ironic manner, bloody scenes of Japanese wildly killing whales and dolphins. In Season 12 Episode 8, *The China Problem*, it satirizes those who claim that China poses a threat. The alleged threat merely originates from a protagonist’s dream that China’s development (including its booming population and nuclear weapons) would threaten US national security. More ironically, in Season 9 Episode 8, *Two Days Before the Day after Tomorrow*, a global warming state of emergency is declared. The world’s largest dam breaks and floods the adjacent town of Beaverton (a virtual city in SP). The plot seeks to reveal with sarcasm and dark humour that global warming is merely a vicious hoax. The break of the dam is totally Cartman’s fault.⁵

Who is to blame for the disaster? Nominally on one hand, the episode is ridiculing those elites that have been highlighting the environmental crisis. After a swell of global horror, those warning of global warming in the end engage in a yelling match. However, on the other hand, in a postmodern way, the episode also reminds us of the fact that human activities are having a catastrophic impact on the earth. There is an imbalance or deterioration between humans and the human-influenced environment. The emission of carbon dioxide contributes to the increase in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The massive forests that consume carbon-dioxide are vanishing year by year. Overall, the increase of carbon dioxide production and the reduction of carbon

⁵ Cartman is one of the 4 protagonists in *SP*. In this episode, he accidentally destroyed a dam after playing in a boat with his friend Stan. However, everyone believed that the destruction had been caused by Muslim terrorists, Russian radicals, or Chinese communists. Finally Stan told the truth to his friend Kyle. <http://forums.southparkstudios.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=33356>>.

dioxide consumption are leading to a change in the chemical balance of our atmosphere. Pollution exists and poses a real problem to human beings.

Who should take responsibility? For contemporary international relations, environmental issues have become one of the Gordian Knots to cut. At the Copenhagen conference (2009), all interest groups seemed to show great concern over current global environmental issues. However, ironically, nearly all the states failed to take responsibility for the problems and sought to impose obligations on others. Some interest groups even refused to perform their obligations and tried to circumvent procedures to reach a deal. It is a kind of particularism when a solution to a global problem is blocked because that solution threatens given nations' national interest and security. When nationalism or particularism arises, universalism is rejected. As a result, the optimistic expectations for this conference were not fulfilled. In reality, the environmental crisis does exist, and there is no Cartman to be the scapegoat. Therefore, compared with the dark humour of global warming in *SP*, the elites' decisions at Copenhagen failed to respond to world-wide grassroots anxiety.

Another global issue is reflected in the film *Avatar*. This movie tells the story of human beings' degrading invasion of a planet, *Pandora*, in order to resolve the energy crisis on Earth. The film, together with other sci-fi films exploring similar themes of space exploration, such as *Star Trek* and *Lost in Space*, reflects human beings' ambition for colonial expansion to outer space. Meanwhile, it also alludes to on-going international conflicts that have been caused by the avarice for others' wealth; and suggests that an energy crisis is threatening current and future global development.

The scrambling for energy among nations has been escalating. It is possible to imagine a future in which energy scarcity on earth would encourage the exploration of other worlds for resources. It is also possible to imagine that such exploration would ultimately reproduce the exploitative and non-sustainable relationships that characterise much resource exploitation on Earth.

Inter-textually, international relations are sometimes affected by some pop cultural anecdotes or trivialities. In May 2005, *Newsweek*, an American news magazine, featured a story about American interrogators who had flushed a Koran down a toilet in an attempt to break a detainee suspected of being a terrorist. The story immediately aroused virulent and widespread anti-American

sentiment in Afghanistan. The magazine retracted the story, claiming it was inadequately sourced and probably inaccurate. However, the reaction to the story was a clear setback to American foreign policy, despite the story being retracted (Nexon and Neumann 11-13).

Pop culture does not belong to elite culture and is not officially or ideologically acknowledged as the dominant culture at the expert or official level, yet its discourse has enormous significance in the formation of public attitudes and values (Andersen 51), as well as a profound impact on both domestic and international affairs. Analyses of forms of pop culture, such as literary fiction, films, television series and so forth, have been undertaken within IR studies. The significance of pop culture in contemporary western IR studies is increasingly recognised. Systems of representation manifested in pop culture products take shape in an active exchange process between reader/viewer, context, and text, thereby producing connections and links between texts and political moments (Patricia 9). The meaning of pop culture products is not stable, nor dependent on the intentionality of its producers. Indeed, where fiction and reality differ or converge is sometimes in the eye of the beholder (Pfaltzgraff).

A Case Study: *Harry Potter* and International Relations

Social sciences often make use of literary works to understand how people from different backgrounds and times view the world. This includes analysis of popular fiction. Literature's reflectivity, representation or signification to the outer world offers useful source material to social scientists (Bennet 71-73).⁶ In other words, the sets of norms, rules and social relations revealed in stories can shed light on reality. Michael D.C. Drouthas calls attention to:

A. The transformation of source material without the author's noting, within the text, where the material comes from, but without the author's making special efforts to disguise the source; B. The transformation of source material with overt discussion of the source and the transformation; C. The transformation of source material in which the source is deliberately disguised, of no interest and so not noted, or not recognized by the author.

⁶ However, some formalists also call into the question the concerns of the theory of reflection, showing that all literary forms are the semiotic mediation of reality, a signification.

In contextualizing fiction within the current global environment, we can provide insight into people's norms, cultures, and their perceptions of issues from a new perspective. For example, *Harry Potter* (HP) is a work of fantasy fiction with world-wide popularity. It contains a series of "sociological concepts including culture, society, and socialization; stratification and social inequality; social institutions; and social theory" (Fields). If focusing on the political and economic models revealed in the *Harry Potter* texts in order to see international relations in the real world, we find that, in many cases, the real and the imaginary worlds are quite similar, because the political and economic organizations of the imaginary worlds depicted in popular literary works may be viewed as a mirror to public opinion on the political and economic organizations of real life.

The antagonist, Voldemort, is a villain, tyrannical, dictatorial, and racist. Several people have drawn parallels between Lord Voldemort and some politicians. Even J. K. Rowling has admitted that there is similarity between Voldemort and Adolf Hitler⁷ and Joseph Stalin⁸. Alfonso Cuarón, director of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* compared Voldemort with George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. Both are selfish, show disregard for the environment, in love with power, and seek to manipulate people.⁹ Voldemort's insistence on wizards' blood purity and persecution of mud blood (non-wizards) reveals severe racial discrimination. Andrew Slack and the Harry Potter Alliance compare media consolidation in the U.S. to Voldemort's regime and its control over the *Daily Prophet* (the newspaper in the books) and other media, saying that:

Once Voldemort took over every form of media in the Wizarding World, Dumbledore's Army and the Order of the Phoenix formed an independent media movement called 'Potter-watch'. Now the HP Alliance and Wizard Rock have come together to fight for a Potter-watch movement in the real world to fight back against Big Volde-Media and prevent it from further pushing out local and foreign news, minority representation, and the right to a Free Press.¹⁰

⁷ *J.K. Rowling outs Dumbledore!* | PopWatch Blog | publisher = EW.com.

⁸ New Interview with J.K. Rowling for Release of Dutch Edition of "Deathly Hallows" – 3. The Leaky Cauldron.

⁹ Carla Power and Devin Gordon (4 August 2003). "Caution: Wizard at Work." *Newsweek magazine*. <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/152656/page/1>>.

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voldemort>. <http://thehpalliance.org/what-we-do/>.

Voldemort is also a terrorist because he sends his Death Eaters to destroy public utilities, murdering the innocents, and forcing children to commit patricide.¹¹ Indeed, it may be coincidental, but worth noting, that the series has grown in popularity at a time when people around the world have become increasingly fearful of terrorism, and the menace of Lord Voldemort and his followers is paralleled with Al Qaeda. Rowling depicts a similar event to an anthrax poison scare in fiction—the delivery of wizard mail led to the magic ministry arresting many innocent people (Trend 112).

Inter-textually, some scholars have offered parallels to the real-world war on terror. In *HP*, those who tried to destroy Hogwarts were living among common students, hiding in plain sight. The students must learn not to discriminate, while protecting themselves from a stealthy enemy. Similarly, in our world, terrorists mixed unnoticed in the crowd at American airports in 2001, sat unrecognized on a train in Madrid in 2004, rode on a double-decker bus in London in 2005, even boarded a train at King's Cross Station to kill many innocents (Neal 160).

In the context of Bush and Blair's "war against evil" and an intensifying reliance on melodrama in political culture, state power and corporate media are used to organize feelings of national victimization to support agendas of domination (Heilman 177-178).

From another perspective, if reviewing the personal relationships between characters in Harry Potter, the Potterian models may reflect a kind of gift economy, which is quite similar to that in international diplomacy. For example, in *Harry Potter*, Hagrid gained Harry's trust and took him to Hogwarts away from his Uncle's family, who had been ill-treating Harry for eleven years, by sending him a birthday cake and performing magic. It made Harry happy. Harry also helped him in return, such as taking good care of his idiot Giant brother; Harry established a friendship with Ron by buying nearly all the snacks on the train during his first journey to Hogwarts, which allowed poor Ron to enjoy the luxury of food. In turn, Ron's mother also sent Harry some gifts to maintain the friendship, such as a watch, a hand-knitted sweater, and so on. It made Harry, the orphan wizard, feel

¹¹ Julia Turner "When Harry Met Osama; Terrorism Comes to Hogwarts," 20 July 2005, <retrieved at <http://slate.com/id/2123105/>>.

at home. Harry would maintain Ron's dignity on any occasion. In return, Ron himself would go with Harry through water and fire.

Pettigrew sold out Harry Potter's parents to Voldemort, the Dark Lord. In return, he achieved Voldemort's trust and became one of his Death-Eaters. Pettigrew also cut off one of his hands to put into a boiling pot as his a gift for Voldemort's revival because the Dark Lord promised him a better hand in return for his gift.

Dumbledore bequeathed Harry, Ron and Hermione some gifts—a sorting hat, a 'deluminator' and a fairy tale book recording the legend of dead hallow. The three gifts are important tools for maintaining their friendship and will to fight Voldemort. In return, the three showed an impregnable allegiance to Dumbledore, so did the members of the Phoenix Order. It is those gift exchanges that promote ideological or moral commitments.

Whether inside or outside fiction, the gift exchange economy is based on the acknowledgement of needs and desires that would strengthen relations between individuals and groups to perform their moral obligations (Mauss 1974).¹² To some extent, the gift exchange economy is not totally free. The recipient should acknowledge the indebtedness and return a gift as well. It is based on Mauss' social practice of gift exchange, who agrees with Derrida's argument that there is a paradox in the concept of gift (Beatty 135-37).¹³ The exchanging parties should achieve reciprocity, though the initial gift seems unsolicited. Exchange can encourage reciprocity, though unequal exchange can lead to inequalities. If reciprocity is not achieved, tensions can arise whereas relations of reciprocity can lead to equilibrium and harmony (Cory 160).

In IR studies, Robert Keohane in his *After Hegemony* (1984) divides the gift economy into two forms: specific reciprocity and diffuse reciprocity, which are equated with the transition from the exchange practices of family or gift economy to the practices of a market economy. The former is also identified as prisoners' dilemma or tit for tat exercises in game theory, allowing two players to gain maximum profits through cooperation. However, it is well acknowledged that the pattern is highly idealized and unrealistic, inapplicable in multilateral international trade relations. So the latter is naturally thought as the optimal mode

¹² See the introduction to *The Gift*.

¹³ Derrida asserts that the paradox is inherent in the gift exchange. On one hand, the behaviour seems unsolicited; on the other hand, it commands a return, an obligation of reciprocity to the original giver.

to deal with such relations, requiring a general commitment to the set of rules and practices, and showing respect for the interests of oneself and others (Beatty 161). Both are entangled with each other in achieving a mutually beneficial outcome.

In the process of reciprocity, fair trade is expected, which is regarded as the token to build up and maintain friendship, moral obligation and interdependence. However, paternalism can gradually morph into power entrenchment and dominate-subordinate relationships. That is, the reciprocity would be unfair in the end. Pettigrew, like other Death-Eaters, was at first Voldemort's friend. Pettigrew promised to use top-flight magic to exchange support and friendship, so others would become his followers. Eventually Pettigrew is subordinated and calls him Dark Lord. Fudge, and Scrimageur (the two ministers of Ministry Department) all promised Harry that he could get a prominent post in the department on condition that he shifted to their side from Dumbledore's. However prominent the post was, Harry would forever be a subordinate to the minister of the Department. Dumbledore treated every with equality and sincerity. Harry and all the others would still enshrine him as the spiritual leader with unshakable allegiance.

Diverse gift exchanges, in international communications, such as diverse magnanimous international aid, purchasing, low- or zero-rate loans, cash, or other political, economic or cultural cooperation, are all diplomatic tactics to deal with international relations and establish bonds between states. To some extent, Dollar Diplomacy is a good example to fully demonstrate the Gift Economy. It refers to diverse financial aid and even bribery to entice the recipient's support and to maintain good relations between each other, but in essence is not an equal gift exchange. The giver could always be expected to reap more. So it is with the work of fiction, *Harry Potter*. The superior givers, whether Fudge or Scrimageur, Dumbledore or Lord Voldemort, reap far more than their inferiors receive.

In real life, some gifts are humanistic and beneficial for those aided, and help to improve living standards, eliminate poverty, eradicate disease and even promote the process of civilization. However, some are not. Nominally, aid is beneficial. Historically, through various forms of currency control, some powers such as the UK, France, Portugal, and the USA, maintain colonial relationships by retaining total control over monetary and banking systems (Bretton 87-103). And the use of Dollar Diplomacy through international lending and advertising helped

the US to extend its civilization and create a new imperialism, so that even the early supporters became worried. They were concerned that excessive borrowing may cause domestic instability and default in other states (Rosenberg 2003).¹⁴

However, compared with military occupation and other forms of political intervention, the gift exchange economy is a kind of soft interference, an “invisible infiltration.” All behaviours, even altruism, can be reduced to an explanation involving individual rewards and interest, because in practice, actions are motivated by a complex combination of self-interest (receiving the reciprocal gift in the future, self-affirmation, feeling good about ourselves) and group interest (making friends happy) (Klotz 14). The gift economy as a way into the moral dimension of affective bonding is very important in both *Harry Potter* and international relations. At the same time, an unequal gift economy puts human beings into a state of bondage (Harvey 63-65) while evoking emotional and relational intimacy.

To sum up, “imaginative literature and analysis of international relations do not inhabit different worlds [and] they overlap and even intertwine” (Yew 306-308).¹⁵ An analysis of *Harry Potter* can shed light on international relations—what happens in *Harry Potter* might be going on, or has taken place, in the real world. Fiction can be considered as a symbolic system, inter-textual with reality. Contextualizing the series into a global network, we could try to bridge the gap between the real and imaginary world to offer some parallels or find similarities in international relations. It’s the death of the author. A literary text can be interpreted freely by the reader. Fiction offers insight as to who we are—in terms of nationality and as part of the state in which we live, in a system of international relations. (Sylvester 306).

Conclusion

The article attempts to discuss popular culture’s relationship with international relations—how international relations could be reflected and affected by popular cultural. Some detailed

¹⁴ See the comments on the back cover of the book.

¹⁵ Sometimes, nations legitimate the state’s boundaries of inclusion and exclusion by citing literary fiction.

examples are provided.¹⁶ The article demonstrates that there is a symbiotic relationship between pop culture and international politics. The association is not subjective, but inter-twined, inter-textual and interactive. It is not arbitrary to “construct discursive objects and relations out of raw cultural materials”; and in combining and recombining the extant cultural materials, the contingent and contextually specific representations can be forged as though they are inherently, necessarily and even accurately connected to the meaning of reality (Fierke, Jørgensen 148). Finally, the article identifies two key, correlated, ideas. The first is that pop culture, as a humanist and anthropological methodology, if contextualized, could be applied to analyse international issues; the other is that a nation could attempt to propagandize its ideology and constitute its discourse in international politics via popular culture, as a soft power.

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¹⁶ However, cultural structures sometimes also constrain actors by preventing certain arguments from being articulated in public discourse or, once articulated, from being favourably interpreted by others or even properly understood. See Ma, Tsai, “Cultural Effects in Policy Process: The Institutional Embeddedness between Neo-Confucianism Thought and the Patriarchal System,” presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta Hilton Hotel, Atlanta, GA, Aug 16, 2003.

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