

# How Movie References Can Make Teaching Theories More Accessible

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Teaching theories of IR (or of anything really) doesn't have to be done in an unstimulating way that puts students to sleep. I find that it often helps to relate complex, theoretical ideas to scenes that can be visualized and are either commonplace or known to students from pop culture. This is where I usually reference themes from or situations in movies or TV series in order to make sure students grasp theoretical concepts of IR.

One such movie series that has proven useful is the [Back to the Future](#) (BTTF) trilogy. The movies were first released in 1985, 1989, and 1990, respectively. Throughout the trilogy, protagonist Marty McFly journeys to four different points in time: 1885, 1955, 1985, and 2015. As such, it also took a stab at predicting 2015 from a 1980s perspective. The fact that “the future” was set in 2015 is why the trilogy [re-appeared frequently in the media last year](#) and even [in the current presidential race](#). The different time periods in BTTF have been valuable for bringing concepts in courses such as IPE and IR theory to life.

Though there are surely many more examples, I identified four “best uses” of BTTF for connecting it to IR theoretical themes: (1) power-transition theory/U.S. global hegemony, (2) IPE export-led development strategies, (3) realism's assumption that history repeats itself, and (4) constructivism's challenge that anarchy is what states make of it.

The first two great analogies from BTTF have to do with Japan's economic miracle post-World War II up until the 1990s and the theories and themes that can be associated with that, e.g., export-led development strategies, the rise and fall of great powers, and power-transition-theory. [When Marty travels to 2015 in BTTF II](#), his future boss, who is Japanese, fires him for professional misconduct while skyping in from Japan. In the late 1980s, Japan was seemingly on track to replace the U.S. as the global hegemon in the near- to mid-future. This would most suitably illustrate power-transition theory and may relate just as well to not only Japan's rise but also the current rise of China, which may experience a trajectory similar to that of Japan. That way, students can easily see how people viewed Japan in the 1980s; people in 1989 thought that by 2015, the Japanese would be “the future masters.” This can be compared to today's prospective thinking concerning China. I have also used this scene when talking about the renewalist vs. declinist debate in IPE regarding U.S. global hegemony.

The second scene is also related to Japan. In BTTF III, in order to save Doc Brown from certain death in 1885, Marty finds himself having to repair the DeLorean time machine in 1955 with the help of Doc's younger self. When (younger) Doc Brown finally discovers the auto part that caused the problem, he says: “No wonder this circuit failed. It says ‘Made in Japan.’” Marty retorts, “What do you mean, Doc? [All the best stuff is made in Japan.](#)” Young Doc exclaims, “Unbelievable!” This may also be used for economic development theories in IPE, like export-led development strategies and “competitive advantage” using industrial targeting, which exemplify how Japan went from the shattered, post-World War II economy that Doc referred to in 1955 to the advanced, high-tech economy and second largest market in the world by 1985.

The third and fourth references in BTTF are more closely related to IR theories, especially realism and constructivism: Villain Biff Tannen—together with his 1885 ancestor “Mad Dog” and 2015 grand-son Griff—plays the antagonist in all four time periods that Marty finds himself in. Whenever he is, there is really no running away from conflict with a Tannen bully for Marty. In class, this can easily be linked to the realist concept of IR as a cycle in which history (and conflict) repeats itself—[tragically so, if one believes John J. Mearsheimer](#). After the third movie was released in 1990, one of Mearsheimer's most famous articles came out in *International Security*. In its title, he himself used a reference to BTTF to predict what would happen to Europe post-Cold War, i.e., that history will repeat

itself: *“Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War.”*

Like Mearsheimer’s realist article, the movie may actually also be connected to a famous constructivist publication. Though Mearsheimer clearly made an intentional reference to BTTF, the following IR connection may or may not be deliberate. In one of the last scenes of BTTF III, Doc Brown gives the trilogy a nice moral conclusion by stating, “The future is whatever you make of it; so make it a good one!” Constructivist Alexander Wendt’s 1992 article [“Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics”](#) picks up this line (and logic) from Doc Brown, i.e., that it is what one makes of something, whether that be the future or anarchy. Early constructivist works like Wendt’s are mainly reactions to realist assumptions as well as their inherent over-simplicity (or “parsimony”). Therefore, it may not be too far-fetched to think that Wendt in 1992 wanted to react not only to the realist Mearsheimer (among others) but also to his 1990 article title reference to BTTF. IR scholarship never actually identified Wendt’s title as a BTTF movie reference, but I do think that it likely is one. Without speculating further, given that I already use the BTTF analogy to talk about realism in class, it is only natural for me to come back to it when talking about constructivism.

BTTF is only one source of movie references for the classroom. Still, I think it’s one of the best because it gives us a window to the past and the future—both from a 1985 perspective—and it was of some importance in the titles of IR theory articles, too. In the end, though, your theory class can be whatever you make of it; so make it an accessible one!