

# Pop Culture as a Learning Tool

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## INTRODUCTION

This project explores the benefits of utilizing popular culture as a teaching tool and assessment practice. I argue that far from a mere diversion, pop culture can enhance student interest in a set topic and provide an important bridge between abstract theory and empirical research. In order to validate this claim, I integrated pop culture into the first assignment of my "Security Studies" masters class at the University of Copenhagen.

## Conceptual framework

Popular culture is an intrinsic element of social and political life. In our day-to-day lives, we are exposed to a massive array of fictional entertainment content, interactively (video games), and passively (movies, television, etc.) (Webber 2005: 389). This exposure can be for good or ill – pop culture can inform and enhance our moral imagination; it can also delude and deaden our sensitivity to a range of morally and political pressing issues (Renic and Kaempf 2022).

While the political dimensions of pop culture have long been recognized, its pedagogical value is a more recent focus. There exists a growing body of research highlighting its potential value as a teaching tool and assessment practice (Blanton 2013; Clapton 2015; Engert and Spencer 2009; Simpson and Kaussler 2009; Swimelar 2013). Drawing on this scholarship, I develop my own project investigating the utility of pop culture in the classroom.

Through the creation of a tailored assignment requiring student to analyze and critique a security studies theory through the lens of a fictional and security-based television show or movie (of their choosing), I evaluate the potential for pop culture to enhance curriculum enjoyment and knowledge.

## Methodology

This project explores the following claim: popular culture can be an asset in the teaching of the MA course, "Security Studies". To test this claim, I created the following assignment:

## Theoretical Analysis of Pop Culture Security Issue

Select a piece of security-focused (broadly understood) pop culture – either television or a movie – and analyze it from a realist, liberal, constructivist, or feminist perspective.

I also created an additional mandatory task:

Along with the essay, submit a short reflection (one paragraph maximum) giving your opinion of the exercise. Did you find the pop culture focus helpful, challenging, pointless? In what way (if at all) did it encourage you to think differently, or more creatively, about security studies?

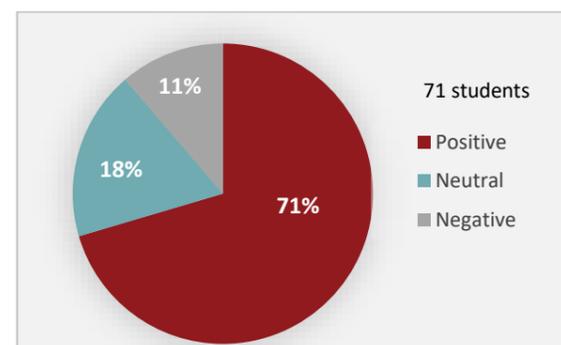
## Pop culture and security

The results of this project are tentative but encouraging.

In regards to the actual quality of the submissions, I was pleased to discover that the overall standard was impressively high – some poor submissions (as you would expect from a pass/fail format) but good to excellent for the most part. The theoretical analysis of the selected security challenge was just as nuanced (if not more) than in previous semesters when this assignment utilised a real-world security case.

The students' reflections on the experience provided further encouragement. Of the 71 students who submitted the assignment: 50 registered a positive response (preferred the pop culture focus over traditional formats); 13 were neutral or balanced (no strong opinion or positive and negative feedback evenly balanced); and 8 were negative (didn't value the exercise and/or would have preferred to analyse a real-world security scenario).

Figure 1. Student Satisfaction with the Exercise



Some students eagerly embraced the exercise from the outset:

*'Art and especially movies and series have been tools of political interpretation, protest or event description*

*since the beginning, studying them through the theories we viewed in class thus seems totally logical.'*

Most, however, were at least slightly apprehensive, primarily for two reasons: 1) The exercise struck them as insufficiently serious or "academic"; and 2) They were unsure as to whether and how they could apply a security studies theory to a pop culture security issue:

*'When we first received the research question, I could not really see the relevance of the assignment. However, working on it, it made me think differently, which eventually created a fruitful discussion.'*

In most cases, these initially apprehensive students found the exercise fruitful:

*'This midterm assignment was definitely very different from any other academic paper I had to write, but, without a doubt, one of the most captivating.'*

## Embracing new ways to engage with security theory

Further encouraging, many students expressed that the exercise encouraged them to engage security theory in a new way, and appreciate its broader applicability. This is an important finding, as a major challenge when teaching a course like this is conveying the relevance of the theories discussed, beyond the narrow set of security cases evaluated over a semester:

*'I strongly believe that the exercise has been a valuable experience, as it encouraged me to think differently about security studies. The pop culture focus provided a different and captivating way to explore complex theoretical concepts, making them more relatable and tangible. It illustrated how these theories are not confined to academic discussions but are, in fact, embedded in various aspects of our daily lives and cultural productions. This exercise challenged me to view popular culture as a source of distinct methodological approach, providing valuable insights.'*

*'We think that this paper was a very good exercise to make us reflect on a film from a critical perspective by linking it to different – sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory – political theories. It has also made the both of us realize that everything is politics.'*

## Room for improvement

In most cases, the negative responses were mild, with students mostly enjoying the task but still preferring to examine a real-world security issue:

*'I liked the fact that the exercise forced me to think outside the box (in terms of applying it to new cases from pop-culture), but my personal taste is simply more in the lane of applying the theories to real-life empirical cases of security issues.'*

## Conclusion

The assignment has validated the growing body of supporting literature arguing that pop culture can potentially serve as an important teaching and assessment tool.

It boosted student interest in, and enjoyment of, a theory-based item of assessment, and, more importantly, has broadened the conceptual horizon of the students regarding the applicability and explanatory value of security studies theory.

In the future, I will better clarify my expectations for the assignment and provide further guidance on structure. Future assignments will allow students to select either a pop culture or real-world security case for their analysis.

I will continue to monitor the value and limits of pop culture integration in a classroom setting, and further iterations of this same assignment will aid in that effort. There is already enough evidence, however, to counter the assumption that pop culture is unhelpful and unserious. To the contrary, it is an important cultural and political resource that can be harnessed as a pedagogical tool.

## References

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