

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: representation of leadership in popular culture [Editorial]

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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly - Representation of leadership in popular culture.

Introduction

Popular culture has increasingly been positioned as a productive site through which to examine and develop insights into organisational life in all its diversity (Śliwa et al., 2013; Bell & Sinclair, 2016; Mavin et al., 2016). This Special Issue (SI) focuses on two intersecting topics that are at the heart of the *Culture and Organization* journal's - critical, interpretive explorations of organisations and culture. The role of popular culture in shaping organisations has previously been examined in this journal, for example, in relation to military organisations (Godfrey, 2009), gender (Boncori, 2017; Rhodes & Pullen, 2012), or resistance (Benozzo et al., 2019). Similarly, leadership debates have more recently included studies on mediated leadership representations (Biehl and Santama 2023) or humanities

studies of leadership (McManus and Perruci, 2015, Rhodes and Westwood 2008, Hassard and Holliday, 1998). While they could be considered paradigm-shifting, these approaches have gained little currency in the mainstream management academy. Seeking to advance the debates beyond individual contributions, this SI focuses on the intersectional perspective of leadership and pop culture, which is relatively new for both the journal and more widely to the field of Organization Studies.

Specifically, in response to global concerns in leadership, in which power, diversity, individualism, and heroification have been brought into sharp focus, this SI examines how structures of power play out in pop culture texts, thus providing an important interdisciplinary intervention. In line with the dominant understanding in cultural studies, we see popular culture as a key mediator and catalyst for social change and control, and recognise its potential to advance our understanding of the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Leadership. Articles in the SI forge fruitful interdisciplinary links between those working in Cultural/Media Studies and Leadership Studies and, together, invite a closer future dialogue between these disciplines.

Pop culture and society

Popular culture, including visual fiction (e.g. Holstein and Rantakari, 2023; Holt and Zundel, 2014; Panayiotou and Kafiris, 2011), has traditionally been associated with pop fiction, movies and TV series, more recently social media and gaming. Cultural studies has long recognised the significance of media and popular culture in shaping social meanings, identities, and practices (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1989). More recent scholarship has further demonstrated the capacity of popular culture to influence public discourse, mobilise social movements, and shape understandings of justice, inequality, and social change (Wheatley, 2024; Louis 2020, Louis et al 2023, Louis and Loxham 2024, 2025, Louis and Obst, 2026). The capacity of film and television to shape public attitudes and behaviours is well established. Media texts have influenced public understanding of HIV/AIDS (*Philadelphia* 1993), altered perceptions of criminal justice and forensic evidence (*CSI* 2000-2015), raised public awareness and triggered wider debates about toxic masculinity (*Adolescence*, 2025) and child sexual abuse, together with failed responses to it (*The Girls*, 2017) as well as intensified

public scrutiny of institutional failures and miscarriages of justice (*Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, 2024). Such examples demonstrate that popular culture does not simply reflect social reality; it actively participates in the production of social knowledge, public sentiment, and policy conversations. Film and television are especially powerful because they communicate complex social and ethical dilemmas through compelling narratives that foster emotional engagement and identification.

Yet despite growing recognition of the impact of mediated narratives on wider social life, the role of popular culture in shaping leadership beliefs, identities and practices remains underexplored. This gap is particularly significant at a time when culture is increasingly recognised as a strategic societal resource. International policy frameworks, including UNESCO's work on cultural industries, have highlighted culture's economic contribution and role in supporting innovation and social development. However, as Mazzucato (2025) argues, assessments of culture based solely on economic metrics underestimate its broader public value. Rather than viewing culture as a consumable product, divorced from reality, Mazzucato proposes understanding it as a form of public infrastructure, comparable to education or healthcare, that shapes how societies imagine collective futures, establish shared values, and make sense of complex challenges. Popular culture therefore warrants serious scholarly attention not only for what it represents but also for what it enables people to think, feel, and do and the influence it has in mobilising action, shaping attitudes and agendas.

Popular culture in leadership studies

The exploration of popular culture artifacts as representations of leadership that are simultaneously embedded in and influence the public discourse (Alvesson, 2010; Learmonth and Morrell, 2017) of leadership is a relatively small sub-field of leadership studies (for example, Badaracco, 2006; Biehl, 2021; Carroll et al., 2015; Craven, 2019; Edwards et al., 2015; Urick, 2021). Nevertheless, it offers considerable potential for advancing the broader field of leadership studies. Biehl and Satama (2023: 418) have argued that “popular culture can be seen as a serious exploration of leaders and their human nature”. In particular, films

and novels offer rich stories about people where protagonists portray the good, the bad and the ugly of leaders and leadership (see e.g. Moore's, 2022, analysis of *The Game of Thrones* as a useful example). Indeed, Biehl and Satama (2023: 418) argue that they not only mirror contemporary ideologies of leadership but also "reflect misogyny, hetero- and cissexism, and toxic masculinity".

Pullen and Rhodes (2012) and Rhodes (2016) argue that popular culture as a focus of management and leadership research offers great opportunities for reflections, critiques and new approaches to, and frames, of leadership. For example, studying the misogyny, hetero- and cissexism, and toxic masculinity deeply embedded in storylines of books and films can aid critical analyses of the inherent bias in dominant leader images and leadership discourse (Biehl, 2021). Fictional plots may further be seen to push the boundaries by creating new, inclusive leadership role models that challenge existing norms and illustrate what could be possible. They may further give insights into possible leadership scenarios and approaches in different types of contexts, including crisis situations (e.g. Buchanan and Hallgren's 2019 analysis of zombie movies).

From a practice perspective, we can further see popular culture at times being based on leadership practices in real organisations and in turn influencing leadership practices (Gilani et al., 2020). Moreover, the increased interest in social media as a context for the study of leadership has challenged the traditional leader-follower notions embedded in organisational hierarchies. Popular culture examples of leadership have also been used in leadership and management education serving as a reflective mirror, possibly influencing future leaders (Callahan et al., 2007; Library, 2022; Bezio, 2022; Stead and Elliott, 2019) and rebuilding leadership theory (Śliwa, 2023).

Biehl and Satama (2023) propose that popular culture presents a powerful source of unconscious, and a tool for conscious, learning about leadership through its captivating, emotional and illustrative nature. The individual engaging with popular culture artefacts is not just a recipient of intended meaning but importantly actively engages in an experiential sense-making process that constructs meaning in relation to the viewer's context and experience. The benefits of using art and popular culture in leadership development has been proposed some time ago by Ladkin and Taylor (2010). Edwards et al. (2015) have, for example,

demonstrated how films such as 'Batman: The Dark Knight' can offer powerful illustrations of the dialectic nature of good and bad in leaders and be used in the leadership development classroom to explore the socially constructed nature of ethics and the dilemmas this poses for what we construct to be good or bad leadership. Biehl and Satama (2023: 421) add that such "strong images and emotional content in a learning context provoke aha moments, furthering the understanding and retention of abstract leadership theories and concepts".

Special Issue contributions

The SI has attracted a wide range of submissions from authors from various disciplines, well beyond leadership studies, including history, political studies and media. The final selection consists of five articles focused on a broad range of forms of popular culture. We now briefly introduce each of them separately before outlining how we interpret their joint contribution to leadership and organisation studies.

The opening article by Brigitte Biehl's 'Leadership development with reality TV: identity work with the Kardashians', explores how alternative contemporary representations of leadership in popular culture can serve as an easily accessible resource for leadership identity work and thus for leadership development. Biehl, performing a dual role of a leadership development course instructor and researcher, as well as building on her earlier work (Biehl, 2023), discusses a pedagogic intervention of learning with film, which, as she cautions, should be viewed as distinctive from learning from film. We are reminded that learning with film approaches 'film as an aesthetic experience' (Biehl, 2023: 146) where viewers do not merely consume content but actively engage in it through their experiences and deeper reflection. Here popular culture is seen as 'inviting viewers into an active dialogue' (op cit: 146). The current paper in the SI builds on these ideas and applies them to a leadership development intervention. It draws on multimedia data: reflective diaries with drawings, created over 10 weeks of entries by 29 international undergraduate and MBA students. The paper turns our attention to the rarely explored possibilities afforded by reality TV for the viewers 'to engage with affective and material aspects in [leadership] identity work' (p. 4). As she explains, 'through their capacity to generate affect, films and TV shows may provide new opportunities for learners to engage in identity work' (p. 2) in ways that exceed what formal, cognitively-oriented leadership curricula typically offer. The cited narratives and evocative imaginaries

shed new light on how alternative female role models in popular culture stimulate affect; relatedness and connection but also distancing. More specifically, it demonstrates how affective connection to reality TV characters evolves through multiple reflexive movements, leading to de- and reconstruction of self-views. Biehl sees the resulting 'expanded affective repertoire' (p. 15) as transformative learning, related to individuals' 'embodied dispositions and responses towards themselves and others' (p. 15) and understandings of leadership. On the practical level, the paper highlights the possibilities of empowering, self-directed leadership development with popular culture.

The second article, Stevenson's 'Mastering the art of prime ministership?: the politics of cooking in ABC's *At Home with Julia* (2011)' turns our attention to political leadership. Stevenson engages in a close reading of key episodes of a popular Australian TV series that fictionalised Gillard, Australia's first female Prime Minister, her private life and relationship with her partner Tim Mathieson. The paper demonstrates how the series draws on culinary archetypes, comparing well-known Julias, including the renowned chef Julia Child (played in the film *Julie and Julia* (2009) by Meryl Streep), with Julia, the Australian Prime Minister. It illustrates how gendered assumptions about cooking ability and domesticity are paired with women's political leadership. Rather than a residual trace of pre-feminist ideology, Stevenson identifies cooking as a distinct feature of Australian postfeminism of the 2000s and 2010s, explaining how it makes female political leadership more vulnerable to gendered narratives.

Bowden, Robinson, Collins and Thompson's article continues the focus on gender, popular culture and leadership through their critical analysis of *Antz*, Dreamwork's first feature film. They demonstrate how the filmmakers represented dominant hierarchical and gendered notions of leadership through the storyline, which departs significantly from the ecological reality of ants. Indeed, an ant colony is a female, family-unit world very unlike the male-dominated hierarchy displayed in the *Antz* film. The plot and characters are therefore more representative of what producers and writers consider human leadership to be, rather than of the reality of ant colonies. Drawing on Implicit Leadership Theories, the authors critically explore how the film seems to forgo the opportunity to challenge traditional organisational hierarchical norms and gendered constructions of leadership, and instead works towards institutionalising the audience into dominant notions of organisational membership, thereby perpetuating leadership stereotypes. They further argue that representations of the real

ecology of ant colonies could help to re-imagine organisations as operating successfully without masculine leadership and indeed without leaders. The authors reflect how children's productions can 'be instrumental in socializing multiple (and successive) generations in an ever-evolving suite of social practices, institutional norms, and cultural aspirations and expectations, about life and work (p. 6).

The following article by Gardiner investigates interconnections among postfeminism, authenticity, and leadership through an exploration of the fashion influencer Trinny Woodall's use of social media to enhance their brand and their own leadership credibility. Through an analysis of three episodes of *The Trinny Takeover Show*, Gardiner brings together insights from feminist cultural studies and leadership studies to offer a nuanced critique of contemporary constructions of authentic leadership. Gardiner persuasively argues that Woodall cultivates an authentic persona that is influenced by postfeminism and intertwined with the promotion of her company. Central to the article is the question of how authentic this form of leadership is and to what extent 'being honest and candid' (p.12) represents a carefully managed performance that projects the 'best self forward' (p.10). The paper concludes that one should take a closer look at authenticity in the guise of social conformism, mixed with agentic selves, which often influences what women and leaders should really look like.

The closing article in the SI is by Rehn and focuses on leadership caricatures and spectacle in pro wrestling, analysing the case of World Wrestling Entertainment and its CEO. The study challenges the conventional distinction between authentic leadership and its cultural representations. By using caricature and carnivalesque spectacle lenses, the author analyses pro-wrestling as an arena which blurs the boundaries between Vince McMahon, a CEO and performer. The paper asks if McMahon is 'a worker playing a caricatural CEO, or a CEO playing a caricature of himself' (p.2). The first contribution that Rehn is making here is by showing how managers and leaders become more engaged in front-stage spectacle, making it an act dedicated to specific audiences. There may also be tension between front-stage and backstage performances as leaders start occupying different roles in the corporate-capitalism spectacle. Secondly, he points to performativity as a conscious, creative capitalist move. By commodifying the notion of management, it sells tickets and merchandise to support WWE's

business. This makes representation play a greater role than just popular culture, turning an 'economy unto itself' (p.12).

Final reflections

This SI builds on emerging work that positions pop culture as an important site for understanding leadership (Biehl and Santama, 2023, McManus and Perruci, 2015, Rhodes and Westwood 2008). The papers serve as a strong reminder and vivid illustrations that screen narratives do not merely entertain; they construct powerful cultural scripts about authority, legitimacy, ethics, success, and gendered power. They offer evocative representations of the challenges leaders face, while simultaneously inviting audiences to engage emotionally with those experiences. By bringing leadership studies into dialogue with cultural studies, this research, we hope, will set the foundations for novel interdisciplinary frameworks for examining how mediated leadership narratives shape the way leaders understand themselves and their professional practice. In doing so, it addresses a significant gap between scholarship on organisational leadership and scholarship on cultural representation, demonstrating that leadership is not only enacted within institutions but also imagined, learned, and contested through the stories that circulate within popular culture.

Turning attention to a range of rarely explored forms of popular culture in Organization and Leadership studies, such as animated feature, parody, reality television and caricature the five articles in this SI add further weight to earlier arguments about the theorising potential of popular culture for our disciplines. They demonstrate the analytical and practical value of learning through, and with, popular culture on the concept of leadership and as tools for leadership development. For example, they demonstrate the potential of parody and caricature to expose what seemingly more 'realistic' representations of leadership are likely to suppress or naturalise, whether the imposition of hierarchy onto contexts that do not require it, the gendered domestic expectations placed on women in leadership or the affective and embodied dimensions of authority. Several contributions further demonstrate that the boundary between authentic leadership and its popular-culture representation is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain and may need to be reconsidered. For Organization Studies, the implications from this SI are both conceptual and practical: they illustrate that

popular culture warrants scholarly attention not as easily accessible illustrations of prior leadership theory to be used primarily for teaching purposes but as a site with rich potential for novel analytical and conceptual work. This calls for scholarship and pedagogy that consider affect, spectacle and performance, without prioritising cognition.

For leadership studies specifically, the insights from this SI reinforce previous suggestions (e.g. Badaracco, 2006; Biehl, 2021; Carroll et al., 2015; Craven, 2019; Edwards et al., 2015; Urick, 2021) that popular culture is a powerful site where people experiment with leadership identities, negotiate gendered expectations, and rehearse the emotional and performative dimensions of leading. Going forward, leadership development research and practice should recognise informal, affective, and culturally embedded identity work as legitimate and influential. Leadership research should draw on popular culture further to interrogate how gendered cultural scripts shape expectations, legitimacy, and vulnerability for leaders who do not conform to dominant white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual leaders' images. This includes explorations of authenticity as a gendered, socially regulated performance and leadership practice more widely as a staged, audience-dependent performance.

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