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Kuusisto, Riikka Maaria

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Comparing IR plots: dismal tragedies, exuberant romances, hopeful comedies and cynical satires

Riikka Kuusisto

Abstract

In a world where convincing explanations take narrative form, IR theories, too, resort to the basic plot alternatives of tragedy, romance, comedy and irony/satire. While the tendency to view the human condition as tragic pertains especially to the so-called realist school, romantic IR storytellers dwell, for example, among liberals, Marxists and peace researchers. This paper focuses on the lesser analyzed plots of comedy and irony/satire, finding comic traces in normative, constructivist and critical IR research, and the ironic/satiric mood in poststructural studies. Using the criteria of nonviolence, flexibility, self-reflection and innovativeness, the paper evaluates the relative merits and downsides of the different plots, and takes a stand in favor of comic IR theories. The paper argues that comic theories are best equipped to come up with novel solutions to grave world political problems. Mildly hopeful comedies steer clear of tragic despair, exuberant romantic optimism and satiric cynicism.

International relations – both in theory and practice – often seem chaotic enough: events are difficult to explain afterwards, let alone to predict beforehand, and contradictory interpretations abound. As individual happenings, international relations, as any other human activity, would be incomprehensible. As part of a story though, we can bring some order and meaning into the chaos, and as various stories we can at least compare the competing explanatory bids. Stories turn mere motion into purposeful action, physical movement into something symbolically communicable. In narratives about international relations, state actors often have clear roles and moves are usually made for a reason. What might appear as random bustle is transformed into clear-cut endeavours with beginnings and endings.

This paper studies different plot structures used in framing international relations in scholarly discourses. First, attention is given to the role of the narrative in general and the basic plot alternatives. Then, choices explicitly made and discussed in IR research – namely, references

to tragedies and comedies – are examined. Next, a closer look at comedy and irony/satire – the two relatively unexplored IR stories – is taken and traces of these plots are searched for in works less often analysed from a narrative perspective. Finally, the relative merits and disadvantages of the plots in the context of international relations are summed up, and a stand in favor of comedy is presented and justified.

Narrative Explanation and Basic Plots

The persistence and importance of the narrative has been recognized and appreciated in different fields. Historian Hayden White (1987) studies how the human desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of ideal life causes us to impose narrative order on (our descriptions of) the world. Moral meaning is possible only through narrative form, and human truths are products of narrative representation of reality. White claims that any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, that is, can be told as many different kinds of stories each endowing a specific kind of moral meaning. For White, emplotment *is* an explanation, comprehension *means* the recognition of the form of the narrative, and causation may be narratological when agents act as if they were characters in a story charged with the task of realizing the possibilities inherent within the plot. Stories render merely consecutive events consequential.

Hayward Alker was one of the first IR scholars to focus on the recurring elements of major societal and historical texts. Alker (1996, 267-302) claims that no matter how objective and scientific our stories aim to be, they contain mythic and poetic elements – kings' daughters, dragons and heroes, kidnappings, rescuings and rewards – normally associated with folktales and legends. More recently, Hidemi Suganami (2008) has written on narrative accounts as a means by which truth claims about world politics are presented. He believes in the narrative as a means of causal explanation in IR. According to him, in order to explain an event in world politics, we use a story that moves from the original input through the middle parts until, in the end, it reaches the output. In these stories, three conventional ingredients are always present: chance coincidences, mechanistic processes and human acts. Causal narratives explain – in addition to making understandable – both the particular and, by extension, the general; they take into account both circumstances and statistical generalizations, history and theory.

If one desires to go to the philosophical source, Western plot structures and their study can be traced back at least to Aristotle. Aristotle's analyses (1996 / ~335-22 B.C.) of the art of

poetry in general and its species – epic, tragedy and comedy – are a standard reference point in different fields. More recent typologies usually distinguish three or four basic plots. As different kinds of stories, White (1987, pp. 43-44) names ‘for example’ epics, romances, tragedies, comedies and farces. When discussing possible notions of historical development, he (White, 1987, p.65) outlines three alternative plot structures (with accompanying world views): comedy (idealism, belief in progress), tragedy (cynicism, resignation to the degeneration of the human race) and irony (scepticism, continuation at the same level). Alker (1996, pp. 267-302) devotes special attention to three kinds of stories: fairy tales that point to noble missions, decisive moments and great individuals in societal existence; tragedies that convey a haunting inevitability of failure and provide emotional purging or catharsis; and comedies that make us happy and restore our faith in life. Literary theorist Kenneth Burke (1966; 1969a; 1969b) also is interested in three plots: the heroic combat myth, tragedy and comedy. As regards the heroic combat myth, Burke demonstrates how the virtuous or divine character of the champion is dramatically built up, how the heroic battle against the vicious and cunning enemy is described and how a radical triumph and a celebration of victory in the end are necessary. The tragic hero, according to Burke, is basically ‘good’, yet prone to dangerous absolutism, excess and vehemence. His destiny is preordained: he understands that his uncompromising attitude will lead to disaster, but he cannot be helped and will not turn back. For Burke, comic characters have faults that we can laugh at, and comic plots result in happy endings.

Literary theorist Northrop Frye (1973, pp. 162-239) distinguishes four narrative categories or generic plots or mythoi: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony or satire. He defines these narrative categories as being broader than and logically prior to the literary genres of epos, prose, drama and lyric. In Frye’s organization, narratives refer to expectations of structure, mood and character types. According to Frye, romances resemble wish-fulfilment dreams and are dialectical in form: virtuous heroes save beautiful heroines while monstrous villains threaten to pull the world into darkness, confusion and death. Tragic heroes typically disturb a balance in nature, a balance which sooner or later must right itself. Frye approaches irony as a parody of romance and satire as militant irony; thus, these two plots are ‘parasitic’ to romance. Irony and satire are both mythoi of winter where, instead of heroic efforts, we witness obscene attacks against conventions by outsiders to society. Frye discusses comedy first and understands it as the mythos of spring: the story of a new, better society replacing

the old, absurd one. Some kind of a happy ending is inevitable, but not much else is, as all sorts of gimmicks along the way are possible.

Burke, Alker and Frye – in addition to studying the three or four stories individually – all look at various mixed types and interfaces between stories. This is evident especially in their analysis of the supreme (Western) merger: the story of Christ. Burke (1966) studies the story of the life of Christ as the ‘ultimate’ Western tragedy and combat myth and divine comedy – merging the ideas of an omnipotent hero, a sacrificial lamb and a scapegoat. The brave champion, explains Burke, undergoes hardships, is unjustly killed, and then miraculously resurrected, the same story providing both despair, hope and laughter. Alker (1996, p. 140) concludes that ‘as with most other great *epics*, Jesus’ story is *tragicomic*’ (emphasis mine). Alker underlines the generative nature of the meanings of the Jesus story, its ‘viral’ character. Frye (1973, pp. 141-142) claims that the conception of ‘Christ’ unites all categories of being in identity. Frye views the mythoi as phases in a cycle and seasons of the year: one blending into another, elements fading away and returning again, dialectical movement between different orders being part of the narrative process. Narrative forms are thus interrelated and overlapping.

In the following, for heuristic purposes mainly, I will, however, operate with four separate plots: romance, tragedy, comedy and irony/satire. The typology is built around certain basic dimensions. First, there is the distinction according to the type of ending, i.e., happy versus sad denouement. Important differences also concern the roles of actors, the means they resort to and the general manner of progression: clear or ambiguous roles, violent or nonviolent means, logical progression or novel and surprising developments. In romances, constant heroes slay enemies on their designated path towards a happy end, while in tragedies, heroes fiercely fight for doomed causes and face demise. In comedies, everybody encountered on the bumpy but bloodless road – the whole messy lot – is invited to the final celebration. Ironic and satiric stories portray incoherent characters and incomprehensible events, violent clashes and total havoc. This typology does not do justice to the variety of logical possibilities and actual realizations, but is useful in grasping the basic alternatives in all story-telling and assessing their relative merits in the context of international relations. Studying the differences might also increase the appreciation of skilful combinations of different plots. I will start by a brief overview of what has already been written on international relations stories, mainly on tragedies and comedies.

Previously Charted Grounds: International Relations Tragedies and Romances

Studies of narratives in recent international relations *practice* include for example Erik Ringmar's (2006) article on competing Iraq War stories, Riikka Kuusisto's (2009) analysis of Western conflict resolution narratives and Robert A. Payne's (2013) reading of the global war on terror. Ringmar looks at the narratives of both political leaders in office and various opposition forces, and finds all kinds of story-tellers: romantics, tragedians, comedians and satirists interpreting the US decision to go to war against Iraq in March 2003. Kuusisto focuses on the official rhetoric of US, British and French leaders since the end of the Cold War, and claims that while the epic and the tragic plot designate clear roles and deliver spectacular denouements to conflicts, the comic plot has provided an appealing alternative and should be opted for more often due to its flexible and nonviolent nature. Acknowledging that elements of the global war on terror have been framed as a romantic adventure story by US policymakers and as a liberal tragedy by various scholars, Payne emphasizes the narrative possibilities offered by comedy and satire, namely exposing inconsistencies and hypocrisies.

Many – if not most – major contributions to IR *theory* view world politics as a tragic affair. Starting from classic 'pre-IR' interpretations such as Thucydides's portrayal of the Melian dialogue, tragedy is very much present. In his brilliant article, Alker (1996, pp. 23-63) shows how the Melian dialogue is pure tragic drama, a scientifically written classical 'morality play' about might and right. According to Alker, Thucydides rigorously displays the arguments of both sides – the Athenians claiming that voluntary Melian submission is in the interest of both the Athenian empire and the Melians, the Melians pleading for neutrality and looking towards Sparta for help – and reports on the final slaughter. His method of dialectical reconstruction is both analytical and engaged. In contrast to certain realist readings, Alker sees Thucydides neither as a positivist nor a fatalist. Thucydides took sides on the key issue of moral-political responsibility for the war, and elaborated on the 'cases' of the two parties so as to show all grammatical possibilities. Alker emphasizes that when we understand that theater in Athens was an accepted part of political dialogue, we can understand how Thucydides was attempting to cathartically instruct his audience. The tragic destruction of, first, the idealistic and proud Melians, and later, the arrogant and lustful Athenians, were meant to move and to teach several lessons.

As Paul Roe (2000) purports, the security dilemma (at play also in the relationship between Athens and Sparta) – an illusionary incompatibility between actors concerning their security

requirements – is in itself a tragedy: two sides, neither intending to harm the other, end up going to war due to uncertainty and misperceptions. The tendency to focus on the security dilemma and to view the human condition as tragic pertains especially to the so-called realist school of IR. Jonathan Kirshner (2010) describes the classical realist attitude as very wary and always sceptical: realists share a certain pessimism with regard to humanity and especially the prospects for fundamental progress in the nature of human behavior. Similarly, Payne (2014) notes how in realist stories, states are essentially doomed to suffer the consequences of preparing for, and engaging in, recurring acts of competition and violence. Kirshner differentiates between classical realists such as Morgenthau and offensive realists, namely Mearsheimer, claiming that while the latter (are prone to) produce dangerously simple, even deterministic, analyses and policy recommendations, the former believe that political choices are always manifold and make a difference.

Robbie Shilliam (2007) discusses Morgenthau in terms of tragic sensibility, in the context of a European tragic tradition of political thought wherein the human condition is considered to be one of anti-perfection and human action is characterized by hubris. In this tradition, according to Shilliam, to act in accordance with a moral principle is deemed to bring consequences of suffering upon oneself and one's community to the extent that the action undermines the very principle it is designed to promote. Shilliam sees Morgenthau's realism as tragic liberalism: it is the tragically crusading liberal spirit that is in danger of destroying the world. Nicholas Rengger (2005) underlines that for Morgenthau, human rationality is incapable of mastering tragedy: the tragic cannot be 'overcome', it should simply be confronted in all its forms without undue optimism.

Fifteen years ago, Torbjørn L. Knutsen (2002) compared stories of the 20th century written by historians, on the one hand, and social scientists, on the other, and concluded that while historians employed the narrative forms of tragedy, comedy and satire – all reactions to romance – social scientists also, or still, used the romantic plot. As romantic story-tellers, Knutsen identified Francis Fukuyama (1992) and Bruce Russett and John Oneal (2001), and of these romances, he focused on *Triangulating Peace*, on how Russett and Oneal portray the institutions of democracy, trade and organizations producing more peaceful relations among states. Suganami (2008) is reluctant to draw a sharp distinction between International Relations and International History (on the basis of their treatment of narrative). As regards narrative lines within IR, he notes that 'idealism' voluntaristically reads/writes potentialities for progress into history and 'realism', by contrast, deterministically reads/writes constraints

on the states' freedom of action. Payne (2013; 2014) claims that despite the realist/tragic dominance, the field of IR has a relatively strong tradition of scholars and practitioners telling romantic adventure stories, and that generally, these optimistic IR story-tellers can be viewed as liberals. Other IR schools of thought arguing in a romantic manner that the traditional insecurities of world politics can be transcended by the extension of moral and political community globally include approaches as varied as functionalism, theories of world government, Marxism, anarchism and pacifism (see Booth and Wheeler, 2008; on romantic Marxism, White, 1987, pp. 142-168).

Many of the discussions concerning narratives about international relations do not take a stand as to which narrative we should embrace or avoid. However, some scholars express their views on the merits of different narratives. Knutsen (2002), for example, appears to praise certain peace researchers for seeing romantic hope for humanity, while Mervyn Frost (2003) envisions deeper understanding of tragic agonies as the key for transformations of our international practices for the better. According to Frost, by appreciating the tragic situation – where acting ethically right causes pain and suffering, where compromise between competing ethic codes is not possible, where unanticipated consequences may destroy the very thing we sought to protect in the first place – we may learn to direct our efforts to changing the social practices that repeatedly produce tragic outcomes. Frost joins others who praise the tragic sensibility of realists in general and certain ones (here, namely Butterfield, Niebuhr, Carr and Morgenthau) in particular, and also names the 'English School' as often appreciative of tragedy, although sometimes too pessimistic, shutting out possibilities for progress. He is much less approving of current normative IR theory where the notion of tragedy does not figure prominently.

Richard Ned Lebow (2005) situates his position close to Frost's. He, too, considers tragedy central to international relations: the potential for tragedy is omnipresent and powerful leaders, especially, may succumb to hubris, forget their limitations and become blind to risks. Lebow argues that both Thucydides and Morgenthau combined sensitivity to the causes and consequences of tragedy with a belief in progress, however strongly tempered. Like them, he harbors hope and does this through tragedy, not despite it. Certain forms of realism, claims Lebow, have the unfortunate potential to make our expectations of a fear-based world self-fulfilling. While tragedy helps us appreciate what went wrong in the past and makes us aware of present dangers, the future need not resemble the past.

James Mayall (2003), a member of the 'English School', in his answer to Frost, stands behind the idea that tragedy is the political idiom that international relations respond to. According to Mayall, the modern world cannot easily escape tragic outcomes, be it that the idea of progress is the coin of democratic politics. Obviously, he does not rejoice over the strong grip that tragedy holds on world politics, but warns about the dangers of over-optimism. Rengger (2005) considers even Mayall's and Lebow's modestly positive outlooks – not to mention Frost's belief in social transformation possibly already under way – misguided. He seems to dismiss the usefulness of the notion of tragedy in world politics altogether, curiously, due to the hope that it may kindle. Much like Oakeshott in his critique of Morgenthau, Rengger would rather go with complete scepticism than with a sense of tragic.

Continuing the debate, Chris Brown (2007) specifically advocates full acceptance of the tragic nature of the choices that have to be made when deciding on issues related to humanitarian interventions or free trade or global distributive justice for example. Contra Rengger / Oakeshott, he claims that the notion of tragedy has political purchase; he does not focus on the (non)existence of signs of progress, but his recommendations to international political theorists might come close to the points Mayall makes. According to Brown, awareness of tragedy ought to cause us to act modestly, to be aware of our limitations and to be suspicious of grand narratives of salvation which pretend that there are no tragic choices to be made. Sometimes we must act even though we know the result will be morally unsatisfactory – some will lose if others are to win, some will suffer when others are rescued – and we should not turn our backs on this tragedy of human existence, emphasizes Brown.

Finally, in a recent answer to Lebow, Ian Hall (2014) suggests that satire can provide just as good a form of political education as tragedy and just as robust a foundation for IR theory. Hall argues that by mocking human vice and folly, one can both present a more realistic version of politics and appraise a specific moral code. However, Hall draws a clear distinction between academic writing and literary genres. While he believes that a 'satiric vision' could be used for ontological purposes much like the tragic one, he does not see all theorists as producers of literature, but as professionals engaged with the truth. Payne (2013; 2014) sees a closer connection between fiction and science, film and IR theory. He calls for 'comedy and especially satire' and purports that these narratives go well together with Frankfurt School critical theory. According to Payne, romantic and tragic narratives (liberals and realists) devote insufficient attention to many interesting and important actors, actions and circumstances in global politics. As the main advantages of comedic or satiric stories

(critical theory) he advances the focus on ordinary people and human security, the ability to expose foolishness and weaknesses, and an emancipatory purpose. Earlier already, Jennifer Milliken and David Sylvan (1996) explicitly spoke for employing irony or satire in the study of international affairs – and conducted a satiric discourse analysis of US policy-making in Indochina.

To conclude, many IR scholars believe that *tragedy* is the plot we should embrace more fully not only because it provides the most accurate answers to crucial ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions, but also because it directs us towards a better future. No one, of course, is content with tragedies being acted out as such, i.e., with the gloomy endings witnessed so far. A happy ending is the very essence of *romance* whether we believe that we have encountered the end of history already or place our hopes on the gradual spreading of democratic peace or on the taking root of global civil society or a human rights culture. From the romantic viewpoint, tragic sensitivity is a self-fulfilling prophecy like any other – thus, something to be avoided. The ideas of *satire* as an ontological and epistemological foundation and *comedy/satire* as the most apt narrative for contemporary world politics have been touched upon, but there remains much to develop IR-wise in the humorous stories. To these lesser studied plots – comedy and irony/satire – I turn next: first, by having another look at literary theory and studies of rhetoric.

Unexplored IR Terrains: Comedy, Irony and Satire

The classic comic plot – for example Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *Twelfth Night* – revolves around characters who misunderstand each other, make silly mistakes and invent complex strategies to reach their goals. They wear disguises, stumble into embarrassing situations and attempt to interpret cryptic messages. The comic hero will typically get involved in unusual conflicts and meet different kinds of obstacles. Finally, however, after trying out all sorts of ideas, the protagonist succeeds, and a party, often a wedding, is organized to celebrate the fortunate outcome. Comic portraits have been painted of not only lovers but also soldiers, as the examples of Good Soldier Švejk and Baron Münchhausen show. Neither of these stories directs laughter at the horrors of war, quite on the contrary, but rather at grandiose schemes and faultless heroes. The struggles of comic heroes and the flaws in their characters are not to be taken too seriously. Comic heroes may be described – not as omnipotent saviors or evil scoundrels – but as ‘little rascals’: inventive, resourceful, clever, crafty, cunning.

Irony and satire, on the other hand, are usually defined as much harsher forms of description, explanation or critique. In irony, the surface meaning and the underlying meaning are not the same, there is a disparity of awareness between actor and observer, or the speaker intends the opposite of what he says. This ironic discrepancy can be funny, but often it is not, as when Romeo kills himself (mistakenly) believing that Juliet is dead or Oedipus (unknowingly) murders his father. Where ironic reversals and incomprehensibility may sometimes cause pain and despair, satiric presentations usually mock, ridicule and shame quite expressly. There are light-hearted versions like Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, but satire routinely tears down the objects of its attack, mercilessly revealing hypocrisy and absurdity, like Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. Satire is cynical and subversive, and frequently also fragmentary and unfinished. The society and norms that previously seemed normal to us, in satire, appear nightmarish, lunatic or demonic. A satire features neither a gallant nor a crafty hero, but might well be presented through an idiot mind, underlining the difficulty of communication.

This having been said, sometimes the line between positive and constructive comedy and negative and destructive irony/satire is not that easy – or indeed, necessary or useful – to draw. In his brilliant study of Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) presents Rabelais's carnivalesque images as stemming from the rich tradition of thousands of years of folk humor. What readers today tend to see merely as strange style, crude descriptions and direct parody, the contemporaries of Rabelais, claims Bakhtin, regarded as both familiar and philosophical. Bakhtin separates Rabelais's symbolic and ambivalent gayness from mere negative, straightforward critique, despite all the radical reversals and mocking spirit. He presents the stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel as literary masterpieces where Rabelais gives voice to the laughing chorus of the people, people accustomed to connecting death with birth and the tearing down of the old with creating something new. Bakhtin interprets Rabelais as progressive, yet pitiless: always seeking to liberate his readers from fear and oppressive norms, but never quite satisfied with any particular, seemingly perfected solution. Rabelais sought to humorously correct all seriousness; through, not despite of, his grotesque style and debasing images, Rabelais underlined his belief in the immortal and ultimately free people who create history.

The potentially terrific power of laughter has been demonstrated in both literary works and world politics action: in *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco (1983) convincingly describes how the desire to prevent access to the subversive tool of laughter might become a matter of

life and death, and the reactions to *Jyllands-Posten*'s Mohammed cartoons in 2005 and to *Charlie Hebdo*'s journalism in 2011 and 2015 show how laughter is not tolerated in practice. Quentin Skinner (1996) first analyses Quintilian's views on the potentially lethal weapon of humor and the nature of irony as speaking in derision, and then turns to the way in which Thomas Hobbes, 'the most dangerous among scoffers' of his time, put the weapon of laughter into use. Quintilian, claims Skinner, saw laughter almost invariably as an expression of scorn or contempt, as laughter *at* someone. In *Leviathan*, asserts Skinner, Hobbes directs a remorseless barrage of scornful comment against the alleged defects and imperfections of his intellectual adversaries. While studying the English version of 1651, 'a masterpiece of satire and invective', Skinner employs his survey of the mocking techniques of the classical rhetoricians. Laughter often does go together with irony/satire – likewise, with comedy – but assessments as to its benevolence or maliciousness – laughing with or laughing at – need to be made on a case by case basis, and one assessment may differ from another.

Normative, Constructivist and Critical Comedies

As was noted earlier, there are few self-proclaimed IR comedians. However, the potential of comedy has been hinted at in several studies, and Payne (2013; 2014) has named the Gramscian scholarly position (of Richard Wyn Jones) and Frankfurt School critical theory as candidates of comic theorizing. Where else might one find comic theoretical traces? As argued earlier, comic theories portray a happy or satisfactory ending without the dashing about of faultless heroes and the violent eradication of evil opponents. Comic theorists are ideally, in the mood of Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, self-reflexive and open-minded; even after presenting the best strategy (s)he can arrive at, the comic theorist cheerfully admits fallibility and changes course if need arises. Moreover, a comic theory not only tolerates, but outright celebrates contingency, indeterminacy, surprises and novel solutions. Judging on these criteria, it might be easier for critical theories than for problem-solving theories to embrace comedy. Both explicitly and implicitly normative theory can be comic, as definitely can metatheory.

First turning to a specific normative candidate, Mahatma Gandhi certainly fulfils the comic criteria of envisioning a happy ending and commitment to peaceful means. In addition to personal and spiritual development, he also dealt with the political sphere, and had global ambitions – qualifying him as a scholar of international relations. Gandhi's nonviolence is a

mirror image of Mearsheimer's offensive realism (see Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 225). While Mearsheimer believes that the cycle of violence will continue, Gandhi (1960, p. 128) avows the opposite, emphasizing the infinite possibilities of the individual to develop nonviolence. Gandhi does not suggest that the work of nonviolence in itself is easy or something for the cowardly. Quite on the contrary, according to him, nonviolence demands tremendous courage and perseverance. However, once embraced, nonviolence gathers momentum and encompasses all actors and domains – at first sight, certainly for many, a laughable idea. Gandhi never concentrated his efforts on writing a lengthy and coherent monograph or presented himself as an epic hero: 'I deny being a visionary' (see Gandhi 1960, p. 219). Instead, he argues for comic intellectual flexibility: 'I have grown from truth to truth; I have saved my memory an undue strain' (Gandhi, 1960, p. 220).

While Gandhi's writings are in many ways the most impressive illustration of the genre of absolutely peaceful comedies, Alexander Wendt's (1992; see also Wendt, 1995) thesis of anarchy being what states make of it – his claim that anarchy as such is not a structural cause of anything – also seems to be formulated in a flexible and hopeful vein, leaving room for unforeseen solutions. Advocating critical theory, Wendt (1992) first explains how the realist-rationalist alliance has reified self-help and then shows how reified practices can be changed or denaturalized. According to Wendt, brute facts do not drive states to act one way or another; instead, at any given moment, social practices and processes create meanings and constitute a system. Even though 'social construction talk' is analytically neutral between conflict and cooperation (see Wendt, 1995, p. 76), Wendt himself has later argued teleologically for a more specific stand – namely, the inevitability of a world state (see Wendt, 2003). This narrative does have comic characteristics: a happy end (a global state where the subjectivity of all individuals and groups is recognized and protected), tolerance for contingency (movement back and forth along the way to a world state is probable, not all the steps can be laid out in advance) and cheerful self-reflexivity (as demonstrated in passages such as 'Since my burden here is already great, at the macro-level I will play it safe and make my argument on non-intentional grounds, speculating only [...]'). While evaluating the attitude towards violence in the story, one notes that the progression may include war in some (of the early) stages, but that non-violent dispute resolution is increasingly favored and becomes the norm.

To glance at the similarity of purpose and means between comedy and other variants of critical theory, Robert Cox's (1981) version contains an element of utopianism, but no

foreboding of an inevitable apocalyptic battle (several scenarios, multiple instruments), assumes that theory is always for someone and for some purpose (self-reflexivity) and, together with historical materialism, believes in the possibility of new social forces, new structures and remaking human nature (novel solutions, happy end). Trying to achieve a perspective on perspectives and to create an alternative world – comic-sounding endeavors – are part of the definition Cox gives to critical theory. Andrew Linklater's (2009; 2010) critical theory is based on Habermas's work, but is more optimistic than the writings of many Frankfurt School theorists. Linklater focuses on the grand narrative of the global civilizing process, and especially the contribution that societies of states have made in the process. Even though he underlines that there is no guarantee that the cosmopolitan ethic of care and responsibility will continue to spread – also the human capacity to inflict harm has increased, violent encounters with outsiders remain possible – he is hopeful that it will. Continuing in the vein of Norbert Elias, Linklater interprets various recent legal conventions (e.g. environmental law and international criminal law) and the strengthening of the 'harm narrative' (concern about personal carbon footprints, child labor, fair trade, ethical tourism, modern humanitarianism and the like) as evidence of the possibility of ever wider systems of cooperation. Linklater deals with a time span of millennia and recognizes the role of violence in the past, but his vision of the future might well be seen as a comedy (satisfactory ending, no need for an omnipotent hero, embracing indeterminacy, novel solutions).

Ironic or Satiric Poststructuralism

As to self-proclaimed IR ironists/satirists, there are some individual studies (see e.g. Milliken and Sylvan, 1996). Moreover, there is a whole body of thought or political philosophy – also important in IR – that has been associated with the ironic/satiric mood and style, namely poststructuralism. Starting with Foucault's studies of knowledge, madness, criminality and disease, poststructuralism has sought to disturb, disrupt and break down normalcy, rationality and continuous progression. White (1987, pp. 104-141), among others, analyses Foucault as a master of irony or 'self-conscious catachresis', and the story Foucault tells over and over again as the tale of the fundamental human fatality: the will to know. The postmodern spirit in its most radical form can be interpreted as being sceptical towards all coherent narratives: radical anti-foundationalism tears down truths and coherence rather than constructs appealing plots. Jean-François Lyotard (1984) defines post-modernism as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. In the words of White (1987, p. 38), poststructuralists carry out 'deconstruction of narrativity'. Alternatively, poststructuralism might be seen as advocating a

‘better’ narrative, a story of its own, but one with no discernible direction or responsible actors. These postmodern stories tend to be riotous, polyphonic and incomplete – mirroring similar ‘reality’.

Maybe the best way to think about ironic or satiric IR would be to picture it on a scale from the mildly ironic to the mercilessly satiric, from the sympathetically engaged deconstruction of suspiciously fluent accounts to the nihilist scorn of all foundationalist truth claims, let alone explanatory theories. Somewhere close to the rather gentle satire of *The Rape of the Lock* might be placed for example some deconstructivist readings of hegemonic theoretical narratives, such as J. Ann Tickner’s (1992) feminist reading of *Politics Among Nations*. Tickner shows how Morgenthau constructed a world almost entirely without women. While analysing Morgenthau’s ‘political man’ as a social construct based on a particular representation of human nature extracted from the behavior of men in positions of public power, she gently calls into question the explanatory force of Morgenthau’s tragedy. Similarly, she criticizes the ‘rational economic man’ and accompanying policy prescriptions of liberalism, that is, Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* romance. Tickner’s ideal of a nongendered discipline where the experiences of all individuals regardless of race, culture, class or gender would be genuinely included seems to predict (ironic) difficulties of communication, unshared meanings and discrepancies of various kinds, but desperation is not the dominating mood of her story.

Richard K. Ashley’s (1989) critique of the ‘reasoning man’ and ‘sovereign state’ in *Man, the State and War* and *Theory of International Politics* is less constructively oriented than Tickner’s project. Ashley approaches Kenneth Waltz’s laborious efforts to bring international politics ‘under control’ rather mercilessly. Ashley’s poststructuralism explicitly encourages resistance to all disciplining practices and historical closure, that is, modern narratives. In contrast to Tickner’s all-encompassing inclusion, Ashley advocates cutting all ties and becoming a stranger to country, language and sex – definitely, a subversive, satiric element here. However, Ashley also talks about a *better* (italics mine) course for us to take – the ‘work of a dissident’ (à la Julia Kristeva), the work of *thought* (original italics) – thus demonstrating at least minimal belief both in the future of the world and intellectual efforts to approach the world. Like Ashley who claims to engage in critical thinking, not traditional, logocentric theory-building, David Campbell (1998), too, rejects the goal of constructing of a coherent theory of international relations. Instead, he encourages an on-going political process of critique and invention that is never satisfied that a lasting solution can or has been

reached – maybe echoing the spirit that Bakhtin attributes to Rabelais. Campbell's poststructuralist strategy for studying the Bosnian war is to think outside the political discourses that gave the war meaning – in the hope of eventually 'fostering better possibilities' (see Campbell, 1998, p. 15). Again, Rabelais's belief in the ultimately free, history-creating people readily comes to mind.

In a subversive yet committed manner, Cynthia Weber (2014) teaches IR theory – the collection of stories about international politics, as she defines it – and studies the myths that various theories rely upon by using the 'other worlds' of popular films. She goes about the project by comparing each IR story (e.g. realism or anarchism) with a film (*Lord of the Flies* and *Hunger Games*, in these two cases) that illustrates the functioning of the same myth ('anarchy is the permissive cause of war' or 'we are the 99 percent'). In addition to postulating similarity between the two story lines and castings, her analysis brings additional insights into the theory and new readings to the films ('anarchy requires the element of fear to turn violent', 'battles for private liberties in public are not necessarily battles for the public'). Weber's story does not cast a heroic theory in a battle against enemy theories, but sees 'apparent truths' in all theories. The picture she presents is, on the one hand, systematic, and on the other, fragmentary and unfinished. She aims to teach students of IR (better than she did before), but her most important contributions are the questions she asks, not the answers she gives. What students get is not a final perspective on the various limited perspectives, but instead, tools to dissect all the conventional theories, and any new theory claiming rationality or intellectual progress.

Conclusion

Before assessing the relative merits and disadvantages of each of the four basic plots discussed above in the context of international relations, one needs to make certain important specifications. First of all, no one plot is 'in itself' and universally better than any other: for example, tragedies are not more truthful or eloquent or compelling than comedies (to everyone everywhere all the time). Value judgements always originate from, and carry with them, a situational perspective: better or worse for whom, when, why? Frye (1973) – my main source for narrative categories in literary theory – specifically underlines that literary criticism and making value judgements of various kinds are separate exercises: while the principles of the former should be derived from literature alone, the latter refers to 'outside' criteria, that is, ethical, political or religious principles. Whereas Frye purposefully limits

himself to pure or self-sufficient literary criticism, the field of study here is IR, and my stance, in this concluding section of the paper, explicitly normative. The preceding analysis – mainly descriptive, comparative, typological – does not necessitate taking up a specific ethical or moral position; however, I have decided to adopt one, and use the typology in its explication.

In the context of international relations, I take a stand for flexible and innovative strategies to achieve peaceful coexistence, a joint effort for a moderately happy ending. Of secondary importance to me are clarity, consistency and ‘larger-than-life’ experiences. Whereas clear roles, unequivocal progression and spectacular endings (or nihilist impasses and abandoned hope) are often enjoyable (or cathartic) to audiences, and work just fine in many settings, I argue that the world political arena calls for certain prudence, patience and lenience. Nuclear arms, I claim, render ruling out violent denouements from explanatory stories desirable. Moreover, complex global problems such as environmental crises, poverty, terrorism and debt, speak for favoring critical self-reflexion, open-minded cooperation and novel solutions as elements in the plot. Opting for modest optimism, like I do, is a choice just like gloomy resignation or cynical scorn: all positions can be backed up by facts and may turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

By using the criteria I outlined, the most important *merits* of the different plots as IR theories can be summed up roughly along the following lines. Romances and tragedies allot clear roles to the protagonists (states and other actors) and provide definite denouements (resolutions to conflicts). Comedies, ironic plots and satires allow for indeterminacy and novel twists and turns. Moreover, romances and comedies portray happy or satisfactory endings (annihilation ruled out), and are generally hopeful about human endeavors. As to the *downsides*, both romances and tragedies include a violent element – heroic or tragic battle – and speak against changes of course once an assessment of the situation has been given. Romances are sometimes rather naïve, exuberantly optimistic, and romantic heroes rarely engage in profound self-critique. Tragedies have sad endings for all parties concerned. Comedies are seldom spectacular or deeply moving, either in their progression or end result. Finally, ironic and satiric narratives fail to give positive meaning to human existence and to formulate constructive suggestions; their mood is generally sceptical or pessimistic, and creating chaos is an important motivation of the ironic/satiric exercise.

From the perspective of favoring nonviolent, flexible, self-reflexive and innovative progression, it is comedy that fares best. Adopting the comic plot as a framework for interpreting events in world politics translates into viewing actors and endeavors through comic lenses, searching for novel solutions to central problems, and fostering tendencies towards self-criticism and humility. Recommendations adaptive to changing circumstances are part of comic wisdom: comedies accommodate both cheerful indeterminacy and belief in better understanding. Comedy is mildly hopeful: mischievously amused vis-à-vis elaborate projects of enthusiastic heroes, but seriously engaged in working for a better future. Comedies do not require bloodshed or intense agony. Even though the twists and turns of the comic plot may at certain times be less jovial than at others, the general atmosphere is enthusiastic and a happy ending is presumed.

By choosing comedy, IR theories stand to lose fixed roles, certain development and grand finales. The gains, however, are significant: comedies are less black-and-white, less absolute, less deterministic and less aggressive than romances and tragedies, and more constructive and conciliatory than satires. Comedies examine disagreements, problems and conflicts – after all, without conflict, there is stagnation – but they allow for mistakes, surprises and learning, and do not easily sink into despair. Comedies represent the pragmatic choice, the piecemeal reform and the versatile character. Comedies check the romantic and tragic tendency to oversimplify, and the satiric temptation to tear everything into pieces. Where epic romances and tragedies lead to extremes, comedies calm down, relativize and swing round. Where the personae in romances and tragedies are stable and predictable, comedies are lenient with inconsistencies and momentary lapses. As compensation for not providing certainty and exalted endings, comedies offer many interesting episodes, and – most importantly – a nonviolent denouement.

Robert L. Ivie (2003) invokes Burke's idea of comic correctives as a means of observing yourself critically while acting and creating consubstantial rivals instead of evil enemies. He recommends fuzziness, spirited debate and malleable categories as a democratic way of dealing with political problems. In a similar fashion, I claim that comedy portrays a better story of international relations: one where conflicts might not be solved for good in the best possible way, but where the actors live to see the next conflict and the second try that might be fundamentally different from the first one. Paths through comic conflicts are 'life-size', mundane and winding. Framing world politics in nonviolent, comic terms invites brainstorming that would be too risky in romances or tragedies, and useless in satires. Despite

the brief survey of existing theorizing, the purpose here is not to speak for a particular IR approach, let alone a specific theorist. Instead, comedy is presented as a meaning-creating frame, organizing plot and general attitude – echoing Frye’s narratives that refer to expectations of structure, mood and character types (see Frye, 1973, pp. 162-163). As concerns attitudes, the claim here is that ossified and frustrating ‘you just don’t understand!’ debates (see Tickner, 1997) will be missed by neither scholars nor students of IR. Replacing them by comic encounters where the parties gladly admit fallibility and seek new perspectives is indeed desirable.

Epilogue

In practice, *all* action on the world political stage can be interpreted through *any* of the (four) frameworks. Conflicts readily offer roles for romantic heroes (the winners), tragic heroes (the losers), and comic heroes (the fumlbers), or can be depicted as devoid of heroes altogether (satire with lunatics all around). Cooperation can be interpreted as the epic victory of benevolent forces, as a tragic/ironic illusion or as a comically imperfect truce. The conflict in Libya since 2011, for example, may be seen as a successful intervention to overthrow an evil dictator, yet another romantic victory for liberal democratic forces; a humanitarian tragedy for the civilian population of Libya; in a satiric light, a battle between a crazy dictator and Western hypocrites; or a comic tumult featuring numerous more or less benevolent heroes pursuing various partly overlapping, partly contradictory causes such as democracy, human rights, revolution, restoration of order, anti-imperialism, national sovereignty or Islamist rule. The non-proliferation regime, to take a case of cooperation, may be seen as an essentially successful means to stop the spread of nuclear arms (epic), as yet another set of treaties that privileges the superpowers and falls short of achieving the beautiful, initial objective (tragedy), as an on-going game played by many swindlers who, despite their less-than-pure motives and divergent specific interests, are most likely not to induce mass destruction (comedy), or as a senseless and nightmarish game of death (satire).

Likewise, on the metatheoretical level, a narrative choice is *always* involved. No research perspective appears as the best explanation or the most accurate description automatically, without being chosen and justified as such – more or less consciously. Just like conflicts and

cooperation among world politics actors may be placed in all the four basic plots, the existence of different theories may be given meaning in various ways. In both practical cases and abstract debates, once a specific narrative is accepted, it begins to gather force: new evidence is interpreted in the framework it provides and alternative interpretations are overshadowed. Also, the more often you choose a particular plot, the more likely you are to employ it in the future. The choice is constrained not so much by 'reality' or the 'facts', as by narrative force and tradition – and often by the expectations of others, since switching narratives without losing face may be difficult especially in the scientific community. In this sense, also, the flexibility of comedy is an asset: changing perspectives is not a problem for comic theorists who define themselves via producing surprises.

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