

PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract: *The association between national security and pop culture might seem puzzling at first as the former category immediately brings to mind connections with fun and fiction, whereas the latter is linked with serious analyses and real-life relevance. Nevertheless, as this paper will show, exploring the complexity of American popular culture with regard to national security does prepare the ground for an interesting investigation. After all, media such as movies, video games and books represent great channels through which stereotypes about the activities carried out by intelligence and law enforcement agencies are reproduced, reshaped and reinforced among the general public. Popular representations of espionage, mass surveillance, terrorism or enhanced interrogation techniques are just a few examples that deserve to be analyzed as far as the discourse on national security is concerned. Therefore, it is the aim of this paper to look at some of the aspects related to national security through the lens of American popular culture.*

Keywords: *national security; popular culture; intelligence agencies*

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a very strong bond between culture and national security. This link is highlighted by various anthropologists who suggest that culture influences the activity of human beings in any society because it helps people to better adapt and increase their chances of survival. Thus, the analysis of the role of culture as the essence of social contract theories and of practical human organizations is closely connected with national security issues which influence both the individual person and the community as a whole (Gbadegesin in Oladiran & Adadevoh, 1991:96). From this point of view, it can be argued that the protection and expansion of a nation-state depend on the cultural context.

But how exactly do we define culture? Although various definitions tend to say the same thing, culture, much like intelligence, escapes a precise definition. The variety of meanings the word culture encapsulates can be explained by, on the one hand, the outstanding number of cultures across the globe and, on the other hand, its applicability to a large number of academic areas. Therefore, when we speak of culture, we refer to different things in different contexts.

The renowned Welsh Marxist theorist Raymond Williams was particularly interested in this matter and established four main uses of the term. The first one sees culture as a form of 'intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development'; the second one is synonymous with civilization, denoting a 'general process of social development'; the third indicates 'the objects of artistic production' - books, movies, paintings, songs; and the fourth refers to the anthropological meaning of the word culture - understanding a society by analyzing its shared system of behaviors, norms and symbols (Williams in Willmetts, 2019:801). For our research purposes, it is the third category, culture as artistic representation, that most interests us. This third interpretation is also the one that best describes the sub-category of culture that we commonly refer to as popular culture.

Over the last hundred years, American movies and books have probably been the most popular and influential media of culture in the United States. As Dan O'Meara *et al.* point out in *Movies, Myth and the National Security State*, these two channels have played a crucial part in envisioning the universe and in determining the vocabulary, setting the images, metaphors and creating the

mental maps, models, attitudes, and emotional frameworks through which Americans understood their own identity, their country, and its national security in the aftermath of the Second World War (O'Meara *et al.*, 2016:3-4).

US intelligence agencies have a long history of influencing cultural representations and molding how the public understands the way in which the state operates. As far back as the early 1930s, the FBI established an office to shape its image in film, radio, and TV shows. Ever since, the FBI press officers have been trying to mystify the workings of the Bureau by emboldening fictional representations that praise its activities. Other government agencies such as the Department of Defense, the Army, the Navy, the DIA, or the Drug Enforcement Administration followed in the FBI's footsteps and established media offices aimed at methodically securing sympathetic portrayals from media producers. The most recent members to join the trend have been the CIA and the Department of Homeland Security.

In light of this, we share Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon's contention that there are important elements to be unraveled as to what represents legitimate national security narratives and how they are reshaped and reinforced through the various channels of popular culture (Jackson, Nexon, 2003:144). To put it differently, we might argue that popular culture has essentially become an ideal stage on which national security scenarios are rehearsed and the politics of the national security state is analyzed.

Therefore, it is the aim of this paper is to look at some of the aspects related to national security through the lens of American popular culture. To achieve this, we will group some of the best known American artistic productions into three categories - espionage, war on terror/drugs and mass surveillance - and briefly comment upon them using plot analysis to better understand their perspective on the activities carried out by US intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

2. ESPIONAGE

There is a certain fascination with espionage among the American people that is reflected in the abundance of cultural products dedicated to this matter. Spy stories, for instance, are a staple of the American culture and it is not surprising that the two have been companions since the birth of the country. In fact, the first major American novel that dealt with espionage was James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy*. Published in 1821, this was

Cooper's second novel and, through the story of a peddler named Harvey Birch, it shed some light on what it meant to be a spy during the Revolutionary War.

Nowadays, it is seldom that a few weeks go by without a new spy novel being published, with secret agents ranging from beautiful female agents trained to seduce their targets like in former CIA operative Jason Matthews's *Red Sparrow* trilogy, to the spies that operated amidst the turmoil of the Second World War such as the ones from Alan Furst's *A Hero of France* or *Under Occupation*. Some of the authors focus on non-fiction dedicated to the world of espionage like Larry Loftis in his 2019 *Code Name: Lise* or David E. Hoffmann in his 2016 *The Billion Dollar Spy*, while others continue to explore the complexities of spying through sequels and prequels to their former critically acclaimed novels, like gender-veteran John le Carré in *A Legacy of Spies*, his 2017 novel being both a sequel and a prequel to his 1963 bestseller *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

Even teenagers have their own spies. The supremacy of vampires is challenged by the *Gallagher Girls Series*, which comprises five books published between 2006 and 2013 by Alice Carter. The stories focus on the Gallagher Academy for Exceptional Young Women, a school for the training of spies. Another example is Gail Carriger's novels from the *Finishing School Series* printed between 2013 and 2015. The series combines espionage with supernatural creatures such as vampires and werewolves through the story of a 14-year old girl who enrolls in Mademoiselle Geraldine's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies of Quality only to discover that the school offers more than just lessons in dance, dress, and etiquette, as it also trains the girls to deal with death, diversion, and espionage - in the politest possible ways, of course.

Spy mania becomes even clearer in television, where a growing number of movies and TV-series are winning prizes and viewers with their edge-of-the-seat stories of moles and mole-hunters and with their cliffhangers. Some of the aforementioned titles, such as *Red Sparrow*, have already been adapted for the screens, thus reaching an even wider audience. The *Mission Impossible* series is one of the best known American action spy franchises and follows the story of Ethan Hunt, an agent working for the IMF, as he is sent to carry out various missions around the world to ensure national and international security. Through the work of world-class auteurs, memorable stunts, adrenaline-packed plots and a haunting soundtrack

this, alongside James Bond, has become one of the most iconic series that depict espionage.

If we turn our attention to TV-series, *Homeland* has been one of the most celebrated shows winning 5 Golden Globes and another 55 other awards over the past 8 seasons. The series has even gained fans among the members of the former White House administrations; President Barack Obama confessed it was one of his favorite shows and former Vice-President Dick Cheney said that he could relate to a plot from season two. The series has been praised for its complex and well-written script which keeps the audience hooked and guessing as to how the unfolding of the action will affect the US national security.

Airing between 2013 and 2018, *The Americans* was another popular American TV-show. Created by Joe Weisberg, a former CIA officer, it is set in the early 1980s, just after Ronald Reagan's election as President, and tells the story of Phillip and Elizabeth Jennings, two KGB spies whose marriage was arranged. The couple move with their two children to Washington where they assume a double identity in order to gather information. As the series develops, their task becomes increasingly difficult as even the smallest mistake could cost them their lives.

Sometimes, espionage is served in the form of comedy as the audience is presented with kindhearted but inept protagonists that are given assignments which far exceed their abilities. Who has not heard of the famous *Johnny English* who, against all odds, successfully completed not 1, but 3 missions and ensured the safety of millions of people? Similarly, the *Austin Powers* trilogy parodies the very world of espionage by putting forward a character who is the total opposite of Ian Fleming's famous James Bond. While these are examples of British spies, they are, nevertheless, deeply ingrained in American popular culture.

Children are also consumers of cultural products that address the issue of espionage. Recent movies such as *Spies in Disguise* or *The Boss Baby* and TV-series such as *Spy Kids* or *Carmen Sandiego* combine humor and adventure into stories that appeal to preschoolers and grade-schoolers. Children are also very interested in spy equipment such as invisible ink pens, night vision goggles or laser trap alarms and dedicate a great deal of their time playing spy games, e.g. *I Spy with My Little Eye*; the CIA has even created their own webpage dedicated to kids: <https://www.cia.gov/kids-page>. Thus, boys and girls learn from a very young age what espionage

is all about and how it is connected with the security of a person or a community.

As we have seen so far, the theme of espionage is multidimensional and ubiquitous and, as a result it is dealt with at all levels of the media. This begs the question: what do all of these examples tell us? The most important thing to note is that the perception of espionage has constantly changed with the political and cultural context of the times and adapted to reflect the new zeitgeist. In the 1950s and 1960s, any fictional spy carrying out assignments for America or its allies was likely depicted as unmistakably heroic, even when involved in activities that might have drawn the criticism of civil libertarians. A good example, based on real characters and events, is that of advertising executive Herbert Philbrick who agreed to spy on the Communists for the FBI, and spent almost a decade of his life as a Communist, FBI spy, and Communist counter-spy. His autobiography became the basis for a drama series entitled *I Led Three Lives*, which aired between 1953 and 1956, at the height of the Second Red Scare.

There followed the Cold War spies such as James Bond and Matt Helm who were absolutely dazzling, driving their hot little sports cars and having countless affairs with young, beautiful women when they weren't chasing and killing Soviet agents. However, the disillusion with the Vietnam War and the disclosure of the CIA's recruitment of mobsters to murder Cuba's young communist leader, Fidel Castro, brought about a transformation of the fictional spies. Thus, they were turned into anti-heroes, cynical burnouts who botched their operations; examples are to be found in le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* or *The Looking Glass War*, where the spies are often portrayed as incompetent and morally indistinguishable from their communist counterparts.

Nowadays, spies and espionage come in a plethora of forms, from video-games such as the *Metal Gear* series or *No One Lives Forever*, in which players have the ability to control their spies and the missions they take on, to songs such as Ed Sheeran and Camilla Cabello's *South of the Border* whose video has been dubbed as a frivolous spy film which brings under the same roof all the features of the genre: a heist, a car chase, a fight, and a story that involves seduction and betrayal (Roth, 2019). One thing is certain: spies have acquired and will continue to acquire a special fascination as their activities continue to touch the everyday life of Americans.

3. WAR ON TERROR / DRUGS

When George W. Bush declared that the US was starting a War on Terror in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the nation had already been involved in a long-lasting war that started under President Nixon who, in 1971, declared drug abuse public enemy number one. While it is true that the two Wars have their share of differences regarding various social, economic and cultural aspects, we share Professor Oswaldo Zavala's point of view according to which they are both constructed on the same narrative pillars: a racialized enemy who comes forward from the margins of a subjugated foreign nation, allegedly setting up a transnational organization capable of pacifying the official institutions in that country, and penetrating the permeable US borders, which in turn validates the concurrent militarization of the US borders and the target country alike (Zavala, 2019). It is easy to see that for the last five decades these two issues have shaped the US national security policy and it is worthwhile exploring what popular culture has to tell us about them.

Let us turn our attention first to the War on Terror. Just from a quick glance at the outstanding number of books, TV-series, documentaries, movies, video-games, paintings and sculptures inspired by the 9/11 events, one cannot help but wonder how critical they were for the nation and for the imagination of its people. Famous TV-shows such as *24*, *The Unit*, or *Homeland*, bestsellers like Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, Mitchell Zuckoff's *Fall and Rise: the Story of 9/11*, or Chris Adrian's *A Better Angel*, critically acclaimed movies like *Body of Lies*, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Eye in the Sky*, songs such as Tori Amos' *I Can't See New York*, Beyoncé's *I Was Here* or Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising*, and videogames like the *Call of Duty* series are just a few of the cultural products inspired by the 2001 World Trade Center terrorist attack. As David Grondin points out, the stories told in these pop culture vehicles can elicit critiques of current American policies, while also inviting alternative narratives and accounts of what September 11, 2001, has represented for the American society (Grondin, 2014:1).

This is not to imply that writers and film makers were not interested in terrorism before the 9/11 attacks; on the contrary, there have been many books and movies dedicated to this issue and they were all correlated "with the waves and historical development of political violence" (Riegler, 2010:35). Thus, the 1970s put the

spotlight on hijackers and lone wolves with movies such as Hitchcock's *Saboteur*, Seaton's *Airport* or Frankenheimer's *Black Sunday*. With the US engagement in the Middle East in the 1980s and experiences such as the 1983 Beirut barracks bombings, the perspective underwent a change and the topic became ubiquitous among the public. Movies such as *Nighthawks*, *Invasion U.S.A.* and *Delta Force* now tackled religious fanaticism and communist infiltrators through a 'fight fire with fire' approach. Finally, the 1990s witnessed the arrival of action films which portrayed a lone hero who had to defeat single-handedly numerous terrorists who were depicted as ordinary criminals motivated by money rather than political ideology. Examples are abundant and include the famous John McClane from the *Die Hard* series and Casey Ryback in *Under Siege*.

The 9/11 attacks enabled American pop culture to reflect the changing face of terrorism and depict it more realistically. The attacks became a central topic or the historical backdrop for numerous works of art, which stand witness to the complexity of 9/11 as historical, political, and media event, and help to negotiate its cultural meaning (Bauder-Begerow, Schäfer, 2011). The cultural trauma experienced by the United States gave rise to an increasing number of portrayals of torturers that were seen as heroes. Practices such as waterboarding, walling or sleep deprivation, which until then were deemed reprehensible by a large majority of Americans, were now used by the US at black sites around the world, the most famous being Guantanamo. Thus, for a few years after 9/11, there was nothing the government would not do in the name of national security and the media was very fast to pick up on this and process it through its various channels.

Pop culture representations of the War on Drugs also underwent significant changes over the last four decades as the involvement of the US government grew stronger. The chief channel through which these representations were disseminated amongst the American people was Hollywood and the backdrop of the stories has almost always been Latin America. This is important because, as Thomas Riegler points out, cinema usually upholds the political and cultural status quo of the country from which it originates (Riegler, 2010:35).

After Nixon's declaration of war on drugs, one of the first movies that came out was *The Panic in Needle Park*. Starring Al Pacino, the movie follows the lives of a group of heroin addicts from New York City who often get in trouble with the law

because of their dependence; the movie obviously hints at the firm stance US society was beginning to take with regard to drug consumption. With Reagan sworn in as President and the signing of a national security directive that turned drug trafficking organizations into the new national security threat, the United States began a new chapter in the War on Drugs. As the public fear grew higher, Miami gained the status of the drug capital of the world where many drug lords from Latin America operated. It was against this backdrop that Brian De Palma released *Scarface* (1983), which narrates the rise and fall of Cuban migrant Tony Montana from a modest dishwasher to a powerful and violent kingpin. In its depiction of the Miami drug cartels, the film draws heavily on real members of the drug organizations, stressing the plight of the city's officials at the time. Virginia Vallejo's memoir, *Loving Pablo, Hating Escobar* (2007), which was adapted into a movie in 2017, also offers an interesting chronicle of the birth of Colombia's drug cartels during the same decade.

The beginning of the 1990s saw the United States government become more hostile, often employing unethical means in its attempt to win the War. This is probably the reason why the War started to lose support among Americans. The first years of the decade were marked by the climax of the famous Colombian drug cartels of Medellin, led by Pablo Escobar, and Cali, ran by the Rodriguez brothers. Movies such as *Clear and Present Danger* and TV-series such as *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico* present the reality of those days with the CIA and DEA being placed at the forefront of the fight against cartels. At the turn of the century, the US government started to realize that the War on Drugs could not be won and the focus should be on containing its effects rather than doing away with it. Movies such as the 2015 *Sicario* move away from the good vs. evil dichotomy of the War and present it as a lawless conflict. Thus, the movie concentrates on the American efforts to restore some order to the drug business and not to shut it down entirely. This time, it is the FBI's turn to step in and save the day.

More recently, the two Wars that this subchapter addresses have found common ground in what is known in literature as narco-terrorism. The concept was coined in 1983 by Peruvian President Fernando Belaúnde Terry and refers to acts of terror and violence committed by drug lords against the drug police of their own country in order to influence the policies of the government and to instill fear among the population (Thomas, 2009:1885). To some extent, narco-terrorism changes the geography of the war because

although it is traditionally a concept associated with South America, in contemporary policy, it has become increasingly linked to the regions of Central and Southeast Asia, more particularly with the drug-producing regions of the so-called Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle (Bjornehed, 2004:305). Nevertheless, with very few exceptions, the products of American popular culture do not necessarily focus on narco-terrorism per se, but rather see it as being part and parcel of the larger world of drugs.

Last, but not least, it is worthwhile pointing out the appearance, as far back as the 1930s, of a form of narco sub-culture at the US-Mexican border that comprises music and folklore. Known as narco-corridos, or drug ballads, they represent "a genre of Mexican folk/pop music that celebrates and chronicles the drug trade and the lives of high-level traffickers" (Campbell, 2005:326). The style of corridos has been compared to that of rap songs and their lyrics refer to particular events and include the names of real people and places. Among the most famous narco-corridos are Angel Gonzalez's *Contrabando y Traicion*, Tucanes de Tijuana's *El Mas Bravo de los Bravos*, Garardo Ortiz's *Los Duros de Colombia* and Oscar Ovidio's *El Corrido de Juan Ortiz*.

Although the War on Terror was officially declared over by the Obama administration in 2013 and the War on Drugs has been largely unsuccessful, their portrayal still captures the minds and imaginations of many Americans. It remains to be seen exactly how these complex issues will continue to be portrayed in American popular culture in the following years.

4. MASS SURVEILLANCE

We live in a century that is ruled by technology, a cinematic society obsessed with seeing so as to believe and this has facilitated the appearance of what many scholars have called a 'culture of surveillance'. Since Snowden's 2013 revelations about the NSA's global surveillance programmes such as PRISM and X-Keyscore, the Americans' cultural understanding of surveillance has expanded, the vocabulary associated with it demystified and they have come to understand how surveillance works through its representations in popular culture (Kammerer, 2012:99). But can anyone actually believe that they understand the complex operations and procedures surveillance involves just because they have read it in a classic novel or have seen a film about it? The answer is clearly no, yet the question does bring forward the

symbiosis between surveillance and US pop culture: while images of the former are abundant in films, songs, documentaries and novels, these, in turn, can influence the latter as the media has the power to shape people's attitudes, actions and behavior towards surveillance.

If we turn our attention to literature, George Orwell's *1984* is probably one of the most famous literary embodiments of the theme of surveillance. Indeed, many of the elements that characterize life in Oceania bear a striking resemblance with what is to be found in American contemporary society: the omnipresence of CCTVs in public spaces, at the workplace or in malls remind the readers of the telescreens and hidden microphones Winston Smith encounters every day. Similarly, privacy and human dignity are abridged, or eliminated altogether with reference to an ongoing war - on terror. John Twelve Hawks' 2005 novel, *The Traveller*, takes the idea of surveillance one step further and describes what will happen with it in a parallel future. Orwell's Big Brother is replaced by a secret organization called 'The Brethren' which believes that a society can thrive only through the control and stability offered by surveillance. However, there are people, such as the protagonist, Maya, who are willing to fight against this system and so the novel essentially depicts the epic struggle between tyranny and freedom. Other works that address the issue of mass surveillance are Dan Brown's *Digital Fortress*, Shane Harris' *The Watchers: The Rise of America's Surveillance State* and Dave Eager's *The Circle*.

Big Brother is very much present in movies, TV-series and documentaries as well. Here is what the opening narration of a popular TV-series, *Person of Interest*, tells its audience: 'You are being watched. The government has a secret system, a machine that spies on you every hour of everyday. I designed the machine to detect acts of terror but it sees everything (...) we work in secret. You'll never find us, but victim or perpetrator, if your number's up... we'll find you'. The message Americans get is that surveillance is the lesser evil that ensures the greater good. This seems to be the embodiment of Jeremy Bentham's idea of utilitarianism, a moral philosophy doctrine which argues that actions should be judged according to the levels of happiness and well-being their consequences generate. Thus, when it comes to surveillance, people should not adopt a categorical moral stance, in Immanuel Kant's understanding of the idea (right vs. wrong), but rather accept that it is necessary for the rights of some to be violated in order to ensure the safety of millions.

However, people are neither naturally inclined nor willing to give up their rights just because someone tells them they have to do so, even if that someone is the state itself. This is why, when Snowden came forward in 2013 and revealed the gross violations of Constitutional rights on the part of the government, the public's reaction was so divergent and polarized. Polls indicated that one-third of the American public believed Edward Snowden was a hero for leaking the information, another third thought of him as a traitor, and the rest could not make up their minds.

The 2014 Oscar-winning documentary *Citizenfour* tells the real story of how Snowden contacted journalists from *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* and revealed thousands of classified NSA documents that opened the eyes of the world to the magnitude of the US surveillance programmes. Citizenfour is the code name Snowden used in his communication with the journalists and represents a direct hint at the 4th Amendment of the US Constitution which guarantees "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized" (*Bill of Rights*, 1791). His story also became the plot of Oliver Stone's 2016 movie, *Snowden*, which, un/surprisingly, failed to become a box-office success.

Also worth mentioning is the international success of the reality show *Big Brother* in which people are voluntarily placed in enclosed spaces to be under permanent observation. Participants are fully aware of the cameras and the aim of the show is entertainment rather than political commentary. However, the show received its fair share of criticism for its apparent support of surveillance as well as its use for the production of entertainment. To some extent, the show bears resemblance with a 1998 movie starring Jim Carrey, *The Truman Show*, in which an insurance agent learns that his whole life is in fact a reality TV show.

Lastly, American musicians have also attempted to make sense of the complexities of surveillance through their songs, the most representative genres being hip-hop and pop. This should not come as a surprise given that the FBI and the police have been spying on rap communities for decades. Lyrics such as 'Carry a telephone/Which can disclose/Name and location, /The address of your home' from Broken Water's

1984 warn Americans about the dangers of modern technology. Other singers, like New York rapper Heems in *Patriot Act*, are more direct and tackle the issues bluntly when they say that ‘Politics make victims for income/Parlor tricks, schism from system/(...)/That’s Patriot Act/That’s a privacy prison/That Pentagon/They vision is PRISM/Got what we ask for, someone to listen/Handcuffs smother our phone’. Glorifying Snowden’s revelations, the electro-pop music group Yacht launched a song called *Party at the NSA* which criticized the widespread domestic surveillance conducted by the NSA. The lyrics need no commentary: ‘Did you read my mail again?/How do you find the time? /I lost my signal yesterday./ But it was never mine./We don’t need no privacy./What do you want that for?/Don’t you think it’ll spoil our fun/(...)P-P-P-Party at the NSA,/Twenty, twenty, twenty-four hours a day!/ There is a rainbow at the end of every P-R-I-S-M.’

As we have seen, modern US culture is inundated with the rhetoric of surveillance and the vehicles of pop culture reinforce the idea that mass surveillance is a must in today’s technology-driven society for the simple fact that it keeps people safe. Pop culture narratives, about what might happen if surveillance were not used by the state, offer protection and legitimacy to the act. Although the stories are fictitious, the advocates of surveillance consistently reach out to Americans’ imagination and hypothesize about the grim possible future of the country. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the government’s rationalization of security should always be balanced by the state’s moral and Constitutional obligation to respect the citizens’ rights.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper has hopefully demonstrated that American popular culture provides valuable insight into the way in which three topics concerning national security are perceived - espionage, the War on Terror/Drugs and mass surveillance. Pop culture vehicles such as literature, cinema, television and songs have been at the forefront of American lives for the most part of the 20th and 21st centuries and it is precisely because of this that they have represented key elements in the promotion and representation of the United States approach to national security both at home and abroad. By exploring a small part of the outstanding variety of American cultural products regarding this topic, we are inclined to assume that Americans will continue to turn to

popular culture in order to explore and better understand the developments and intricacies of their national security environment. As a result of this interest, any changes to the US agenda on matters of national security will inevitably trigger their subsequent interpretation through the various channels of American popular culture. What the exact changes will be and how the mainstream media will illustrate them remains a mystery that will certainly be explored in future academic endeavors.

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