Making Movies Active: Lessons from Simulations

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ABSTRACT Movies have a long and distinguished history in the political science and international relations classrooms; they provide connections between abstract theories and concepts and concrete everyday practices. However, traditional approaches to teaching movies in the political science and international relations classrooms allow for passive student learning, where students watch the movie and then react. We propose using insights from simulations to help resolve these problems with using movies in the classroom. In this article, we outline the learning methods and approaches of simulations, and then apply them to movies in the international relations classroom.

Movies have a long and distinguished history in the classrooms of international relations (IR) and political science courses. Often movies are used to illustrate important concepts or ideas that are normally abstract and distant for the students. For example, a popular movie in the IR classroom for teaching about deterrence is *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Started Loving the Bomb* (1964) (Lindley 2001; Gregg 1998). However, the traditional method of using movies in the classroom, which entails simply following a movie with a class discussion, fails to optimize learning opportunities. We argue that pedagogical lessons learned from teaching with simulations apply to using movies as well. Thinking of movies in terms of simulations changes the way in which instructors prepare and incorporate movies into their syllabi. By taking pedagogical lessons from simulations, we highlight three learning opportunities when teaching with movies that prevent passive learning, an inherent problem whenever using movies in the classroom.

Movies help the learning process in a number of ways. For one, movies make a theoretical concept accessible to the student. The student has an empirical and concrete reference to draw from when needed (Kuzma and Haney 2001). In addition, this empirical reference is a visual image when presented in movie form. This stimulates visual forms of learning that can improve retention and cognition (Pollard 2002; Kuzma and Haney 2001). Movies have distinct characteristics from other media, changing the message by how it is received (McLuhan 1964). Movies "dramatize the abstract idea and the mundane event" (Gregg 1998, 3). Through this dramatization, previous distant and cold concepts are made more human. Students identify with the actors, bringing situations and events down to the personal and individual level. Related to their dramatic and personal nature, movies also produce emotional reactions (Gregg 1998; Kuzma and Haney 2001). Emotions imprint information into the memory and therefore contribute to the learning process. Finally, movies provide a "constructivist learning environment" where students build their knowledge through experiences (Kuzma and Haney 2001; also see Brown and King 2000). This not only allows more effective learning, it also motivates students.

Yet movies can also create significant problems in the classroom. The most important issue is that movies often produce a passive audience. We have all seen instances where students fall asleep or daydream during movie time. But a passive audience is problematic even when students stay awake and actually watch the movie. If students simply watch as an external observer, then the aforementioned learning advantages of movies are lost. Students need to be attached and actively engaged in the movie, and not just reflect at the end of the movie. This is often too late in the learning process. Furthermore, the passive nature of movies becomes intensified if the movie does not fit with the learning objectives. Showing an irrelevant movie creates student confusion and frequently leads students to disengage from the learning process. In addition, passive learning means that students often do not analyze movies critically. Students dismiss movies as "innocent entertainment" and fail to recognize how movies are "thoroughly political artifacts bound up with political rhetoric, ideology, agendas, and policies" (Combs 1993, 69–70). These problems allow students to walk away from a movie focusing on the wrong ideas

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or concepts, failing to learn the important lessons and the movie's relevance for IR.

One way to ensure that students are critical, prepared, and active is to use insights from simulations. Simulations have proven popular and successful in promoting critical and active learning in the IR classroom (Asal 2005). Simulations engage students, prompting passive students to become actors rather than observers. By locating students inside the process and giving them experience, simulations help students make connections between political concepts and reality (among others, see Lantis, Kuzma, and Boehrer 2000; Grant 2004; Ellington, Gordon, and Fowlie 1998; Tessman 2007; Sunderland, Rothermel, and Lusk 2007).

Interactive learning optimizes a number of different learning opportunities for the IR classroom. Research on simulations highlights several learning opportunities. Petranek, Corey, and Black suggest three opportunities for learning: while participating in the simulation, immediately after the simulation with oral discussion and debriefing, and later after the simulation with journal writing (1992). Asal specifies six different learning opportunities with simulations: preparing for the simulation, while playing the simulation, when pausing during the simulation, while orally debriefing the simulation, at a written debriefing, and during examinations (2005). These insights suggest that movies present some additional opportunities for learning beyond the traditional oral or written debriefing at the end of the movie.

In this article, we focus on three different learning opportunities: before, during, and after the movie. The first learning opportunity is before the start of the movie. Instructor preparation is critical for successfully using movies in the classroom. Instructors should start with the learning objectives for the course, and then structure the syllabus and movie showings accordingly. It is also important to prepare the students. Students should have a basic understanding of the concepts and theories addressed in the movie. The instructor should provide questions before the start of the movie so that the learning process is already primed. These questions can encourage a critical approach to the movie where students realize the alternative perspectives and discourse. The level of priming depends on a variety of factors. For example, introductory classes usually require more priming, while easy to understand concepts and lessons need less priming.

The second learning opportunity is during the movie. This is often the most neglected learning opportunity for using movies in the IR classroom. The instructor should stop the movie at critical junctures in order to discuss the situation. Major points of interest should not wait until the end of the movie. Students might have missed the point or forget the scene by the time the movie ends. The instructor needs to instigate active learning during the movie and make sure the entire class is engaged and understands. In much the same way that instructors often stop and start simulations to make sure that major points are discussed or to prevent problems from occurring (Asal 2005), this should also be done during the film viewing.

The final learning opportunity occurs after the movie. While most studies of movies encourage a debriefing, it is best if this exercise occurs immediately after the end of the movie. It is important to encourage connections between the movie and key concepts, as well as critical analysis. Furthermore, it is particularly useful when a movie can be shown early in the semester and referred to throughout the remainder of the semester to reinforce important concepts. Another effective approach is to include the movie in a later evaluation, often the final exam. When they know that the final exam will contain lessons learned from the movie, students tend to pay more attention.

We outline below examples of the three different learning opportunities in two movies: *Ghosts of Rwanda* and *Hotel Rwanda.* These case studies highlight the method of applying lessons from simulations to teaching with movies in the classroom, and give instructors some practical illustrations to use in the classroom. Each of these movies offers instructors a unique learning tool to teach their students about the lessons of Rwanda. In general, they can be used to highlight several important concepts of IR. As a caveat, it is the responsibility of the instructors to appropriately tailor their teaching methods to the learning abilities of their students and the requirements of the course. *Ghosts of Rwanda* and/or *Hotel Rwanda* can be incorporated into an introductory course syllabus as well as a more specialized higher-level course. The main point is that instructors take the time to apply lessons at the three different learning opportunities.

CASE STUDY: *GHOSTS OF RWANDA* AND *HOTEL RWANDA*

The mass murder of over 800,000 Rwandans in the spring of 1994 is a stark reminder of the anarchic and sometimes brutish nature of the international political system. Despite the presence of a United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda and an international convention designed to prevent genocide, the premeditated murder of thousands of Tutsis by Hutus took place under the watchful eye of the international community. Unfortunately, Rwanda has become a lesson of international politics, and IR instructors use this example to highlight several important international relations concepts, including sovereignty, (neo) colonialism, ethnic conflict, international law, realism, and human rights.

Several movies have documented the brutality of the genocide in Rwanda, including *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire* (2004), *Frontline*'s *Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004), and *God Sleeps in Rwanda* (2005). While most of these movies are classified in the documentary genre, there are a couple of dramas that have also been produced based on true stories: *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Shooting Dogs* (2005). In deciding whether or not to incorporate movies into the classroom, instructors are often confronted with the choice of documentary or drama. There are pros and cons to both formats. Dramatized movies will at times exaggerate historical facts or make liberal use of their poetic license to satisfy viewers looking for a Hollywood ending. On the other hand, dramatized movies tend to have a broader audience in mind, and the story line (often with the assistance of subplots) helps to draw in otherwise disinterested viewers. In addition, using dramatized films forces students to draw their own connections to historical facts and concepts.

Documentaries, however, tend to be based on empirical evidence. Typically, documentaries use interviews with decision makers, victims, and eyewitnesses, as well as newspaper accounts and television coverage in order to present an argument. In the case of Rwanda, there is explicit footage of the carnage both during and immediately after the genocide available. Thus documentaries offer sober assessments of history, which are intended to inform rather than entertain. Yet it is important to keep in mind that like dramatic films, documentaries sometimes also make a biased political argument and select supporting evidence on that basis. One drawback with documentaries is that students will often take them at face value without thinking critically about assumptions they

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make or the political agenda they may be advancing. Therefore, it is important to remind students to keep this in mind.

Determining which type of movie to use is ultimately the decision of the instructor, but simply popping in the DVD during the most appropriate section of the course followed by the traditional class discussion misses several learning opportunities. Instead, getting the most out of a movie requires careful planning so that valuable lessons are learned before, during, and after the movie. This case study considers using both a documentary, the *Ghosts of Rwanda*, and a drama, *Hotel Rwanda*. The *Ghosts of Rwanda* is a *Frontline* documentary that was originally broadcast on PBS, which marked the 10-year anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. Also in 2004, *Hotel Rwanda* chronicled the heroic action of one man (Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager) to save Tutsi refugees in the midst of the mayhem that was taking place around him. The movie starred Don Cheadle, who was nominated for an Oscar for his performance.

BEFORE THE MOVIE: THE FIRST LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

The first learning opportunity for either film can begin with a short lesson on colonialism and neocolonialism. A good visual starting point to comprehend the dominant European influences throughout the African continent would be to compare a contemporary map of Africa to one that depicts the former colonial powers' control over the majority of the continent. The effects of colonialism have led to arbitrary political boundaries and divisions among the African people. Assigning short case studies on selected African countries will help students uncover some of these effects and may also offer new evidence of neocolonialism. For example, despite gaining its independence from Belgium in 1960, the Belgian practice of distinguishing between Tutsis and Hutus and privileging one group over another would have fatal repercussions in decades to come. To reinforce Belgium's culpability, instructors might consider assigning John R. Bowen's "The Myth of Global Ethnic Conflict" followed by a discussion of Bowen's provocative argument that ethnic conflict is the product of political processes rather than real centuries-old rivalries (Bowen 1996). Other readings could present alternative arguments about ethnic conflict (Kaufmann 1996) or broaden the insights and concepts to a more global scale (Sadowski 1998).

An additional first learning opportunity might include a primary text, namely the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (United Nations General Assembly 1948). The *Convention* is relatively brief (only 19 articles) and is rather straightforward. Students can read the *Convention* and discuss the signatories' obligation to the *Convention*. The impetus for the treaty can also be presented with a brief lesson on the Holocaust and the international community's determination to prevent future acts of genocide. Of course, the interpretation, compliance, and enforcement of treaties are problematic in our international political system, and the students' understanding of the general theories of international politics can be used to reinforce these points. Additionally, the United States's unwillingness to ratify the convention until 1988 is likely to provoke questions about the its commitment to international law, which can be used to prepare students for the United States's hesitancy to become involved in Rwanda.

Besides colonialism, ethnic conflict, or human rights, the instructor could also structure the syllabus to teach about the United Nations and the Security Council. Before watching the movie, students would be taught about how the Security Council works, especially for peacekeeping operations and human-rights interventions. Instructors could use introductory IR textbooks, or books that provide a more in-depth analysis of the United Nations, such as Paul Kennedy's *The Parliament of Man* (2006) or Linda Fasulo's *An Insider's Guide to the United Nations* (Kennedy 2006; Fasulo 2004). Additionally, instructors could utilize Michael Barnett's *Eyewitness to a Genocide* (2003) for an insider's perspective on the United Nations and Rwanda. No matter which reading is chosen, it is important that the instructor teaches the students the principles and practical limitations of the United Nations before watching the movie. The students will then have a better understanding of the issues and problems that emerge in the case of Rwanda.

DURING THE MOVIE: THE SECOND LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

While the students watch the *Ghosts of Rwanda* or *Hotel Rwanda*, instructors should prepare for and utilize several learning opportunities. Discussion questions that are distributed prior to the movie help students understand the rationale behind the movie. Discussion questions should be relatively brief and limited to no more than five so that students can easily refer to them throughout the movie. Instructors might consider some of the following discussion questions for *Ghosts of Rwanda*: (1) What was the role of the United Nations during the genocide? (2) Which explanation for ethnic conflict best explains the Rwandan genocide? (3) When should the international community intervene for human rights? Or some of these for *Hotel Rwanda*: (1) How is the United Nations portrayed in the movie? (2) How is radio used throughout the movie to incite terror and organize the genocide? (3) Why did Paul, who was a Hutu, help to save hundreds of Tutsis and Hutu refugees?

Notice that each type of movie evokes different types of discussion questions. This should be factored in when considering which movie to use. Also, explain to students that they should take notes if they do not understand what is going on in the movie or if they believe a particular scene is cogent to one of the discussion questions. Therefore, it is best if the lights in the classroom are not turned completely off because students should be encouraged to write directly on their discussion-questions handout. Collecting the handouts at the end of every class session, particularly if a movie takes more than one class to watch, will provide the instructor with some preliminary feedback and help to address any confusion or questions.

There are several critical junctures in both movies that are great learning opportunities for instructors to teach a new concept or reinforce a previously taught one. As general rules of thumb, instructors need to be proficient with their technological equipment, and the remote control should be accessible at all times so that a movie can be promptly and easily paused to make a point or comment. Instructors should preview the movie beforehand and take note of critical junctures during the movie where it can be paused to teach or reinforce a learning objective. For example, in the *Ghosts of Rwanda*, the death of the Rwandan prime minister despite the presence of UN peacekeepers would be a good opportunity to discuss the limitations of UN peacekeeping operations. By periodically pausing the movie, students will be more likely to be engaged in the movie, rather than using the movie as an opportunity to zone out for the entire class period.

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AFTER THE MOVIE: THE THIRD LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Traditionally, instructors conduct class discussions following the viewing that are convened in an open-ended forum (e.g., asking, "What did you think of the movie?"). Although an open-ended strategy may evoke a lively and interesting exchange, referring to the discussion questions posed at the start of the movie will help to provide a more structured and poignant discussion. In some cases, allowing the students time to respond in writing to the discussion questions (either in class or for homework) will elicit comprehensive feedback on whether the learning objectives were met. As an aside, we also recommend that instructors incorporate the movies into their online-teaching platforms (e.g., Blackboard). For example, a discussion forum could be established online to accommodate increased participation, quizzes on the movie could be administered online after the movie, or links to movie reviews or supplementary Web sites could be provided (e.g., *Frontline* has an extensive Web site of resources devoted to learning more about the *Ghosts of Rwanda* and the aftermath of the genocide).

There are also several follow-up lessons that can be applied during the third learning opportunity. Soon after the genocide, the international community acted to put those responsible for war crimes committed in Rwanda on trial. To this end, the United Nations Security Council established the International Tribunal for War Crimes in Rwanda. Students can follow up on the work of this tribunal and report on the effectiveness of its proceedings. In addition, the International Tribunal helped to lay the groundwork for the International Criminal Court. Lessons from Rwanda helped to generate momentum for it; however, the United States is conspicuously absent from the International Criminal Court. Drawing upon students' previous understanding of the general theories of IR and the role of the United States as a superpower, the instructor could facilitate a debate among the students on whether or not the United States should join the International Criminal Court.

Another example of a post-movie lesson that highlights these points is a mock International Criminal Court trial of the Rwandan genocide. Students are assigned various different roles, depending on the size of the class and time frame. Students are given time to research their roles and write position papers in order to be prepared for the mock trial. Throughout this role play, students learn about international law and the problems of enforcement.

Finally, the genocide in Sudan has perplexed many who thought that the mistakes of Rwanda would not be repeated. For example, we often assign Power's "Remember Rwanda, but Take Action in Sudan" after the movie in order to elicit discussion about the idea of "never again" (Power 2004). Sovereignty is a powerful principle among the international community, and intervening in another country—however seemingly justifiable—requires the collective will power of the international community, especially in a country where there are no discernable, vital, and major-power interests at stake. Where countries are failing to act, non-state entities are becoming increasingly active in international politics. Students could conduct projects on non-governmental organizations that are working tirelessly in the realm of human rights and study both the successes and failures of these organizations to influence international politics.

DISCUSSION

Applying the lessons from simulations to using movies in the IR classroom can generate interest in the subject matter and teach students about important concepts in IR before, during, and after the movie. Before the movie, instructors need to select the proper movie and prepare the students with relevant readings. This includes structuring the syllabus so that the movie naturally fits into the course. It is up to the instructor to determine the extent to which students should be prepared prior to the film. It is important to note that some instructors believe that preparing students too much does not allow them to draw on their own experiences and apply fresh insight to their analyses of the film. However, in our experience, preparation encourages students to focus on the relevant concepts to be learned from the movie. We agree with research about teaching with simulations that emphasizes the critical nature of preparation and argue this insight should be extended to movies (Asal 2005; McIntosh 2001).

Instructors also need to take advantage of learning opportunities during the movie. Students can get lost or confused while the movie is playing, and these learning opportunities can prevent bigger problems down the road. For example, we often use *Dr. Strangelove* to teach about nuclear deterrence. Some students, however, end up focusing on other aspects of the movie. While discussion afterwards can usually lead students in the right direction, much of the learning opportunity is lost. Students no longer have the personal or emotional connection that is evoked while watching a movie.

Learning opportunities that occur during the movie are probably the most controversial aspect of this model. Pausing the movie disrupts the flow of the narrative and potentially dislocates the student. We understand these concerns, but believe they are outweighed by the positive effects seen in the classroom. While some students might find it more challenging to follow the storyline because of the interruptions, more students get re-engaged because of the pauses. Even good students who take notes and pay attention sometimes focus on the wrong stories or issues in the movie. Stopping the movie and asking questions at pre-designated times eliminates many of these problems. However, it is critical to pick the right times to stop the movie. This can minimize any disruptions while maximizing the learning opportunities.

Finally, after the movie is a traditional learning opportunity that can be enhanced by referring to pre-assigned discussion questions and following up on concepts or issues that were introduced in the movie. During this final learning opportunity, students should be encouraged to draw connections between the movie and the real world. This solidifies and expands the lessons of the movie, where students can generalize and apply what they learned. Assignments that promote critical thinking of issues raised during the movie are particularly effective.

In conclusion, we have argued throughout this article that a pedagogical approach to teaching movies in the classroom as simulations changes the way in which instructors prepare and incorporate movies into their syllabi. Movies can be a highly effective way to teach students when used properly, and we have seen significant success using the techniques described in this article. For one, students have demonstrated in their tests and papers a greater retention and deeper understanding of the concepts covered by the movies. After incorporating these three learning opportunities, we noticed that referencing movies to reinforce learning objectives elicited more diverse classroom participation. In addition, students point out in their course evaluations how the movies really helped them understand key concepts.

Throughout this article we have noted some pitfalls associated with movies, but we have also argued that preparing for

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movies as simulations creates critical and active learning environments. While there are a number of different methods for teaching movies, we argue this approach is not only effective, but also simple and flexible. The instructor might need additional preparation when first teaching a movie this way, but subsequent classes will only require a minimal amount of time. Furthermore, this approach works with different types of movies and classes. We have taken advantage of the three learning opportunities in large introductory and small upper-level courses. We recognize that some instructors will be wary to spend valuable class time showing movies, but when planned properly, we believe that it enhances student learning. Alternatively, this approach can be applied to movie clips to reduce the time spent watching movies and to teach a specific learning objective.

Using insights from simulations, instructors can reduce the negative consequences of teaching with movies while improving the learning process. Movies used in the traditional manner fall short of their teaching potential. By preparing and planning for the use of movies in the classroom the same way as if they were planning for a simulation, instructors will transform teaching with movies from a passive learning approach to a highly interactive and multipronged pedagogical method that has proven to be very effective in the classroom. ■

NOTES

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