

Films, world politics and the International Relations classroom: Learning to do a postcolonial analysis of *The Breadwinner*

Películas, política mundial y el aula de Relaciones Internacionales: aprender a hacer un análisis poscolonial de El pan de la guerra

MARINA DÍAZ SANZ

Universidad de Deusto

Cómo citar/Citation

Díaz-Sanz, M. (2022). Films, world politics and the International Relations classroom: Learning to do a postcolonial analysis of *The Breadwinner*. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 60, 85-113. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.60.03>

Abstract

This article presents and evaluates an activity developed in an area studies course on the Middle East. Learners must use postcolonialism and the theory of Orientalism in the analysis of a film about Afghanistan. The activity's general purpose is to teach students to read the film in terms of the *truth effects* it creates rather than its trueness. It develops in several stages and combines active (e.g., collaborative learning) and traditional (e.g., lecturing) learning methods. Throughout, data are gathered for analysis, mainly short reflections written by students at several stages in the process. A thematic and narrative analysis is conducted of the data set. The article contributes to the literature in teaching international relations with films by offering insights into an active learning process. Results show that the activity helps students to improve critical thinking skills, most visible in the evolution from plot-focused readings of the film to readings in which questions are formulated around the film's Western-centrism. It also accomplishes to raise awareness on postcolonialism's potential as an international relations approach but fails short to systematically address postcolonialism's limitations.

Keywords: international relations, postcolonialism, film analysis, active learning, critical and analytical thinking competencies, thematic and narrative analysis.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta y evalúa una actividad desarrollada en una asignatura sobre Oriente Medio. Los alumnos deben usar el poscolonialismo y la teoría del orientalismo en el análisis de una película sobre Afganistán. El propósito general es enseñar a leer la película en términos de los *efectos de verdad* que produce en lugar de como representación verdadera. La actividad se desarrolla en varias

etapas y combina métodos activos de enseñanza —como el aprendizaje colaborativo— y tradicionales —como la clase magistral—. A lo largo del proceso se recogen datos en forma de reflexiones escritas de los estudiantes que se analizan con los métodos de análisis temático y narrativo. El artículo contribuye a la discusión sobre el aprendizaje de las relaciones internacionales con películas ofreciendo una aproximación detallada a un proceso de aprendizaje activo. Los resultados demuestran la mejora en la capacidad de pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes, con una evolución significativa desde lecturas centradas en la trama del filme hacia análisis posteriores que generan preguntas alrededor del punto de vista occidentalista de la película. La actividad también contribuye a la comprensión del potencial del poscolonialismo como enfoque de análisis de las relaciones internacionales, pero puede mejorarse la transmisión de las limitaciones de este enfoque.

Palabras clave: relaciones internacionales, poscolonialismo, análisis de películas, aprendizaje activo, competencias de pensamiento crítico y analítico, análisis temático y narrativo.

INTRODUCTION

This article presents and evaluates a film analysis activity designed for an upper-level undergraduate course in International Relations (IR). The activity was developed for the first time during the Spring Semester 2020/21 with 36 participants. The participants were the students sitting in Political Challenges in the MENA Region, the area studies course I have taught at University of Deusto since the Spring of 2019. The course is presented as an introduction to the study of the region and world politics. The course establishes postcolonialism as a preferred analytical approach¹. This is justified by the importance that postcolonial thinkers attach to imperialism and colonial history in the constitution of the contemporary world, and to the role of cultural discourse in the legitimization of power practices (Loomba, 2015). Accordingly, understanding the theory of Orientalism (Said, 2003) is a priority affair. Amongst the many discursive spaces that can be subjected to analysis through the lens of Orientalism, popular culture —in particular, films— is one of the most fertile ones.

Analyzing films is politically significant due to their capacity to elicit in audiences' questions about truth and accuracy, but film analysis in an educational setting requires thoughtful planning. This means that learning objectives, assessment and learning methods need to be carefully defined. *The Breadwinner* (Twomey, 2017), an animated drama film about Afghanistan in the lead-up to the 2001 invasion, was my choice (see Tomé-Alonso and Ferreiro Prado, 2019, for other options). The activity's general aim was to teach students to do a postcolonial analysis of the film —namely, to learn to read the film in terms of the *truth effects* it produces rather than of its trueness— and, more specifically, to identify Orientalist elements. This aim is closely related to two

1. In my understanding, a postcolonial approach is an intersection of elements from critical constructivism, poststructuralism, historical materialism, feminist and cultural studies.

key competencies my course seeks to improve: analytical and critical thinking². The article thus evaluates the activity's effects on a) the development of the said competencies (with a focus on critical thinking), b) awareness related to the potential of theory, and c) sense-making of one's own learning process. The question guiding this research is whether by planning a student-centered, active learning activity, we will achieve a satisfactory result in terms of the critical thinking skills developed by the students and their understanding of the potentialities associated to the selected theoretical approach.

This article can be generally read as a contribution to the literature on teaching and learning IR and Political Science with "new" methodologies, which in recent years has seen an exponential rise (Ferreiro Prado, 2020; Ishiyama *et al.*, 2015). The buzzword in this literature is often "active learning" which involves moving attention from the instructor to learners and getting them to take responsibility of their learning process³. But, more specifically, the article contributes to the literature on teaching IR with films. Thus far the literature has not offered the small planning details and practical ideas that can help instructors to incorporate film analysis in their courses. IR instructors can find relevant indications in the literature about films that can be used to discuss realism, neoliberalism, or constructivism (Weber, 2001), but we lack mentions of postcolonialism as well as works that offer detailed insights into and evaluation of comprehensive pedagogical experiences. Besides, while some reflections can be found in the literature referred to the teaching of problem-solving vs. critical theory informed approaches to IR (Lamy, 2007), no works have been done on teaching postcolonialism and associated methods. The only mention can be found in Díaz Sanz and Ferreiro Prado (2021), where we concluded that, when teaching postcolonial approaches to IR, it is important that learners become aware of their condition as world political subjects.

The article is organized as follows. The first section offers a review of the literature on teaching IR with films. The second section introduces the postcolonial approach in IR that orients my activity design. The third section presents the activity design and highlights the stages in which data for analysis were collected. The fourth section explains the methods. The fifth section presents the results relative to a), b) and c) (above). The sixth section discusses the results and considers areas for improvement. Lastly, a brief conclusion is offered.

TEACHING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS WITH FILMS

The use of films as teaching material in International Relations (IR) (and Political Science) courses is a long-established practice (Gregg, 1998). The literature, which

-
2. Analytical thinking is understood here as the capacity to analyze elements, relations and the organizing principles within a whole (Kratwohl, 2002). Critical thinking is understood as the capacity to examine assumptions and look at the implication of the ideas one or others hold (Cohen, 1993).
 3. See Prince (2004) for an overview of the advantages and disadvantages attached to student-centered learning.

often underscores the positive learning results, has discussed manifold aspects related to teaching with films (Genovese, 1984; Kuzma and Haney, 2001; Lobasz and Valeriano, 2015; Simpson and Kaussler, 2009; Valeriano, 2013; Waalkes, 2003). Overall, scholars underline the political quality of films, the potentialities associated with film viewing in courses that seek to foster active learning, and the specific opportunities for learning IR. Genovese (1984: 3) starts off from the premise that films make “political statements” about socially relevant topics such as war, peace, power, diplomacy, or political campaigns. They can, therefore, be easily picked up as “discussion-generating tools” (*ibid.*: 4). Films can be used as primary course material in combination with a reader or textbook to cover basic concepts (Valeriano, 2013: 55; Lobasz and Valeriano, 2015), or to engage in advanced discussions in IR (Kuzma and Haney, 2001; Weber, 2001). They can also be used in combination with other teaching methods like simulations and role play (Simpson and Kaussler, 2009).

Films normally arouse interest and might address world political issues that are less available in non-entertainment media (*ibid.*: 425). Waalkes (2003: 157) sees in the work with film clips the possibility of reflecting on ethical issues and thinking up “advanced” research questions. Generally, films offer students an experience that breaks with traditional instructional models that foster students’ passivity. Contrarily, teaching with film is highly related to active learning (Prince, 2004). Kuzma and Haney (2001: 34-35) consider film viewing as a multisensorial experience that can be emotionally very powerful, and foster learners’ creativity and freedom of interpretation. Valeriano (2013: 52) associates the potency of visuals with knowledge retention, finding that “visual analogies are a superior instructional method compared to other options”. One reason for this is that films have the capacity “to dramatize the undramatic’ aspects of global politics” helping to bridge the gulf between filmic narratives and abstract concepts (Gregg, 1998: 4).

Teaching with films might seek to illuminate these said abstract concepts (see, for example, Lantis, 2013) or IR theories more generally. With respect to the latter, Cynthia Weber (2001) suggests that both films and IR theories be inspected as two realms where world political narratives are produced. In this way, she encourages us to look at IR theories as “cultural practices where stories that *appear* to be true get told” (*ibid.*: 282). Teaching students “to be critical readers and writers of narratives about international politics” (*ibid.*: 281), therefore, implies developing the ability to unpack the *truth effects* of the theories any IR student is expected to be knowledgeable of, and of the other media participating in world political talk. As far as we are concerned, this boils down to films.

ORIENTALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM: NARROWING DOWN THE MEANING OF ANALYSIS

With a genealogy that harks back to literary studies in the case of postcolonialism, in the early 1990s, postcolonialism and IR were two uncannily “self-referential” fields

(Darby and Paolini, 1994: 372). Over the last three decades, however, dialogue across fields has notably expanded (Barkawi and Laffey, 2002; Chowdhry and Nair, 2002; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004; Loomba, 2015; Seth, 2013). Like other critical developments within IR, postcolonialism questions the neorealist onto-epistemology and Westphalian myths that dominate IR analysis. It investigates how the legacy of colonialism shapes the contemporary world and contributes to the construction of global hierarchies. It draws attention to culture, trying to understand how cultural institutions and cultural discourse produce the subjects of international relations.

One major contribution to the study of culture and global power is Edward W. Said's theory of Orientalism. In *Orientalism* (2003), Said illuminates the relationship between colonialism and Europe's cultural discourse of the Orient. The Oriental Other is the condition of possibility of the modern Western subject (Hurd, 2003) and a source of legitimization of Britain and France's colonial adventures in the "Muslim Orient" throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Later, the U.S. takes over the great power status and the leading role in the production of the Orientalist imaginings. This task sees tipping points in the aftermath of the Cold War and of 9/11, when Muslim/Arab Others are increasingly associated with anti-hegemonism and anti-Westernism. This is also a period in which the imaginative construction of the Middle East and North Africa as a terrorism exporting, anti-democratic and gender equality averse region crystallizes (Culcasi and Gökmen, 2011; Falah, 2005; Tuastad, 2003). If there is one subject that embodies the most extreme negative ideal of the East, it is the Taliban's Afghanistan (Manchanda, 2020).

Today, reflection on Orientalist discourse and practices is part of a broader program of postcolonial studies that aims to decolonize world politics. Decolonizing involves placing dominators and dominated in the same analytical framework and unpacking their relational ontology; questioning the universality of Europe's historical experiences; challenging the modern categories of thought that underpin world political discourses; and incorporating the voices and experiences of "the subaltern" to narrations of the international (Sabaratnam, 2011). In this regard, it is important to mention that, despite the great popularity of Said's ideas among many critical intellectuals, the original formulation of Orientalism's theory in the late 1970s is not without flaws. For the purposes of this article, it is important to highlight feminism's critique of Said's theorization in two respects. On the one hand, feminists argue that, by implicitly assuming that the conqueror and producer of Orientalist cultural discourse was a European male, *Orientalism* occludes the active participation of metropolitan women (writers, travelers, wives of diplomats, etc.) in the whole colonial enterprise (Lewis, 1996). On the other hand, *Orientalism* also fails short to register instances in which "Oriental" women actually resisted the domination staged by white male conquerors. This is particularly important today when the tendency to picture "Oriental" and "Muslim" women as lacking agency and victims of evil males persists, thus paving the way for narratives about liberation enabled by Western saviors (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

In short, postcolonial analysis is one of the possible paths for analyzing the international reality. Taking this path is associated with an onto-epistemology of the

international that is anti-foundationalist as compared to those of realism or liberalism. In our activity, the purpose of enhancing the critical and analytical competencies of students is linked to the adoption of a postcolonial approach. In the choice between rationalist or reflectivist, positivist or post-positivist analysis, post-colonial analysis is aligned with a philosophy of science that questions the subject/object divide and the neutrality of knowledge and representation (Hollis and Smith, 1991; Lamont, 2015). It is also associated with a general critical attitude towards the stories that, woven into theories or into films, appear to be true (Weber, 2001). As in the famous Coxian wording “film and literature are also for someone and for some purpose” (Lobasz and Valeriano, 2015: 406). Therefore, by adopting a post-colonial approach the students sitting in my course must develop skills that enable them to “recognize that cultural artifacts not only represent but also participate in politics” (id.: 406).

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

The Breadwinner (Nora Twomey, 2017) is an Irish-Canadian animation drama film that narrates the story of a 10-year-old girl (Parvana) and her family in the lead-up to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. It is based on a best-selling book by Deborah Ellis and had Angelina Jolie as co- executive producer (Wikipedia, n. d.). The film shows the harsh life conditions of Afghans under Taliban rule. The protagonist’s father, a mutilated from the Afghan-Soviet war, has been taken to a prison on the outskirts of Kabul. Without the tutelage of a man, the women of the family remain vulnerable and isolated. To break their confinement, Parvana adopts a boyish appearance. Against the backdrop of Afghanistan’s troubled history and constant fear of the Taliban, Parvana’s struggle culminates in the liberation of her father on a night when the first American bombers fly over Kabul.

The activity is related to a specific module in the course that deals with the representation of Muslims/Arabs/Middle Easterners in media and cultural discourse, thus using *The Breadwinner* as a study case. The activity is designed on the hypothesis that, after the first viewing of the film, students will carry out a non-critical and fundamentally descriptive analysis of the film; and that, the seminar/online discussion stage will allow students to take their critical and analytical skills to a higher level by being able to detect the Orientalist assumptions nourished by the film through both the story and the visuals. It is also expected that by doing this analysis students will develop an awareness of what it means to do a postcolonial analysis of a film and, more generally, of postcolonialism’s potentialities as an IR approach. The learning objectives are:

- a) to identify Orientalist/neo-Orientalist elements in the film;
- b) to identify the visual plane as constitutive of Orientalist/neo-Orientalist discourse;

- c) to relate different levels of representation (textual and visual) and examine how they work together for the construction of the film.

The activity develops in several stages during the second half of the semester. It combines several teaching and learning methods:

Stage 1: Lecturing

The lecturing stage takes up a single 50-minute session in which students are introduced to the theory of Orientalism.

Stage 2: Film screening and first data collection (initial reflections)

The film is screened once during class hours. After this, students are requested to write a 150-word text addressing this question: “Why is the film *The Breadwinner* interesting for an IR student?”. Students submit their individual responses in the course’s Moodle platform.

Stage 3: In-class reading seminars (3 seminars/1-2 hours each) and group discussions in online forums

The seminars begin with a presentation of an assigned reading (see Table 1 left column) by a class group followed by debate and summary of the main take-aways. After the seminar, students must discuss the film based on the ideas presented by the different authors in the reading list. The discussion develops in online forums, where students are presented a series of questions (see Table 1 right column). Within the overall activity plan, the only relevant step for student assessment is Stage 3. Students are assessed based on whether their responses in the online forums show accomplishment of the learning objectives. The activity is 10% of the final grade.

TABLE 1.
STAGE 3 IN THE ACTIVITY DEVELOPMENT

In-class reading seminars	Group discussions in online forums
<i>Seminar 1</i>	<i>Questions:</i>
Assigned reading: Hurd, Elizabeth S. 2003. “Appropriating Islam: The Islamic Other in the Consolidation of Western Modernity”, <i>Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies</i> , 12 (1): 25-41.	How does the argument that “the Islamic Other has been appropriated by a Western modern Self” resonate with the release of <i>The Breadwinner</i> ?
	Do you find similarities between “the Orient” presented in the film and “the Orient” manufactured by the US/Europe?
	Is the notion of seraglio useful to analyze gender roles and ideals of domesticity in the film?

In-class reading seminars	Group discussions in online forums
<p><i>Seminar 2</i></p> <p>Assigned readings:</p> <p>Culcasi, Karen and Mahmut Gökmen. 2011. "The Face of Danger. Beards in the U.S. Media's Representation of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners", <i>Aether: The Journal of Media Geography</i>, VIII. B: 82-96.</p> <p>Tuastad, Dag. 2003. "Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)", <i>Third World Quarterly</i>, 24 (4): 591-599.</p>	<p><i>Questions:</i></p> <p>One important idea in Culcasi & Gökmen's article is that, in the Western imagination, Muslims have a certain appearance (men are bearded and women are veiled) and that appearance is full of political significance. A certain appearance is an indicator of "civilization", "modernity", "religiosity", etc. (or lack of them). How is this idea relatable to the film? What does the film accomplish by picturing male and female characters the way they are?</p> <p>In the film, war is an important, yet little explained theme. How does the film associate Afghanistan with war? How does the new barbarism thesis help us disentangle this association?</p>
<p><i>Seminar 3</i></p> <p>Assigned reading:</p> <p>Falah, Ghazi-Walid. 2005. "The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States", in Ghazi-Walid Falah y Caroline Nagel (eds.), <i>Geographies of Muslim Women</i>. New York: Guildford Press.</p>	<p><i>Questions:</i></p> <p>In the analysis of "The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States", Ghazi-Walid Falah presents several relevant arguments which are usable in the analysis of <i>The Breadwinner</i>.</p> <p>Falah's argument boils down to the idea that seldom are Muslim/Arab women represented as having "normal lives": they are either "passive victims" of conflicts or "misguided political actors". You will probably agree with me that, in the film, we see more of passive victims than of misguided political actors. My question is: how is this "victimization" accomplished? Can you give specific examples or depict specific scenes? And is there any space for female agency in the story?</p> <p>Lastly, if you were filmmakers or film producers, had the power to produce a more complex portrayal of Afghan women and show them doing "normal things" (in other words, if you had the chance of not reproducing an Orientalist/neo-Orientalist imaginary), what kind of normal things would choose to show?</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

Group discussion is one of the strategies by which students can significantly improve their analytical and critical thinking competencies. Group discussion is a form of collaborative learning in which small groups of students cooperate to construct “knowledge through consensus building among the individual group members” (Wolfe, 2012: 421). The use of small groups (3-4 students) seeks “to increase student knowledge and to enhance higher order thinking skills” (id.) and “students’ interdependence” (Bruffee, 1995: 17). Specifically, studies of film teaching have shown that “collaborative learning practices can help achieve educational objectives, including: (1) promoting a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught; (2) allowing students to make conceptual linkages between theory and real-world examples; and (3) increasing retention of knowledge” (Lantis, 2013: 234).

The groups in the learning experience presented here were rather medium-sized (5-7 students). The purpose of group discussions was to get students engaged in answering the questions, exchanging ideas, and benefiting from each other’s interpretive and analytical capacities to generate a theoretically informed conversation around the film. Each student had to contribute to each forum thread with short texts of about 80 words and follow-up on group members’ contributions.

Stage 4: Second data collection (Closing reflections, debriefing and survey)

Once group discussions finish, students are asked to a) write “Closing reflections”, and b) participate in a debriefing session. To complete the “Closing reflections” stage, students are asked to go through their initial analysis and think about how the reading of postcolonial texts and the group discussions have affected their interpretation of the film. They are then asked to address this question: “What does it mean to analyze world politics or international relations from a postcolonial perspective?”. Students are requested to write at least 150 words. Students submit their responses in the course’s Moodle platform.

To wrap up the activity, a debriefing session is conducted during a 50-minute session, the purpose of which is to critically assess the learning process since the onset of the activity. To ensure the collection of enough feedback on Step 3, an online survey is made available to students on the Moodle platform. The survey is anonymous and includes 13 Likert-type questions. The questions seek to know whether the readings-based online discussions facilitate the fulfilment of the learning objectives, whether students understand better the potentialities associated to postcolonialism and IR approaches in general due to the activity, and their level of satisfaction with group work.

DATA AND METHODS

The article seeks to broaden our understanding of the effect of the activity on a) the development of analytical and critical thinking competencies, b) awareness related to the potential of theory, and c) sense-making of one’s own learning process; and, from this draws conclusions on the adequacy of the student-centered and active

learning philosophy that informs the activity planning. The data set consists of 32 textual units of the category “Initial reflections”, 30 textual units of the category “Closing reflections”, notes from a debriefing session and survey data⁴. The 62 textual units were imported into Atlas.ti software. Following a mainly inductive strategy, codes have been generated to systematize the data. The main methods of analysis are interpretivist research methods. Through thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) the article illuminates a) and b); narrative analysis is done to unpack c) (Bevir, 2006).

RESULTS

THE FILM AND THE REAL (DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES)

In Stage 2, students prioritize plot and description and tend to ignore the influence of Orientalism

Generally, students’ responses in the “Initial reflections” validate the starting hypothesis of this work. In Stage 2 of the activity, cognitively students are bent towards describing rather than analyzing the movie. Learners construct their responses to the question “Why is *The Breadwinner* interesting for IR students?” by reference to the film’s plot. At this point, students’ understanding of the last part of the question —“for IR students”— works at the level of the topics relatable to a world politics’ agenda (i.e., war, conflict, human rights, etc.). Responses disclose little critical capacity. By this it is meant that students are not yet engaged in a decolonial exercise as defined by Sabaratnam (2011). The category “Film’s principal themes” grouping three codes (see Table 2) has been created to designate the theme/s that come to prominence in the student responses. Students tend to foreground one or two principal themes and identify a range of other sub-topics.

TABLE 2.
FILM’S PRINCIPAL THEMES

Code	Grounded
1. Afghanistan under the authoritarian regime of the Taliban and effects on civil population	16
2. The situation of Afghan women under the Taliban	9
3. Inter-imperial rivalries and the geostrategic interests of great powers in Afghanistan	8

Source: Own elaboration.

4. It means that not all students enrolled in the class (36) participated in the project. The only compulsory part of the activity was participation in Stage 3. Both Faculty and participants granted permission to the realization of this research project.

The main theme in 16 textual units is “Afghanistan under the authoritarian regime of the Taliban and effects on the population”. This code is assigned to instances of text where the main focus is the Taliban, their governing style and civil-political relations. In students’ reflections the link between the evil Taliban rule, “war”, “conflict” and a suffering population is strong, but this tends not to be put in a relational framework that factors in the role of great powers in Afghanistan’s history. Whenever students find that the film is interesting for an IR student because it reveals the impact of long-term inter-imperial struggles over Afghanistan the code used is: “Inter-imperial rivalries and the geostrategic interests of great powers in Afghanistan” (8)⁵. In sum, the first main theme explains Afghanistan’s *disastrous* (my emphasis) situation in the lead-up to the 2001 invasion by reference to the Taliban rule (understood largely as an endogenous phenomenon), whereas the second theme considers the impact of colonialism and imperialism on present-day Afghanistan. The latter is the interpretation that comes closest to postcolonial tenets, but it is the least frequent theme in the data set.

The following excerpt exemplifies the first theme and the relevance of the Taliban’s actorness:

Firstly, we can see the Taliban regime, its ideas, and the lifestyle of the period. It is essential to understand the ideas of the Taliban regime because the regime had impact on the region and the world as well. The regime took the power after the Soviet-Afghan war and stayed in power until 2001, which means that the regime itself were a huge “actor” in the region and in the global world. Secondly, the movie shows that facts and lives of the people who lived under Taliban regime and experienced two wars (Soviet Afghan war and 2001 War in Afghanistan). These two wars shaped the history, policy, and the form of the region so people’s lives as well⁶.

Two elements in the student’s response deserve more attention. First, the lack of recognition of foreign involvement in the creation of the regime that oppresses the Afghan population. Indeed, the film keeps silent about US support of the Afghan *mujahedeen* in their war against the Soviet empire during the Cold War. Second, the identification of the Taliban and “wars” as the two factors that mold people’s lives. But “wars” here are “experienced”. They do not seem to be something other than a blurred happening without an intelligible grammar.

In the following excerpt, another student elaborates further the characteristics of the Taliban regime and the way in which people, including women, are victims of it:

The movie is located in Afghanistan, Kabul, in a period of domination by the Taliban, with an authoritarian regime [...]. An IR student can realize how the citizens

5. Numbers in parentheses stand for code occurrences.

6. Quotations from students’ Initial and Closing reflections are reproduced in their original form, without altering their words by correcting errors.

of countries suffering these kinds of authoritarian regimes are subject to human rights abuses and their dignity as human beings is not respected. Gender inequality the Taliban brought to Afghanistan is important, as women could do nothing but stay at home, they could not even speak up, not even show their bodies and they were constantly abused. In fact, they were not treated as human beings.

In fact, the fragment echoes the second theme with highest grounding in our sample: “The situation of women under the Taliban” (9). The student argues that the film documents the excesses of an authoritarian regime, especially over women and girls. In this way, the excerpt establishes a strong connection between “authoritarianism” and the situation of women. Since the film contains many scenes in which non-Taliban male and female characters are mistreated by Taliban characters, the emergence of this topic is unsurprising.

Mentions to the situation of women and the obligations imposed by the Taliban on them (namely, wearing *burqas*) are abundant. The obvious explanation is that the film tells the story of a 10-year-old girl, her mother and sister who, due to the father’s imprisonment, must develop strategies to survive in Taliban-ruled Kabul. This prompts references to the strictures of traditional societies and the role of religion in public life: “The film [...] different social struggles within a traditional society, it is undeniable that the most striking characteristic is how it approaches the subject of women and our struggle to climb up the ladder within society, something that is even harder to achieve for a girl like Parvana that lives under the complications that come from religious views governing the political powers”.

Lastly, the following text unit represents a prime example of a student who builds his Initial reflection around the theme with the lesser grounding “Inter-imperial rivalries and the geostrategic interests of great powers” (8):

The movie the Breadwinner is an interesting take on the war film genre. I say this because it is not placed directly in the conflict but in an area that has experienced battle and is waiting for another. Throughout the movie, we see the encroachment of the USSR and how it continues to affect Afghanistan with empty tank husks left as relics or how those who lived through the conflict continuing to bear the scars. In addition, we hear many of the characters refer to Afghanistan as a nation between empires and this links back to the tradition of colonialism and the experience with the Russian and British Empires and how this links to the Cold War with the Soviets and the American and once again in the modern day with the US’ hegemon and their imposition of “Western” values.

In their explanation of the *Afghan problem* (my emphasis), the student prioritizes inter-imperial/inter-state competition over domestic conflict between rival actors. The listing of three major periods of foreign interference in Afghanistan since the 19th through the present suggests that making proper sense of current events in Afghanistan requires the adoption of a long-term perspective and fair understanding of colonialism’s legacy, which is consonant with the postcolonial

approach in IR. In another excerpt, a student asserts that “this film prompts the audience to consider how great empires have fought each other over lands. Historically, there has been a desire for conquer and expansion for ideological, economic, and strategic purposes”. Both quotations echo the tendency to view Afghanistan as a cursed land and long-term object of imperial desire (Manchanda, 2020), as well as the inattentive attitude of imperial powers vis-à-vis the people. In this narrative, the Taliban stand as an endogenous “solution” to an externally imposed life of neglect.

In Stage 2, students tend to interpret that the film represents rather than participates in the construction of “the real”

Weber (2001) considers IR theories as meaning-making sites that generate *truth effects* on the reality they seek to explain. This view also informs her approach to working with films in the IR classroom. Accordingly, her pedagogical work is oriented towards “suspending a concern with what is true and what is false so that what makes something appear to be true of false can be analyzed” (*ibid.*: 286). This section discusses students’ takes on the film’s relationship to reality/truth. It establishes two categories depending on whether students attribute the film the capacity to *represent* or to participate in/*perform* “reality”. The first category —*Representational capacities*— speaks of a lack of critical view of the film’s relationship to truth. It is premised on the idea that the film is neutral and accurate with regards to the “facts” it represents. The latter —*Performative capacities*— speaks of the ability to identify that the film offers a biased view of reality and therefore constructs *a* truth.

Table 3 shows the distribution of the capacities in the 32 text units. Twenty-eight mentions to the film’s capacity to represent reality and 13 mentions to performative capacities have been coded. Four student profiles appear. Thirteen students identify only representational capacities (marked in light grey). Five students identify only performative capacities (marked in dark grey). Twelve students identify capacities of both types. In two student responses (S7 and S10, marked in light green) references to capacities do not appear.

Twenty-two of the 32 Initial reflections make assumptions about the film’s capacity to “instruct the audience”. The underlying reasoning is that, since the film deals *accurately* with war, invasion, gender inequality, Afghanistan’s traditional society or the Taliban, the film provides global audiences with trustable knowledge. It has been considered that students attach an instructional value to the film when expressions such as the film “illustrates”, “describes”, “reflects”, “helps to familiarize”, “offers an approximation”, “shows”, etc. appear in students’ writing. For instance, “It is worth recognizing that the film helps the viewer become familiar with the daily life of families and women in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan” or “it describes the Afghanistan of recent years after the rise of the power of talibans, after wars against URSS and the fundamentalism”.

In five instances, students reasoned that the film represents reality according to an insider perspective or the point of view of women. For example, “the movie shows the point of view of women in the conflict”. This genre of interpretations is a corrective to the general claim that the film instructs the audience from no particular point of view but fails to consider the movie in terms of the *truth effects* it produces.

A different understanding of the film’s relationship to the real world can be sensed every time students question the film’s neutrality. The code “The film is not neutral” (8) is assigned to text instances in which students pinpoint the film’s lack of objectivity. In fewer occasions, students wed the lack of neutrality to Orientalism’s productive capacity. The code “The film is Orientalist” (2) is assigned to sections of text when terms such as “orientalist” or “orientalism” appear. Doing so indicates that students are trying to make an argument which is grounded in a concept/theory they are starting to be familiar with. In these cases, there is also a clear identification of the West/East framework embedded in the film. For instance, “It is essential to acknowledge that very often movies like this portray the western vision of the situation, easily falling under stereotypes and orientalism”.

Not all students, however, share the view that the film is Orientalist. For others it is exactly the opposite; they assert that the film is an invitation to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes about the Oriental that colonize the Western imagination. The code “The film challenges Orientalism” (3) is assigned to reflections that point in that direction. For example, a student begins his reflection by listing a series of elements in the film that convey an orientalized idea of Afghanistan, and then states that “However, as the film continues, another perspective emerges, a more nuanced perspective”. Other students consider that the film challenges the Orientalist imaginary because the movie shows “female agency” even in the context of the Taliban repression.

In sum, the analysis of the students’ Initial reflections shows a remarkable tendency to interpret the film from the “film itself” (Rose, 2001), without reflecting on the *truth effects* that derive from the choice of storylines and the combination of visual and textual elements in the film. Simultaneously, evidence is found that some students, at this point in the activity, sense that the film is not independent of the context (discursive and otherwise) of its production (id.). This tendency becomes much more visible and widespread after having gone through Stage 3 in the activity, as shown in the analysis of the students’ Closing reflections below.

POSTCOLONIALISM’S POTENTIALITIES

In Stage 4, students have developed an acute understanding of the potentialities associated with adopting a postcolonial approach in IR

Students’ “Closing reflections” come as a response to the question: “What does it mean to analyze world politics or international relations from a postcolonial

perspective?”. The analysis of the data discloses two levels of reflection. The first level concerns the potentialities for analysis (even for political practice) that students associate with postcolonialism. The second level, which we will discuss in the next section, concerns students’ sense-making of their own learning process.

As Table 4 shows, the potentialities associated with postcolonial analysis have been further clustered into four groups.

TABLE 4.
POTENTIALITIES ASSOCIATED WITH POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS

	Code	Grounded
	Identify the role of popular discourse in the production of global hierarchies	13
A	Identify the role of colonialism in the production of global hierarchies	12
	Look into historical, societal, and cultural processes and relations involved in the establishment of global hierarchies	9
	Complement traditional analysis in IR	9
B	Identify the Eurocentrism of traditional IR	4
	Understand why states behave as they do	2
	Develop structuralist understandings of political violence	1
C	Identify Orientalism and Western-centric perspectives	9
	Adopt a critical perspective vis-à-vis established “truths”	8
	Incorporate subaltern voices and perspectives	8
D	Overcome paternalistic attitudes	1
	Promote a peace-oriented agenda	1

Source: Own elaboration.

Group A contains three codes that refer to what postcolonial analysis can enlighten with respect to the relationship between colonialism, popular culture, and the production of global hierarchies. The code with highest grounding “Identify the role of popular discourse in the production of global hierarchies” (13) has been assigned to text segments in which students focus on the contribution of popular cultural forms to the (re)production of an imaginary of the Arab/Muslim world that perpetuates the difference between “us” and “them”. Examples include the following:

It is Westerners vision of the Middle East, and, in this case, of Afghanistan and its society the one that is portrayed in “The Breadwinner” even if the producers and director of the film might believe that they are giving an “accurate” and “realistic” representation of this concrete region of the world.

The breadwinner is an important film for IR students to understand the political power of popular content and to understand the relevance of the content that we consume and the power it has.

Students stress the power of popular culture to foster one-sided visions of the Middle East/Afghanistan, and Western audiences' inability to question mainstream representations, thus producing cultural industries' desired effect which is to disseminate their "truth" —a truth that, in turn, is convenient for global hegemonic agendas.

A related potentiality is "Identify the role of colonialism in the production of global hierarchies" (12). Here, students cherish that postcolonial analysis is an approach that considers the legacy of colonialism for world politics, meaning that world political analysis cannot afford to ignore the influence of past events or colonial forms of relation across North and South in the postcolonial present:

Analyzing world politics from a postcolonial perspective, means that we analyze how and why did the hierarchical world order come into place, recognizing the everyday injustices that existed in the past with the least favored regions, and that still nowadays influence them to a large extend.

Finally, I think that these understanding of the present with lenses that take into consideration the colonial legacy is fundamental in order to frame, understand and act in the world of politics, and also to leave behind the paternalistic approach that I have referred to before.

As the above statement shows, for one student, acknowledging the role of colonial legacies in the game of world politics is a necessary step to accomplish another "post-colonial" obligation which is to "Overcome paternalistic attitudes" (1). This is relevant because it suggests that other than an awareness-raising intellectual effort, postcolonial analysis prompts a commitment with a practical political agenda that includes a change of attitude towards governments and societies in the Global South; or an even more ambitious project which is to "promote peace" (1) (see cluster D).

Cluster A contains yet another code that groups instances of text specifying the different levels at which colonialism and enduring imperial forms operate. For some students, therefore, postcolonialism is tied up with analyzing world politics by "Looking into historical, societal, and cultural processes and relations involved in the establishment of global hierarchies" (9); thus, looking beyond inter-state power relations: "A postcolonial perspective to the analysis of international relations essentially forces you to go beyond the hegemonic discourses and power relations between states, to a greater scope of analysis involving dynamics at the societal and cultural levels".

A second set of potentialities has to do with the contribution of postcolonial analysis to IR analysis. Several students situate postcolonial analysis as a "Complement to traditional analysis in IR" (9). As shown below, adding a postcolonial layer to the analysis of international relations enables "a greater critical understanding of the power dynamics that dominate the world", something which is in turn related to the interest in fleshing out the power relations between colonizers and colonized, and the relevance of constructed visions of the Other:

Widens the traditional (and dominant) IR understandings and implies a greater critical understanding of the power dynamics that dominate the world. Moreover, the lenses used by Postcolonialism, enable a focus that in my view other perspectives to IR lack. Meaning by this that this perspective, looks at the reality from the literature of the colonial power over the colonized, which implicates a deconstruction of the constructed perspectives about the Orient (mostly).

For another student, postcolonial analysis complements IR analysis because it pays attention to categories such as “identity”, “culture”, “gender”, “class” or “ethnicity” which are not so common in “mainstream” analysis. And yet another student defines postcolonial analysis in terms of adopting an alternative epistemology. Indeed, this is a very important remark. It reveals awareness that different approaches to IR are not just a colorful repertoire of fruits in a market from which one picks up based on random preference, but that different IR approaches are linked to specific onto-epistemologies.

Some reflections “Identify the Eurocentrism of traditional IR” (4) and the role of the postcolonial approach in unpacking modern categories of thought that are also embedded in Orientalist discourse: “The postcolonial IR theory challenges with the mainstream IR theories by bringing the discourse of colonialism in the world politics. The mainstream ones have the Western centric approach, and this is one of the targets of criticism by the Postcolonial theory. Their theory and approach are based on criticism of Western’s construction of other as backward and irrational”.

Lastly, two more codes are included in this cluster. One is assigned to sections of text where students underline that postcolonial analysis furthers “Understanding on why states behave as they do” (2) and “Develop structuralist understandings of political violence” (1). The occurrence of the former indicates that for at least two students postcolonialism is also useful for the analysis of an IR classical theme: state behavior. The latter —“Develop a structuralist explanation of political violence” (1)— is directly related to the “new barbarism thesis” (Tuastad, 2003) debated in Seminar 2 and the online discussion that followed.

Finally, cluster C groups all those potentialities associated with the questioning of Orientalism and the Western-centric perspective on reality, as well as the questioning of established truths. In Stage 4 of the activity already many students associate postcolonial analysis with the potential to “Identify Orientalism and the Western-centric perspectives” (9). This applies to popular discourse and *The Breadwinner*, but also to other genre of discourses. Thus, as one student notes, postcolonial analysis helps in “Identifying (Neo)Orientalist discourses, characterized by generalizations and cultural assumptions, as well as Manichean processes of ‘othering’: civilians v. barbarians, order v. disorder, rationality v. irrationality”.

A different code has been assigned to tracks of text where an explicit concern with the Orientalist/Western perspective is not identified, but the association of postcolonial analysis with the capacity to question “the dominant and mainstream” is expressed. The code “Adopt a critical perspective vis-à-vis established ‘truths’” (8) is assigned to instances where students sense that postcolonial analysis offers tools to challenge

established frameworks for thinking the reality around them, as in “to question what is established, to look for a new and freed perspective and try to open our eyes on what we call our ‘normality’” or “an important alternative lens to understand the international sphere outside the established perspective”.

Finally, it is significant that, for some students, the postcolonial approach serves to “Incorporate subaltern voices and perspectives” (8) to analyses of international relations. A student, for instance, writes: “I also believe that adopting a postcolonial perspective means being ready to listen and pay attention to testimonies and voices of marginalized people which have been historically left out of dominant discourses”. Differently put, some students sense that the postcolonial approach is helpful in decentering “us” from the narration of world politics.

MAKING SENSE OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

In Stage 4, students (unexpectedly) set out to make sense of their own learning process and three main narratives come to the fore: eye/mind opening, loss of innocence and deconstruction

The students’ final reflections go far beyond “objectively” enumerating the possibilities that postcolonial analysis opens. The analysis of these texts reveals that students use this space to make sense of their own learning process. Table 5 shows a series of codes, their grounding and examples from the real text that exemplify the different categories into which student’s reflections on their learning process have been systematized. A more advanced exercise of interpretivism allows us to observe that three narratives stand out referred to how students make sense of their learning process. Some of the self-assessment categories are visibly related to the said narratives.

Eye/mind opening narrative

The image of the mind or eyes opening to a new or more nuanced reality gives access to a narrative about the learning process that acknowledges enlarged capacities to think about international reality and the film. There are examples of actual text that directly express this idea: “I feel I have opened my mind” or “The last week’s readings have completely opened my mind”. This narrative resonates loudly as students engage in a self-evaluative process when asked to write Closing reflections on the film. The narrative is associated with students’ acknowledgement that their perspective on the movie has changed; that they are now able to see the film in more complex terms; pierce through the surface of things and “see beyond”. Acknowledgement that analytical and critical thinking capacities have been enlarged is an ability of which eye/mind opening depends. The same is true for the other two narratives. The eye/mind opening narrative pictures a more capable student, but not excessively emotionally involved.

Loss of innocence narrative

Innocence is a human state associated with childhood and happy old times when reality seemed kinder and devoid of duplicity. So, when we see students narrating their learning process in terms of losing their innocence or ceasing from being naïve, we feel the expression of a certain sense of bitter disappointment regarding how things are “in reality”. The difference between this narrative and the mind opening narrative is that, while opening one’s mind has to do with identifying more dimensions to a phenomenon, developing analytical skills to address that phenomenon and, in short, a process of intellectual growth; the loss of innocence narrative denotes that the transformation operates at a psychic level. It touches directly on a person’s coming of age and gaining awareness of unpleasant realities. As several students confess: “I first saw it [the film] in a totally innocent way”, “Looking back at my first thoughts on the movie, I think now that I was a little bit naïve” and “At first, I thought this movie was really accurate regarding the representation of the Orient and their traditions. However, it is some kind of naïve of not seeing the Western ideal through the movie”. Tracks of text coded as “Initially, I was unable to identify Orientalism and its visual constitution”, “Initially, I was unable to read the film within a geopolitical framework” and “Initially, I was unable to question established discourses” relate to this narrative too.

Deconstruction narrative

In the deconstruction narrative the development of the activity affects students in a very personal way and is psychically transformative as in the loss of innocence narrative. The distinct element here is that students become aware of their participation in the establishment of (a received) truth but see the possibility of change. They seem to mean that, once the trick has been revealed to them, there is no alternative but change things. The excerpt below notwithstanding acknowledges the difficulty of changing everything we have believed in so far. The narrative is strongly associated with the assessment that “Throughout, I have had to question my assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes”, also evident below:

I think that analysing world politics and international relations from a postcolonial perspective means to detach ourselves from the western clichés that we might have acquired since we were children.

I think that analysing world politics and IR from a post-colonial perspective takes a whole deconstruction of our beliefs and what we thought was the reality (for Western people). The orientalist perspective is so deeply rooted in our construction and what we’ve been told [...] that it’s really difficult to free ourselves from that.

TABLE 5.
SELF-ASSESSMENT

Code	Grounded	Examples
Throughout, I have had to question my assumptions, prejudices, and stereotypes	8	<p>It has given me the opportunity to build new arguments, to detect long-held assumptions and to apply and see reality through a different perspective</p> <p>Becoming aware of one's own prejudices vis-a-vis colonised peoples, derived from the Orientalist discourse that "we" as people from the metropoli might have been exposed to</p> <p>I realized that some of the Western stereotypes of the Middle East were really ingrained in my mind. Starting from no knowledge of the Middle East, I can now take much more perspective on what I observe in the media or in discourse about the Middle East created by the West.</p>
Initially, I was unable to identify Orientalism and its visual constitution	8	<p>This Orientalist portrayal of women is something that I did not consider when I first watched the movie, but now after having read the texts and having discussed about it with my colleagues, I clearly identify the trend.</p> <p>Now that I read the analysis I did a couple of months ago, I notice that I did not pay attention to elements that in fact, reflect the Orientalist approach that rules many visual representations of the Middle East.</p>
Throughout, my perspective on the movie has changed	7	<p>Throughout, my perspective on the movie has changed.</p> <p>It is clear that my perception of the movie has changed a lot since we began this discussion.</p> <p>I can now take much more perspective on what I observe in the media or in discourse about the Middle East created by the West.</p>
Throughout, I have developed analytical and critical thinking	5	<p>Going through my initial analysis of the Breadwinner [...] makes me be aware of the interesting development and evolution of acquired abilities that the gradual reading dynamics accompanied by the understanding of the context and the postcolonial perspective studies (in-class lectures) have increased my ability to analyse and to extract important elements from texts or visual representation materials.</p>

Code	Grounded	Examples
Throughout, I have been able to see/go beyond	4	After all our lectures, reading and discussion, I'm now able to take more distance, to use different angles, to notice way more information than before, and most of all to see behind, beyond. the arguments of the postcolonialist authors have enabled us to go beyond a superficial analysis of those ideas to look at deeper elements.
Initially, my analysis was simplistic, narrow-minded, too general or lacked an academic perspective	4	I can see that my analysis at the beginning was much more general and lacked an academic perspective. I can observe that it was very much carried forward through my personal point of view about the Middle East region, my knowledge of international geopolitics and my cultural background.
Throughout, I have been able to develop a more complex vision of the movie	3	The way I see it, the reading of postcolonial texts has given me new perspectives and ideas on the analysis of the movie.
Initially, I was unable to read the film within a geopolitical framework	2	In the previous analysis, I could not associate this with the general division that the west has been doing and developing throughout the years between the west and the east.
Initially, I was unable to question established discourses	2	Before this I would not question to such extent the realities shown by discourses but now I realize I have to rethink many ideas.
Initially, I was unsure about how to interpret the film	1	At first [...] I was not very sure about how to interpret the film.

Source: Own elaboration.

DISCUSSION

The results offer substantial indications that the activity contributes positively to a) the development of competencies, especially of critical thinking, b) the development of awareness related to the potential of theory, and c) to making sense of one's own learning process. It has also achieved to prompt students to construct a map of the potentialities associated with the postcolonial approach in IR that is not restricted to the specific theory of Orientalism. The latter achievement has exceeded my initial expectations. Given that students had not previously been instructed in Weber's (2001) or Sabaratnam's (2011) theses, this has largely been an inductive journey. By engaging in the exercise of dissecting the film through theoretical arguments that were somewhat more limited in their explanatory scope (those in the reading list), learners have been able to move away from the understanding that the film represents reality as it is to the vision that the film participates in the construction of that reality, thus generating *truth effects*.

Overall, I read these as indications that critical thinking skills have been developed. But to test the impact of the film on the analytical capacities of students, one should analyze the online group discussions in Step 3. Grading was based on that step (obviously the most important for students!), but the focus of my analysis here has been on the "before" and "after" Step 3. This article has not provided enough data to draw all possible conclusions regarding the activity's capacity to enhance analytical skills, which also depend on additional objective assessment tools such as replicating a cognate exercise —namely, asking learners to apply what is by now a learnt theoretical approach to a different film (or a similar cultural product). The truth of the matter is that this logic was applied in the final grading of the students enrolled in Political Challenges in the MENA Region in 2019/20, since they were asked to submit group projects consisting of a film analysis (40% of the final grade). But an analysis of the resulting projects has not been developed for the purposes of this article.

Still, it is important here to get some sense of whether the activity design was overall successful and that includes mention of Step 3. Data from the debriefing session, the survey and the "Closing reflections" offer relevant insights. In the "Closing reflections", group work and collaborative learning have 12 mentions, often to underline that it was "nice", "entertaining" and "enriching". Only once a student admits that "I found very hard to discuss the films with my mates because I felt each one didn't want to share personal opinion". References to the adequacy of the seminar/online discussion dynamic are also frequent (15). As one student notes, "As postcolonial perspective requires critical analysis and deeper linkages of ideas, group work has also nourished the experience, enabling us to go further from our initial interpretations and correlation between the texts and the films". Also, during the debriefing session, students pondering over group work and the active learning methods opined that "It's good to learn in a way where we are put in an active position and the teacher is there facilitating the learning"; or, what is perhaps the most epic sentence uttered by one of the students in the class, "on your own you go faster, but together we go further".

We cannot, however, ignore that a potential desirability effect is behind students' overall positive responses and that the less enthusiastic simply did not voice their opinion. The survey data actually confirm that group work elicits mixed feelings. It must be also mentioned that less than half of the student population attended the debriefing session, with only eight students openly expressing their views on the learning experience. Some bits of overheard conversations between students participating in the debriefing session, allow me to think that, at least for some of them, the activity sowed a seed. Their position as receivers of popular culture material and consumers of representations of Arab, Muslims and Middle Easterners was transformed. They acknowledged to be then much more conscious of the embedded Orientalism, especially when it comes to women⁷.

Thirty students completed the survey. The data teach us three main lessons. First, the level of satisfaction with linking the film to readings is very high⁸. For example, 13 students "Totally agree" with the statement "Discussing the film based on academic texts has helped me to analyze the point of view about the story"; 16 students "Agree" and only 1 student "Neither agrees nor disagrees". Secondly, answers are more distributed across the Likert-scale in questions relative to group work. Eleven students "Totally agree", 12 students "Agree", 2 students "Neither agree nor disagree" and 4 students "Disagree" with the statement "Group work on the film has served to build a more complete analysis of the film". This casts doubts on the overall satisfaction with group work but, on the other hand, students acknowledge that they benefited from their peers' inputs. This comes to view when we see that 15 students "Totally Agree", 12 students "Agree" and only 3 students "Neither agree nor disagree" with the statement "Reading the contributions of my peers in each thread has made me reflect on elements of the film that had not caught my attention".

Thirdly, survey data show that the activity needs to improve its capacity to teach the limitations attached to postcolonialism as an analytical approach and its stand within the broader repertoire of IR approaches. Sixteen students "Totally agree", 8 students "Agree", 3 students "Neither agree nor disagree" and 3 students "Disagree" with the statement that "The work on the film has helped me to understand the contribution of postcolonial studies to International Relations"; whereas 11 students "Totally agree", 11 students "Agree", 6 students "Neither agree nor disagree" and 2 students "Disagree" with the statement "The elaboration of a postcolonial analysis has

-
7. The gender and female agency question has appeared constantly in the conversation, especially around whether the film allowed us to see Afghan women in other than passive roles, but in my course, I have not made visible the feminist critiques of Said's original formulation of Orientalism. Obviously, doing so would be positive and could allow students to address the question of whether white females (Nora Twomey and Angelina Jolie) doing a film about Afghan women is a practice of "epistemic violence" (Lewis, 1996), or otherwise.
 8. The survey did not include a question about the specific questions I formulated related to each reading. Student feedback on this could be useful to improve Step 3. My own impression is that the questions worked quite well except for the very last one.

helped me to better understand what other approaches to IR (realism, liberalism, etc.) are useful for”.

In this regard, I must acknowledge that while in the design of the activity and throughout its development, I have focused on students understanding the potential of the postcolonial approach to IR, I have made less effort to share the criticisms coming from the rationalist-positivist camp regarding the great deconstructive potential of approaches steeped in critical theory but lacking in problem-solving capacity. I do not necessarily agree with the assumptions behind this point, but surely the theoretical training of my IR students would be richer and more honest if the critiques levelled at the “non-mainstream” IR approaches were made evident. This could also help students to grasp better the distinct analytical horizons that rationalist-positivist vs. reflectivist approaches to IR illuminate.

Finally, it is important to mention that the experiment was carried out with only one group of students due to the need to assess everyone with the same criteria. Organizing a group control was not an option. A group control would have allowed us to know whether the learning objectives can be achieved by following other learning methods, and in which points the achievement differs. Nor can we know whether an alternative activity design would have had a comparable effect to that obtained here in terms of the development of critical thinking and understanding of the theoretical approach.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is an exercise in continuous learning and many of us will surely continue to ask ourselves questions about how to turn a nice idea in our heads into a solid pedagogical experience. Here I have shared the effort of planning a film analysis activity for students majoring in IR. The question guiding my research has been whether by planning a student-centered, active learning activity, the critical thinking skills of my students and their understanding of the potentialities associated with postcolonialism would see themselves improved. Considering that the only traditional teaching method employed in the activity was a 50-minute lecture, and based on the results from my analyses, the overall conclusion is that the idea was successful. However, it is also important to bear in mind one should not think about critical thinking as a competency that can be attained once and for all. Critical thinking requires long-term commitment with estrangement with the things we believe in, and with the stories than films and theories tell.

Also, the path traced here is not the only option available to teach about postcolonialism. The activity discussed is especially useful if one is interested in teaching the relevance of the culture-power nexus for postcolonial thinkers. Following in the footsteps of active learning defenders, I have betted that getting students to do the analysis of a cultural product themselves (getting into the story, looking at the details, drawing connections with other films) would be a more lasting learning experience than

hearing or reading about how others conduct cultural analyses. Postcolonialism nonetheless is a broad program and might be addressed from different (and complementary) angles like the international political economy which other colleagues might find more useful. Similarly, film viewing can be combined with learning methods I have not considered here. The options are infinite for IR instructors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the two reviewers for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this article.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others", *American Anthropologist*, 104 (3): 783-790. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>.
- Barkaw, Tarak and Mark Laffey. 2002. "Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations", *Millennium*, 31 (1): 109-127. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298020310010601>.
- Bevir, Mark. 2006. "How Narratives Explain", in Dvorah Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds.), *Interpretation and Method*. New York and London: M. E. Sharpe.
- Boyatzis, Richard E. 1998. *Transforming Qualitative Information*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. 1995. "Sharing Our Toys. Cooperative Learning Versus Collaborative Learning", *Change*, 27 (1): 12-18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0091383.1995.9937722>.
- Chowdhry, Geeta and Sheila Nair. 2002. *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations*. New York; London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203166345>.
- Cohen, Mel. 1993. "Making Critical Thinking a Classroom Reality", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 26 (2): 241-244. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/419838>.
- Culcasi, Karen and Mahmut Gökmen. 2011. "The Face of Danger. Beards in the U.S. Media's Representation of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners", *Aether: The Journal of Media Geography*, VIII. B: 82-96.
- Darby, Phillip and Albert J. Paolini. 1994. "Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism", *Alternatives*, 19 (3): 371-397. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644813>.
- Díaz Sanz, Marina and Lucía Ferreiro Prado. 2021. "Orientalism is not my opinion: Decolonial teaching and the problem of credibility in IR courses with a MENA focus", *Politics*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211009068>.

- Falah, Ghazi-Walid. 2005. "The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States", in Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel (eds.), *Geographies of Muslim Women*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Ferreiro Prado, Lucía (ed.). 2020. *Metodologías activas en las aulas de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales*. Valencia: Tirant Lo Blanch.
- Genovese, Michael. 1984. "Teaching Politics With Films", *News for Teachers of Political Science*, 40: 1-5. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0197901900004268>.
- Gregg, Robert W. 1998. *International Relations on Film*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Hollis, Martin and Steve Smith. 1991. *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks.
- Hurd, Elizabeth S. 2003. "Appropriating Islam: The Islamic Other in the Consolidation of Western Modernity", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 (1): 25-41. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1066992032000064174>.
- Inayatullah, Naeem and David L. Blaney. 2004. *International Relations and the Problem of Difference*. New York; London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203644096>.
- Ishiyama, John, William J. Miller and Eszteter Simon (eds.). 2015. *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science Education*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Kratwohl, David R. 2002. "A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An Overview", *Theory into Practice*, 41 (4): 212-218. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4104_2.
- Kuzma, Lynn M. and Patrick Haney. 2001. "And... Action! Using Film to Learn about Foreign Policy", *International Studies Perspectives*, 2 (1): 33-50. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.00036>.
- Lamy, Steven L. 2007. "Challenging Hegemonic Paradigms and Practices: Critical Thinking and Active Learning Strategies for International Relations", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 40 (1): 112-116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096507250279>.
- Lamont, Christopher. 2015. *Research Methods in International Relations*. London: Sage.
- Lantis, Jeffrey S. 2013. "War and peace of film", in Robert W. Glover and Daniel Tagliarina (eds.), *Teaching politics beyond the book. Film, Texts and, New Media*. New York: New Bloomsbury.
- Lewis, Reina. 1996. *Gendering Orientalism. Race, Femininity and Representation*. London: Routledge.
- Lobasz, Jennifer K. and Brandon Valeriano. 2015. "Teaching international relations with film and literature: using non-traditional texts in the classroom", in John Ishiyama, William J. Miller and Eszter Simon (eds.), *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*. Cheltenham UK-Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Loomba, Ania. 2015. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315751245>.

- Manchanda, Nivi. 2020. *Imagining Afghanistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108867986>.
- Prince, Michael. 2004. "Does Active Learning Work? A Review of the Research", *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93 (3): 223-231. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2168-9830.2004.tb00809.x>.
- Rose, Gillian. 2001. *Visual Methodologies*. London: SAGE.
- Sabaratnam, Meera. 2011. "IR in Dialogue... but Can We Change the Subjects? A Typology of Decolonising Strategies for the Study of World Politics", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39 (3): 781-803. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811404270>.
- Said, Edward W. 2003. *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. London: Penguin.
- Seth, Sen. 2013. *Postcolonial Theory and International Relations. A critical introduction*. New York; London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203073025>.
- Simpson, Archie W. and Bernd Kaussler. 2009. "IR Teaching Reloaded: Using Films and Simulations in the Teaching of International Relations", *International Studies Perspectives*, 10 (4): 413-427. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2009.00386.x>.
- Tomé-Alonso, Beatriz and Lucía Ferreiro Prado. 2019. "Mapping Orientalist Discourses: Using *Waltz with Bashir* in the Classroom", *International Studies Perspectives*, 21 (2): 154-171. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz009>.
- Tuastad, Dag. 2003. "Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)", *Third World Quarterly*, 24 (4): 591-599. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3993426>.
- Twomey, Nora (dir.). 2017. *The Breadwinner* [film]. Studiocanal.
- Valeriano, Brandon. 2013. "Teaching Introduction to International Politics with Film", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 9 (1): 52-72. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2013.747840>.
- Waalkes, Scott. 2003. "Using Film Clips as Cases to Teach the Rise and Decline of the State", *International Studies Perspectives*, 4 (2): 156-174. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.402004>.
- Weber, Cynthia. 2001. "The Highs and Lows of Teaching IR Theory: Using Popular Films for Theoretical Techniques", *International Studies Perspectives*, 2: 281-287. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44218170>.
- Wikipedia. n.d. "The Breadwinner (film)". Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Breadwinner_\(film\)#Production](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Breadwinner_(film)#Production).
- Wolfe, Angela. 2012. "Implementing Cooperative Learning Methods in the Political Science Classroom", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 8: 420-432. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2012.729451>.

Presented for evaluation: June 3rd, 2022.

Accepted for publication: October 3rd, 2022.

MARINA DÍAZ

marina.diaz@deusto.es

She obtained her PhD in Political Science and International Relations from Complutense University of Madrid. Her main research interests are post-Cold War geopolitical discourses and representations, popular culture and world politics, and critical pedagogy in International Relations. She is interested in the constructions of meaning that guide the analysis and practice of world politics and interpretative research methods such as narrative and discourse analysis. She is a team member of the funded project “WHAT4WHOM: percepciones de seguridad en el escenario de la pandemia COVID-19” (ref. PID2021-129000OA-I00). She is Assistant Teacher of International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, International Relations area, University of Deusto.