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International Relations Theory: A Critical introduction by Cynthia Weber

Review by Kirsten Haack¹

Why review yet another IR theory book? There are many good IR theory books on the market and more are added all the time. Yet, Cynthia Weber's book promises something different²: the use of film for the classroom, with ready-made suggestions for films, their application and discussion. This teaching approach, "active learning", has become very popular³. The active learning approach uses alternative 'texts', be that films, music or poetry, in trying to enhance student learning. It does so by building on students' everyday experiences to help them relate to and thus better understand the subject. This is a promising approach for IR theory as many students find IR theory very complex and difficult to apply. However, despite its popularity, the approach is also fraught with danger, in particular when navigating the fine line between the exploration of fictional narratives, the depths of theory and the application of film to the world of IR and the 'reality' of international relations. Just because the medium is considered in educationalist terms as 'authentic'⁴ does not mean that students easily relate to the text (film) chosen or that it is relevant to their

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² Several teachers have described their use of film in the university classroom but rarely provided the comprehensiveness of Weber's book, which promises to function as a full syllabus. For accounts of teaching with film see Boyer, Mark A. (2002) "At the movies: a continuing dialogue on the challenges of teaching with film", *International Studies Perspectives* 3: 89-94; Kuzma, Lynn M. and Patrick J. Haney (2001) "And...action! Using film to learn about foreign policy" *International Studies Perspectives* 2: 33-50; Simpson, Archie W. and Bernd Kaussler (2009) "IR teaching reloaded: using films and simulations in the teaching of International Relations" *International Studies Perspectives* 10: 413-427.

³ As shown, for example, by the activities of the International Studies Association's Active Learning group and the pedagogy section of ISA's journal *International Studies Perspectives*; see Lantis, Jeffrey S., Lynn M. Kuzma and John Boehrer, eds. (2000) *The New International Studies Classroom. Active Teaching, Active Learning*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

⁴ Task authenticity is usually described along three dimensions relating to the nature of the problem (e.g. open-ended, varied) and their relevance to 'real life' in terms of everyday experience or academic and professional tasks (e.g. journalistic writing, negotiations), see Herrington, Jan; Thomas C. Reeves and Ron Oliver (2006) "Authentic tasks online: a synergy among learner, task, and technology". *Distance Education* 27 (2): 233-247; Kreber, Carolin, et al. (2007) "What do you mean by 'authentic'? A comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching" *Adult Education Quarterly* 58 (1): 22-43; ten Berge, Hanne; Stephan Ramaekers and Albert Pilot (2004) *The design of authentic tasks that promote higher-order learning*, Paper presented at the EARLI-SIG Higher Education/IKIT conference, 18-21 June.

immediate experience, be that their academic or future professional career. Secondly, the nature of the task can significantly impact on its solution if it involves a considerable degree of task interpretation.⁵ Hence, a film's complexity or similarity to the subject studied (e.g. a film about JFK or apartheid in South Africa, versus a crime story or romantic comedy) would influence students' understanding of IR theory. The questions that need to be asked of a book like Weber's do not just relate to how well IR theory is explained but how well the films are chosen and explained, how 'authentic' the films are and whether they will help or hinder student learning.

The first chapter on realism is an excellent example of how film can work to explain IR theory. Weber draws out the key principles of anarchy and order to show how the realism 'myth' is constructed, applies them to *Lord of the Flies*, before highlighting 'fear' as a critical principle which does not receive adequate attention in IR theory. She concludes with suggestions for further reading on two key ideas (here: neorealism, and the uses of fear in IR theory). While *Lord of the Flies* does not deal with states, the stranded boys and their anarchic (i.e. adult-less) island life make it easy enough to translate realism's key ideas – and Weber helpfully points the reader to the best cinematic interpretation of the original book. This then works very well as an introduction for students unfamiliar with IR theory. By contrast, chapter 2 on idealism works considerably less well.

Weber's obvious disdain for liberalism finds an easy target in *Independence Day*, a perhaps overly optimistic humans-against-aliens film, which celebrates American heroism. Not only does the analysis of both theory and film drip with sarcasm regarding liberalism's moral dimension ('the goodness of people', 'perfect communication'), Weber mocks the heroic cinematography of *Independence Day*, which she takes as a theoretical shortcoming of idealism and not a stylistic element of Hollywood film-making. She criticises the focus on the US and its replacement for "international society", comparing it to the Wilsonian ideals of international society of "making the world safe for (American) democracy". Yet, she takes US dominance in the film (US action for the good of human kind) as a given, and instead of making connections to IR theoretical explanations of hegemony (e.g. hegemonic stability theory), Weber does not engage with the finer details of IR theory, instead leaving her critique standing as a failure of liberalism. Thus, in discussing *Independence Day* Weber moves too far into the fictional, almost accepting the film as 'real'. One wonders whether the film has driven theory here, rather than the other way around. This is problematic insofar as a film studies reading of *Independence Day* would require an appreciation of Roland Emmerich's film-making, which is both budget-conscious and focussed on the creation of 'big' films, while relying on the use of (then) B-listed actors and a black action hero, Will Smith.

⁵ see Hiebert, J. et.al. "Problem solving as a basis for reform in curriculum and instruction: the case of mathematics" and Wolf, A. "Outcomes, competencies and trainee-centred learning: the gap between rhetoric and reality" in Patricia Murphy, ed. (1999) *Learners, Learning & Assessment*, London, Paul Chapman Publishing.

The following chapters vary in their usefulness for the classroom, with either Weber's film choice or the discussion of theory and film raising questions about the book's intentions or its appropriateness as an introductory theory text book. The chapter on constructivism, like idealism, features a film which directly transposes IR theory (and practice) onto the screen. Her analysis of both theory and film works well, yet somewhat loses the simplicity of the first chapter (realism) when discussing authorship. The chapters on globalisation, neo-marxism and modernisation discuss very engagingly the core myths and shortcomings of each theory, however, Weber's choice of films becomes decreasingly helpful as the book progresses: from a fairly straightforward *Lord of the Flies*, *Independence Day* and *Wag the Dog*, it moves to the somewhat obscure and very confusing *Memento* (neo-marxism) and rather contrived applications of *The Truman Show* (globalisation) and *East is East* (modernisation).

The chapter on feminism or gender is particularly surprising, if not disappointing. We learn very little about feminist IR theory and its core myth. Instead, Weber uses criticism of feminism (Adam Jones' 1996 article on gender as a 'variable') and the film *Fatal Attraction*, which has no overtly IR dimension but focuses on an interpersonal relationship gone wrong, to discuss the relationship of the *discipline of IR* (in particular of those male academics who inhabit the classical tradition) with feminism. By following this approach, Weber adopts an overly defensive position which does not do feminist IR theory any favour – if only we could find out what that theory entailed. The final section somewhat remedies this by highlighting IR feminism's critical dimension. Unfortunately, however, at this point any insight about feminism we might have gained through her myth-culture/theory-through-film approach is lost.

Equally disappointing is Chapter 9 – environmentalism – where Weber not only insufficiently distinguishes between environmentalism and ecologism, thereby undermining a dialogue built around the question of consumption, she finds a rather easy target in an unsuspecting Al Gore and his 'non-academic' (i.e. made for a different purpose) text (documentary) on climate change. Where Weber could have chosen a less polemic text, be that the Brundtland report, which predated Gore's paper, or indeed any academic text, her choice means that again the idea of an 'introduction' to IR theory slips away into a debate about its reception and production, as well as a refutation of the theory in favour of a distinctly anti-American, anti-liberal approach.

Perhaps the conclusion offers an explanation – or better: reminder – why Weber has chosen this approach. Suddenly her choice of films makes a little more sense: Weber reminds us that her intention is to analyse the production of myths in IR theory and with it the discipline's culture, its way of 'doing theory'. This allows for films to be included which merely draw parallels rather than explain or demonstrate IR theory. The conclusion then also explains her anti-American, anti-liberal position, which was so obvious in chapters 3, 6 and 9, as well as her poor defence of feminism. It becomes clear that this is not a general 'introduction' which 'critically' analyses IR theory, as the title may suggest (be that at the author's behest or for the expediency of publication demands). This is an introduction of critical theory as a means to read IR theory! Despite this, her 'critical' claim that IR theory is problematic because it is

typically ethnocentrist, racist, classist and sexist, and most of all North American, is a particular weak one. And this weakness is a problem of her choosing: Weber *chose* ‘key texts’ from US scholars, ignoring European scholarship, and she *chose* in the main Hollywood films (exception: *Lord of the Flies*, *East is East*).

Seen from this meta-theoretical perspective the book is considerably more enjoyable, interesting and refreshing in its approach. However, it is also here where the book’s greatest flaw lies: One can not dip easily in and out of this book, as one usually does with textbooks. The book needs to be understood in all its complexity and different levels. Thus, while advanced students of IR theory may find Weber’s arguments enjoyable to engage with, first and second year students, i.e. those who find the concept of IR theory and “doing” theory difficult to get their head around, will find that this book is the wrong pick. Considering that this group is the majority and the former only a small minority, the book crowds a niche market. This is regrettable because a guide to using film in the classroom is a great idea!