

2014

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## Recommended Citation

Orzeck, Reecia; Craine, James; Dando, Christina E.; and Somdahl-Sands, Katrinka, "On Dittmer's Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity as a classroom resource" (2014). *Geography and Geology Faculty Publications*. 21.  
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## **On Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* as a classroom resource**

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### **Abstract**

In this intervention, four geographers, all of whom have used Jason Dittmer's book, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*, in their classes, assess its status as a teaching resource. All have had considerable success using Dittmer's book, alongside other resources, to cultivate critical thinking and critical knowledge production in a wide range of classes.

### **Keywords:**

geopolitics, identity, popular culture, cultural geography, media geography, political geography

### **Introduction**

Jason Dittmer's 2010 book, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*, has to date received several very positive reviews in Geography journals (e.g., Somdahl-Sands, 2012; Wilkinson-Ray, Mahabir, & Shaw, 2013). Among Dittmer's many achievements in this book is his success in rendering accessible some of the social sciences' most complex theories. Indeed, rendering this material so accessible is a primary purpose of the work. While many scholars have written about the relationship that the book addresses – that between popular culture, geopolitics, and identity – few have produced texts that are, like Dittmer's, tailored for use in the classroom. In this book, Dittmer offers senior undergraduate and junior graduate students a uniquely user-friendly introduction to scholarship about this relationship; he does this both by employing a clear and conversational writing style, as well as by deploying examples of the concepts he is discussing that are likely to interest the student demographic. An introduction and two opening chapters set the theoretical stage for the case-driven chapters that follow. In these opening chapters, Dittmer exposes students to the academic study of geopolitics and of popular culture, respectively, focusing in both cases on trends in geographical scholarship without neglecting the broader theoretical influences and movements that have influenced this scholarship. The remaining five chapters are structured so that each explores one or more of the concepts that are central to our understanding of the relationship between popular culture, geopolitics, and identity (e.g., nationalism,

affect) through one or more pop cultural examples or cases (e.g., *Captain America* comic books, first-person shooter video games).

In this intervention, four geographers, all of whom have used Dittmer's book in their classes, assess its status as a teaching resource. As will become clear, all have had considerable success using Dittmer's book, alongside other resources, to cultivate critical thinking and critical knowledge production in a wide range of classes.

**By Reecia Orzeck:**

I have used Jason Dittmer's book twice now, both times in upper-level undergraduate Geography seminars – one a class on Geopolitics, the other a class on Cultural Geography. I have also several times used the Preface to Dittmer's book – an essay about the influence of geopolitics on the various incarnations of the *Star Trek* series, and on the influence of the series on the young Dittmer – in classes aimed at introducing students to the discipline of Human Geography. In what follows, I explain how I have used Dittmer's book, in combination with other readings, visual media and written assignments, to help my (mostly American) students to think critically about the role that culture plays in shaping popular support for American imperialism.

I begin by acquainting students with the broad argument that cultural representations have an effect on the way we view the world and the people who make it up (including how we view ourselves and how we decide which “selves” fall into the “our” category), and thus on how we understand geopolitical events. To do this, I have students explore non-contemporary and non-American cases in which popular culture has played a role in creating popular acceptance of particular foreign policies and practices. For this purpose, Dittmer's third chapter – on colonialism and representation (“Representation of Place and the British Empire”) – is a crucial resource. Dittmer illustrates his argument that culture affects popular understandings of a state's extra-territorial adventures using a case of colonialism of which my students are generally unaware and to which they are largely indifferent. The fact that the foreign policy being discussed is not their own – it being British and, as far as my students are concerned, ancient – serves, I think, to increase the students' receptivity to Dittmer's broader argument. So too does the fact that the students tend to be, at best, *casual* fans of the pop cultural artifacts critiqued by Dittmer in this chapter (the James Bond films, for example), with no stake in these artifacts' ideological innocence.

In order to build on the students' receptivity to Dittmer's argument, and indeed, in order to compel students to explore for themselves how cultural representations can shape perceptions of geopolitical conflicts, I then have students complete a writing assignment in which they critically compare two representations of colonialism and decolonization: Regis Wargnier's 1992 film, *Indochine* – a family saga and love story set during the final years of French colonial rule in Indochina<sup>1</sup> – and Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers* – an account of the *Front de Liberation National* (FLN)'s struggle against French colonial rule in Algiers, Algeria, based in part on the memoir of an FLN leader. The students' familiarity with French colonialism is generally no better than their familiarity with British colonialism, and they are similarly free of any pre-determined allegiances – none of the characters inspire automatic loyalty. Students are asked to conduct research on colonialism and decolonization in Indochina and Algeria so that they can execute comparisons of these films' treatments of history. They assess how the films represent their respective national histories – what they emphasize, omit, fabricate – and discuss the ideological effects (who benefits and who loses out) of these representations. By and large, the students tend to produce papers in which they confirm Dittmer's argument that popular culture has the

power to shape popular understandings of geopolitical events – including historical events – and in which they conclude that such shapings are not politically neutral.

By the time we begin to discuss the relationship between popular culture and *American* imperialism, students are ready to consider what the popular culture they consume might be saying about the USA, the rest of the world, and the relationship between the two. We begin with Dittmer's fourth chapter ("Narration of Nation in the Post-WWII United States") in which he illustrates the concepts of narrative and nationalism through an analysis of the *Captain America* comic book series. In this chapter, Dittmer pays particular attention to the changing geopolitical context that led to the series being repeatedly reimagined during the tumultuous decades between its creation in 1940 and the end of the 1970s. After this nearer-to-home example, the class considers more recent representations of US foreign policy and the peoples bound up with it: television shows such as *24* and *Homeland*, films such as *Aladdin* and the Batman movies, and the first-person shooter video games discussed in Dittmer's fifth chapter ("Affect, Embodiment, and Military Video Games"). In addition to Dittmer's book, Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) and Jane Mayer's 2007 essay on *24*, "Whatever it Takes" (2007) have proven to be useful resources during this part of the course.

On the whole, my sense is that building up to a critique of what American pop culture says about American geopolitics in this way works well. Course evaluations suggest not only that students enjoy Dittmer's book, but that the class made them cast a warier eye on the media they consume and the messages it carries. That said, some students have remained unwilling to accept the idea that their own perceptions of geopolitical events and the peoples and places involved in them have been shaped by pop cultural representations. These students have insisted that they, unlike, say, English fans of Bond films *circa* 1980, possess a media savvy that allows them to enjoy ideologically loaded pop cultural artifacts without having these affect their perceptions. In future versions of these courses, I hope to include more empirical evidence illustrating how media shape human desires and geographical imaginaries. That Dittmer's book does not include much of this material is less a comment on the book itself than on the critically inclined humanities and social sciences, within which the notion that we are not entirely self-determined and self-conscious subjects is frequently invoked but rarely illustrated or defended, no doubt because scholars in these fields generally address one another rather than readers for whom this notion is not axiomatic. That critical scholars address the unconverted in so few of our writings attests all the more to the importance of Dittmer's book, and to its status as a resource for pedagogy aimed at countering blindness to ideology and defenselessness against it.

**By Christina Dando:**

Geographers use all sorts of media in our teaching (video, DVD, YouTube, slides, maps, photographs). We study media in our research: in my own work, I have used photographs, advertisements, and films. But how might we *teach* media geography? Jason Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* offers multiple possibilities.

In Fall 2010, I taught Geographies of the Media, technically GEOG 4170/8176 Advanced Cultural Geography. While the focus was on media, I wanted to emphasize cultural geography to stay true to the course. I found Dittmer's book to be a logical choice. First, the text is very approachable for students, especially undergraduates. It is written in an engaging manner without pretention. Terms, theories, methods are defined in "glossary boxes" on the page where the terms are used.

Second, Dittmer has a strong media theme throughout the text. Each chapter provides a theoretical and methodological set-up and then applies the concepts using case studies. All case studies are media-based and include analyses of films, comic books, video games, blogs, and science fiction novels; materials that students found interesting, familiar, and eye-opening.

Third, while Dittmer's focus is on geopolitics and popular culture, I felt there was ample cultural geography to meet my needs. Discussions of various "cultures" are sprinkled through the text: high, folk and pop culture are discussed in Chapter 2, fan culture in Chapter 6, but also the interplay of empire and culture in Chapter 3 and nation and culture in Chapter 4.

I used Dittmer as the basis for the readings but the structure of the course was organized around the media that I wished to address. This was a night class meeting once a week with a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. The course began with classes devoted to culture and media theory before moving on to various media formats (newspapers, film, music and radio, television, video games, Internet, etc.). Each week's readings were a combination of a Dittmer chapter plus three articles, with the articles selected not only for their media focus but also for their ties to Dittmer, particularly resonances with theories and methods presented in that week's chapter. For example, during the fourth week (the theme of which was newspapers and print media), students read Dittmer's Chapter 3, "Representation of Place and the British Empire," addressing representation, colonization, and empire. I paired this chapter with my article on local versus national/international coverage of a Montana brothel (Dando, 2009), Potter's (2009) article on US media coverage of Haiti, and Gasher and Klein's (2008) study of international newspaper websites. Students chose one of the articles to read in addition to the Dittmer chapter and turned in a weekly "reading journal" (notes taken while reading and/or brief summaries along with discussion questions). The breadth of readings opened discussion up beyond British Empire to patriarchy and American imperialism but also to the geography of news and changing media sources. Dittmer provided the base that I played off of, with students receiving a good introduction to concepts from Dittmer.

In addition to reading journals, students were to complete a "mediagraphy" and a short project. The concept of mediagraphy came from Terhi Rantanen's *The media and globalization* (2005) where she proposes that to get at "mediated globalization and its consequences," we needed to get at how individual, local experiences are related to the global. Mediagraphy is an ethnography/biography focused on media, delineating individuals' use of and interaction with media. Dittmer's Preface is essentially a mediagraphy, reflecting on his upbringing, geopolitics and *Star Trek*. Students produced multi-generational "automediagraphies," interviewing family members about media and global awareness and reflecting on their own changing media and geographical landscape, producing ideally a three-generation mediagraphy (i.e., grandparents, parents, and themselves). It worked out perfectly: mediagraphies were due the day we read Chapter 4 (narrative and nation). Discussion was rich, with students presenting their mediagraphies as we discussed narrative and how and why we tell stories, but also considering changing personal, cultural, media, and political landscapes.

Besides the reading journal and mediagraphy, all students were to do either an original research project or a creative project. For the research projects, students were to incorporate a theory or methodology from the readings. Because I played off of and reinforced Dittmer's content, students had several examples to work with. For example, Dittmer briefly discusses content analysis in Chapter 2 and several of the semester's readings also employed content analysis. One undergraduate student did an

outstanding content analysis for her research project, analyzing the portrayal of the Haitian earthquake of 2010 in the print media. A graduate student did an excellent geopolitical analysis of state embassies in *Second Life*.

Looking back, I am very happy with the Dittmer text and will certainly use it again. My students seem to have appreciated it and the class with the course being rated 4.66 out of 5 (“Compared with other courses I have taken at UNO, this course is”: with, on a scale of 1–5, 5 being “very good”). Students in their evaluations commented: “I very much enjoyed this class. It was very interesting and caused my brain to really stretch” and “Discussions were great. Interesting and informative ... readings were good and useful.” I have to note that this text has been out on loan to students almost constantly since I taught the course, largely to graduate students interested in media geography.

My biggest criticism: this is a very masculine text. While feminism is briefly addressed, the examples are all male: from the cover with Barack Obama as Superman through the James Bond and video game case studies. This can, of course, be addressed through additional readings, something I will rectify the next time I teach this course and which I hope Dittmer will address in the next edition.

Dittmer's text can be used quite effectively to teach media geography. One of the book's great strengths is its approachability and its flexibility. It is fairly easy and enjoyable to read, even as it introduces challenging concepts such as affect or Lacanian psychoanalysis. With this strength, it also has the flexibility to be used in a range of upper-level human geography classes, such as political geography, cultural geography, or a class on Geography and Popular Culture (that may be next for me!). Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* is a welcome new resource for our teaching repertoires.

#### **By Katrinka Somdahl-Sands:**

Within a semester long undergraduate Political Geography course, Jason Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* was a keystone text assigned with two other more traditional political geography textbooks: *An Introduction to Political Geography: Space, Place and Politics* by Jones, Jones, and Woods (2004) and *The Geopolitics Reader* by ÓTuathail, Dalby, and Routledge (2006). The course covered the typical units in a political geography course such as the history of geopolitical thought, nationalism, landscapes of power, and electoral geography. My two established texts cover these topics admirably, but are not always easily accessible to undergraduates. Dittmer's text was used in my course class as an *entre* to the more theoretical discussion embedded in the other textbooks. As one student wrote in her/his class evaluation:

I thought Dittmer's book acted as a great “Political Geography Decoded” text, or “This is what those other old dudes were trying to say.” (quotation marks in original)

In my Political Geography classes I certainly intend to cover the basics, but my true pedagogical aim was to have my students see how political geography and geopolitics are alive and inescapable in their daily lives. My intent was to expose my students to how their geographic imaginations, their political worldviews, had been shaped by the media sources they interact with uncritically. Another student stated:

I am now beginning to see the interconnection between areas of politics, culture, geography in ways I never noticed before. Politics are everywhere, in the music we listen to, the television we watch; it is all around us. This is what fascinates me, that it's been there all along and I never really noticed it.

In the rest of this essay, I will provide some pedagogy ideas for those who may not be sure what to actually *do* with Dittmer's book within a political geography course. First of all, Dittmer's humor lightened the theoretically dense chapters and I used the structure of Dittmer's text and examples right from the start. At the beginning of the semester, I asked the students to apply the terms from Chapter 1 (i.e., formal, practical and popular geopolitics) to the very controversial film, *Why We Fight*. I like using this film because the terms are clearly demonstrated and it creates a forum to discuss how to disagree civilly. It should be noted however, that any controversial policy-oriented documentary could be used.

Then the class moved on to colonialism and imperialism and the examples from the book can be used on their own or as inspiration. In the book, Dittmer uses James Bond as the primary media example for the chapter on imperialism. I brought Bond into my class by finding classic James Bond scenes on YouTube and then compared them to those same scenes parodied by the *Austin Powers* series (see an example below). Not only was this really funny, but it clearly showed the imperial tropes the students had been exposed to since childhood. To further reveal to the students just how well they knew these spatial narratives, I broke the class into small groups and had them come up with a plot for "the next James Bond movie" starting from either the perspective of "the superspy," "the supervillian," or "the Bond bimchette" (aka "what/who needs to be saved"). They had to decide on settings, the current zeitgeist concerning world domination, and of course how it would all resolved in a "civilized" way by the end. Debriefing this class was a highlight of *my* semester and they "got it," too, as evidenced by this comment:

[The book] took elements of pop culture like James Bond and video games that I would normally consider slightly juvenile and made them relate to identity and geopolitics in a scholarly way.

For the chapter on nationalism, I showed commercials from beer companies to illustrate the different approaches to nationalism (primordial, modernist, postmodernist) which not only gave them a visual marker for these very abstract concepts, but again was fun. As we continued with nationalism, I purchased dollar comics from my local comic book store because it was much easier for the students to understand the power of the narrative in the Captain America, X-Men, or Avengers comics by analyzing them themselves (video links and activities in Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Resources and directions for an in-class activity.**

## Resources

“Why we fight” film by Eugene Jareki (2005), <http://www.sonyclassics.com/whywefight/>

Commercials: (primordial, modernist, and postmodernist nationalism)

- Guinness - Irish Rugby Team: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22b5YF4IRVY>
- Scotch Whisky Commercial HAKA Kilts: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z\\_WEP9ZkpS4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_WEP9ZkpS4)
- Guinness Advert - All-Ireland Tickets: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvwo3ZTDDBo&feature=related>

James Bond/Austin Powers example:

Boardroom Scenes; Spectre briefing

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW9-llaIS-g>

Austin Powers-Mustafa

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htRHj3tyYyo>

## Directions for Comic Book Activity

Step 1: Divide up the comics and read them (in pairs is fine).

Step 2: Use the ideas from class (and the terms from Dittmer) to analyze your comic book. You may discuss with your small group to define/identify the terms.

Step 3: Compare within your small group, then between the groups.

Terms to consider in your analysis (go find these IN the comics!):

- Plot
- logos/mythos/narrative
- essentialism vs identity politics
- colonialism vs imperialism
- realism vs social constructivism vs critical realism
- rationality
- ontological narrative vs public narratives vs metanarrative

In following weeks, we talked about “active audiences” and compared Dittmer's discussion of the narratives in the Lost Behind series to the geographical narratives of al-Queada (Hobbs, 2005) to look at how “risk” is actively constructed by different actors to different audiences leading to different (political) actions. While for our discussion of affect I made my students dance in class, I am sure a day of video game play would be a hit.

As a scholar who writes about how media frames our spatial imaginations, using a text that addresses geopolitics through the lens of popular culture made sense to me, eventually to my students, and I hope to you, too. As one student put it:

I think it is an ideal book for the nature of the class because it uses everyday references that are appropriate for people who know nothing about geopolitics while still including elevated terminology and concepts.

## By James Craine:

In the early to mid-twentieth century, cultural geography was mainly concerned with issues of human–environmental relations, the defining of culture regions, and the diffusion of societies over time. While

not unimportant, many of these studies were a-theoretical and treated such important concepts as culture, power, identity, and place unproblematically (if at all). As a result, by the 1980s, cultural geography's importance within the discipline specifically and academia in general had waned considerably. However, in the past 20 years, with the help of books like Jason Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*, we have seen a rejuvenation of the field of cultural geography. Dittmer's work has helped to reinvigorate and make vibrant a subfield concerned with issues of how power and space come together to help shape identities and the landscapes and places within which we live. The book is engaging on many levels and, importantly, is quite accessible for students thus allowing many opportunities for comprehensive discussions on the wide variety of topics and concepts presented in the book.

My use of Dittmer's book is primarily in my graduate seminars. I use the book because, importantly, I like it and because it examines, through its insightful discussions of a wide variety of topics, the role of popular culture in geography with: (1) an emphasis on how the field has arrived at the theories and concepts developed in the "new" cultural geography and (2) cultural geography's emphasis on issues such as place, power, landscape, and identity. Dittmer's chapters comprise a complete spectrum of popular culture's place in cultural geography (recognizing that each of the topics discussed can be semester-long seminars in and of themselves). The book successfully explores several of the key concepts that permeate cultural geography today through an in-depth examination of ideas such as geopolitics, place representation, affect and new media. The book is the foundation of my seminar because it allows us to discuss and analyze issues of power, cultural geographies, and identity, through discussions of how popular culture works to create and maintain identities of sexuality, gender, race, and nation. Dittmer has theorized within and beyond geography, exploring the contention that the "politicization" of particular identities is central to the normalization of space and *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of popular culture in order to understand its role in shaping social relations of all kinds.

I have found the book especially useful in my seminar discussions on new media and its role in engaging geography, especially the affective properties of new media and popular culture. We cover a variety of media topics but our consummate focus is on landscapes, spaces and spatialities, mobilities, scales, narratives (spatial stories), and networks. Dittmer's work serves as an accessible gateway to these topics because Dittmer is not one of these geographers who are reliant on earlier theories of visualization, particularly those based on Deleuze. While Deleuzian theory is still applicable to the geographic engagement of static imagery such as photography or analog-animated imagery such as cinema, it is problematical in the analysis of the machinic functionalities of digital spaces such as cyberspace, the DVD, or computer-generated mapping technologies. Dittmer gives us a better understanding of *how* we affectively engage space – his work allows geographers to better understand the research they undertake and the results that are produced for academic and public consumption.

An illustration would be Dittmer's chapter on the "Active Audience and Evangelical Geopolitics." Although performance and audience are not new to geography, Dittmer (2010, p. 91) offers a more sophisticated conception of this engagement. For him, affect is "sensation linked to your environment; can be both biological and relational." In a biological sense, the connection is between our bodies and the social/cultural world. Relationally, it is less about the biological/environmental interface and more about reciprocal connections between people, or people and objects.

With this in mind and Dittmer's book in hand, our seminar looked closely at The International House of Prayer Missions Base of Kansas City, Missouri, an evangelical, nondenominational neo-charismatic Christian organization with Pentecostal origins best known for its live continuous broadcast of "The Prayer Room" on its website *ihop.org*. As Dittmer (2010) points out, affect serves as "a sense of push in the world" influencing our collective behavior and is defined as "the active outcome of an encounter, taking the form of an increase or decrease in the ability of the body and mind alike to act" (p. 92). Both forms are highly influenced by a myriad of environmental factors but neither are reducible to just purely "emotion." The body's experience of affect comes in the form of feelings and sensations prior to our mind labeling them as such. And it can be understood to work in several ways – through contagion (affect's ability to circulate among populations); amplification (intensification of individual experiences); and resonance (synchronicity between two or more affects producing a larger affect). In "effect," affect is the how of emotion. Thus, Dittmer's chapter is central to my seminar's understanding of how modern American evangelical Christianity and its geopolitics, from the optimism (postmillennialism) or pessimism (premillennialism) they promote to the literalism of God's hand intervening in human affairs, are the Bible-inspired eschatological imaginations (Sturm & Dittmer 2010, p. 10).

This is just one of the varied ways *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* considers the geographies that appear in popular culture, the geographies constructed by and through popular culture, and importantly, how popular culture is changing our geographies. In our increasingly media-dominated world, the representations of popular culture are our means of knowing the world, as well as constructing new worlds. For my cultural and political geography seminars, I have found that Dittmer's book successfully considers the "real" geographies being constructed and their ramifications in our modern world of intertextuality. Students understand the book's value as well. At the end of the semester, I have students rank the books used during the semester. Criteria include the academic utility of the book, presentation readability, value to the themes discussed in the seminar, and overall interest in the book. In general, I use these rankings to decide whether to keep a book or move on to something different. Since I have been using the Dittmer book, students have consistently ranked it at the top of the list. Comments have been quite positive, particularly in terms of how the book engages important themes at an accessible level. Students liked the discussions constructed around the topics addressed in the book and this allowed the seminar to engage in numerous in-depth conversations about geography and culture.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing essays are meant to provide readers who are interested in using Dittmer's *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* as a classroom resource with some suggestions for how to make the most of this rich and enjoyable text. Like any text, Dittmer's has flaws. This intervention has drawn attention to the book's masculinism, and to its failure to illustrate the critical theoretical axiom that we are not the self-determining subjects that we tend to think we are. Other reviews have drawn attention to other weaknesses. Somdahl-Sands (2012), for example, notes that, in his selection of examples, Dittmer tends to privilege Western visual pop cultural artifacts. She also notes that Dittmer's text fails to adequately address the political economy of media and popular culture. Wilkinson-Ray et al. (2013) make several critiques of the book's ability to meet the challenge of its own form – noting, for example, that the chapters are somewhat disconnected from one another – but find little wanting in the book's substance. By and large, then, the substantive flaws that critics have highlighted pertain to what the book leaves out, rather than to what it does wrong. Flaws of this sort, of course, can also be viewed as

openings: spaces that instructors can fill with supplementary lectures, readings, and examples. And indeed, none of us have relied upon the text exclusively in our courses. All of us, however, have found *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity* to be a superlative classroom resource, and one, moreover, that lends itself well to being the centerpiece of a syllabus. This is because its quality, breadth, and accessibility allow it to be a “weight-bearing” text, and because – and this well befits a book about popular culture – Dittmer's spirited and capacious approach to his topic makes the text one that “plays” particularly well with others. We encourage instructors of cultural, media, and political geographies to consider it for their courses.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>. Crystal Bartolovich at Syracuse University introduced me to this film's pedagogical potential.

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