

Visual Literacy in International Relations: Teaching Critical Evaluative Skills through Fictional Television

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Bio:

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Abstract

This article explores how students experience fictional television as part of their broader learning experience. In particular, the article investigates the potential role of fictional television in the development of visual literacy and critical evaluative skills. The article reports the findings of an experiment into critical evaluative viewing, which measures the foreign policy beliefs of students after exposure to two contrasting episodes of NBC's *The West Wing*. The results indicate that students are influenced by fictional television, but in perhaps unexpected ways. Although nuanced, the findings suggest that students demonstrate and develop critical evaluative skills – and visual literacy – in two different ways. First, students oppose the fictional/political message to which they are exposed. And, second, students reject the options that are presented to them in their totality. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for teaching critical evaluative skills and visual literacy.

Introduction

This article analyses three things. First, and most generally, it explores the role of fictional television screenings within the student learning experience. Second, and more specifically, the article assesses *how* students watch fictional television, when it is included as part of their studies. Third, and most specifically, the article investigates whether and in which ways students demonstrate visual literacy when viewing fictional television as an integrated additional component of their modules.

This investigation responds to three notable trends. First, the potential for video use in the classroom, including fictional television screenings, is increasing in line with better classroom technology. Second, the reality of video use and fictional television screenings is increasing, as more higher education teachers make use of clips, episodes, and even entire series, as part of their modules and programmes. Third, there is a growing literature on video use, including the role of film and TV in the (higher education) classroom, but studies of *how* students experience this medium remain relatively limited.

The article addresses a conundrum specific to social science, arts and humanities disciplines, such as Politics and International Relations. Film and television can be effective teaching tools, if used appropriately, in part due to their affective lure. However, the imperative to develop critical evaluative skills in International Relations should make scholars wary of the impact of film and television. Can and do students work against and overcome the powerful and (often) emotional narratives put forward in (film and) fictional television? In order to develop

critical evaluative skills students must actively resist appealing characters, seductive plots and emotive soundtracks. They must develop visual literacy.

In order to explore whether Politics and International Relations students demonstrate and develop critical evaluative skills – and visual literacy – the article is structured in four parts. First, the article introduces a selection of the most pertinent literature, with a focus on video use, its usefulness in the classroom, and the development of visual literacy. Second, the article outlines the methodology informing two controlled experiments into student viewing habits. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used, making use of questionnaire and focus group data. Third, the article presents the most significant findings from the data. This includes the fact that students *do* view fictional television critically in two distinct ways. Fourth, the article discusses these findings, considering their wider implications for Politics and International Relations.

Literature Review

A number of studies have noted that students are often “media fluent” (INT 2009: 4), absorbing “information quickly, in images and video” (Duffy 2008: 119; see also Bloom and Johnston, 2010: 115). At the same time, “video use is increasing in the classroom with significant numbers of academics indicating that they expect to make greater use of videos in the future” (Holland 2013c: 2; see also INT, 2009; Park et al 2008). The combination of a potentially media savvy student population and higher education teachers increasingly making use of videos in their lectures and seminars has initiated several research projects

and generated a developing body of associated literature. Here, we will consider video use and visual literacy in turn.

Video use and fictional television in higher education learning and teaching

Research into higher education video use has noted the important role video can play in higher education, including: its promotion of student self-efficacy (McConville and Lane 2005); its usefulness in developing personalized learning strategies (Burden and Atkinson 2007); and its role in personal development (Tochon 1999). There is also good existing research on how videos are often used to negative effect in the classroom (Hobbs 2006; see also Swimelar 2013 for a warning on superficiality and confusion; as well as Bostock 2011 and Rackaway 2012 for discussion). It is imperative, of course, to classify and categorise video genres. Extensive work on online video lectures (e.g. Ronchetti 2003) has become increasingly important in the era of MOOCS, while there is growing interest in the role documentaries (e.g. van Munster and Sylvest 2013) and current affairs clips (e.g. Holland 2013c) can play in learning and teaching. Holland (2013c), for example, has shown how different types of video, such as lecture capture and current affairs clips, impact different students in different ways, encouraging the development of different skills. Here, we focus on a third type of video used in higher education teaching: fictional television. Videos delivering fictional messages (such as film and TV) have the potential to help students – and particularly top students – to develop critical evaluative skills and achieve a high-end transfer of these skills through encouraging independent learning (Holland 2013c).

Film and fictional television are receiving increased attention in Politics and International Relations research (e.g. Weber 2001, 2006; Webber 2005; Weldes 2003). Shepherd's (2013) *Critical Approaches to Security*, for example, is a textbook which includes recommended films alongside topics to introduce students to different perspectives, theories, and issues. The most agreed upon potential benefit derived from utilizing film and fictional television in Political Science and International Relations is the increased interest that videos can stimulate in a topic (e.g. Holland 2013c; Valeriano 2013; Webber 2005; Weber 2001). This research also confirms that student interest is piqued through the use of videos, such as fictional television. However, as others have noted, integrating film and fictional television into the higher education classroom can achieve additional benefits, beyond the retention of student interest. Video use can, for example, help students to develop (international) multiperspectivity (e.g. Bloom and Johnston 2010; Swimelar 2013), or to develop a deeper understanding of a standalone issue, such as the rise and fall of states (Waalkes 2003), social movements (Pollard 2005), or global financial crises (e.g. Hall 2011). There is also considerable research into the role of film and TV for teaching IR theory (e.g. Webber 2005) and its critique (e.g. Weber 2001), whether through the use of zombies (e.g. Drezner 2011; see also Blanton 2012), *Harry Potter* (Nexon and Neumann 2006), *Breaking Bad* (e.g. Grayson 2013), *The Wire* (e.g. Evans forthcoming), *Lord of the Rings* (Ruane and James 2008), *Game of Thrones* (e.g. Saideman 2011; Carpenter 2012), *Superman* (Evans 2010), *The Incredibles* (Dunn 2006), or something else.

One of the greatest potential benefits as well as the greatest potential problems of introducing film and/or fictional television into the higher education classroom is that the medium is particularly emotive. Like novels and video games, for example, fictional videos deliberately play to the senses of the audience. It is this affective quality of fictional video that can both help and hinder learning in Politics and International Relations. By attempting to affectively invest an audience, film and fictional TV certainly offer the potential to help tap into the multitude of “ways that the human brain learns” (Berk 2009: 77; see also Kuzma and Haney 2001: 34-35). As Berk (2009: 77) summarises, film and fictional television have the potential to tap “into the human brain’s core intelligences which are verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, and musical/rhythmic”. This ‘affective’ investment makes fictional television a potentially powerful addition to higher education syllabi, as well as a useful vehicle for political learning more broadly (Capelos 2012). It can teach empathy and multiperspectivity, as well as simply aid memory and increase interest. However, in the social sciences, arts and humanities, such affecting properties can be as problematic as they are useful. In Politics and International Relations, like cognate disciplines, critical evaluation is an imperative skill for students to develop (Biggs and Tang 2007; Mayer 2003: 130; Swimelar 2013; Weber 2009). In Politics and International Relations, therefore, it is important to explore *how* students watch fictional videos and ask whether and in which ways they might demonstrate a skeptical attitude to presented material, thinking critically and evaluating the message to which they are exposed. In short, do Politics and International Relations students demonstrate visual literacy and critical

evaluative skills when watching and discussing fictional television integrated within their modules and programmes?

Fictional television and visual literacy

We must not assume that films and fictional television are useful additions to a syllabus simply because students like them and they help to maintain interest in a subject. Rather, it is important to explore how students experience fictional videos as part of the broader learning experience, given that when showing films and fictional TV cognitive load is extremely high and critical evaluation may be harder (e.g. Cunningham, 2010). The development of critical evaluative skills for the viewing of film and television is closely related to the concept of ‘visual literacy’. Christopherson (1997: 170) defines visual literacy as “critically viewing – interpreting, analysing and evaluating meaning”, as well as “judging quality” and the “general need to develop an awareness and defence against visual manipulation” (ibid.). Given the increasing role played by video in today’s media ecology, the importance of integrating visual literacy within experiential and active learning approaches has been noted by numerous scholars (e.g. Florez-Morris and Tafur, 2010; Simpson and Kaussler 2009; Waalkes, 2003: 157; Weber, 2001; and see Usherwood 2009 on active learning). As Bleed (2005: 1) has noted:

“[Today’s media] environment is highly visual—television, Web sites, video, and images dominate our lives—and visuals created with new technologies are changing what it means to be literate. The literacy of the 21st century will increasingly rely not only on text and words but also on digital images and sounds [... In this environment, visual literacy] will

become as important as textual literacy for learning”.

What Bleed is advocating for is a ‘multimodal literacy’, which goes beyond textual competence and critique (Carey and Gunther, 2003).

For Politics and International Relations, this need has been made particularly acute given the fierce urgency of the political present. Contemporary events have shown the importance of the visual to, for example, security (Hansen 2011), gender (Shepherd et al 2012), and development (Singh 2013). The policies and politics of the War on Terror are one prominent example of the important role played by film and fictional television (e.g. Jackson 2005; Croft 2006; Holland 2011a, b, 2013a, b; Altheide 2010; Nilges 2010).

“Instant access to visual images and emotional accounts of terrorism have secured them a vivid place in our memory and reinforced the idea that ‘we’ have been targeted and are under immediate threat. Fear and the sense of belonging to an innocent, victimized, and threatened group, under attack from irrational, malevolent, and uncontrollable ‘others’, is a significant feature of ‘terrorist times’ in Western nations. These identities and feelings are reinforced through visual images and the circulation of recurrent statements, polemics, rationalities, and representations” (Matthews 2005: 203).

Of course, it is not just film and television that offers these potentials. Graphic novels and literary fiction (Juneau and Sucharov 2010; Upstone 2010), video games (Annandale 2010; Robinson 2014), photography (Pusca 2013; see also David Campbell’s work), and pop music (Franke and Schiltz 2012) are also important mediums through which meaning is made and political narratives

(re)produced. Film and television, however, have been a particularly prominent and pervasive vehicle through which dominant discourses have been proffered, and (less frequently) resisted (e.g. see Hammond 2011; and, in particular, Holland 2011b). One useful example of this comes from Engelkamp and Offermann (2012) who analyse constructions of the 2001- War in Afghanistan in film, which enable the portrayal of Germany in a particular and deliberate light; one which allows for the forging of a German identity reconciled in opposition to its undesirable temporal Other. There are, of course, numerous excellent analyses of the role played by film and television in the construction of dominant identities and discourses (e.g. Frank 2011; Zywiets 2011). And, there are equally numerous studies demonstrating why these constructions matter for 'real world' politics and policy (e.g. Nacos 2011). It is within this context that we have to situate calls for a more critical pedagogy. Higher education must equip students to counter and resist such televisual narratives.

“[It is] an important but neglected task of critical pedagogy [...to engage...] with visual culture and analysis of the ways discourses disperse power and construct identities [...although...] we may not have ready access to alternative ways of representing the troubling events of our times, we can explore pedagogies which expose how identities and truths about ourselves and others are established, challenged, and resisted” (Matthews, 2005: 221; see also Janks 2001).

It is the purpose of this article to explore whether or not this is happening in International Relations, by investigating how students view fictional television and whether and in which ways they might demonstrate critical evaluative skills and visual literacy. The risky alternative is that, without critical evaluative skills

and visual literacy, students might accept narratives put forward in film and fictional television as merely 'content' to be consumed and learned.

Methodology

In order to explore how students viewed fictional television an experiment (Experiment 1) was devised. A mixed (in terms of year group) undergraduate cohort of students was split into two equal groups in terms of politically partisan beliefs. To generate two equivalent groups, students completed a 'line up' exercise, identifying their political beliefs, relative to their peers, along a classic left-right political spectrum. To generate two mixed groups, students were labeled consecutively "A, B, A, B, A, B...". Subsequent statistical verification confirmed the comparability of the groups, in terms of political biases. The cohort of students studied came from the University of [removed for anonymous review]: a research intensive, well-ranked university, outside of the Russell Group (roughly equivalent to US R1/Ivy League counterparts). The cohort was mixed across all year groups, with roughly equal gender representation, and a range of nationalities and ethnicities. However, the largest 'category' of students was white and British.

The first group, "Group A", were shown a pre-9/11 episode of *The West Wing* titled 'A Proportionate Response', whereas "Group B" were shown a post 9/11 episode titled "Isaac and Ishmael". The messages of these two episodes are markedly different and reflect the political context in which they were written (Holland 2011a, b; Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005). The episode shown to Group A - 'A Proportionate Response' - advocates an unemotional, rational and

proportional response to terrorism, with limited military action. The episode emphasises the rules of war, international law and accepted norms and traditions of behavior, with a heavy focus on reasonableness, rationality and proportionality, even when terrorist events might enrage key foreign policy actors. This episode was written and aired at the end of the 1990s, prior to the events of 9/11 and the context of the War on Terror. Its focus and political message, therefore, reflect a pre 9/11 political situation, within which terrorism and counterterrorism have yet to take on specific post 9/11 connotations. Correspondingly, the episode's principal framing therefore supports a broadly conservative foreign policy narrative, informed by the logic of realism and *realpolitik*, drawing on longstanding norms and traditions (e.g. see Holland 2011b).

The episode shown to Group B - "Isaac and Ishmael" - explores the necessity for exceptional forms of response to terrorism, including intervention, enhanced police powers, and assassination (e.g. Holland 2011a). Explicitly and implicitly, both episodes deal with the nature, context and drivers of terrorism, delivering different accounts of the phenomenon, and thus different policy options to remedy it (Holland 2011a,b). 'Isaac and Ishmael', however, is a particularly controversial episode. Produced in two weeks and written in two days, the episode aired only three weeks after 9/11, to a large US audience, which greeted it in broadly positive terms, despite criticism from reviewers (Lowry 2001; Holland 2011a; Buckman 2001). On the one hand, Wodak (2010: 50) argues that the episode is 'the perfect example of ... emancipative anti-racist education': it pursues a liberal and cosmopolitan message, in keeping with the show's heritage

and familiar political stance (see Rollins and O'Connor 2003). On the other hand, the show's dominant storyline (re)produced a number of prevalent post 9/11 tropes, which 'ultimately served to reinforce the Bush Administration's response to the events of September 11th' (Holland 2011a: 87; and, on the broader liberal response, see, for example, Brassett 2008). Holland (2011a) argues that "'Isaac and Ishmael' contributed to a narrowing of political dialogue after 9-11 ... [the episode] reflected (and arguably helped to drive) calls for a more muscular liberalism in the realm of foreign policy after September 11th 2001' (see also Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005). In short, 'Isaac and Ishmael' supports a political narrative far closer to the emerging neoconservative foreign policy moment than the more 'traditional' conservative message proffered by 'A Proportional Response' two years earlier, amidst a very different political context.¹

Following screenings of these two contrasting episodes, Groups A and B completed questionnaires, recording their views of terrorism and counter-terrorism, as well as personal political preferences and self-assessments of susceptibility to political and marketing narratives. Questionnaires asked largely closed questions, with some open answers permitted. Questions covered student opinions on: proportionality, values and victory in foreign policy; the necessity of the use of force; exemplarism, internationalism and interventionism; the exceptionalism of terrorism; the necessary exceptionalism and interventionism of counterterrorism; police and intelligence powers; terrorist motivations; and

¹ The possibility that students might 'read' these episodes in different ways is raised in the discussion. To ensure that students broadly 'read' the episodes as outlined here, focus groups began with students outlining what they had watched and how they interpreted the episode.

the death penalty. Additional questions gleaned information on: television viewing; political leanings; foreign policy views; and susceptibility to narratives in political speeches, and advertising, as well as in film and television. Questionnaire data was coded and analysed using one- and two-tailed T-Tests, as well as Factor Analysis. 71 students were involved in the study, roughly split between the two Experiments and two Groups. Due to the relatively low numbers of students involved, simple averages and percentages have been taken to complement statistically significant data, with results indicative of broader findings.

Following completion of the questionnaires, students in Groups A and B were brought together for a joint focus group to discuss the respective episodes they had watched and how they felt about them. Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, with significant scope to respond to student-raised topics and allow dialogue between students. Both focus groups were recorded and a second staff member assisted with note-taking and logistics. Finally, this entire process was repeated and re-run (Experiment 2), twelve months later, with (a) new group(s) of students.

The study's hypothesis was: Students will adopt some of the political biases represented in fictional television; students will bring their own foreign policy beliefs into line with the specific episode of the *West Wing* to which they are exposed.

Results

The working hypothesis and general expectation that the foreign policy beliefs of students would be more likely to align with either the broadly 'traditional conservative' message or broadly 'neoconservative' message to which they had been exposed proved false. Students rejected the foreign policy message to which they were exposed in two ways. First, students actively resisted the political and foreign policy message to which they were exposed. And, second, students rejected the options that were presented to them, in their totality. This two-part critical evaluative viewing is reported, here, by outlining the study's quantitative and qualitative findings in turn.

Rejecting political and foreign policy narratives: Quantitative indicators of critical resistance

The headline results of Experiment 1 include: Group A and Group B were comparable in terms of political leanings, yet Group A were more in favour of exceptional counter-terrorism measures, more police powers, and the use of the death penalty. Group A were also more likely to see terrorism as exceptional, support the use of force to fight terrorism, and think that fighting terrorism requires military intervention. Despite dealing with relatively small numbers of students, statistically significant findings were generated from Experiment 1. The increased likelihood of Group A students viewing terrorism as exceptional and requiring an exceptional form of response was statistically significant ($P=0.049$). To reiterate, Group A watched a pre-9/11 episode of *The West Wing*, which delivered a message of proportional foreign policy that was broadly realist, traditional, conservative and in keeping with prevalent domestic and international norms and laws. This result, therefore, was unexpected and proved my hypothesis incorrect. In fact, it is the *reverse* of the expected outcome.

Figure 1: Student beliefs on terrorism and counterterrorism (Experiment 1)²

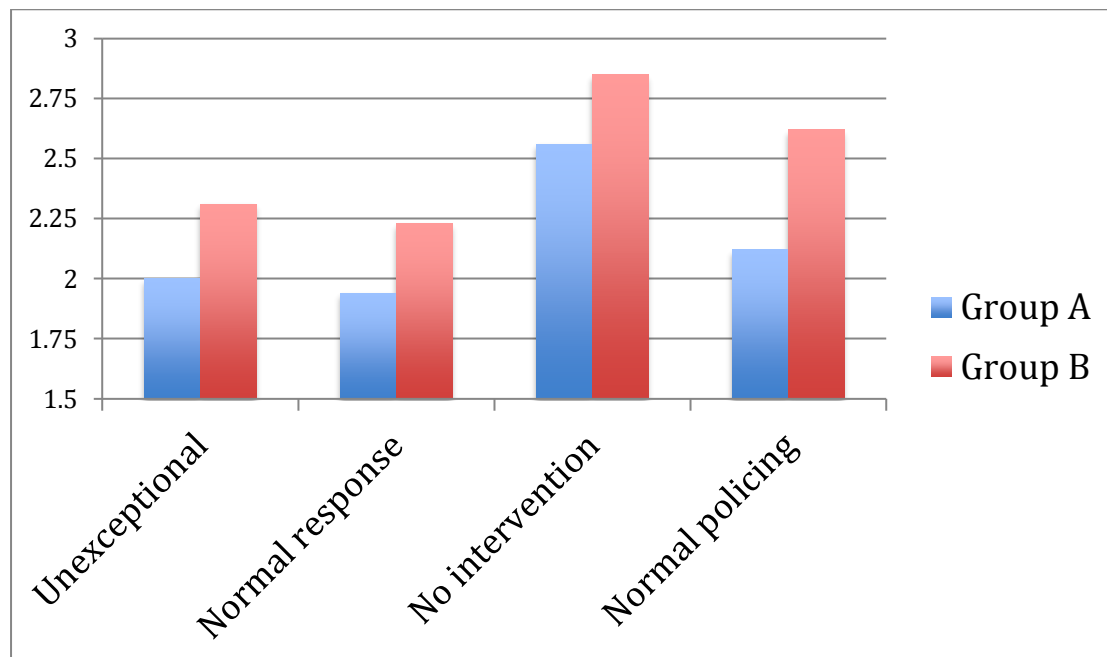


Figure 1 shows that the beliefs of Group A and Group B on terrorism and counterterrorism diverged. This divergence is in the reverse direction to that predicted, as student views appear to oppose the dominant message of the episode of *The West Wing* episode that they watched. Table 1 shows that Group B, despite being exposed to a post 9/11 episode of *The West Wing*, are more likely to agree that: terrorism is unexceptional; terrorism can be fought with an unexceptional response; counterterrorism does not require military intervention; and counterterrorism can be fought with normal policing.

Figure 2 shows that students in Group A were 5 times as likely as their counterparts in Group B to suggest that terrorism definitely requires an

² (Y-axis: high-agree, low-disagree; X-axis: terrorism is unexceptional, terrorism can be fought with an unexceptional response, counterterrorism does not require military intervention, counterterrorism can be fought with normal policing).

exceptional form of response, and 2.5 times as likely to suggest that additional policing powers are definitely necessary. Given that these findings reverse the expectations of the study's working hypothesis, a second experiment was conducted.

These findings were repeated in Experiment 2. The questionnaire confirmed that Groups A and B share broadly similar political stances, foreign policy persuasions, and self-perceptions of susceptibility to media narratives. However, once again, the Groups actively opposed the messages to which they had been exposed. As Figure 3 shows, although there is no longer a gap in the interpretation of terrorism as exceptional, once again Group A are more likely to identify the need to respond to terrorism in exceptional ways, with enhanced police and intelligence powers.

Figure 2: Student beliefs on counterterrorism (Experiment 1)

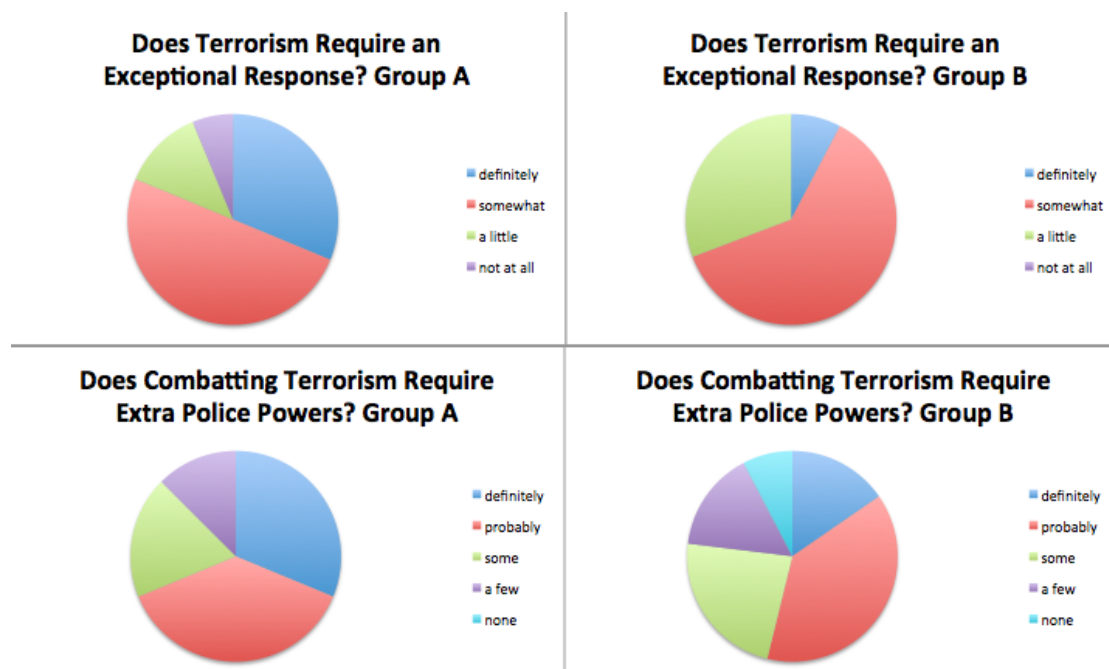
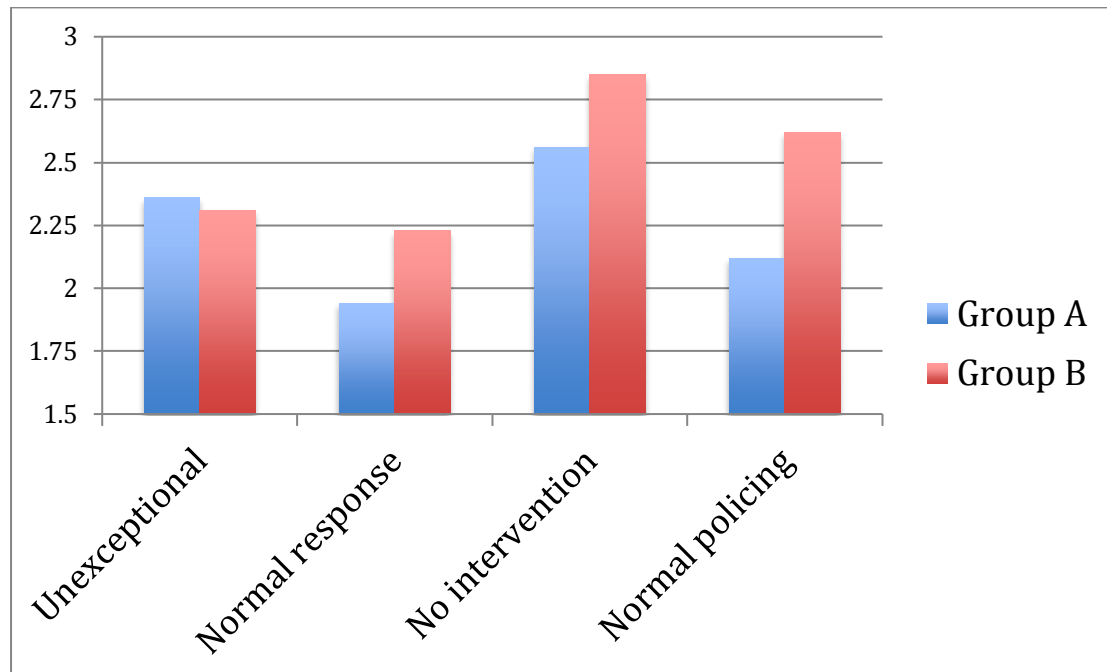
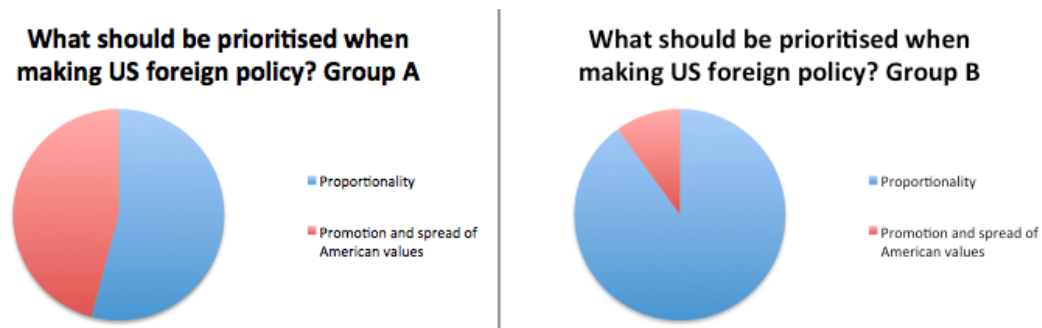


Figure 3: Student beliefs on terrorism and counterterrorism (Experiment 2)



This time, as Figure 4 shows, Group B was also significantly more likely to advocate a proportional response to terrorism ($P=0.004$), despite the fact Group A had been exposed to this particular message in their episode of *The West Wing*. Strikingly, 54% of Group A members advocated a proportional response to terrorism, in contrast to 88% of Group B members.

Figure 4: Student beliefs on proportionality and values in US foreign policy
(Experiment 2)



Clearly, there is a significant direction of influence evidenced in these findings, which runs counter to that hypothesized at the outset. Unpacking these findings, however, requires a qualitative analysis of focus group data.

*Rejecting the constraints of fictional television: Qualitative indicators of thinking
Otherwise*

Qualitative analysis of focus group data from both Experiments reveals that students demonstrated critical viewing habits in two distinct directions. In the first principal theme of critical readings of *The West Wing*, confirming the findings from the questionnaire, students opposed the message presented within *The West Wing*. For instance, students were critical of the show's delegitimisation of an emotional, values-based foreign policy:

“It portrays the president’s view as overly emotional. There’s a lot of emphasis on how much stress he’s under and how much pressure he’s

under. I think that *The West Wing* showed that in quite a harsh light really - maybe too much in portraying a rational response”.

“It basically said one position was bad and the other wasn't that bad... [it] put forward the idea of one path as having huge repercussions ... the other option was presented as everyone being OK with it and in international politics that's unlikely to be the case ... The whole thing was bad.”

Having criticized the show's presentation of a particular foreign policy message, students subsequently attempted to make sense of this apparent bias in three ways. First, students attempted to situate the episode with *The West Wing's* own context and history:

“You have to take into account that he's supposed to be a Democratic president with no prior experience with the military and that's what Leo [his experienced Chief of Staff] is there for. He knows what he wants with military control. That's why you have to know the background to understand why they think retaliation is appropriate or not”.

Second, students questioned the political biases of the show:

“The whole idea of *The West Wing* is a liberal response ... it presents a liberal agenda ... what a Democratic president would love”.

Third, students voiced concerns and critical questions regarding the show's funding, makers and purpose:

“Who produces it? That could impact it. Does it get state funding? Who are the shareholders?”

“It was a preachy episode – maybe written to calm people down and educate them.”

Despite differences on the show's usefulness and accuracy, students overwhelmingly concluded with an outright rejection of the show's overarching foreign policy message, with members of both Groups, in both Experiments, repeating this critical stance.

The second principal theme of critical student readings of *The West Wing* centred on a rejection of the show's framing *in its totality* i.e. students rejected the terms in which the options were pitched to them. One illuminating exchange, involving several students, reveals how students were able to build up from the rejection of a dominant narrative, via its motivations, to arrive at a broader questioning of the show's limits and constraints:

“I thought it was quite right wing of him [the President] ... he wanted to show this wasn't a little game of tennis ... I thought that wasn't liberal.”

“But he was shown to be wrong ... It presented that the liberal ideal was the best one and there were no repercussions for it ... in terms of reality it has absolutely no idea what goes on it's still going to create huge repercussions.”

“It was a proportional response but they acknowledged that they would have to do it again in six months they recognized that there would be repercussions.”

“It still finishes though with that he makes the right answer so why is it finishing on the idea that he made the right answer even the way they picked it was right when I don't think...”

“So what do you think? Which one do you pick? The one with more or less civilian casualties?”

“But that's not the point: the point is that they aren't the right answers”.

“They didn't say it was the right answer: they said that's all there is.”

“They concluded that he'd made the right answer.”

“Out of the two choices, he's made the right answer.”

“The international environment doesn't come down to two answers”.

“They didn’t take into any account existing structures they didn’t think outside... he just picked from two”.

Parsimony and false (exclusive) dichotomies were recurrent themes of focus group discussions. Students noted that the episodes they had watched misleadingly reduced the complexity of terrorism and counterterrorism, often into two (overly simple and falsely opposed) competing narratives.

“It simplified why terrorist acts happen. For example, in certain religions you have to dress a certain way. Or, anyone who differs from certain “norms” aren’t like them, and that’s why they want to attack us. It was very simplistic”.

“It spent more time on the cultural differences. The others were glossed over. I think political reasons are the most influential though.”

“There wasn’t enough context”.

“It helps to understand how ideas are made but it is a bit of a false dichotomy. There is not a good/bad option”.

Following up on these limitations, students in both Experiments and all four Groups noted the constraining impact of this televisual parsimony. One student, for instance, bluntly noted that the episode “is limiting”. Another student

reflected that “when the main person was talking about why people commit terrorism they placed no blame on the US”. A third student suggested the narrow parameters of the episode they had watched meant “it was very guarded”.

Taken together, then, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this research indicate that students do demonstrate two variants of visual literacy and critical evaluative viewing. First, students pursue a critical resistance to dominant narratives when viewing and discussing fictional television. Second, students reject the constraints of parsimony that the dynamics of fictional television inspire, offering alternatives and thinking otherwise. This two-part critical evaluative viewing can be summarized as comprising ‘opposition to the favoured political narrative’ and ‘rejection of the overarching terms of the episode’.

Discussion

Here, two questions are explored. First, how might we make sense of these findings? And, second, what are their implications? In making sense of the results of the study it is necessary, from the outset, to rule out coincidental correlation. Given the relatively (and necessarily) small numbers of students involved, it is unusual to generate statistically significant data. Statistically significant data, indicating complementary patterns, was generated in both Experiments. And this data was backed up by qualitative focus groups. It is extremely unlikely therefore ($p < 0.05$ for select results in both Experiments) that results are coincidental. Given that political beliefs were controlled for before both Experiments and that the statistics confirm a lack of partisan bias between

Groups, it is likely that our independent variable – the episode to which students have been exposed – is inspiring these statistically significant results.

Next, it is important to question whether the methodology is flawed. Since ‘readings’ of fictional television are always subjective, is it possible that students ‘read’ these episodes in different ways. There are two good reasons to suppose that they do not. First, the literature backs the interpretation of the episodes put forward in the methodology (Holland 2011a, b; Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005; Rollins and O’Connor 2003). Second, student discussions confirmed that they interpreted the episodes in the same way as the literature and methodology suggests. Students reported interpreting ‘A Proportional Response’ as a broadly traditional conservative message, premised on realpolitik, international law and widely unaccepted norms. And, they reported interpreting ‘Isaac and Ishmael’, as a broadly neoconservative, robust and ‘right-wing’ response to terrorism generally and 9/11 specifically.

One explanation could be that students associate with characters promoting narratives that *The West Wing* ultimately delegitimizes. For instance, in ‘A Proportional Response’, the ‘emotional’ disproportionate response is favoured and promoted by the President, until he is eventually talked around by his more experienced and calmer colleagues. The President – played by Martin Sheen – is a powerful and likeable character, suffering considerable emotional turmoil. Likewise, in ‘Isaac and Ishmael’, a secondary storyline sees the Chief of Staff learn a (post 9/11) lesson in anti-racial prejudice, with which students are likely to concur. While this remains an important point to note, drawing on the findings

of focus group discussions, an alternative explanation is possible and likely to better account for the critical resistance of students to dominant televisual narratives.

The students involved in both Experiments were exclusively studying Politics and International Relations. As such, they are students who have been trained to think, read and write critically, as part of the pedagogy of their discipline and as a route to unlocking the highest potential grades on offer. Politics and IR students, like many social science, arts and humanities students, recognize that the development and demonstration of critical evaluative skills is key to performing well in their degree programmes. And these programmes, of course, attract students who are more likely to prioritise critical thinking in their skillsets. This study therefore demonstrates that Politics and IR students do possess critical evaluative skills which extend to multimodal and visual literacy, despite this not being a principal feature of their training. Two implications arise from this.

First, this article calls for greater use of fictional television, film and other video use as part of a critical pedagogy. The relative ease with which many students apply analytical and critical evaluative skills to fictional television is encouraging. And, given the increasingly visual media economy in which they live their lives, this is an essential skill. Moreover, focus group discussions revealed that students learn from each other in developing critical evaluative skills and visual literacy. And, students reported the high-end transfer of such

skills, critically evaluating film and fictional television independently in their everyday lives.

Second, this call for the greater use of fictional television as a useful pedagogical supplement must be accompanied with a warning for caution. Critical evaluation of course, is far more than opposition and rejection, which dominated student discussions of *The West Wing*. While nuance was demonstrated, several students supported the most critical (i.e. oppositional) voices in the room. Clearly, the role of the higher education teacher will be crucial in leading and moderating such discussions to encourage nuance. However, it is important to consider that higher education teaching in Politics and IR does very often reward assertively polemical arguments, and to think carefully about the implications of such an incentive. In tempering the association of critical evaluation with polemical or bluntly oppositional stances, it is imperative to situate the use of film, fictional television and other video with a range of active learning approaches, such as negotiations, simulations and other group work (Florez-Morris and Tafur, 2010; Simpson and Kausler 2009; Waalkes, 2003; Weber, 2001).

Conclusion

The article has shown that Politics and IR students do demonstrate visual literacy, watching and discussing fictional TV in a way that develops critical evaluative skills. The implications of this finding confirm those of previous research. First, film and fictional television have a useful and important role to play in teaching Politics and IR (Burden and Atkinson 2007; McConville and Lane 2005; Tochon 1999). Second, film and fictional television can do more than

promote student interest, developing specific and advanced skills, despite the risk of uncritical support resulting from affective investment in emotive productions (Bloom and Johnston 2010; Holland 2013c; Swimelar 2013; Valeriano 2013; Webber 2005; Weber 2001). Third, film and fictional television, when used, should be integrated within a broader critical pedagogy that makes use of additional forms of active learning, in order to balance critique with other important skills (Florez-Morris and Tafur, 2010; Simpson and Kausler 2009; Usherwood 2009; Waalkes, 2003: 157; Weber, 2001). The article therefore contributes to a growing critical IR literature, extending research into film, television and pedagogy (Carpenter 2012; Croft 2006; Drezner 2011; Dunn 2006; Grayson 2013; Hansen 2011; Holland 2011a, b, 2013c; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Saideman 2011; Shepherd et al 2012; Singh 2013; Webber 2005; Weber 2001). Two further points are worth noting for considerations of video's integration into higher education syllabi.

First, Capelos (2012) has shown that the assessment, resonance and critical evaluation of film and fictional television is contextually and culturally dependent. Her research found that Greek and US citizens, for example, were less likely to distinguish between news and fictional TV than their Dutch counterparts, who are more likely to draw a distinction, and value fictional television in different (less important) ways. Learning, and an increase in civic IQ, however, does occur across national boundaries through the use of fictional television (Capelos 2012). While, therefore, differences will be evident between all students, it is worth keeping in mind national and cultural differences. It is possible that in international groups of students, very different understandings

of television's value and purpose will be apparent, as well as a varying degrees of importance afforded to critical evaluative skills. That, however, as Capelos (2012) shows, is not a reason to abandon the genre, which has a positive learning impact regardless.

Second, a further consideration for educators in Politics and International Relations might be how to foster creativity to accompany critical evaluative skills. Singh (2013), for example, has shown how encouraging students to become the producers and editors of video – rather than their passive consumer – can achieve this. Cynthia Weber's 'I am an American' project is a powerful example of academic interventions in this manner (see the special issue of *International Political Sociology*, and see also Carpenter 2012). Encouraging student video interventions might not only develop useful additional practical skills, but also promote advanced creativity skills that encourage students to think beyond critique and offer alternative. Together, these approaches might form complementary components of a critical pedagogy which equips Politics and IR students with multimodal literacy.

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