International Relations at the Movies: Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film

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Abstract: For mainstream Political Science, 'popular culture' is still not considered worthy of serious investigation. Similarly, the idea of using movies as a pedagogical tool has remained at the margins. Nevertheless, film can be a valuable means of teaching university students about politics and international politics in particular. This paper identifies four distinct ways of using movies as a teaching tool: the first approach uses film to portray historical *events* such as the Cold War, and the second utilizes film to debate specific *issues* in international politics such as terrorism or genocide. The third approach examines movies as *cultural narratives* – e.g. anti-Americanism in Turkey –, while the fourth uses film to explain and criticize *IR theories* (here, for example, Post-Modernism is discussed with the help of the movie *Pulp Fiction*). The article examines the strengths and weaknesses of using film in the IR classroom in general and illustrates each of the four approaches by using examples from movies.

Key words: international relations, learning, theory, film, visual turn

'I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way.'
(John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*)

INTRODUCTION

'Images' in International Relations (IR) have become increasingly important. Regardless of whether one believes in the dawn of a 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell, 1994) or an 'aesthetic turn' (Bleiker, 2001) in the field of IR, very few people would refute that our knowledge about the world is predominantly shaped by the powerful visual representations in newspapers and television. Even the cinema has become, or maybe always has been, a potent form of political communication. Nonetheless, the idea of using popular art in the form of films to explain/understand and teach international politics is still at the margins in IR. This is surprising as the idea of using

film in the classroom is by no means new or uncommon (Haney 2000: 238). One of the first scholars to note the possibilities of film in the teaching of political science was John D. Millett (1947) just after the Second World War. But even this early, Millet (1947: 526) realized that '[t]here is little advantage in employing a film simply to photograph a classroom lecture'. So there is more to it than just plugging in the VCR or rather the DVD player to fill some of the time of the lesson and let the film do the teaching. Since the late 1940s others have also noted the potential of the idea. In the 1970s Patrick O'Meara claimed that 'the use of the film is not only a challenging new direction within political science, but also one of vital future relevance and promise' (O'Meara, 1976: 220). And two years later, Charles Funderburk (1978: 111) wrote that '[t]he use of feature-length motion pictures in the classroom is a teaching resource of considerable potential for political scientists'. 'Cinematic IR' has become increasingly popular (Holden, 2006) and it is now firmly established that 'popular culture has much to offer to our contemporary understanding of international relations' (Debrix, 2005: 553). As we will see, there are a number of scholars who have specialized in the subject, and among these, there are some who focus specifically on the opportunity of using popular art in the teaching of international politics.

The article will be structured as follows: The first two parts will review the existing literature on film and IR and examine some of the advantages and disadvantages of using film and movies as a method of teaching in general. This will then be followed by an overview of the different ways of using film. Although the possibilities of using movies as a pedagogical tool for teaching university students are nearly limitless, we have identified four major ways in which films have been used in the past: the ways of *events, issues, cultures* and *theories*. Although this kind of classification is artificial and there are obviously overlaps, we believe that it can nevertheless be helpful for teachers in framing their own teaching objectives. As will be made clear in the article, the four approaches differ with regard to their understanding of political science: The first two approaches are represented by scholars such as Robert Gregg (1998), Lynn Kuzma and Patrick Haney (2001) and are influenced somewhat by a more positivist view of International Relations (IR), which believes that a real world exists which can be investigated from the outside with 'scientific' means in order to establish an unbiased and real truth. The first approach focuses on the explanations of certain historical *events* such as the Cold War while the second approach examines specific *issues* of IR such as war, terrorism or genocide. Following this, the article will investigate two more post-positivist understandings of using movies to teach international politics. These approaches, exemplified by scholars such as Jutta Weldes (2003) and Cynthia Weber (2005), are based on the assumption that inter-subjective, not objective, knowledge is the dominant form of discourse. Here, the paper briefly outlines the potential of film for the understanding

of *cultures* and then focuses on IR *theories* by using the film *Pulp Fiction* as an example with which to illustrate and critique post-modern approaches to IR.

AH ... I SEE! THE ADVANTAGES OF USING MOVIES IN THE IR CLASS

The use of movies does have some clear advantages, and students of IR do potentially benefit from the use of film in the IR classroom. For example, it is widely accepted as scientific knowledge that the human memory stores information in both a visual and an oral form and that a combination of both cognitive capacities helps people access, learn and then remember information (Champoux, 1999; Kuzma/Haney, 2001: 34): 'Students retain 10% of what they read, [but] 50% of what they see and hear' (Stice, 1987, cited in Powner and Allendoerfer, 2008: 77). We have to accept the contemporary student's affinity for visual stimulation: they get their information and ideas about the world in a visual fashion through television and the internet and have been socialized through all sorts of visual channels. It is therefore inevitable that the perceptions and information from films enter the classroom whether we like it or not (Lee, 1990: 96). It seems that young people in general and students in particular have become inherently good at dealing with visual material. It therefore makes sense to consider the use of such material in class in order to facilitate the teaching and learning of international politics.

For Robert Gregg (1999: 129) movies and films help students learn and enhance their knowledge about international politics as they constitute a 'window on the world'. Showing a movie in class provides a common reference point to which all participants can refer in order to make their arguments, points and views clear for the other members of the class (Sachleben/Yenerall, 2002). After seeing the movie, it can act as a kind of empirical case study as everyone in the class is then familiar with it, and thus it can provide the 'hook' with which to open a class discussion (Waalkes, 2003: 156).

At the same time films can make challenging abstract concepts, ideas and theories such as deterrence, terrorism or neo-liberalism more concrete, thereby making students 'see' and understand the issues involved (Lovell, 1998; O'Meara, 1976: 219). Students get an insight into issues which they have little experience of and would otherwise not encounter in their normal life (Waalkes, 2003: 169–170). Events seem more 'real' and relevant in movies as they can show events and issues more vividly than the printed word (Haney, 2000: 240; Kuzma/Haney, 2001: 35). They dramatize an event or idea by bringing a human face to even the seemingly most mundane issues in international politics (Hartlaub, 2001: 431; Giglio, 2002). A movie can lead to a personal identification with a political actor and help students to step into their shoes. Thereby they are led to empathize, consider the scope of manoeuvre the actors involved may have and reflect on the choices as well as on the

normative and ethical implications at stake in complex circumstances (Gregg, 1998: 5; Waalker, 2003: 157).

This personalization, this dramatization and this kind of visual confrontation with political and sometimes violent issues and theories dealing with war and peace inevitably create a certain level of emotion among students (Cracium, 2004). For one, these emotions lead to a higher level of attention and some have argued that emotions have a large influence on students' learning ability as they help imprint information in their memory (Kuzma/Haney, 2001: 35). These emotions evoke enthusiasm, encourage class participation and, without doubts, have the potential to provide the means for animated class debates and discussions (Funderburk, 1978: 111; Leib, 2000: 1).

As students are familiar with movies and are used to talking openly about films, movies can also work as a 'levelling device' between the teacher and the students (Chandler/Adams, 1997: 12). They seemingly readjust the power structures and reduce the stringent hierarchy which can impede class discussion and privilege the learning over the teaching component. The positive effect of familiarity with movies is further underlined by the use of science fiction movies as metaphors for political events, issues or theories. In contrast to clearly political films where students may be more reserved about their comments, students seem to be more comfortable in participating in a discussion and hypothesizing about the meaning of a metaphorical movie as there is no right or wrong interpretation (Cooper, 2002; Webber, 2005: 381).

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING IR AT THE MOVIES

In contrast to the advantages and benefits mentioned above, there are also a number of difficulties and objections to using films in the classroom which need to be discussed and taken into consideration. Firstly, there are technical and logistical issues which need to be taken into consideration when planning such a course. For example, the seminar room has to be suitable for showing movies and all the necessary technical equipment (DVD player, projector, loudspeakers, etc.) has to be arranged and working before things can get on the way. Although this may sound obvious, these aspects are easily underestimated as we found out, for example, that some copy protection software on older DVDs prevented them from being played via a laptop. One should also be aware of copyright aspects and the legal questions of private/public performance which may arise through showing the movie in class.

Apart from these technical and administrative difficulties, there are a number of other (more fundamental) questions which arise when considering the use of movies in the IR classroom. For example there is the 'trade-off between the time spent watching a film and the instructor's ability to cover the course content'

(Kuzma/Haney, 2001: 46). Teachers have to decide whether it is worth it to show the whole film in class, whether to make students watch the film outside of class or whether to simply show short clips or scenes to highlight certain events, issues or theories (Sachleben/Yanerall, 2002: 3). On the one hand one could argue that there is probably a lot of irrelevant material in a whole movie which does not help in the understanding of the event, issue or theory and therefore wastes valuable discussion time (O'Meara, 1976: 215). On the other hand, however, by only showing certain clips, the instructor is explicitly pre-selecting certain issues and is therefore reducing the amount of critical thinking the students have to do to identify aspects that they consider to be of importance.

On the student level, movies can have two negative effects which both represent the extremes of the spectrum. On the one side they may become little more than passive, merely consuming observers, as students are used to seeing movies and films as entertainment and as a way to relax from the stresses of university life (O'Meara, 1976: 219; Waalkes, 2003: 158). On the other hand students can become too emotionally involved with the topic of the film. Some authors have pointed out that extreme emotions such as fear and anger can reduce the viewers' attention and hinder the learning process, as they prevent critical and thoughtful reflections on the subject (Haney, 2000: 241). As Allen (1998) points out in this respect, it is impossible to guess what students have been through in their life and the emotional baggage they bring to class. It thus might be useful to discuss certain aspects of the film with the students in advance or prepare with them a common list of guiding questions or issues which would help them to focus on the original research interest while watching.

One of the main arguments against using movies in the IR classroom is that they are simply not made for teaching IR. With respect to IR theory Gregg (1998: 10) argues that movies do not explicitly champion a certain theory. At the same time certain theoretical components are found more often than others. For example, 'realist' assumptions have been very dominant in movies about international politics. Similarly, movies generally only deal with certain things while they almost totally neglect other very important issues of international politics (Gregg, 1999). 'Conflict sells': movies predominantly focus on exciting things such as war or a violent crisis rather than on international economics, international law or international organizations despite their vital importance for international politics. Even when focusing on one political issue such as war, genocide or terrorism, movies are mainly about death, destruction, heroism and physical and psychological anguish. They do not tend to explore the causes of the conflict or the consequence for international politics. 'The result is a picture of the puzzle of international relations from which important pieces are missing or seriously underrepresented' (Gregg, 1998: 9). Movies therefore have to be selected carefully and prepared in accordance with the course objectives.

A number of scholars have argued that many movies are not really suited to teach students about international political events as they oversimplify and revise history and thereby give a distorted view of international politics (cf. Gregg, 1999: 129). Historical figures and events are reinvented to fit the plot of the movie and '[m]ore often than not Hollywood gets it all wrong. Students need to be reminded that the movie industry is in the entertainment business and not in the business of manufacturing historical documents' (Giglio, 2002). As films rarely last longer than two and a half hours, they have to condense history, they heighten the drama, and they portray individual characters as being representative of a whole category of people. Every film is a necessary simplification and condensation of events no matter how complex and intricate the storyline may be (Berenson, 1996: 514).

Accordingly movies are inherently biased and always express a clear and distinct viewpoint no matter how value-free they present themselves to be (O'Meara, 1976: 216). Apart from a personal, maybe aesthetic, bias, there is also a certain more general Western or Eurocentric bias as most movies used in IR classes are likely to have been produced *for* the European or American market as well as *by* Western film studios in Hollywood, Berlin or London (Gregg, 1998: 7). As will be seen in the following parts of the article, other authors, however, believe that subjectivism is not so much a problem but a benefit. For example, Lee (1990: 104) argues that '[i]n some cases, even defects can become positive resources for teaching'. As we will show in sections three and four, openly questioning and critically analysing the background behind a certain perspective or narrative (here: *culture* or *theory*) is an important thing for students to learn. Therefore, highlighting certain 'inaccuracies' or biases can lead students to critically question the issues raised in the film and examine the fundamental and often implicit power structures of the movie as well as those in international politics.

APPROACHES TO USING FILM IN IR: UNDERSTANDING EVENTS, ISSUES AND CULTURES

There are four distinct ways of utilizing film in the International Relations classroom. All of them are interconnected and most films can be used as examples to illustrate certain points in all four approaches. This section will illustrate three of the four approaches and concentrate on illustrating how films can be used in the classroom to teach *events* in international politics, *issues* of importance in international relations and *cultural identities* and narratives.

The first approach, which focuses on *events*, represents a more traditional way of utilizing film in class. Here the film or movie is simply used to give students information on a specific event or historical period and the movie takes over the role of providing a kind of lecture. The approach is usually not suitable for teaching a whole

course but is commonly used at all levels as a device for supplementing the normal seminar readings. Most of the time this includes documentaries on historical time periods which shaped world politics such as the famous and Academy Award winning documentary *Fog of War* on the events of the Cold War and *Hearts and Minds*, *Winter Soldier,* or *Sir! No Sir!* for the Vietnam War.

A little bit more adventurous and therefore facing the threat of being called unscientific is the use of popular movies rather than documentaries. Such (partially) invented stories may have the advantage of automatically avoiding the suspicion of being identified as impartial, correct, or objective (hi)stories. Nonetheless, Oliver Stone's award-winning movie *JFK* (on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas) is a prominent example of a highly acclaimed movie persuasively narrating a 'correct history'. Yet, providing the audience with high quality, accurate historical information is not the primary aim of such films. As popular films are made for entertainment and financial success at the box office, the choice and availability of themes and histories in the *events* approach that can be discussed in class are somewhat limited as wars and conflicts dominate much of the historical filmmaking (Giglio, 2005; Gianos, 1998; Pollard, 2002). In this context, it becomes quite obvious that movies also serve political purposes and either reflect a dominant national interpretation of an event or are used by the political elites to create a certain narrative of an event – in both ways, the instructor has to be aware of the fact that the *events* approach has a heavy subjectivist bias. For example, despite their aesthetic quality, the Vietnam movies *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon,* and *Full Metal Jacket* are by their very nature partial and over-exaggerated. In order to perform a useful function, we hence argue that *event* movies work best if they are embedded within an analytical or theoretical framework. For example, one could use Roger Donaldson's film *Thirteen Days* to introduce students to the historical circumstances of the Cuban Missiles Crises in 1962, the height of the Cold War. The movie is, however, solely a US narrative of that event – the Soviet perspective is totally absent and performs the function of the 'Other'. In order to escape the 'subjectivity trap' of the *events* approach, a more fruitful way of turning the movie into a valuable contribution to be used in the classroom is to embed it within an analytical framework, e. g. deterrence theory and Graham T. Allison's and Philip D. Zelikow's (1999) ground-breaking analysis 'The Essence of Decision', in order to grasp the superpower-logic of the Cold War. In addition to documentaries and movies, one might even turn to fictions, which, of course, never have the intention to serve 'visual history telling', but which nonetheless do so. A rather exotic example which nicely adds to *Thirteen Days* or *The Fog of War* is *Star Trek VI* (cf. Weldes, 1999), a science fiction movie about the Iron Curtain coming down in outer space in the 23rd century. The 1991 movie also lends itself to a social-constructivist framework of analysis by investigating the (de-)construction of enemy images (cf. Weller, 1992; Fiebig-von Hase/Lehmkuhl, 1997).

Obviously there is a clear overlap between examining historical *events* and analysing *issues* of importance for international relations. As Dan Lindley (2001: 663) points out, he not only uses the film classic *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* to teach about the history of the Cold War but he also uses it 'as a springboard to discuss deterrence, mutually assured destruction, pre-emption, the security dilemma, arms races, relative versus absolute gains concerns, Cold War misperceptions and paranoia, and civil-military relations' and places these in their historical context in the process. There are a number of scholars who follow this model and choose 'films which dealt with very specific political themes' (Sanchez, 1976: 94) to teach international politics courses. Some, such as Robert Gregg (1998, 1999), focus on issues in 'International Relations' while others, such as Kuzma and Haney (2001), Haney (2000) or Gerner (1988-89), examine issues in 'Foreign Policy'. Here Gregg (1998) focuses on issues such as sovereignty; nationalism; civil strife; subversion; decision-making; war; economic interdependence and development; ethics and international law; the clash of cultures and the domestic roots of IR. In contrast Kuzma and Haney (2001) focus on McCarthyism; deterrence; the Berlin Wall; Glasnost; Covert Operations; presidential and congressional powers in foreign policy; and State Department and Foreign Service Officers, as well as the War Powers Act.

There is a vast number of different issues which play an important role in movies and at the same time are important issues in international politics. For example, the topics of genocide and forced displacement could be illustrated with the help of *Hotel Rwanda, Star Trek IX or The Killing Fields.* Some films even exemplify two or more topics, e. g. *Blood Diamond*, which is suitable for the discussion of new wars, the role of private military companies, and the effectiveness of new forms of governance such as the 'Kimberley Process' to control the export of conflict diamonds. One issue of international politics that has so far been neglected but seems predestined to be the subject of IR film classes is terrorism (Bloggs/Pollard, 2006). One of the very first movies to deal with the topic of terrorism was Alfred Hitchcock's film *Sabotage* in 1936, which was the film version of Joseph Conrad's 1907 book *The Secret Agent* (Davies, 2003). In a fairly early text on the topic, Walter Laqueur (1987), one of the leading terrorism experts, examined the potential of gaining insight from films on terrorism. He, however, was sceptical about the genre, believing that it had little future in the film industry, and more recently, others have also questioned the use of movies in teaching about terrorism (Miller, 2006). Nevertheless, we believe that there is a vast number of other films which could be used to highlight and reflect upon some of the issues surrounding terrorism (cf. Slocum, 2005; Fröhlich et al., 2008; Spencer, 2008).

In sum, the main problem with regard to the *events* and *issues* approaches is that students often take documentaries as 'correct histories', i.e. as *the* narrative of a par-

ticular event (objectivism) rather than as one individual viewpoint or perspective among others. But no matter how 'perfectly' a documentary is directed or how acclaimed it is by film critics, the national film academy or the scientific community, all documentaries are inherently subjective. Moreover, they (necessarily) oversimplify and condense history (cf. Berenson, 1996: 514). By their very nature, documentaries are considered very persuasive as they successfully create the illusion of an 'unfiltered [...] access to reality' (Trinh, 1991, cited in: Denzin, 2000: 410). In addition, students often fall into a 'consumer trap' and display a tendency to simply watch the movie and thereby lose their ability to maintain a critical distance from what they 'see'.

The third approach to using film in the classroom is concerned with movies as a *cultural narrative* of the 'self'. Authors such as Gregg (1998) and Kuzma and Haney (2001) (mentioned above) assumed that films reflect real events and provide a more or less objective visual representation of the world 'out there'. Movies were understood as a simple and easy opportunity to gain access to the 'reality' of (hi)stories and topics of world politics. However, some argue that there is no such thing as an 'unproblematic window on the world' (Holden, 2006: 807). Post-Structuralists state that there is no direct observation of reality, objective reflection of history, or sole 'correct' account of an event. The world of politics and political science and the world of film making and popular culture do not exist independently of each other – not even fiction is outside of the cultural, social, or political spheres of reproduction (Weldes, 1999, 2001; Debrix, 2005: 553). For example, a director will always be influenced by his/her ideological, national or ethnic background as well as by his/her gender, class or family (Denzin, 2000: 417). The 'real' is therefore always inter-textual, an image of the world among many other images that claim to adequately represent the world. Movies are neither objective nor culturally neutral texts, but socially constructed transcripts of 'reality': inherently subjective, equally valid, and, most of all, culturally bound stories. The 'second hand model of reality' consequently regards films as visual representations of various 'selfs' rather than as searches for the one or the true story. Within such a framework, the subjectivity inherited in movies is not a 'mistake', but a crucial advantage that allows us to develop an 'epistemology of perspectives' (Denzin, 2000: 422). In being aware of their inter-textual bias, one can look at movies as an important tool for understanding particular cultural narratives of events or topics: the mutual constitution of the aesthetic and international politics (cf. Holden, 2006: 801, 807). Here, popular culture is the product and the cause of international politics. In order to take into account this 'bias', one has to accept that all movies are context-bound and filtered by the director's lens, the historical context, and budget restrictions, as well as by the expectations and interpretations of the audience. The critical view allows for the understanding of films as specific, individual versions of truth – a film is *a* visual representation of a re-

ality in which the images provide meaning to a particular historical view. See, for example, Cynthia Weber's (2006) analysis of the construction of American identity and US foreign policy reflected in popular film culture after 9/11. The main problem of this third approach is one of cultural representativeness. If we can gain access to diverse cultural narratives via a supplementary reading of these images, i.e. by biased but nonetheless valuable insiders' views of history, how do we know that the individual perspective provides us with a better understanding of collective concepts such as cultures, times, or peoples? In short, how can we protect ourselves from analysing completely extreme, absurd or 'invalid' stories? Is there a criterion for untruth? Of course, the radical constructivist answer is 'We cannot and we need not!' Already posing such questions is wrong; this creates artificial categories through which we (seemingly) separate the valid from the non-valid, truth from non-truth, or science from non-science. It is exactly the belief in the principled equality of truths and the benefit of 'the margins' which will tell us much more about histories and the power-relations written into narratives than the mainstream or the broader focus. However, there is also a more moderate, slightly positivist-like possible answer: Taking into account the reaction of the audience will help us to better understand the social-cultural context. Most films touch people emotionally as they reflect cultural values and historical meanings, i.e. a particular image of truth (cf. Denzin, 2000: 426). Hence, the more a film hits an audience's nerve, the greater its success at the box-office will be. And the more successful a film is (measured in box office takings), the higher the probability that it is a representative (rather than a marginal) narrative of the identity or values of a particular country.

A good example of a film which illustrates an interesting and very particular cultural narrative is *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (hereafter VWI) – with three million viewers in its first two weeks, Turkey's most successful movie production of all times. The 2006 film about the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 portrays the US as an evil country as well as the *Other* of the Turkish nation.[1] As Washington and Ankara have been strategic allies for over 50 years (Redmond/Pace, 1996: 438), the successful domestic reception of the *Other* image is puzzling. Whilst any *positivist* would criticize that VWI is – apart from the linkages to the Abu Greibh prison scandal – *not* an objective movie about the 'real' criminals in Iraq (the dictatorial *Baath* regime of Saddam Hussein) but tells an imagined and hence 'false' story by portraying the US soldiers as the bad guys (as conceited criminals lusting for power), the *post-positivist* would point out that exactly such inter-subjective or seemingly 'absurd' views tell us valuable 'truths' about Turkey's interpretation of the post-9/11 events. VWI hence helps us to understand the contemporary Turkish mind-set. The negative image of the US goes hand in hand with what the majority of the Turkish people perceive as an 'arrogant' unilateral policy of the US that ignored Ankara's regional sensitivities and feelings of security in 2003. Together

with other examples from Turkey's popular literature (Uçar/Turna, 2004), the film suggests that the anti-American *Zeitgeist* portrayed in the movie is not an absurd or marginal interpretation but that it reflects a dominant reading of the US image in Turkey. Thus, *popular* culture (here movies) can indeed be a valuable tool for students and researchers for understanding the role of political narratives in international politics and changes in *political* cultures. The film was well received also among the Turkish political elite. For example, Bülent Arinc, the President of the Turkish National Assembly, praised it with the words 'In a word, it is great. It follows the historical facts to the letter'.[2] Therefore, one might also analyse whether the constructions in popular discourse constitute 'realities' and eventually affect Turkish foreign policy preferences towards the US in 'real' life (cf. Katzenstein/Keohane, 2007: 276).

Within this third approach movies could be used to compare cultural narratives and display changes over time. For example, the change of the US perspective on the use of torture before and after 9/11 is displayed in Edward Zwick's 1998 movie *The Siege* (cf. Wilkins/Dowing 2002), which clearly condemns torture, and the highly popular US television series *'24'*, focusing on a fictional counter-terrorist unit of the US government, which has fuelled a domestic debate on whether torture is not a legitimate means to prevent terrorist attacks (Erickson, 2008). Moreover, the sole example of one event (here the World War II battle over the Japanese island Iwo Jima) being complementarily portrayed from two viewpoints in popular films is that of Clint Eastwood's movies *Flags of our Fathers* (the US perspective) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (the Japanese angle).

TEACHING IR THEORY WITH THE HELP OF MOVIES

The preceding parts of this article have examined the possibilities of using films to teach certain *events, issues,* or *cultures* in IR. In this section we want to outline a fourth approach and examine the potential of using movies to teach IR *theories*. This approach has been introduced by Cynthia Weber (2001, 2005), who connects the illustrative aspect of movies with a critical perspective. Others have followed this interest in combining popular culture with IR theories. For example, Hulsman and Mitchell (2009) use the movie *The Godfather* to illustrate different American foreign policy perspectives, and Ruane and James (2008) use *Lord of the Rings* to relay the theoretical debates in IR. Due to a lack of space, we have decided to follow Cynthia Weber's approach and concentrate in the following on one theory per film, in our case post-modernist theory and *Pulp Fiction*, rather than applying a range of theories to the same movie.

Weber examines 'how IR theories appear to be true' (Weber, 2001: 281) and analyses how the film and the theory make sense of the world and what they both

portray as normal or deviant in their worlds. Although movies were never intended as IR theory teaching tools, they generally (explicitly or implicitly) make use of the same meta-theoretical assumptions about the world and the nature of the actors in it as IR theories. Films portray a certain interpretation of how the world works – for example, they follow a logic of consequentiality, a logic of appropriateness or both (cf. Risse, 2000; March/Olsen, 1989, 1998). One of the main strengths of such an approach is that students are 'forced' to apply the theories to a much less self-evident object of study. Theories are scientific constructs, and as such they can be much better understood and their explanatory strengths and weaknesses can be much better uncovered if they are applied to a world which is as obviously artificially constructed as the theory itself, such as the world we encounter in a movie. To attain a better grasp of the theories' main assumptions and to become able to critically evaluate their ontological or epistemological underpinnings, it is helpful to re-direct the centre of attention away from the 'usual suspects' (empirical politics and policies) to a rather unfamiliar setting (the world of fiction). This could lead to a deeper understanding of and more critical thinking about the theories' potential and limits. In our view, a good starting point is to identify in advance the respective theory's main assumptions in order to help students focus on the selection of scenes which display the diverse 'bits and pieces' of the theoretical approach.

EXAMPLE: PULP FICTION AND POST-MODERN IR THEORIES

Identifying the core elements of Post-Modern IR theories (cf. Campbell, 2007: 225) is an intricate task, in particular as this school of thought by definition questions the usage and usefulness of labels. We will start with describing very briefly what we consider some of the main ideas of post-modern thought in IR before discussing some of its elements in greater detail with examples taken from the movie *Pulp Fiction*.

Post-modern (or post-structuralist) theories give *language* a central role. The world is understood as a discursive (social) construction, which acquires meaning only through exchange of speech acts: The agents (as well as the political scientists) are an indivisible part of the discursive context and at the same time (re-)produce these structures linguistically. Reality hence cannot exist outside discourse and must be understood 'from within' (Hollis/Smith, 1991: 72); its analysis always requires an abstraction or interpretation (Campbell, 2007: 204). Being aware of the manifold interpretations of reality, post-modern theories subscribe to the idea of *multiple truths* (cf. Foucault, 2002 [1969]). This worldview contrasts sharply with that of the positivist mainstream, where truth is viewed as an 'objective' fact. By contrast, post-modern theories believe that truth is inherently subjective (given its interpretative na-

ture) or *inter-textual* (dependent on a particular discourse). Thus, they are convinced that a final version of truth – a so-called *master-narrative* (cf. Lyotard, 1984) – cannot and should not exist. However, this does not mean that post-modern theory is totally indifferent to truth or that it has an arbitrary attitude towards science. Rather, it is aware that *knowledge* is always linked with *power* and – in order to be regarded as 'valid' – must conform to the ruling societal canons of meaning, which define which thoughts are admissible and which are not (Steans/Pettiford, 2005: 130; Smith, 1997: 181). In other words post-modern theories are hyper-critical of any accounts that present themselves as 'objective' whilst dismissing or excluding alternative accounts as trivial, marginal, or 'false' (cf. Diez, 2006). Their common concern is to undermine the hegemonic discourses by exposing the textual interplays and hidden assumptions through which power relations are sustained and (re-)produced (cf. Derrida, 1976). This method is called *deconstruction* (Diez, 2006): the reading of a text's sense (its contents and linguistics) and the reading of the text's hidden message, i.e. the so-called *knowledge/power*-nexus. This includes analysing what is written and what is *not* said or written (Campbell, 2007: 216–218) as the latter may have become trivialized or silenced by the use of 'binary oppositions' such as self/other, central/marginal, truth/falsity, or science/non-science (Steans/Pettiford, 2005: 130). As 'there is always more than one reading of any text' (Smith, 1997: 182), the analysis usually also involves a re-interpretation of the events from an – according to the mainstream – unconventional or *dissident* perspective that is incompatible with the dominant ways of reference (Diez, 2006).

In the following we want to consider this theoretical understanding in the movie *Pulp Fiction*. *Pulp Fiction* (PF) is a 1994 film directed by Quentin Tarantino. Its reception at the box office was huge as it grossed about 210 million USD while having been produced on a budget of only 8 million USD. In addition, the film was highly acclaimed by the critics and won the *Oscar* for 'Best Screenplay' as well as the *Golden Palm* at the Cannes Film Festival. The movie is hence distinctively *not* what its title or the first word of its title ('pulp') claims it is: rubbish or a trash movie with 'a lurid subject matter' (PF 0:18). Already in its beginning, the film thus deliberately tries to blur the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art.[3]

PF is frequently cited as a prime example of the p*ost-modern* cinema in an aesthetic sense (Steans/Pettiford, 2005: 137). Its unconventional multiple narrative structure breaks with the tradition of linear storytelling and is therefore difficult to summarize: The overall plot is told in three parallel accounts or major storylines (*The Bonnie Situation, The Gold Watch,* and *Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife*), which are, however, eclectically narrated in seven sequences (!). In the end, the whole story is resolved in the final coffee shop scene (The Diner), which is, however, also the movie's beginning or prologue. '*Pulp Fiction* has a circular narrative [...] it shifts and rewinds, forcing the viewer to construct the story [...]' (Villella, 2000). The

director, Quentin Tarantino, himself explicitly noted: '[Y]ou can tell it in any way you want. It's not just, you have to tell it linearly. [...] Pulp Fiction would [then] be dramatically less interesting' (cited in Winnefeld, 2006: 7).

Although there is a large number of different issues of post-modernism to focus on in the film, the following part will concentrate on three aspects: firstly, Tarantino's *dissident reading* of violence, secondly, his homage to *dialogue* and the constitutive role of *language* in PF, i.e. the various ways the speech-acts of the characters (re-)produce a violent world, and finally, how the idea of *multiple truths* relates to a possible criticism of post-modern theories in IR as having an arbitrary *understanding of science/quality*.

PF offers a *dissident* perspective on violence and has been largely criticized for its excessive and – from a mainstream point of view – politically *in*correct display of brutality (Ebert, 2001). But quite contrary to glamorizing violence, PF tries to makes violence totally ridiculous. The film is a cartoon: its world and its actors are per definition un-realistic, exaggerated, and weird as according to Tarantino (1994), the sole use of the violence in PF is to entertain. In this respect, the movie does not want to be taken seriously; it does *not* want to paint a 'true' account of the world. PF is a neo-noir movie: Everything brutal is covered under a large blanket of black humor, sarcasm, and irony. Tarantino's disproportionate use of violence aims at 'disturbing'[4] and de-constructing the artificial 'good/bad cop' categories. For example, the two hitmen, Vincent and Jules (played by John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson) cannot be pigeon-holed: They are somewhat but not totally unsympathetic, but they do not clearly belong to the dark side either. Moreover, none of the killings *after* the introductory 'kids scene' at the beginning (PF 13:48–20:15) are premeditated – they all happen by chance. None of the homicides are thus meant to create fear or suspense, which would be the typical function in every 'serious' mainstream action movie. Accordingly, it's not the spectacle (the action) that is central in PF but the *dialogue*. During the whole movie, Tarantino makes use of humorous conversations in order to decrease the negative effects of the violent pictures (Winnefeld, 2006: 15–16). See, for example, the gangsters' shallow 'chit chats' about everyday matters (Villella, 2000) such as the 'little differences' between the US and Europe (PF 7:35) or the dangers inherent in foot massages (PF 8:30–13:00). Under 'normal' circumstances, the harmless dialogues would contrast sharply with the evil events. PF, however, is *not* an action movie such as *Rambo* or *Terminator* in which the main characters say very little. PF is a celebration of language. It is a 'novel converted into a motion picture' (Tarantino, 1994), in which people – unfortunately, but consistently – get killed during and in-between discourse.

So *language* has a central role in PF and is inherently linked to violence: it is constitutive for the agents and structure. The vulgar, aggressive, and violent verbal

communication mirrors how the agents understand and construct their world. Violence is absolutely 'normal' in PF as all the characters have either a totally agnostic or a supportive attitude towards violence. 'Violence' is – so to speak – the 'mainstream', i.e. the 'usual' or 'ordinary', in this world: Nobody cares for *not* manipulating boxing wagers (PF 22:26), earning one's living honestly (PF 2:33), and respecting physical integrity or fairness in sports (PF 1h11:11). The dignity of human life is permanently violated, e.g. when Jules and Vincent assassinate the college boys (PF 20:15) or when Butch kills the unarmed Vincent (PF 1h27:58) and runs over the defenseless Marcellus (PF 1h30:48). Outside, in the real world (the 'real' Los Angeles of today), violence is dissident: Hierarchy and order exist, protected and enforced by state police. Breaking the rules or 'the law' is a criminal act (illegal, not appropriate) and an exception to norms (deviant) – it usually results in going to jail. Inside the strange world of PF, this logic is reversed: Illegalities, arbitrary justice, brutality, and violence are common. Disorder and anarchy enable the strong and powerful to maintain the somewhat cool and entertaining 'tyranny of evil men' (PF 19:20-20:14). The violence in action perfectly mirrors the violence in language. Jules Winfield's notorious use of the Bible quote Ezekiel 25:17, which he ritually cites (e.g. PF 19:14ff) before murdering someone, is the most representative discursive manifestation of the meaning of violence in PF. Tarantino hence offers a *double reading* of violence. In his various portrayals of violence, the 'usual' moral categories and normative frames of reference fall apart or become blurred. Whilst watching the movie, the spectator becomes increasingly unsure whether shooting people is 'terrifying' (PF 13:00ff), 'funny' (PF 1h51:20; cf. 2h11:00), or – in fact – 'cool' (PF 2h15ff; PF 2h20:40 ff).

Having become accustomed to the 'other' perspective on violence throughout the whole movie, PF ends with a quite unexpected U-turn: the conversion of one of the hitmen (Jules). Similar to the biblical figure Saul, who transformed into St. Paul, Jules declares that he wants to refrain from violence and decides to develop into a (good) 'shepherd' (PF 2h22:07–35). Following the constitutive function of language, Jules' frequently cited Bible quote undergoes a new interpretation, acquires a new meaning, and reflects a new pacifism and a newly rendered moral understanding. As the social context is different, 'Ezekiel 25:17' is no longer considered 'a cold-blooded thing to say' before executing people (e.g. PF 19:14ff), but acquires a new meaning – a re-interpretation of violence as 'bad' or 'wrong' – as an 'other' set of moral standards to lead Jules' new life (PF 2h18:12–2h23:25; Winnefeld, 2006: 14). The reason for Jules' conversion is a miraculously survived shooting: In one scene, a man rushes into the room and fires six gun shots at him and Vincent, but all of these shots miss their target (PF 1h48:05–50). Jules is immediately convinced that this 'wasn't [just] luck' and interprets the event as 'divine intervention: [...] God came down from Heaven and stopped these bullets [...] what happened here was a mira-

cle' (PF 1h49:20–1h50:10). In the aftermath, he informs Vincent that he has decided to quit being a hitman (PF 1h50:44–1h51:01).

But the U-turn and its practical consequences – Jules completely changes his life – are not in line with the *dissident view on violence* so far presented in PF and are hence puzzling. In fact, we find that the new practice damages the credibility of Tarantino's dissident reading of violence, in particular as it goes hand in hand with the conversions of other characters such as Butch (PF 1h39:00–20) and ostensibly Ringo and Yolanda (PF 2h19:00; 2h22:48ff). To replace the film's obviously controversial but nonetheless straightforward dissident perspective with the 'usual' moral condemnation of violence and a rather 'normal' happy ending, which is so often typical for every Hollywood film studio, damages the movie's tight post-modern 'grip' and dilutes the clarity of its dissident perspective. In doing so, the movie becomes much more ordinary, normal and very much attached to the mainstream cinema. Its 'message' then is quite simple: Instead of (positively) irritating the viewers in order to induce them to critically think about violence, the viewers leave the cinema with a quite contemplative, rather non-troubling, and ordinary message. This message is: Those who continue to live a life based on violence, those who are unable to change and cannot take other perspectives into account, have made the 'wrong' choice: they are doomed to fail just like Vincent, who is killed later (PF 1h27:50ff). But those who are able to change, those who progress or are on the way to doing so, have made the 'right' choice: they will survive and probably live a different or a better life like Jules or like Butch with his girlfriend Fabienne (PF 1h43:00–47:00).

At the end of the film, the world has become a slightly better place. In other words there is a fairly mainstream and common moral message to the film. This contrasts sharply with Tarantino's 'disturbingly' complex and colorful portrait of diverse images of violence that he has tried to paint throughout the movie. The intellectual attractiveness of the dissident discourse on violence combined with a *multiplicity of perspectives or 'truths'* is finally reduced to a simple black and white scheme proclaiming only one rather ordinary and mainstreamed version of truth, which is that violence has many shapes and sizes but is always 'bad'. Rather than interpreting this as another dissident element within a film in which violence has been portrayed as mainstream or as an interesting change of discourse once the new and different perspective on violence is put forward by Jules, Tarantino de-constructs and contradicts everything that the movie has previously attempted to (de-)construct. One could also say that our conclusion is an allegory of the so-called 'reflexivity problem' of post-modernism (cf. Diez, 2006): As there are no standards for differentiating between high and low art as well as high and low science, 'anything goes', i.e. by epistemological definition, nothing can be ruled out as unscientific (cf. Holden, 2006: 805). Vice versa, this assumption of a total *relativity of truth* logically implies that we

will also never know (for sure) whether what we have seen, heard, or read is a good post-modern story, simply mainstream, or just 'pulp'. Of course, post-modern analyses are not arbitrary and there are criteria for assessing such research – for example, the originality and the degree of innovation of the alternative presented, the consistency and the plausibility of the main argument, the potential of the analysis to contribute to or even solve actual political problems, and its 'corrective function' (Mathias Albert cited in Diez, 2003: 488), that is, its value in outlining alternatives to the mainstream and pointing out the negative consequences of knowledge-power relationships in politics. Nevertheless, the movie *Pulp Fiction* offers a means of debating the abstract notions inherent in the 'reflexivity problem' of post-modern IR theory.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE 'SCIENCE' OF FILM

The paper provided an overview of the benefits and problems of using movies in the IR classroom and has given an insight into the different approaches of using film. On the one hand we have seen some of the benefits of using movies: students are used to and are generally good at dealing with visual material, and it would make sense to utilize these skills that they already have to help them in other areas. In addition there are clear medical reasons for using films in the classroom as viewing a film involves the use of both halves of the brain and therefore makes learning easier. Here movies can also be used as a kind of empirical case study which would help us to make abstract concepts understandable. Films also engage emotions, which contributes to the learning process, and using movies can actively contribute to reducing hierarchies in the class and encouraging discussion. On the other hand there are scholars who have highlighted a number of grave difficulties and hazards: It may be risky for the teacher's professional development as using movies may still be seen as unscientific. Certain parts of movies may be a waste of time as they do not really contribute to the understanding of the issue at large and films generally do include a lot of irrelevant material. Films are simply not made for teaching international politics: they only focus on certain aspects while neglecting others. Some also believe that movies can provide a bad history and are subject to a personal and Eurocentric bias. Having examined some of the good, the bad and the ugly of using films and movies in the IR class room in the first part of the paper, we believe that the benefits far outweigh the problems. We are by no means claiming that movies should replace the reading of primary literature and academic articles and books, but a combination of showing films and movies together with the appropriate reading for each session does provide a fruitful alternative to a normal lesson.

However, one has to be careful about which approach one chooses for a course as this depends very much on the learning objectives of the course and the level of

the students one is teaching. The first approach seems inappropriate for a university as it does not challenge the students to reflect critically about the events seen on the screen. The second approach could be successfully used to give undergraduate students an insight into some of the more abstract concepts found in international politics, thereby preparing them and giving them tools and information that would be useful for the rest of their studies. Both the third and, in particular, the fourth approach appear to be more suited to students who already have a basic understanding of some of the main issues and theories in IR. Here they are led to reflect more critically on the knowledge they have so far obtained at the university.

ENDNOTES

[1] For more details, see the official movie website at **www.valleyofthewolvesiraq.com** [30 March 2007].

[2] See Turkish Daily News, 23 February 2006; Zeit, 23 February 2006 or Welt, 18 February 2006.

[3] For more information see: **www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=pulpfiction.htm** [8 August 2007].

[4] Quentin Tarantino cited in Tony Bowden: Quentin Tarantino: Sick or Sanctified?; **www.tmtm.com/sides/tarant.html** [8 August 2007].

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