
36. Gender and popular culture

Christina Rowley

The argument on popular culture presented here is located within the discipline of international relations (IR). It addresses how and why the gendered dynamics of popular culture are important to the study of world politics. There has been much interesting research conducted within cultural studies, women's studies, postcolonial studies, anthropology, film studies and other disciplines. However, while the themes, methods and assumptions of traditional IR have been challenged by scholars from diverse critical approaches over the last 30 years, this has not always led to increased attention being paid to the importance of popular culture within the discipline. Moreover, gendered analyses of popular culture have suffered under a 'double burden' of apparent irrelevance and consequent marginalization.

It is essential to study the dynamics of popular culture, and specifically the gendered dynamics, if we are interested in global political processes. An obvious cluster of examples includes those cultural texts that states deploy as recruiting tools and to 'sell' war and military intervention, for example Frank Capra's early 1940s *Why We Fight* film series or *America's Army: Online*. Among other things, these rely heavily on overtly gendered logics of strength, power and nationalism. If we wish to explain why military institutions look and act the way they do, we need to better understand the role popular culture plays in service-members' recruitment, training and recreation time, for example the images of these institutions they formed prior to and upon joining, and how they consume and (re)produce cultural meanings of violence, war and soldiering. Other examples include the overwhelmingly popular cultural (and gendered) nature of the products that form global economic flows, whether these be (gendered) toys and clothes made in and shipped from East Asia to the US and Europe (via gendered processes of production and trade), music and films that often flow the other way, or languages and foodways that disperse with migrant populations. Transnational flows of popular culture both reinforce existing gendered identities and at the same time provide new spaces for the subversion and re-imagination of these.

In this chapter, I am particularly concerned with gender as one of the logics by which popular culture and world politics are intertextually

constituted; in effect, similar gendered representations and assumptions can be found in both popular cultural and world politics texts and practices. However, gender's 'taken-for-granted' binary status plays a key role in obscuring this intertextuality and in making the two spheres appear separate. This makes popular culture appear trivial, while mainstream IR approaches, assumptions and methods appear natural and legitimate to many students and scholars of world politics. In order to destabilize the primacy of disciplinary IR and its accepted themes and preoccupations, this chapter is deliberately centred upon the concept of popular culture. First, I discuss some of the ways in which popular culture is defined, in order to demonstrate the (gendered) foundations on which the distinctions between (popular) culture and (world) politics are built, and how these function to keep popular culture 'below the radar' in IR. Next, I explore only a fraction of the many and varied gendered popular culture/world politics interconnections. I discuss some illustrative examples of the ways in which these intersections have been studied, in order to reflect explicitly on *how* popular culture is and could be studied within IR. I conclude by arguing for the embrace of more localized, particularized and embodied approaches and methodologies if we are to understand more fully the ways in which popular culture matters in world politics and how it should matter to (gendered/feminist and other) IR.

POPULAR CULTURE AND IR

Popular culture is often defined as a 'you know it when you see it' clustering of phenomena, spanning advertising, books, celebrity culture, fashion, film and television, games, hobbies, music, news media, sports, tourism and, in the last two decades, the web and social media. There may be some quibbling about the precise boundaries, but for most people, most of the time, most popular culture is obvious. The boundaries, the margins – and the implied, undisputed, 'obvious' 'centre' – and these distinctions are themselves political. Popular culture has, explicitly or implicitly, usually been defined in contrast to something it is not. The modifier 'popular' implicates popular culture's silent and privileged other, 'high' culture (in effect, cultural practices understood and enjoyed by elites). When someone is 'cultured' (we don't even need to specify 'high'), the binary is invoked. High culture includes opera, art, ballet, poetry, classical music and literature, *haute* (high) couture rather than street fashions. Popular culture – hip hop, graffiti, crunk, *I'm a Celebrity* ... – is 'low' culture (barely 'cultured' at all).

The 'high' and 'popular' qualifiers indicate a broadly class-hierarchy-based distinction, but subject positions such as class are also gendered – and gender functions similarly across the distinction. In high culture, at least in works which have been valued and which have thus endured, women have historically been the 'looked at' objects, portrayed by overwhelmingly *male* subjects such as painters, poets or sculptors. As the object of the male gaze, women have been presented nude, romanticized and sexualized or, as with the Virgin Mary, imbued with other 'feminine' virtues, such as meekness and humility, and 'mastered', just as the lump of clay, the natural landscape or the building materials are mastered (creating masterpieces). In popular culture, it can be seen in women's roles in horror films, in music video dancers, in tattoos of naked women, in 'page 3 girls' and so on. While the precise gendered and racialized dynamics always vary according to context, these commonalities belie the supposed distinction between popular and high culture.

Popular culture is sometimes simply defined as 'consumed by a lot of people', focusing on the sheer popularity of cultural texts and practices. A major problem with this definition is that it cannot specify how many people have to like something before it is considered 'popular' enough to be '*popular* culture'. For example, do cult films 'count', or just blockbusters? One response is to specify that media in general are popular culture. It does not matter how many people watch an individual film; it is a popular cultural text because films are *by definition* popular culture.

This may seem like hair-splitting, but once we shift the problem to the medium itself, this definitional conundrum starts to reveal the blurring of boundaries between popular culture and IR as well. If the whole of the internet is 'popular culture', then 'conventional' IR issues such as cybersecurity, military use of networked computers, and global financial transactions made possible by modern communications technologies start to look more like popular culture. Cybersecurity includes the credit card data, personal account details and communications of global publics, held by Facebook, eBay and Spotify. If television is *by definition* popular culture, then US presidential State of the Union addresses, which since the mid-1960s have been deliberately broadcast in a primetime weekday evening slot, are part of popular culture. In effect, politics and IR *are* popular culture, just as popular culture is political. Politicians appear not only on the news but on *The Daily Show*; they need to show they are 'in touch' with the citizenry and, further, this is often achieved by reference to popular culture. As scholars, embassies, officials, activists, sports-people, artists and musicians comment on politics and foreign policy on Twitter, the notion of a clear line between popular culture and IR now appears blurred. In truth, I contend, there was never a line.

Race, gender, class and other identity distinctions suffuse all boundary-drawing practices between high/low, culture/politics and domestic/international. These binaries carry with them gendered traces (notably masculine/feminine). Politics, and especially *international* politics, has traditionally been understood as a masculine realm in which only, or overwhelmingly, men participate. The realm of politics is one based on hard truths and facts on the ground, core to human survival, while popular culture is often contrasted as the (feminized) realm of melodrama, soap operas, chick flicks, based on fiction and emotion, trivial entertainment. From this perspective, if culture, and popular culture, must be studied by academics at all, surely they can and should be contained within other disciplines such as cultural studies, English, drama, music and history of art. The exclusion of popular culture in IR is itself premised upon gendered assumptions. However, if we do not study popular culture within IR, we miss how, when and why pop culture is political and implicated in global processes (see Weldes and Rowley, 2015, for an overview of ways in which popular culture-world politics relations can be conceptualized).

In short, wherever we draw the line(s), wherever and however the boundaries between popular culture and IR are drawn, those boundaries – and the act of drawing them – are gendered, and political. When we do not look too closely at what happens as a result of the boundaries and distinctions on which our definitions are based, these distinctions become reified as natural, just the way things are, obvious, unquestioned and unquestionable. Nevertheless, the texts and practices of IR theorists and practitioners, conventionally understood as, for example, politicians, ambassadors, civil servants, trade delegations, union leaders and NGO workers, can and should be analysed for their popular cultural dimensions. Here, the focus remains on ‘traditional’ popular culture – those texts, media, practices and genres outlined at the start of this section – precisely because these have been so frequently and comprehensively marginalized, silenced and ignored within IR. This is not to reinstate the binary, but to recognize that some elements of the social world have hitherto received less than their fair share of attention from ‘mainstream’ IR scholars.

GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture is more accepted as a legitimate area of study within ‘critical’ IR scholarship, for example in feminist, poststructural, post-colonial and queer IR. Within feminist approaches to IR, references to

popular culture have gradually been incorporated into more 'mainstream' analyses, as well as pop culture being a focus of study in itself. It makes me more than a little uncomfortable though to single out 'important' works, and to engage in acts of canonization and mythologization around the 'foundations' of popular cultural scholarship in IR. By canonization and mythologization, I mean acts and practices which contributed to the marginalization of feminist scholarship in the first place. If pressed, I would note that, in her analyses, Cynthia Enloe has long refused to maintain the arbitrary distinctions between 'popular culture' and 'IR'. For example, she has deliberately drawn our attention to novels, sneakers, fruit/food and other aspects of daily life that traverse national borders. In particular, Cynthia Weber and Jutta Weldes have both done much to raise the profile of popular culture within critical IR, although Weldes has not published explicitly gender-focused analyses. Debbie Lisle has contributed not only to debates around global cultural communications, but also to forms and practices of popular culture which are not media-focused. This is particularly so in Lisle's work on 'dark' or thano-tourism. From its inception, the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* has published a welcome range of outputs which have addressed popular culture, including reviews and review essays, interviews and conversations as well as conventional articles. This has allowed popular culture to be discussed in conjunction with themes already accepted as worthy of study, and the complex interconnections to be teased out.

Nonetheless, much of the work on popular culture and IR since the late 1980s has focused, in some way, on representations of international relations in popular cultural texts. For the scholar interested in gender, this does not just mean looking at how men and women are portrayed. A focus on bodies reduces our interest to stereotypes, to static understandings, when one of the things that is interesting about popular culture, and which has carried over from literary and cultural criticism into critical IR scholarship, is the function of narrative. Narrative is itself a gendered concept. This includes *but goes beyond* the observation that vast swathes of popular cultural texts reinforce the heteronormatively gendered 'boy meets girl, boy gets girl, something goes wrong, successful resolution, happily ever after' cliché, even if, and as, feminist and queer works might subvert the heteronormative element. Even without an overt love story, the idea of a (male and masculinized) protagonist (with whom the – presumed male – audience is encouraged to identify) who encounters some trouble and must battle (with himself and external forces) for successful resolution has been a key feature of Western storytelling, from before medieval Icelandic sagas to the twenty-first century. Frodo Baggins is an excellent example of such a protagonist.

The key narrative trope of the American Western genre hinges on the binary between wilderness and civilization, with a man attempting to protect civilization, commonly of the *womenandchildren* variety, by mastering the wild. As noted earlier, this binary has gendered traces and implications. How and why does this matter to world politics? It matters because popular genres, in this case Westerns, become the go-to cultural resources for populations (here, US Americans) when attempting to make sense not only of the politics of the historical eras in which these films are ostensibly set (US colonial expansion across North America and the genocide of Native American communities) but also of more recent international conflicts (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq). Popular cultural texts are the fabric of our understandings of our worlds, our politics and our histories. For this reason, in addition to situating and analysing texts in the historical context of their production, it is important to examine how those historical contexts are deployed or erased as meanings are recycled, reproduced and re-articulated by and in later discourses.

However, a focus on narrative and discursive elements of the text is not the whole story (pun intended). Popular culture also draws our attention firmly to the visual and aural logics at work. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, John Rambo is gendered as hypermasculine, in opposition to his feminized Vietnamese captives. This is achieved through visual tropes and symbols as much as through the narrative. Rambo's bare chest, rippling muscles and proficiency with weapons all prominently feature, while the Vietnamese camp commander is shown sleeping between silk sheets and with a tiny, carefully manicured moustache. Rambo is able to withstand the Thai heat, while the treacherous CIA agent needs a constant supply of ice-cold cans of Coke. No comparison between Rambo and Jesus is ever verbalized, but the visual signifiers, a long-haired Rambo strung up in the Vietnamese prison camp, head hanging limply, arms outstretched in a crucifixion pose, make this analogy clear.

CONSUMING POPULAR CULTURE

While discursive, visual and aural representations are spaces in which gender is connoted, and in which it, in turn, functions to connote other meanings, a preoccupation with cultural texts and visual media can often obscure the amount of labour that has to be performed in the reading of these texts and media. Critical analyses of narratives and representations at work within the text may indicate how a film or novel can be read but, by themselves, they do not tell us very much about how, in practice, the novel or film has been read.

Anthony Swofford highlights this well in the opening pages of his 2003 Gulf War memoir *Jarhead*, when he describes how he and his marine buddies prepare for their imminent deployment to Kuwait by watching Vietnam War films. He argues that, although many US civilians may understand these films as propounding anti-war messages, for military men war films function as pornography, getting them ready for battle. The messages they take from these films are very different. Crucially, the point is not that one reading is 'correct' or 'better' than another but, rather, that texts contain multiple potential readings. Different elements of the text may be prioritized from different audience positions; women, for example, may not feel that the author's first-person narrator is speaking to them when he explicitly assumes a male interlocutor and vice versa. We also need to consider, then, how popular culture is *consumed*.

Consumption of popular culture does not merely refer to foodways (in effect, consumption as eating) but to the consumption of artefacts more generally. It draws attention to the active and dynamic nature of culture as lived practices and experiences. If we are interested in understanding the diverse ways in which popular culture and world politics intersect in our daily lives and how their mutual constitution forms the backdrop to our (individual and collective) political consciousnesses, IR scholars (myself included) now need to move beyond the methods that have traditionally been deployed in IR and embrace methods developed by the disciplines mentioned at the start of this chapter. Audience research, ethnographic approaches, participant observation and participant action research (co-producing research with the participants involved) offer richer and more contextualized analyses of how meaning is being actively produced, reproduced and transformed by people in diverse communities and circumstances. These methods can also be utilized in conjunction with close textual readings of, say, websites, films and relevant news media. It may not be possible to go back and interrogate Anthony Swofford's contemporaries for the different models of masculinity being produced in their viewings of Vietnam War films, as opposed to those of peace activists, but there are many other scenarios which would benefit from such close engagement. The gendered dynamics of the Israel–Palestine conflict and associated attempts to procure peace might, for example, be fruitfully explored through investigations of the West–Eastern Divan Orchestra, its members and its audiences, to understand how the orchestra functions, its objectives and its achievements.

Investigating the politics of affect and emotion (themselves gendered and the study of these considered feminine in an IR context) at work in cultural texts and practices requires not only new ways of researching but

also new ways of writing and communicating the findings of that research. How can we hope to present accurately and persuasively the complexity and vitality of processes that hinge on emotions and bodily responses (often unconsciously experienced, in fleeting fractions of seconds), in academic modes, styles and genres that remain based on the gendered binary assumptions about communication as reason and rationality? Bystander theatre may be a better model for communicating the findings of audience research than is the peer-reviewed article or the standard conference presentation. Taking seriously the importance of popular culture in world politics – and reflecting explicitly on the ways in which popular cultural practices and texts are gendered – is thus a more fundamental challenge to the boundaries and practices of the discipline than first appears.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Chambers, Samuel A. (2009) *The Queer Politics of Television*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Crawford, Neta (2003) 'Feminist futures: science fiction, utopia, and the art of possibilities in world politics', in Jutta Weldes (ed.), *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring the Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, London: Palgrave, pp. 195–220.
- Enloe, Cynthia (2001) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hooper, Charlotte (2001) *Manly States: Masculinities, International Relations and Gender Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kaklamanidou, Betty (2013) *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com*, Oxford: Routledge.
- Lisle, Debbie (2006) *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rowley, Christina (2007) 'Firefly/Serenity: gendered space and gendered bodies', *British Journal of Politics of International Relations*, 9 (2), 318–325.
- Rowley, Christina (2014) 'Popular culture and the politics of the visual', in Laura J. Shepherd (ed.), *Gender Matters in Global Politics*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, pp. 361–374.
- Shepherd, Laura J. (2012) *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories*, Oxford: Routledge.
- Weber, Cynthia (2002) 'Flying planes can be dangerous', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31 (1), 129–147.
- Weldes, Jutta and Christina Rowley (2015) 'So, how does popular culture relate to world politics?', *e-IR*, 29 April, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/29/so-how-does-popular-culture-relate-to-world-politics/> (accessed 16 June 2015).
- Wichelen, Sonja van (2005) "'My dance immoral? Alhamdulillah no!" Dangdut music and gender politics in contemporary Indonesia', in Marianne I. Franklin (ed.), *Resounding International Relations: On Music, Culture and Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 161–178.