**INT5459 Popular Culture and World Politics**

**2023/24**

**Central European University, Department of International Relations**

**2 Credits**

**Course convener: Dr. Julian Schmid**

**Contact: SchmidJ@ceu.edu**

**Advice and Feedback Hours: by appointment**

**Time: Tuesday & Thursday, 5:40-7:20**

# Course description

The course offers interested students the opportunity to engage with the connections between popular culture and world politics in a critical and intriguing way, disentangling how political issues are (co-)produced through popular cultural discourses. Students will get acquainted with a rich variety of interdisciplinary theories and insights into how to study politics through popular culture.

The first section of the course will introduce students to the main literature on popular culture and world politics; this will also touch on issues such as geopolitics, security, aesthetics, and virtuality and take a look at cultural artefacts from *Game of Thrones* and *Aladdin* to commercials, beer and sports. The theoretical introduction serves as segue into the second section of the course which will address four core issues of International Relations through the lens of Popular Culture and World Politics, namely neo-liberalism, war, race and gender, and the Anthropocene. In this section, we will take various vantage points and angles to look at the specific questions at hand in order to find out how popular culture produces and shapes these issues. The third section of the module looks at four specific artefacts, their histories and mythologies from cowboys, superheroes, nuclear weapons to weaponised drones. Each of these artefacts will be analysed and discussed against the backdrop of interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches students will be able to work from. The final session will be reserved for a concluding discussion and summary, giving an outlook to future events and policies and how they might be (co-)produced through popular culture. This seems especially relevant at a time when politics is being negotiated in the virtual and digital realm and against increasingly blurred lines between reality and fiction.

# Academic aims

* To introduce important theoretical and conceptual debates relevant to the analysis of popular culture and world politics
* To develop knowledge of key issues in International Relations and the Popular Culture-World Politics debate
* To offer the opportunity to analyse and explain political discourses
* To offer informed discussion on several contemporary issues and topics
* To explore, analyse, and critically assess historical and contemporary issues within world politics
* To develop students’ ability to argue cogently, concisely and critically
* To understand and evaluate the meaning of cultural artefacts and fiction for the real world

Students will be able to demonstrate an advanced knowledge of the role of popular culture in the world and the way popular culture is shaping important aspects of International Relations. With this theoretical and empirical insight students can critically evaluate the main characteristics of key debates, understand their consequences as well as develop their own analytical mindset. Students will also improve their research and analytical skills, their ability to read and write in a sophisticated academic manner and to work independently and as part of a group.

# Evaluation

1. Over the whole term, students will be required to **participate** in the seminars and to actively contribute to small-group and open discussions (**10 points**).
2. Students will submit an AI generated **photo essay** (max. 5 pictures) together with a short **visual analysis** (max. 1000 words; **40 points**). The photo essay should be generated via a free AI software (eg. photoleapapp.com) on a topic of the syllabus of within the broader scope of politics and culture.The visual analysis should be written independently, scrutinising the pictures along some guiding questions (eg. What narratives do the pictures develop? Do the pictures highlight any specific elements or omit any particular things you would have expected?) and explaining the overall process. Both the pictures and the written analysis are part of the submission.

**Deadline: 13 October 2023**

1. At the end of the course, students will submit their **long essay** (max. 3000 words; **50 points**), the title of the essay should be discussed with and confirmed by Julian in due course and before starting the writing process.

**Deadline title: 16 October 2023  
Deadline submission: 10 November 2023**

**Both assignments will be submitted via ceulearning.ceu.edu.**

**Tips for text production**: The essays should be comprehensively structured in an introduction, a main second, and a conclusion. Make sure to have a clearly identifiable claim in the introduction that serves as a thread throughout the whole text. Remain focused and as precise as possible. For the long essay it is important to use plenty of literature (as a rule of thumb at least 15-20 academic sources) as base for your argument; this means using literature outside of the core and recommended reading to demonstrate your ability as independent and critical researcher. Lastly, don’t plagiarise. If you have any questions please ask them during the seminar or send Julian an email.

# Class ethics and use of AI

(A) Any use of quoted text in essays must be acknowledged. Such use must meet the following  
conditions:

1. the beginning and end of the quoted passage must be shown with quotation marks  
2. when quoting from periodicals or books, the name(s) of author(s), book or article titles, the  
year of publication, and page from which the passage is quoted must all be stated in  
footnotes or endnotes;  
3. internet sourcing must include a full web address where the text can be found as well as the  
date the web page was visited by the author.

Please, use the style of Chicago Manual of Style.  
  
(B) In case the use of any texts other than those written by the author is established without proper  
acknowledgement as defined in (A), the paper will be deemed plagiarised.

(C) The use of AI composition software for the generation of the photo essay is necessary. For the other part of the assignment (visual analysis) and the long essay, AI can be used for idea generation or essay planning. Any such use of AI needs to be addressed in a footnote at the beginning of the text. Further use of AI is not permitted.

Structure of the course

**Part I: Introduction to Popular Culture and World Politics**

**1) The Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum (19 September 2023)**

* Which popular culture artefacts can tell us something about world politics?
* What is the role of narratives and aesthetics in producing the *real* world?
* What is the relationship between popular culture and world politics?

**Readings:**

Core

Daniel, I., J. Furman, & Musgrave, P. (2017). Synthetic Experiences. How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations. *International Studies Quarterly, 61*(1), 503-516.

Grayson, K., Davies, M., & Philpott, S. (2009). Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum. *Politics, 29*(3), 155-163.

Moulin, C. (2016). Narrative. In A. Ni Mhurchu & R. Shindo (Eds.), *Critical Imaginations in International Relations* (pp. 136-152). London and New York: Routledge.

Recommended

Bleiker, R. (2001). The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 30*(3), 509-533.

Weldes, J. (2003). Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics. Exploring Intertextual Relations. In J. Weldes (Ed.), *To Seek Out New Worlds. Science Fiction and World Politics* (pp. 1-30). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

**2) Popular Geopolitics (21 September 2023)**

* What is the *popular* in popular geopolitics?
* What does popular geopolitics contribute to our understanding of the world?
* How does popular geopolitics make sense of security and threat?

**Readings:**

Core

Grayson, K. (2018). Popular geopolitics and popular culture in world politics. Pasts, presents, futures. In R. A. Saunders & V. Strukov (Eds.), *Popular Geopolitics. Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (pp. 43-62). London and New York: Routledge.

Saunders, R. A., & Strukov, V. (2018). Introduction. Theorising the realm of popular geopolitics. In R. A. Saunders & V. Strukov (Eds.), *Popular Geopolitics. Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (pp. 1-20). London and New York: Routledge.

Recommended

Campbell, D. (1998). *Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press. pp. 1-14

Sharp, J. P. (1996). Hegemony, popular culture and geopolitics. The Reader’s Digest and the construction of danger *Political Geography, 15*(6/7), 557-570.

**3) National Identity and the Everyday (26 September 2023)**

* What is the everyday in International Relations?
* What is the role of performance, rituals, events and the mundane in politics?
* What is the role of popular culture and the everyday for the construction of national identity?

**Readings:**

Core

Edensor, T. (2002). *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Oxford and New York: Berg. pp. 37-68 (Chapter 2)

Saunders, R. A., & Holland, J. (2018). The Ritual of Beer Consumption as Discursive Intervention: Effigy, Sensory Politics, and Resistance in Everyday IR. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 46*(2), 119-141.

Recommended

Carver, T. (2010). Cinematic Ontologies and Viewer Epistemologies. Knowing International Politics as Moving Images. *Global Society, 24*(3), 421-431.

Rowley, C., & Weldes, J. (2012). The evolution of international security studies and the everyday. Suggestions from the Buffyverse. *Security Dialogue, 43*(6), 513-530.

**Part II: Issues within the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum**

**4) Neo-Liberalism and Critique (28 September 2023)**

* How does popular culture define neo-liberalism?
* Does popular culture develop visions of resistance?
* What is the connection between neo-liberalism and violence?

**Readings:**

Core

Armstrong, M. A. (2019). ‘A Nation Reborn’. Right to Law and Right to Life in *The Purge* Franchise. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 13(3), 377-392.

Davies, M., & Chisholm, A. (2018). Neoliberalism, Violence, and the Body: *Dollhouse* and the Critique of the Neoliberal Subject. *International Political Sociology, 12*(3), 274-290.

Recommended

Lizardo, O. (2007). Fight Club, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism. *Journal of Cultural Research*, 11(3), 221-243.

Grayson, K. (2017). Capturing the multiplicities of resilience through popular geopolitics. Aesthetics and *homo relisio* in *Breaking Bad*. *Political Geography, 57*, 24-33.

Kim, C. (2022). Squid Game, Parasite, and the Increasing Restlessness of Neoliberalism. *Foreign Affairs Review*. https://jhufar.com/2022/01/31/squid-game-parasite-and-the-increasing-restlessness-of-neoliberalism/

**5) War and Militarism (3 October 2023)**

* How has the digital age changed warfare?
* What role do video games play in the production of militarism?
* What are the battlefields of our contemporary era?

**Readings:**

Core

Der Derian, J. (2000). Virtuous war/virtual theory. *International Affairs, 76*(4), 771-788.

Robinson, N. (2016). Militarism and opposition in the living room. The case of military videogames. *Critical Studies on Security, 4*(3), 255-275.

Recommended

Hirst, A. (2019). Play in(g) International Theory. *Review of International Studies, 45*(5), 891-914.

Kaempf, S. (2019). ‘A relationship of mutual exploitation’. The evolving ties between the Pentagon, Hollywood, and the commercial gaming sector. *Journal of the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 25(4), 542-558.

Salter, M. B. (2011). The Geographical Imaginations of Video Games. Diplomacy, Civilization, America’s Army and Grand Theft Auto IV. Geopolitics, 16(2), 359-388.

**6) Race and Gender (5 October 2023)**

* How does popular culture construct race and gender?
* To what extend does popular culture offer social/political critique and resistance?
* What other identities are being negotiated and constructed through popular culture?

**Readings:**

Core

Clapton, W., & Shepherd, L. J. (2017). Lessons from Westeros. Gender and power in *Game of Thrones*. *Politics*, 37(1), 5-18.

Pears, L. (2022). Protecting Whiteness: Counter-Terrorism, and British Identity in the BBC’s *Bodyguard*. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211056372

Saunders, R. A. (2019). (Profitable) imaginaries of Black Power: The popular and political geographies of *Black Panther*. *Political Geography*, 69(1), 139-149.

Recommended

Grayson, K. (2013). How to Read Paddington Bear. Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in A Bear Called Paddington. *British Journal of Politics and International Studies*, 15(1), 378-393.

Wilcox, L. (2017). Embodying algorithmic war. Gender, race, and the posthuman in drone warfare. *Security Dialogue*, 48(1), 11-28.

**7) The Anthropocene (10 October 2023)**

* What are the key features of popular cultural displays of climate change?
* What is the relationship between humans and the environment?
* What are positive cultural visions of an anthropocenic futue?

**Readings:**

Core

dell'Agnese, E. (2021). *Ecocritical Geopolitics: Popular Culture and Environmental Discourse*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 67-108 (Chapter 2)

Recommended

Dalby, S. (2018). Firepower: Geopolitical Cultures in the Anthropocene. *Geopolitics*, 23(3), 718-742.

Killian, K. D. (2021). Welcome to the Anthropocene: Gregory Bateson, disaster porn, *Swamp Thing*, and ‘The Green’. *Globalizations*, 18(6), 1017-1032.

**Part III: Artefacts of the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum**

**8) Cowboys (12 October 2023)**

* What are key features of the Wild West and the Cowboy as a *real* and fictional character?
* What image of nationhood, civilization and frontier does the Wild West myth develop?
* What role do the Wild West and Cowboys play in political discourse?

**Readings:**

Core

Lawrence, J. S., & Jewett, R. (2002). *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. pp. 3-17 (Chapter 1)

Slotkin, R. (1992). *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. pp. 63-88 (Chapter 3)

Recommended

Nicholas, L. J. (2006). *Becoming Western. Stories of Culture and Identity in the Cowboy State*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. pp. 1-32

O'Meara, D., Macleod, A., Gagnon, F., & Grondin, D. (2016). *Movies, Myth & the National Security State*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. pp. 41-64 (Chapter 2)

**9) Superheroes (17 October 2023)**

* Why do superheroes re-appear after ‘9/11’?
* How are superheroes tied to (American) myths and mythologies?
* What role do they play for world politics?

**Readings:**

Core

Hassler-Forest, D. (2012). *Capitalist Superheroes. Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*. Washington D.C. and Winchester: Zero Books. pp. 1-19 (Introduction)

Schmid, J. (2020). (Captain) America in crisis. Popular digital culture and the negotiation of *Americanness*. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 33*(5), 690-712

Recommended

Brown, J. A. (2017). *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 63-89 (Chapter 3)

Dittmer, J. (2013). *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero. Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. pp. 1-23 (Introduction)

McSweeney, T. (2014). *The ‘War on Terror’ and American Film. 9/11 Frames Per Second*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Edinburgh. pp. 1-13 (Prologue)

**10) Nuclear Weapons (19 October 2023)**

* How are nuclear weapons displayed in popular culture?
* How does popular culture make sense of nuclear weapons and deterrence?
* How can we make sense of fantasies of the end of the world?

**Readings:**

Core

Crilley, R. (2023). *Unparalleled Catastrophe: Life and Death in the Third Nuclear Age*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 39-57; 87-99 (Chapter 2 and 5)

Lindley, D. (2002). What I Learned Since I Stopped Worrying and Studied the Movie: A Teaching Guide to Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 34*(3), 663 - 667.

Recommended

Fey, M., Poppe, A. E., & Rauch, C. (2016). The nuclear taboo, Battlestar Galactica, and the real world. Illustrations from a science-fiction universe. *Security Dialogue, 47*(4), 348-365.

Wolverton, M. (2022). *Nuclear Weapons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 177-209 (Chapter 7)

**11) Drones (22 October 2023)**

* How does popular culture make sense of drone warfare?
* How are drones and targeted killing produced through social media?

**Readings:**

Core

Grayson, K. (2012). The ambivalence of assassination. Biopolitics, culture and political violence. *Security Dialogue, 43*(1), 25-41.

Zulaika, J. (2014). Drones and fantasy in US counterterrorism. *Journal for Cultural Research, 18*(2), 171-187.

Recommended

Stahl, R. (2006). Have You Played the War on Terror? *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 23*(2), 112-130.

Schmid, J. (2023) *I Saw It With My Drone Eyes: Digital Fantasies of Targeted Killing*. Draft paper

**12) Popular Culture and Politics between Representation and Co-Production (26 October 2023, will be rescheduled due to national holiday)**

Concluding discussion:

* What does popular culture represent? Co-produce? Shape? Influence?