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## **The absurd quest for vulnerability: Unveiling the political in International Relations Theory through aesthetics**

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# **The absurd quest for vulnerability**

Unveiling the political in International Relations Theory through aesthetics



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## Introduction

This thesis starts from an understanding of the field of International Relations (IR) as a scientific inquiry into what world politics could possibly be. Following Baylis et al. (2020, 6), it understands world politics as: “the political and power relations, broadly defined, that characterize the contemporary world” (Baylis et al., 2020, 6). Since there is as of yet no scientific consensus on what we should include in our understanding of that broad definition, nor a consensus on what criteria we should rely on to reach a consensus (Jackson, 2016, 2-3), IR is an incredibly vast field of study (Baylis et al., 2020, 7), and its theoretical foundations remain disputed. This thesis is my contribution to this dispute. Foremost, in the broader discussion on what aesthetic approaches have to offer the field, it is an exploration of what the writing and performance of a theatre play – as a method - can add to our possibilities for understanding world politics. In doing so, it will specifically investigate how it can add to our understanding of how to deal with the matter that when we investigate world politics from different theoretical perspectives, we come to different questions, we have different conversations, and we find different answers (Wæver, 1996, 150; Bleiker, 2009, 6-7). Are we able to fully acknowledge that this is the case? What does that mean for our choice of certain theoretical perspectives over others? And how can we have fruitful and meaningful exchanges about these matters, taking into account that most proponents of any of the theoretical schools of thought in IR seem to be quite convinced about its validity, but yet can be equally skeptical about seriously considering alternatives as equally valid?

Possibly, part of the answer to this last question can be found when considering Kurki and Wight’s (2013, 15-33) assertion that theoretical work in IR can be considered a business of ‘selling ideas’. Namely, instead of relying on objective measures to decide which theoretical perspective best catches world politics as it ‘really is’, it might very well be the case that students and scholars of IR, instead, choose to support certain theoretical viewpoints over others because they match better with their general understanding of the world and their lived subjective experience of what politics really is, and because accounts of certain theoretical perspectives have become considered to be common sense (Bleiker, 2009, 6). To consider your understanding of world politics as just an understanding of how world politics works, instead of a very logically informed estimation of how world politics actually works, takes courage. It makes the field of IR, like I have called it before, incredibly vast, and that can make us feel vulnerable. Therefore, I kindly welcome you on my quest for vulnerability.

My quest for vulnerability starts with the question: Can the process of writing and performing a theatre play contribute to academic debates in the field of IR? To answer this question, I will do a case study by actually writing and performing a theatre play. I argue that this experiment in itself already contributes to the debates in IR. Namely, to those that investigate how aesthetic approaches could add to the field’s knowledge production. I will delve into this in chapter 1. Additionally, the content of the play will address yet another debate in IR. Namely, it will address the debate that tries to make out how we can make sense of the scientific-philosophic underpinnings of different branches of International Relations Theory (IRT), and how they shape how we make sense of world politics differently as a result. I will delve into this in chapter 2.

I have titled my thesis ‘The absurd quest for vulnerability’. In this, I was inspired by the scholar Catherine Lu (2012, 158-169), who uses ‘tragedy’- the genre of plays conceived by the ancient Greek playwrights - as a mode of analysis through which we can understand world politics anew. Namely, she argues, such a mode of analysis allows us to handle the uncertain and the unknown of the world better. In a chapter of a book on how ‘tragedy’ can be used as such, she calls the neoconservative narrative written down in the book *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* an “anti-tragic quest for invulnerability” (Lu, 2012, 169) because it offered up as a manual for victory that leaves no room for vulnerability. Well, it has been established that my thesis does not aim to be a manual for victory. Rather, it can serve as a manual to allow us to navigate the vulnerability that comes with acknowledging that ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions in IRT are vast and cannot be definitively answered (Jackson, 2016, 2-3). So, my thesis is a quest for the opposite of invulnerability; vulnerability. Rather than using the genre of ‘tragedy’, I will make use of the Theatre of the Absurd – the genre of plays written by postmodern writers such as Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. This genre lends itself well as a poststructuralist method to gain insights into how different theories of IR are ways of meaning-making that are embedded in meta-narratives and power dynamics. And there you have it; my absurd quest for vulnerability. And being vulnerable, I will admit that in line with my former statement about how scholars are possibly most drawn to theoretical perspectives that fit their general understanding of world politics, my poststructuralist angle is possibly chosen because it fits with my subjective understanding of it. I do not think that this is problematic, because my angle on IRT can still tell us something about the whole of IRT. I will address all of this in chapter 2.

In line with the humanities-based program of which it is a part, this thesis blurs distinct disciplinary boundaries. While it concerns itself mostly with the theoretical foundations of the field of IR, it also touches upon philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and performance (theatre) studies. Yet, while this thesis aims to broaden current conventions in IR in the hopes that it might inspire new insights in its readers, and while it makes a case for experimentation, I do not embark on this quest lightly. Allowing unconventional ways of approaching research into world politics does not mean adopting an everything-goes mentality. I will rely on the carefully crafted works of IR scholars that have gone before me, in order to speak to the conversation we are already having in a meaningful way.

## Chapter 1

### Aesthetic openings

#### Introduction

I argue that ample work has been done in (the fringes of) IR scholarship to convince us that aesthetic approaches to world politics are a valuable addition to the field. According to Bleiker (2009, 2- 3) there has been sufficient work that draws on aesthetic sources to actually speak of an ‘aesthetic turn’ in IR. This turn has been brought about by two shifts in the production of knowledge in the field. Firstly, in the 1980s, it was brought about by the postmodern challenge to the positivist foundation of the discipline. Secondly, in more recent years, it was brought about when scholars started to examine the implications of this postmodern critique by exploring different forms of insight into world politics (Bleiker, 2001, 510). A (semi-) recent example of such work that convinced me – and many others – of the added value of aesthetic approaches is *The politics of Exile* written by Elizabeth Dauphinée (2013a), the first scholarly work in IR that employs the form of the novel (Edkins 2013). Through her novel, Dauphinée is able to show the limits of distanced academic writing, particularly when researching war, by telling the intimate and complex story of a university professor researching the Bosnian war and its aftermath. Still, one can wonder why it is necessary to bring art forms into the field of IR. It is all good and well that art can tell us much about the world we live in, but why should it be counted as academic work?

From the second chapter onwards I will do a case study on what aesthetic approaches can add to our academic knowledge production in the field of IR. In the case study, I will use the process of making a theatre play to investigate how theories about world politics shape the world we inhabit. But first, In this chapter, I will outline why allowing art forms as legitimate ways of doing research into world politics, such as the making of an absurdist theatre play, is worthwhile to consider in the first place.

#### Legitimizing aesthetic methods

A prevalent idea in IR scholarship is that world politics is serious business, and that therefore, only well-proven social scientific inquiries can give us the certitude we need when dealing with its complexities (Bleiker , 2009, 1-2). However, Bleiker (2009, 1-2) contends that *because* the

study of world politics is so serious, it is too big of a risk if we only rely on one set of knowledge practices to come to our knowledge of it. Therefore, he argues that we need to legitimize a greater variety of approaches. Specifically, he calls for the embrace of the romantic notion of aesthetics that refers to the re-validation of the full register of human insight that the Enlightenment had reduced to the practices of reason and logos. Namely, this notion of aesthetics, taking with it things like creativity and imagination, could offer us alternative insights into world politics; a type of reflective understanding that can allow us a more open-ended sensibility about the political.

To understand what it means to have a more open-ended sensibility about the political, it is crucial to first understand what is meant by ‘the political’. According to Edkins (1999, 2-6) ‘the political’ refers to a broader meaning than what is referred to as ‘politics’. Whereas politics refers to things like elections, political parties, the doings of government, diplomacy, international treaties, and wars, the political refers to what gets to count as politics. It has to do with the establishment of a social order that installs a particular, historically specific account of what areas of social life get to be defined as politics, and which are not. In this, it is considered impossible to strip power from legitimization. Instead, power is understood to establish a certain social order and corresponding forms of legitimacy, which in turn produce specific representations of power. By re-establishing what gets to count as politics, the political radically departs from sedimented practices and constitutes new social practices. Taking this into account in political analysis, then, shifts our focus. Namely, it becomes necessary to call into question the conditions under which particular representations of power are made conceivable by investigating what principles of legitimacy, belief systems, and ways of apprehending reality enabled specific representations of power to emerge.

According to Bleiker (2001, 509-11), mimetic forms of representation have dominated IR scholarship and constitute the most influential contributions to the discipline. Mimetic approaches to representation aim to represent world politics as it really is, upholding the notion of a neutral observer and a corresponding separation of object and subject. In contrast, aesthetic approaches to representation presume that it is impossible to represent world politics as it really is because a representation of the world is always just that: a representation – and not the world itself. Therefore, instead of ignoring the gap between representation and what is being represented, or trying to narrow this gap, aesthetic approaches take note of the inevitable difference between what is being represented and the representation of it. Moreover, aesthetic

approaches understand this difference to be the location of the political, because they concede that every representation is inevitably incomplete and bound up with the values of the perceiver.

Therefore, according to Bleiker (2001, 510), some of the most significant theoretical and practical insight into world politics emerges from exploring how representative practices themselves have come to constitute and shape political practices. For him, the main challenge ahead is to reclaim the political value of the aesthetic because modern political practices that champion technological reason have eclipsed the aesthetic from our political purview. A turn towards aesthetics, then, offers us an alternative to a model of thought that understands knowledge to be the mimetic recognition of external appearances of 'the real world'. It offers up a more direct encounter with the political because it understands that political reality does not exist in an a priori way, but only comes into being through the process of representation. It is an approach that allows for productive interactions between different faculties such as sensibility, imagination, and reason, without having to do away with the unique position of insight of the other (Bleiker 2001, 511).

This call for alternative, aesthetic ways of acquiring knowledge in IR is in line with Shapiro (2013, 1), who argues that the study of world politics has been in an epistemological slumber. That is to say, it is largely stuck in a pre-Kantian philosophical framing. In this framing, our experience is mostly understood to be shaped by the things that appear in the world – which constitutes the data for empirical and explanatory analysis - or by that which lies behind the appearance – which constitutes the object of interpretive, or hermeneutic analysis. Kantian epistemological orientations move both past empiricist and hermeneutic modes of inquiry. Namely, Kant's contribution privileges the *conditions of possibility* for something to appear. This philosophical framing starkly breaks with convention on issues of method from mere passive perception or the search for the essence of things behind their appearance. Instead, because knowledge of the world is considered to be subjective, it introduces a phenomenological subject responsible for shaping the conditions under which things can appear as things. It encourages us not to focus on explaining how things are related to each other, but to investigate what has made it so that specifically those interrelations are drawn to our attention. Accordingly, it underscores the notion that alternative subjectivities are possible and that there is a multiplicity of alternative worlds within which things can emerge as objects of knowledge because of differently implicated subjects (Shapiro, 2013, 2).

This philosophical framing provides us with an alternative to inquiries that consider objects that already reside in familiar political discourses and that we can re-discover with



technical issues of measurement, reliability, and validity (Shapiro, 2013, 3). Instead, because systems of power are also considered to produce their own ontologies and epistemologies, it urges us to consider why particular problems emerge at particular historical moments and how this reflects the struggle for power (4). According to Shapiro (2013, 5), in the social sciences, the systems of power have led to a technically-oriented and method-obsessive focus.

Aesthetic epistemology, then, can be a way out of existing power structures because it reaffirms personal investigation and social criticism – even when its political register is hard to discern because it appears as mere entertainment (Shapiro, 2013, 5). It presents a critical attitude that provides people a ‘way out’ of their adherence to that what has gained authority and encourages them to dare to engage in unhindered participation in public deliberation. It does so by providing us a historical ontology of ourselves that serves as an antidote to unreflectively submitting to coercive forms of knowledge by unveiling the effects of power they bring about. So, it urges us to resist the modes of subjectivity that authority imposes and that, as a result, we impose on ourselves. Instead of being preoccupied with questions of the validity and reliability of knowledge claims, it encourages an aesthetic mode of apprehension. This consists of the invention of new concepts through creativity and originality instead of relying on already-existing conceptualizations of familiar problems (8-9).

In addition, following Rancière (2008, 11), aesthetic experience, such as a theatre performance, has the potential to disrupt what already has been established, without necessarily persuading us in favor of a clear commonality. Instead, it creates new connections and disconnections that reshape our relationship to each other, the world we live in, and how we are ‘equipped’ to fit into that world.

Therefore, according to Bleiker (2009, 11): “art is not the language of habit, since it searches for the new, the different, the neglected, it may even create a certain ‘mental and emotional alertness’- an encouragement to reflect upon and rethink what has been taken for granted, to move beyond dogma and promote debate about issues that would otherwise remain silenced or marginalized”

Specifically, aesthetics is relevant to consider when investigating world politics in current times because it challenges the modern tendency to reduce the political to the rational, and therefore, it can add to our possibilities for knowing and being. It reminds us to be mindful and self-aware of the politics of systems that rely on fixed principles. It offers up no conclusive answers or absolute principles and rejects the tendencies in the modern world towards control

and the repression of difference in favor of openness and responsiveness. In doing so, it does not promote or denounce positions, but instead, it poses important questions. It focuses on providing us with different options and giving us space to reflect (Bleiker, 2009, 11-12).

How aesthetics can provide us with different options can be understood when we regard politics from the idea of the 'distribution of the sensible'. Namely, this idea refers to what gets picked up by our senses as self-evident facts; revealing what is commonly shared as sensible, and which different individuals have part in the allocation of what is sensible or not. Therefore, politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, and by whom. Aesthetic practices, then, can be considered as ways of doing and making that intervene in the commonly accepted ways of doing and making which open up possibilities of being and perception (Rancière & Rockhill, 2004, 12-13).

For example, when we regard the distribution of the sensible in IR, we can consider how prevailing approaches such as realism and liberalism are characterized by the fundamental assumption that we can understand and represent world politics independently of our values and assumptions. This is why even liberal diplomats often evoke the realist dictum that we need to understand the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be (Bleiker, 2009, 5). However, Bleiker (2009, 7) argues that the language of realism and liberalism is not clear and intelligible by some objective standard. Instead, it is rehearsed, over and over again, and part of a meaning-making system that shapes our thinking in specific directions according to a system of thought that both embodies and masks inherently subjective political judgments and assumptions. So, even though there is no way to represent a political issue independently from the methods that are used to do so, and interpretation is an inherently political exercise, as a result of this 'common sense' image that realism and liberalism have, it becomes harder to identify how their values have resulted in the very conflicts that they seek to analyze and solve (Bleiker, 2009, 6). This is not to say that they are necessarily wrong, but it is to say that they are no longer recognized as inevitably partial and historically contingent interpretations but instead viewed as common sense (Bleiker, 2009, 6).

In a like manner, in their book *Critical Methods for the Study of World Politics*, Choi et al. (2019, 7) hypothesize that knowledge in academia is political and that the world has already been changed through the research and practices of knowing that it produces, but that its political power has been obscured and has become bureaucratic and instrumental. They point out that most universities are shaped by neoliberal governments and processes of marketization in which the way that knowledge is being understood and acquired has become one that fits

with the rationale of the market (Choi et al., 2019, 9). As a result, students and teachers increasingly become ‘sites of human capital’, struggling to improve in a narrow set of self-governing confines, which limits our epistemic possibilities (9-10).

To open up epistemologically, they propose to become attentive to the experiential aspect of knowledge-making. Namely, to acknowledge that research happens in different contexts - also in non-formal research contexts - and from different specifically inhabited positions in and outside the university. In order to break with the instrumentalized conditions of the academy, they call for creativity, collaboration, and honesty (Choi et al., 2019, 15). They position themselves as firm believers that, through this opening up, and by understanding knowledge as encounters with multiplicity, the study of world politics can be “a science *and art* of facing, understanding and addressing difference” (p.15).

Therefore, to allow for new kinds of knowledge to be gathered in IR, they propose that we need to be able to let go of established ways of thinking, behaving, and being in the world. This can be uncomfortable and difficult because venturing into the unknown can be vulnerable and might mean losing a sense of stability. We might even need to lose what gave coherence to our desire to transform because this desire might be based on assumptions that need to be questioned in order to *truly* transform. Additionally, it requires an attachment and entanglement with the environment, people, and things that surround us. Experiential knowledge, the knowledge that we gather through our experiences, is always experimental because they are our direct experiences in ‘the real world’ – which can never be exactly the same more than once (Choi et al., 2019, 15). Therefore, experiential aesthetic methods, such as the making and performance of a theatre play, might be more of ‘the real world out there’, than mimetic methods are. In the process of rehearsals, there is a lot of experimentation, and the rehearsal process is also entangled with other people, ideas, objects, and spaces.

Thus, when considering the study of what world politics could possibly be: “Yes, we can – and indeed should – indulge in artistic endeavors” (Bleiker, 2001, 1). And, as Choi et al. (2019) maintain: “becoming otherwise crucially involves re-centering vulnerability as an organizing concept” (16). Therefore, my quest for vulnerability will wander off into the process of making a theatre play. In the following, I will outline what such a method entails.

## **Fiction writing in IR**

The social science investigator – who interprets the result of data collected about individuals and collectives, and the fiction writer - who invents their subjects and their experimental data - stand at a distance from their materials. However, instead of trying to be objective, the fiction writer practices a mobile subjectivity that develops through the writing process. This is reflected in the creation of their characters, who constantly adapt to a complex world (Shapiro, 2013, 15). In explanatory social science, writing is informational (Shapiro, 2013, 25). Through writing, the researcher reports on the procedures of data gathering and validation and puts forward explanations. In critical artistic work, writing is not meant to present information, but it is meant as a process of thinking that happens through the imaginative staging of encounters that disrupt institutionalized and familiar versions of worlds. In doing so, it abandons hegemonic canons of justifications and enters into a domain of inquiry that does not have to rely on already established understandings (Shapiro, 2013, 29). Thus, According to Shapiro (2013, 30), what constitutes the aesthetic of knowledge is the way in which encounters lead to an alteration in sensible experience from the ordinary.

For Bleiker (2009, 3-4), poetic imagination is particularly relevant when it comes to the study of world politics. Namely, he considers that poetics, being an explicit engagement with language, is political because language is the process through which we represent and make sense of ourselves and our surroundings. Therefore, language always already contains the values that shape our ways of giving meaning to the world we inhabit, and poetry is a conscious attempt to highlight and engage this process. As a result, it is political in the most profound way possible. Through imagination and creativity, it is about stretching language – and with it, it breaks open entrenched habits of knowledge so that we can see the world anew. Through this approach, we might be able to rethink political conundrums to the point where their origins, essence, and implications are no longer recognizable. Poetic imagination can, therefore, be considered as an experimental micro-biotope from which we can garner insights into the larger world of world politics.

So, aesthetic approaches engage in the practices of representation in creative ways. They foreground the way in which we understand and construct the world we inhabit. This has the ability to fundamentally challenge how we think about world politics, not by being overtly political, but by investigating how we represent our world through language, and how this is internalized in our minds, actions, and political consciousness. Therefore, art can make us see a different reality than the one we commonly accept (Bleiker, 2009, 8-9). Correspondingly,

Agathangelou and Ling (2009, 91), through the concept of 'poisies', describe how different social ontologies are inter-subjectively shared communal practices and languages that emerge from a constant interplay both with the material world and with our interpretations of those interactions. Poisies, then, is considered to not only describe the world but also to articulate, and therefore, shape the world. It draws on one's power of articulation to disrupt discursive and epistemic regimes. Additionally they (2009, 99) argue that fiction and poetry can give voice to all nuances of subjectivity. By drawing on fiction and poetry, we can illustrate the multi-layered interactions among contending ways of thinking and being. We can break loose from the familiar and the conventional and wander off into what was supposed to be unthinkable or impossible. Moreover, when fiction and poetry is orated or performed, it relies on symbiotic collaborations between the artist(s), the medium, and the audience. Therefore, they can create the possibility for the creation of meaning through syncretic engagements. Fiction writing, as a method, reminds us that power permeates social relations but that hegemonic constructions are but one of the many narratives of social relations and that we have options to disrupt these constructions and allow the transformational to come into view.

This is in line with Edkins (2013, 292), who argues that, when turning to storytelling as a method of study, the most interesting part is the effects that these stories produce and how we judge those effects politically. Specifically, she considers that it is valuable to investigate how the stories disrupt particular orders, and what makes it disruptive, because stories draw out the complex mutual constitution of selves with others, person with place, present with past, and open up knowledge that remains concealed with academic arguments (Edkins et al., 2021, 604). Art does not discover or understand us, but it is a site of struggle. Its power lies in what artistic knowledge conveys and how it does so. This is no easy task. Rather, it needs disciplined reading, writing, and thinking (Agathangelou & Ling, 109-10).

Additionally, according to Park-Kang (2015, 362), fictional IR, the employment of fiction writing in IR scholarship, can enable us to think deeper about concepts such as fact, reality, and truth, and can help us to articulate complicated problems in a more flexible and imaginative way. Noting how the word fact originates from the Latin verb 'facere', which means 'to do', 'to create', 'to represent', or even 'to imagine' or 'to invent', reminds us that reality and imagination are interrelated. Fictional IR, then, tries to find insights within this field of IR, that is contrary to conventional belief, no stranger to fictional accounts (369). These insights can be found through imaginative writing; constructing a space that is not completely filled with existing ideas or information, but leaves room for newness to appear. The point is to

make use of limited information that is already available and, from there, pursue knowledge through experience, empathic projection, inner travel, and research. In this, it sees fact and truth as an ongoing process. It is not necessarily about arguing a point, but about activating multiple interpretations and exploring the politics of contestedness (372). Through fictional IR, scholars in IR can become ‘empathetic IR detectives’; conducting investigations with the goal to actively and humbly engage with the impossibility or incompleteness of knowing. Through the use of empathetic imagining, we can make an effort to discuss the unknowable in an intelligible manner (380). In Park Kang (381)’s words: “It is to struggle, to get frustrated, and sometimes, to enjoy research as a process. This does not necessarily guarantee successful research results or tangible progress in the immediate future. Nonetheless, making the effort does matter because, in the end, I would say, IR is about understanding other people’s feelings, making relationships between oneself and the world ... By using imagination, creating characters, combining data with fictional narrative, or with one’s own experience, I believe that more original and empathetic IR writing is possible”.

So far we have seen that the employment of fiction writing in IR offers us a novel way of approaching research because it is not simply a way to convey information, but it is a process of thought and imagination that allows us the room to develop ideas through the writing process, and introduces a phenomenological subject responsible for shaping the conditions under which things can appear as things. Correspondingly, this way of research holds a political subversion that makes us rethink established orders.

Such aesthetic processes of inquiry, which Shapiro (2013, 31-32), considers to be “politically oriented trans-disciplinarity” (32), do not follow the common forms of inquiry in social science: a purpose statement that formulates to problem, a description of the study design, specification of the methods and data collection, results and a conclusion. Therefore, Shapiro (2013, 31-32) offers up a series of questions to constitute the basis of such inquiry: “given the general area in which you are interested... what is the origin (in terms of the array of shaping forces) of the *doxa*, the currently dominant way of formulating problems? What are the forces at work that allow those formulations to persist? What are the costs and benefits for various constituencies of the mode of problematization that commands thinking and inquiry in the domain of your inquiry? Whose perspectives on problem(s) gain recognition and whose perspectives fail to rise above the threshold of recognition? And, finally, what conceptions, juxtapositions, and soliciting of alternative subjects and thought worlds will disrupt the dominant modes of intelligibility and open up spaces for new political thinking with

empowering implications for new forms of subjectivization, for the welcoming of new kinds of (in-process or becoming) subjects into politically relevant space?" (Shapiro, 2013, 31-32). The research phase of the play, in chapter 2 of this thesis will engage with these questions. But before we dive in, we first consider the choice of genre.

### **The Theatre of the Absurd: showing precarious knowledge systems through art**

In contrast to the psychological subject that is often studied in social science, a different kind of subject can be studied through aesthetics. Namely, the aesthetic subject is not understood according to a unified personality but within the context of their artistic genre and what they embody within this genre (Shapiro, 2013, 11). To illustrate this, Shapiro (2013, 11) mentions how, in Aeschylus's tragedy *Seven Against Thebes*, the change in attitude of the protagonist Eteocles, the King of Thebes, does not fit with attempts to impose a unified personality on him. However, if he is to be understood as a figure in a Greek tragedy, the changes in his attitude can be understood, not as states of mind, but as different values that are represented on stage. In another example, Shapiro (2013, 11) notes how Godard's film *Contempt* does not explore the psychic origins of contempt, but that it explores its effects on the world through cinematic space. In this, the character's dispositions are less significant in what they reveal about their inner lives than what they reveal about the world to which the characters belong. A turn to the arts, instead of the psychological framework of social science, thus provides us with a different political apprehension because it is framed within a different political ontology and imaginary (Shapiro, 2013, 11).

When it comes to the topic of research that I want to explore through the making of a theatre play; the question of how theories about world politics shape the world we inhabit, I think a particular genre of plays is fitting. Namely, the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd. This postmodern genre lends itself well as a poststructuralist basis to gain insights into how different theories of IR are ways of meaning-making that are embedded in meta-narratives and power dynamics. The terms postmodernism and poststructuralism are often used interchangeably because they have a shared analytical heritage and theoretical overlap that breaks with positivist definitions and categories. However, postmodernism refers to a theory of culture, society, and history that came out of the study of French literature and language. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, refers to a theory of knowledge and language, and this term is more commonly used in IR (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 169).

The genre of the theatre of the absurd can best be understood in the historical and cultural context in which it emerged. Specifically, it can be seen as a reaction to Nietzsche's assertion that God is dead, and the subsequent search to confront a world that has become devoid of a generally accepted integrating principle; a world that has become, indeed, absurd (Esslin, 1968, 389).

The Theatre of the Absurd faces up to the fact that for those for whom the world has no longer a central meaning or explanation, it is no longer possible to continue on standards and concepts that have lost their validity. Instead, it rejects the possibility of knowing the laws of conduct or ultimate values that are deducible from a foundation of certainty about the purpose of humans in the universe. By doing away with ultimate certainties, the Theatre of the Absurd makes an effort, however tentative, to make human beings aware of the ultimate realities of their condition, to shock them out of an existence that has become trite, complacent, mechanical, and deprived of the dignity that is the result of awareness (Esslin, 1968, 389-390).

In doing so, the Theatre of the Absurd fulfills two purposes and presents the audience with a dual absurdity. In one aspect, it criticizes, through satire, lives lived unaware of ultimate reality; the mechanical senselessness of half-unconscious, inauthentic ways of life. In another aspect, the Theatre of the Absurd faces up to a deeper layer of absurdity; the absurdity of the human condition in a world deprived of certainties. However frivolous the plays might appear, the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of human's precarious and inexplicable position in the universe (Esslin, 1968, 390-392).

As chapter 2 will elaborate on in detail, the theatre play that I have written and performed also rejects that the field of IR has a generally accepted integrating principle. I intend to make the audience – and particularly students and scholars in IR - aware of our precarious and inexplicable positions in world politics.



## Chapter 2

### **Research phase; untangling diverging implicit philosophical underpinnings in International Relations Theory**

#### **Introduction**

A play does not appear out of nowhere. It comes into being through the imagination of the people who participate in making it. And imagination does not appear out of nowhere either. Arguably, it is based on the experiences and knowledge of the ones that imagine it. Perhaps we can come to new ideas and experiences through imagination, or at least we can rearrange our knowledge in novel ways, which might lead to new insights and perspectives. In the hopes that it might do so, this particular play is written as a method to understand IRT in a new way, to possibly find new answers, to come to new questions, or to make already hypothesized answers and questions resonate anew. In the first chapter, we have seen how aesthetic approaches to IR, such as the writing of a play, might do such things. In this chapter, we come to the topic of research that this particular play aims to contribute to. Namely, how different schools of thought in IR differ from each other in the way that they make sense of the world, and how they shape possibilities in world politics differently as a result.

This phase of the research happens simultaneously with the writing- and rehearsal-process of the play. As said before, someone's imagination is most probably based on that person's experiences and knowledge. Well, that someone, in this case, is me. Through the process of research, writing, rehearsal, reflective discussions and the performance of this play, I aim to contribute to our understanding of IRT. I'm specifically interested in the question to what extent our theories about 'how the world works' shape the world. Namely, there are a lot of different theories about world politics that all have their own basic philosophical underpinnings. There has been quite some debate from different angles in IR scholarship about the fact that the majority of these philosophical underpinnings cannot be definitively proven to be true or false as of yet, and that they possibly can never be proven to be true or false because different theories have different ideas about what a 'scientific' study of world politics would entail, or what would be valid grounds to come to a conclusion on this matter (Jackson, 2016, 3-10; Kurki & Wight, 2013, 15; Querejazu, 2016, 5-7). Therefore, it has been argued that the only compelling way in which we can assess different theories in world politics, is to assess them according to their own philosophical claims and underpinnings (Querejazu, 2016, 3; Jackson 2016, 24; Wæver, 1996, 173-74). However, the philosophical underpinnings of the

different theories in IR often remain implicit, are often vague (Jackson, 2016, 3) and often remain unquestioned because they are embedded in specific cultural traditions (Qin 2016, 34). As a result, the most compelling theories easily become those theories that match the most with the cultural traditions that you have grown up with, and/or that can convince you the most that they portray the world ‘as it really is’.

First of all, this hinders our ability to have interesting discussions about the different theories in IR, because it is not really clear what ideas they are based on, how they exactly differ from each other in this respect, and how they could meaningfully speak to each other given that they rely on different basic assumptions. Secondly, because some theories are seen to be more fitting with world politics ‘as it really is’ than other theories, those theories arguably also have a stronger influence on the world because they are seen to be more legitimate (Jackson, 2016, 3).

In this thesis, I aim to contribute to our thinking on these issues by taking a rather experimental approach to address them. Through the process of making a theatre performance, which includes research, thinking, writing, rehearsing, talking, performing, watching, and reflective discussions, I aim to engage with the philosophical underpinnings of three diverging theories in IR, in the hopes that it gives us new insights on what they are and how they shape our possibilities for thinking, and being, in the world. In this chapter, I will outline the academic discussions and knowledge that I try to engage with through the unfolding of the play. These discussions and knowledge are the basis on which the play that I have imagined is built. In doing so, I will engage with the series of questions laid out in chapter 1, that Shapiro (2013, 31-32) has suggested should be at the basis of aesthetic inquiries. Namely, I will investigate where dominant ways of problem-solving originate from, how they persist, what effects they produce, and how we might disrupt them.

### **Why philosophical underpinnings remain implicit**

One way in which we can understand how the philosophical underpinnings of different IR theories remain implicit is by considering how Yaqing Qin (2016, 34-35) has theorized about the components of social theories. Namely, he argues that the core of any social theory consists of a substantive and a metaphysical component. In this, the substantive component takes the role of observation, taking signals from the ‘real world’, while the metaphysical component takes the role of interpretation, processing these signals through an ideational filter and making

constructs of them. According to Qin (2016, 35), this metaphysical component is shaped by an unconsciously formed understanding or background knowledge of a cultural community.

When we consider mainstream IRT, which he sees to be primarily consisting of realism, neo-liberal institutionalism, structural constructivism, and the English school, we can recognize that they have a shared metaphysical component that comes out of the background knowledge of Western culture. This metaphysical component is individualistic rationality. Coming out of the Enlightenment, it has become a dominant idea that greatly conditions the theoretical hard core of theories coming out of the West, without, for a long time, being consciously recognized. Accordingly, since there is a plethora of theories that carry a core of individualistic rationality, it also allows them to more easily contribute to and engage with each other (Qin 2016, 34), which can, for example, be recognized in the neo-liberalism/neo-realism synthesis (Wæver, 1996, 164)

Secondly, we can understand how the philosophical underpinnings of IRT have remained implicit by considering how scientific inference has been regarded as the only way through which serious scholars and students can understand social reality (Jackson, 2016, 2-3). Jackson (2016, 3) argues that scholars advancing such claims, heavily rely on the cultural prestige that is associated with the notion of 'science' in our current times. When the idea of 'science' is invoked, he argues, this is used as a very valuable trump-card because it calls to mind a reference to a record of demonstrated empirical success, and notions of truth, progress, and reason. At the same time, Jackson (2016, 3) argues, the role played by 'science' in the field of IR is not based on detailed philosophical or conceptual arguments. Typically, within the field, science is just being discussed in generalities and caricatures by speaking of '*the scientific method*' or '*the philosophy of science*', without detailing how they are being specifically understood. According to Jackson (2016) this notion of 'science' in IR can best be described as "a curious amalgamation of Sagan's skeptical 'baloney detection kit,' an embrace of mathematical formalism, and a desire for law-like generalizations that hold true across cases (given appropriate scope conditions, of course)" (p. 4). As a result, theories that do not fit with this mathematical formalism and these law-like generalizations can be brushed off as being 'baloney', and thus as not being valuable, even though – and because - the means through which this is being assessed has not, and possibly cannot, be definitively proven to be 'true'. And theories that pass the test performed by this 'baloney detection kit', remain unquestioned because of the formerly mentioned prestige associated with the idea of 'science'.

As a result, Fierke (2022, 19) argues, the grounding of reality in this specific science has profound implications for how we understand the world and our place in it. It produces a world of rationality, physical measurement, and a world that treats language as representing pre-existing objects. It does not treat language as a means of communication within sentient and evolving relationality and therefore, it is a world that considers things like emotionality, consciousness, and intention as secondary to analysis, or even as irrelevant byproducts. In this classical view, separateness is prior to relationships. Therefore, since the Enlightenment, our grounding in this world of separateness has made us strangers to each other and to other life (Fierke, 2022, 20).

Similarly, Querejazu (2016) contends that since IR is a discipline that produces knowledge about the world, we might reasonably expect it to allow for theoretical perspectives from around the world. However, the discipline of IR is characterized by a practice of gatekeeping that neglects – and even works against - theoretical contributions from outside of the Western world. This, in turn, has a big consequence for the way we make sense of reality and give shape to politics (Querejazu, 2016, 2). Blaser (2013, 548) explains that realities are created by story-telling; by the narratives we believe in and act upon. These narratives, in turn, are being shaped by our ontological starting points. To understand how this relates to theory in IR, we can see how the predominance of Western theoretical work is being sold by relegating knowledge from ‘outside’ of the Western world to the realm of ‘myths’ and ‘beliefs’ (Querejazu, 2016, 5), whereas ‘modernity’ is not relegated to the realm of myth but is instead seen as truth. However, Western modernity is based on assumptions that are not necessarily proven to be unambiguously true. It is, like other ways of making sense of the world, largely based on assumptions and stories. The story goes as follows: with the Enlightenment, human replaced God and became the center. (Hu)man becomes a rational, autonomous entity that with the superiority of reason can achieve progress and improve its imperfect condition. As a result: “... modern liberal human being becomes... the centerpiece of the stage, with the power to invite on stage those phenomena that are rationally considered part of the act. On this stage, man performs the modern universe as a reality” (Querejazu, 2016, 7).

So, the philosophical underpinnings of different IR theories remain implicit for a couple of reasons. Firstly because they are shaped within a specific cultural context and community. Secondly because there is no scientific consensus on how we can find truth in IR, or on what criteria we should rely to find it. And lastly, because of the prestige associated with the notion of ‘*the scientific method*’ that came out of the specific cultural context and community of ‘the

West', which both promotes theories that come out of the background knowledge of Western communities, while it suppresses theories that do not come out of the West and do not fit with an 'Enlightened' understanding of science.

### **Condoning conundrums**

To deal with this conundrum, Jackson (2016, 26-35) proposes that we make the philosophical underpinnings of different theories more explicit and recognize them as wagers; that we are not certain the world actually works according to these underpinnings, but that we can still use them as hook-ups to understand the world, especially if we make them explicit.

This idea can be linked to Querejazu's (2016, 3) notion of theoretical pluralism. His notion of theoretical pluralism considers how different worlds can coexist and are incommensurable; that they cannot be compared or measured by the same terms, but need to be evaluated within their own paradigm (Querejazu 2016, 3). Querejazu (2016, 4) proposes that the narrow epistemic, methodological, and ontological considerations in IR can be disrupted by engaging with diverse perspectives through storytelling and by the employment of different methods through which we make sense of and produce reality. By accepting the existence of different worlds, concepts such as 'power', which are ordinarily used in IR, could be understood in a radically different way just by trying to imagine what these concepts would look like or refer to in different ontologies.

Related to this idea is Fierke's (2022, 16-18) idea of snapshots. She argues, namely, that each theory about world politics, might provide us with partial information about the world as a whole. If we understand reality to be larger than one person, theory or cultural position, we can also look at theory differently. Instead of trying to figure out which competing theory is more true, we could instead understand different observations or theories as glimpses of truth that can be insightful, but will always be incomplete. This idea can be referred to as a snapshot. When we take the idea of snapshots, the goal would not be to determine which competing snapshot is more true, but instead to juxtapose the different snapshots that are taken from different angles in order to gain information about the parts of a non-linear and multidimensional hologram.

So far, we have established that different theories rely on philosophical underpinnings that often remain implicit. However, these theories still shape the world in a certain way, exactly

because of these philosophical underpinnings that determine ‘how they make sense of the world’. To understand how this might happen, several ideas can be of use. For example, we can turn to the idea brought forward by Steve Smith (2004, 499). In his article: *Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11*, he argues that core assumptions in IRT have constructed a world in which certain forms of violence, such as economic violence, are not recognized as violence. As a result, he contends, the discipline has ‘sung into existence’ a world in which the events of 9/11 became possible. This idea can give us a vocabulary to talk about how certain core assumptions in IRT might ‘sing into existence’ different worlds.

We can contextualize these different worlds with Agathangelou and Ling’s (2009, 85-87) idea of worldism. Worldism understands world politics to be constituted of multiple worlds that each have their own ways of being, knowing and relating that has been passed down from one generation to the other. This passing down, or ‘singing into existence’ to write with Smith’s words, happens through larger events like development, trade, conflict, and war, but also through daily acts like joking and playing, cooking and eating, singing and dancing. Therefore, worldism can be understood as everyday life that enacts certain values and understandings that is intersubjective and that privileges certain subjects and subjectivities over others. It orients us to the existence of multiple social ontologies that make conditions of being possible (91). It posits that fiction and poetry illustrate the alternative visions and practices in worldism and how they operate (98). Moreover, it considers that the everyday life enactment, or narration, that makes these conditions for being possible is never completed, suggesting that the story can always change (87).

So, In order to make the philosophical underpinnings of different theories more explicit, clearer, and to allow them to be questioned, it helps to consider them as philosophical guesses or ‘wagers’. This means, namely, that we should not focus on whether they are true or false, but that we should focus on making these implicit guesses more explicit and on evaluating what kind of worldism they sing into existence. Furthermore, we can question them by engaging with diverse perspectives through storytelling and by the employment of different methods - such as making a theatre performance - and accept the knowledge that we gain from this process as partial information, that can give us meaningful insights about the whole.

## World politics; three times

I have chosen to investigate how three diverging theories; liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology sing different worlds into existence, on the basis of which philosophical underpinnings they do so, and how they differ from and/or relate to each other.

According to Kurki and Wight (2013, 15), inquiries concerning the philosophy of (social) science are considered to be meta-theoretical because they explore the “underlying assumptions of all theory and attempts to understand the consequences of such assumptions on the act of theorizing and the practice of empirical research” (Kurki & Wight, 2013, 15). My thesis can, therefore, definitely be considered to be meta-theoretical. However, addressing “all theory” is quite the assignment. So, about forty years after the ‘inter-paradigm debate’ between realism, liberalism, and radicalism (Wæver, 1996, 154) from the 1980s into the 1990s, we can ask similar questions about my choice for liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology: “Is it vague and arbitrary? Why these three? Why three?...” (Wæver, 1996, 149).

According to Wæver (1996, 149), ‘the inter-paradigm debate’ does not present the ongoing controversies in the discipline. And he calls for the self-referential story-telling of the discipline to move with these ongoing controversies; to create new stories and metaphors to replace the triangle between realism, liberalism (or pluralism), and radicalism (or structuralism, or Marxism) (Wæver, 1996, 154), shown in the figure below. The arrow between liberalism and realism indicates that, although it was a triangular debate, the debate was in practice mainly between the theories on this side of the triangle (Wæver, 1996, 151).

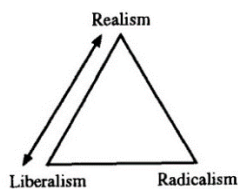


Figure 7.1 The inter-paradigm debate

(Wæver, 1996, 151).

The triangle has been a guiding metaphor for the discipline, and more important than the number of theories that have been included in this metaphor is the idea of incommensurable paradigms (Wæver 1996, 154), which was increasingly seen – not as a debate to be won, but rather as a pluralism to live with. Even more so, some considered that the discipline of IR *was* the debate; this disagreement about truth; about different ‘sides’ of reality (Wæver 1996, 155). According to Wæver (1996, 161), the inter-paradigm debate can best be understood as a pattern

of behavior that gradually emerged in the 1970s and was constructed as a debate for presentational purposes, teaching, and self-reflection afterward. The inter-paradigm debate already stimulated self-reflection in the discipline and moved the field to alternative measures for objectivity and science in IR, but the fourth debate took this even further by fundamentally challenging basic assumptions regarding objectivity, subjectivity, object/subject distinctions, referential versus relational conceptions of language, the use of dichotomies, and the rule by Western metaphysics over diverse ways of thought (Wæver, 1996, 156). Furthermore, the poststructuralist contribution to this fourth debate challenged how we perceive phenomena like language, praxis, politics, and society. In short, according to Wæver (1996, 157), the philosophical questions raised in the fourth debate pushed the field towards a critical pluralism that is meant to expose embedded power and authority structures, call for critical investigation of dominant discourses, legitimize marginalized perspectives, and provide a basis for alternative conceptions. According to Wæver (1996, 164), with the move towards neo-realism and neo-liberalism, and a resulting synthesizing between them, the main line of controversy in IR shifted to the post-modernism debate between rationalist and reflectivists. Still, there is a long during “vehemence of resistance against especially post-structuralism” (Wæver, 1996, 165). For example by dismissively referring to “academics who ‘are content with interpreting text’” (Wæver, 1996, 165). In Wæver’s (1996, 165) diagram below reflectivism is placed in the same corner with Marxists, although the two share little assumptions (Wæver, 1996, 166). However, according to Wæver (1996, 166), post-modernist approaches largely replaced Marxism as the extreme contender; the radical challenge.

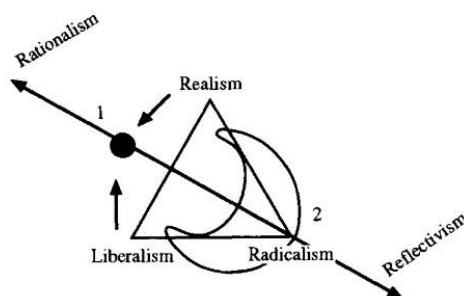


Figure 7.3 IR debate of the 1980s

(Wæver, 1996, 165).

Wæver (1996, 150) considers how from Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigms, the idea was developed that diverging general theories cannot be evaluated in an over-arching, neutral language because each paradigm constructs its own concepts, questions, data, criteria of



judgement, stories, and ‘language’. However, according to Wæver (1996, 159), Kuhn’s sociology and history of science argument that paradigms are intrinsic to the social functioning of a scientific community is often missed. When we consider this argument, we can consider paradigms to be necessary to ask scientific questions. Namely, only paradigms can produce scientific puzzles, and the measures according to which the improvements on those puzzles can be evaluated. Therefore, there is no way to prove which paradigm is ‘right’ (Wæver, 1996, 160). Instead, one finds several paradigms operating in social science, and there is a constant attempt to question the believed (Wæver, 1996, 161).

According to Wæver (1996, 171) the poststructuralist perspective on incommensurability can be helpful. Namely, it believes that all meaning systems are open-ended systems of signs referring to signs referring to signs. Therefore, no concept, also not the idea of closed paradigms, can have an ultimate, unequivocal meaning. Paradigms can merely strive for closure, but cannot ever succeed at closure because all meaning systems are precarious. Still, communication takes place all the time, and it makes sufficient sense to go on (Wæver, 1996, 172).

So, to speak to the disagreement about truth and reality anew, I will juxtapose three theories: liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology, to see how they shape the world we inhabit. I consider the three theories to be paradigmatic because they construct their own concepts, questions, data, criteria of judgment, stories, and language, and I contend that they cannot be evaluated in an over-arching, neutral language. However, I will juxtapose them as three worldisms, that each sing a different world into existence, without claiming that they are completely incommensurable or that they cannot be compared.

I have chosen liberalism because it has been the historic alternative to the dominant theory of realism in IR (Dunne, 2014, 114), but as opposed to realism, which is ontologically quite narrow in that it mostly deals with nation-states, liberalism is ontologically wider, as it considers non-state, sub-state, trans-state, and supra-state actors (Wæver 1996, 152). Additionally, it could be argued that liberalism fits even more with the Western culture of Enlightenment because it underscores the idea that, with our ability to reason, we can get to a better world. Therefore, I maintain that it is currently most present as a “worldism” in IR. I have chosen poststructuralism and relational cosmology because their philosophical underpinnings differ from those of liberalism, but those of poststructuralism and those of relational cosmology do so in distinct ways. The choice for poststructuralism can already be understood by Weaver’s explanation of the rationalist-reflectivist axis – and the substitution of reflectivism for

structuralism as the radical alternative. The choice for poststructuralism, specifically, was made because of its focus on the politics of language and its rejection of incommensurability by virtue of its rejection of commensurability in the first place (Wæver, 1996, 171). Namely, these two factors make poststructuralism – in quite a meta-fashion – interesting to consider in a theatre play that juxtaposes three theories – primarily through language. I will now shortly introduce the choice for ‘relational cosmology’.

In the introduction to her book *International Relations in a relational universe* Kurki (2020, 1-), puts forward a new way to “think thoughts in, and around, IR” (p.3). She does so via relational cosmology: “a strand of cosmological science which highlights the discovery (conceptual as much as empirical) of the ‘relational’ nature of the universe” (p.3), which she further develops in conversation with relational theories that offer up ways to think without objects and things, without laws, and without backgrounds.

In her article called *Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations*, Kurki (2022, 821-836) distinguishes between classical forms of relational ‘social theorizing’ such as classical constructivism or Marxist structuralism, and, for the field of IR, ‘new’ forms of relational thought that come out of non-Western, non-Newtonian and critical humanist orientations. I will focus on the latter form of relational thinking, because, like poststructuralism, it breaks with the philosophical underpinnings on which liberalism relies – but it does so in a different way. I consider the latter category of relational thinking as a worldism that is significantly different from the worldism ‘liberalism’, and ‘poststructuralism’. Following Kurki (2022, 821-22), I will use the term ‘relational cosmology’ to address this paradigm that cuts across the sciences, arts, humanities, and social sciences, and encourages manifold relational knowledges from different parts of the world and across disciplinary experiences, in order to come to an IR that is the result of cross-pollination of values, narratives, and practices (Kurki, 2022, 825).

Thus, the choice for liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology is not meant to portray *the* current paradigmatic debate in IR. But it is no arbitrary choice either. When it comes to the question of how our theories about world politics shape the world we inhabit, these three theories each offer up a different answer. They are each a different worldism that sings into existence different possibilities for thinking and being. So, I have edited the triangle in Wæver’s (1996, 151) article. On top, arguably the place of the most dominant theory in the triangle, I have placed liberalism. I have placed poststructuralism in the bottom left corner to

indicate that the debates, in practice, mostly happen on this side of the triangle. I have placed relational cosmology in the bottom right corner to indicate that it is a promising ‘radically different’ alternative – although I would not call it radical per se, because even though it offers up a fundamentally different perspective, it is perhaps more about letting things unfold than about interrupting, as will be elaborated on in the next part. I have named this figure ‘World Politics; three times’, to indicate that I do not juxtapose them as a debate, but as three worldisms of what world politics could possibly be.

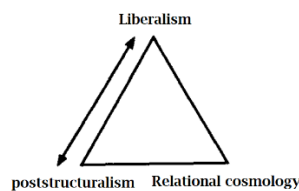


Figure 7.2 World Politics; three times

In short, the play has two goals: 1) to foreground how the philosophical underpinnings of each theory shape possibilities for thinking and being, and 2) to show that ‘the world’ is different each time when there is a different theoretical hegemony.

### **Imaging how liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology sing different worlds into existence**

To translate these ideas into a play, I came up with a concept to tell a story three times, but each time in a different ‘theoretical embeddedness’. The goal is not to portray in a theatrical way how these different theories deal with a certain political case study differently, but instead to show how these different theories make sense of reality differently. I intend to show how they are worldisms, a way of singing our world into existence. Therefore, the plot of the play is meant to be a starting ground to let these different worldisms talk and interact. The focus is to show how reality is constructed through discourse, each time according to a different understanding of world politics. The play, as a product, is therefore quite postmodern, and as a method quite poststructuralist. As you can see later in the play (spoiler alert) the poststructuralists professor will, breaking the fourth wall, attend you to this idea:

“

LARUT

It's funny, the word 'fun', it sounds so light, doesn't it. But I do think they could actually learn something from it.

BOAZ

Oh, yeah, eh, certainly! Maybe they can compare the structures of the boardgames to real world political events. See if there is an overlap, something like that.

LARUT

Or, go even deeper. Make them analyze how different structures could influence daily life differently. Make them think of different types of conversations. (*He looks at the audience*) Between a professor and a student, for example.

”

Additionally, this thesis on the whole also has elements of relational cosmology and liberalism. First of all, I understand this thesis to be a process that is relationally unfolding through my thoughts, my readings, the conversations with my supervisor, the rehearsal process, the writing process, the productional process of making a play and getting people to come and see it, and my talking about it with everyone who wants to (slightly) hear about it. I do not try to separate these different elements too much, at least I understand them to be intertwined. But, of course, there is also a certain focus on the somewhat more traditionally written part of this thesis that foregrounds the practices of reasoning and explaining (even though the subject of some of these explanations rejects foregrounding those practices) because I want it to be understood as a serious contribution to the theorizing about what world politics is, or can be.

To investigate what cooperation between the three theories might be like, the third scène of the play, a meeting of the professors and BOAZ after a storm has happened, is meant as a starting ground to let the different theories interact with each other. As each act is embedded in another theory, I want to imagine what would happen differently when these three different theories would have a discussion amongst each other, but they were embedded in a different 'making-sense-of-the-world' each time. In this, I want to investigate what kind of attitudes, questions, and interactions would arise in these different settings.

To begin to think about this, I have mapped the three theories according to four themes: Purpose, rationality, structure, and knowledge and truth. I have chosen these themes because they are a way to map their philosophical differences, and provide insight into how each theory 'makes sense of the world'.

Purpose:

Liberalism has gained traction in certain times, for example after the first and second World War's, but has lost traction again to realist thinking in fluctuation (Dunne, 2014, 114). According to Dunne (2014, 114), liberal values and institutions are deeply embedded in Europe and North America, but lack legitimacy worldwide. However, liberalism posits that a common power in the form of commonly held liberal ideas worldwide can be realized. As famously stated by Stanley Hoffman: "The essence of Liberalism is self-restraint, moderation, compromise and peace" (Hoffmann, 1987, 396), and "the essence of international politics is exactly the opposite: troubled peace, at best, or the state of war" (Hoffmann, 1987, 396). Additionally, liberalism has a history of embracing imperialism. Even though little liberalists would in current times promote territorial expansion such as in colonial times, interventionism in the affairs of states that are non-liberalist is very much present (Dunne, 2014, 122). Critics of liberalism argue that the universalizing idea to promote democracy, secularism, and capitalism, undermines practices of non-Western cultures. However, liberalists view liberalism as a gift of the powerful to the weak (Dunne, 2014, 123-24), as it rests on the assumption that progress can be realized when we investigate what currently hinders collective action, and work to advance the resolutions to these obstructions (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 68).

Poststructuralism is a theory that is very skeptical of the liberal claim to a morally accurate universal value structure. Poststructuralism posits that all systems of meaning are precarious and that they can never arrive at closure. Therefore, it concerns itself with investigating how discourses impose meaning and how these discourses are taken for granted instead of being recognized as socially constructed in specific historical contexts (Folker, 2013, 170). In poststructuralist theory, all knowledge-producing systems are considered to exclude, marginalize and oppress particular others (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 173). This is in line with the famous words of the critical theorist Robert Cox (1981, 128) that: "all theory is *for* someone and *for* some purpose". By revealing the value structures on which the world is structured, poststructuralism aims to brake open existing dynamics (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 172).

Relational cosmology also rejects a liberal universal value structure, and by virtue of acknowledging complexity, it offers a way out of our conceptional prisons. Without the promise of a final solution, it urges us to reconsider our understanding of cosmology and science, our conceptual biases, political blind spots, and our ethical commitments to humans and non-humans (Kurki 2020, 10) This turn toward relational cosmology in IR could itself be considered through a relational cosmology lens, because it can be seen as part of the unfolding of processual

relationalities in the world, such as the changing power relations away from Western-centric traditions, and the changing understandings of human's role in 'the environment' in the context of our current ecological and climate crisis. Relational cosmology calls for a re-relating to relationality, and overshadowed aspects of politics such as spirituality and emotions, because it posits that we cannot separate things from the world they are processing through (Kurki 2022, 828-30).

<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Poststructuralism</b>	<b>Relational cosmology</b>
The possibility to arrive at a better world through individual rationality	Changing the conditions and possibilities for meaning-making, knowledge, and being	Non-separation of the interconnectedness of unfolding existence

### Rationality

Sterling-Folker (2013) describes liberal theories as “sophisticated analytical statements about both the possibilities and the difficulties of achieving beneficial collective outcomes” (86). To understand this, it can be helpful to note that they are based on the European Enlightenment idea that human's ability to reason can uncover universal truths, and that this can lead to progressively better collective outcomes in the future (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 67).

Poststructuralists reject the idea that our ability to reason can uncover universal truths. Instead, they contend that “how we discursively represent something also determines how we act toward it and hence what it will be” (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 171). Specifically, poststructuralism engages in critically assessing juxtapositions between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’. Namely, according to poststructuralist thought, these juxtapositions serve to produce values about what is good and what is not, and exclusion on the basis of those criteria becomes to be considered natural. Moreover, it analyses how discourse constructs and suppresses humankind, by looking into how humans describe the world and how they justify their actions. (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 172). What makes poststructuralism different from other theories that consider our social reality to be deeply based on the construction of meaning, like constructivism does, is that it rejects scientific methodology to be value-free and free from power structures (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 173). Positivism, when considered in this light, is seen

to be reproducing the value structure of instrumental rationality, instead of a way to objectively discover social reality. Therefore, it is seen to be reinforcing the meta-narrative of liberalism and to be hindering meta-narratives that oppose it (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 173).

Equivalently, relational cosmology rejects the idea that we can understand the universe ‘from the outside’. Instead, it argues that we can only come to knowledge from within the relations that we process through and, therefore, that all the knowledge of the universe comes from within that universe (Kurki, 2022, 830). Going beyond pop cosmology tropes, relational cosmology does not provide a new perspective ‘from above’ that inspires us to ponder the smallness of humanity, or necessarily generates a responsibility to safeguard our planet. Instead, it requires the acknowledgement of our limitations as knowers and ethical actors, an uncomfortable re-relating and re-conceptualization, and a critical sensibility towards the historical use of cosmic arguments to ‘pull us away’ from the planet or to reassert human mastery over it (Kurki, 2020, 9). As a result, the world is regarded as a complex web of ongoing relations, instead of the sum of individual entities (Qin, 2016, 38-39). Therefore, relationality is ontologically primary to any notion of ‘things’ or ‘essences’, and it is not possible to be rational in isolation, but rationality is relationality (Kurki, 2022, 830).

<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Poststructuralism</b>	<b>Relational cosmology</b>
Individual reason	What is portrayed as rationality is actually power	Relationality is rationality

### Structure

Liberalists see a general evolution in human affairs. Although they consider there to be political and non-political spheres, they do think that the changes in ‘non-political’ relations will eventually transform the political spheres of states and conflict (Wæver 1996, 152). According to Zacher and Matthew (1995), although there exist a wide variety of liberal theories, all liberal theories rest upon the thesis that “international relations are gradually becoming transformed such that they promote greater human freedom by establishing conditions of peace, prosperity, and justice” (109).

In contrast, for poststructuralists, it is not possible to escape the workings of power (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 177). In poststructuralism, all meaning is considered to be imposed on the individual, and meaning-making reflects where power is located. So, by analyzing which discourses and meanings are elevated over others, we can gain knowledge of where power lies. Even the meaning of truth is considered to be subjected to power. Especially when we take certain truths for granted, when things are seen as naturally good or bad, poststructuralists recognize this as a manifestation of where power is at work (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 170-71) As a result, poststructuralists, in a revolutionary fashion, seek to appear strange, go against expectations, focus on discontinuities in discursive practices, and focus on what would be considered trivial by positivist approaches (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 177).

In a somewhat similar fashion to poststructuralism, relational cosmology also critically considers how specific historically constituted framings, such as those that draw on the language of objectivity, have gained dominance. Specifically, it seeks to go against the misleading ‘modernist’ notion of science in IR that find its expression in liberalism (Kurki, 2022, 822). However, instead of focusing on the act of questioning the structures of these dominant ideas, as poststructuralism does, relational cosmology focuses on presenting an alternative. Namely, the world is understood to be an unfolding relational ‘mesh’ (Kurki, 2022, 830), or a ‘dance of constant inter-relation and processing’ (Kurki 2022, 825).

<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Poststructuralism</b>	<b>Relational cosmology</b>
Evolutionary; we can evolve through an a-priori structure	Revolutionary; breaking through the meanings that shape us and are shaped by the negotiations between us	Unfolding relational networks; (there is no separation between structure and us)

### Knowledge and Truth

According to Kurki (2020, 7), Newtonian mechanics have shaped early liberalism. Newtonian mechanics conceptualize a world of things that move against backgrounds in patterns that are



traceable and understandable by humans – who are regarded to be intelligent agents that are in charge of ‘figuring out’, or even ‘saving’ life on the planet (Kurki, 2020, 3-4). Accordingly, this sparks an inclination to ‘break apart’ and ‘isolate parts’ (Kurki, 2020, 68).

Additionally, Querejazu (2016, 6-7) considers how liberalism has been shaped by the Enlightenment, in which the idea emerged that human replaced God and became the center of the universe. As a result, (Hu)man becomes a rational, autonomous entity that with the superiority of reason can achieve progress and improve its imperfect condition. Separation is at the basis of this narrative, in the form of opposite dichotomies such as civilized/savage and good/bad (6-7). Reality is based on three main premises: it is ‘out there’, defined, and singular. This is a form of reductionism that limits epistemic possibilities (Querejazu, 2016, 7).

On the liberalist stage, reality is understood to be ‘out there’, and with positivism, humans are able to understand it (Querejazu, 2016, 6). However, post-structural thought regards positivism to be philosophically ignorant about how social reality is constructed (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 173). Therefore, poststructuralism does not understand there to be one true ultimate meaning. This does not mean that poststructuralists think that meaning-making is individual or random. Instead, meaning-making is considered to be embedded in meta-narratives: the systems of discursive practices and knowledge production that create and reproduce the world. It argues that social reality is constructed through discourse. That is, we can only make sense of our social world through our words, and our understanding of those words rests again on previous understanding of those words in other contexts (Folker, 2013, 170-71).

Because there is no truth or meta-narrative that can, in essence, be measured to be better than the other, and truth is seen as a social construction instead of something that can be ‘discovered’, poststructuralist thought does not need to choose between opposing statements but allows for inconsistency and contradiction (Sterling-Folker, 2013, 175).

Relational cosmology also shifts our conception of knowledge and politics in important ways. Namely, ‘substantialism’ – the tendency to think in terms of things interacting is no longer a plausible starting point, nor the conception of positivist knowledge construction based on neutral observations and figuring out laws of human behavior. Relational cosmology considers one of the key struggles of modern science to be the difficulty to think past individual entities or objects, as scientific thinking has traditionally relied on separating phenomena into distinct components. Alternatively, relational cosmology focuses on phenomena as complex

systems that can best be understood as interconnections and relational dynamics (Kurki, 2022, 821) conceptual orientations are considered to be made, and can be unmade in how we process the world (Kurki, 2020, 5).

So, in relational cosmology, sciences do not provide truths but sciences are merely attempts to ‘re-approximate’ the world by situated knowers. Moreover, science cannot be separated from philosophy, politics, and how we think society and ethics. Instead, the relationships between sciences and between sciences and ‘the world’ are complex and more intriguing than the idea that science can capture *the* truth for us to build our theories on (Kurki, 2020, 7-8). Furthermore, life is considered to be a constant becoming. To conceptualize this idea, we can take the example that day is always becoming night, and night is always becoming day (Qin, 2016, 40).

What is more, is that relational cosmology goes beyond anthropocentrism in which ‘disenchanted nature’ is just a background to human agency. Instead, it allows us to think through possibilities of relational cohabitation across humans and non-humans, and that humans are relationally bound with and part of ecologies in which they process through (Kurki 2022, 827). So, to think politically is not only to think ‘humans’, but also ‘minerals, animals, and vegetables’ (Kurki, 2022, 833). Instead of anthropocentrism where humans dominate nature, the human role is embedded and related to other beings. It is a pluriverse of the human world, the souls of the dead, nature forces, and supernatural beings (Querejazu, 2016, 9).

<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Poststructuralism</b>	<b>Relational cosmology</b>
Knowledge is objective, detached, and singular, and truth can be determined via scientific methods	There is no objective truth or knowledge, but there are multiple meanings that are based on former meanings and meta-meanings	Knowledge is situated, transforming, and nuanced, and truth is always becoming

**Chapter 3**

**The play**

**World Politics; Three Times**



*Click on the poster to watch the play or copy the URL below:*  
<https://youtu.be/O9DShmnVZL8>

## Chapter 4

### Reflections on the play

A question that popped up in my mind while working out chapter 2, is whether this chapter could be worked out into a whole thesis on its own. It led me to question whether writing a play, and the whole process of rehearsals were necessary for the thesis that I produce. Now, while finishing the thesis, I do have an answer to that question. I argue that this thesis would not be this thesis without the process of making *World Politics; Three Times*. The unfolding process of making the play directed me where to look in the theorizing within the field. Possibly, it led me to find novel linkages within the field's theorizing. This is in line with Shapiro's (2013, 5) argument that aesthetic methods introduce a phenomenological subject that is responsible for shaping the conditions under which things can appear as things. Arguably, the process of research, writing, and coming up with exercises for my actors led me to develop my ideas further, changing my understanding of them. Additionally, when considering Shapiro's (2013, 8) claim that aesthetic approaches can offer us a way out of our accedence with authority, I recognize this in the process of making the play too. I noticed that, at the start, I needed to let go of wanting to explain, with concepts already familiar to the field of IR, what my project was exactly aiming to get at. Not because I think that my project does not make sense, or because it does not matter (to me) that it makes sense, but because creating something new comes with uncertainty. So, instead, I allowed myself to develop my very broad questions and hinges through a process of research, conversations with my supervisor, rehearsals with my actors, producing a theatre performance, directing and watching that performance, and returning back to academic texts. And for me, things started to fall more into place. Perhaps this means that in the end, this thesis has returned my project back to 'authority' – although hopefully a new flavor of it.

I remember having a conversation with my supervisor in her office, trying to explain that I wanted my thesis, and the theatre play, to be about agency as well. I was struggling with the question how our different theories give us possibilities for agency differently. I remember that we agreed that I could look at how different IR theories would fit into the agent-structure debate. I believe I mentioned this debate also in my call for actors. However, in the end, it did not make it into the theoretical discussion of this thesis. But still, the way in which agency is embedded in this thesis, has become clear to me. Agency is rejecting that world politics is objective or static. It is investigating how we give shape to it through our theories and

recognizing that we ourselves are shaped by the theories, conversations and experiences that we come across in this process. It is standing our ground while we are figuring things out that cannot be explained yet with usual conceptions. It is allowing ourselves to be playful while resisting an internalized sense that it must therefore be less serious. It is shaping world politics, “the political and power relations, broadly defined, that characterize the contemporary world” (Baylis et al., 2020, 6) a little bit anew, together with others that think, perceive, and do in their own ways.

Thus, returning to the question of what the writing and performance of a theatre play – as a method – can add to our possibilities for understanding world politics: it does so because instead of having to frame questions and intellectual curiosity in already existing concepts, it accommodates complex and more open-ended questions such as ‘do we have agency in studying IR?’, and ‘how do our theories shape the world we inhabit?’, without the need to define them immediately in already existing frames. It is a method that allows these questions to develop through the research, writing, rehearsal, performance, and reflection process, because it is a method that is based on philosophical premises that our understanding of the world is always evolving and that we can change current structures by showing their current precarious but powerful configurations.

As Bleiker (2001, 510) has already laid out, the aesthetic turn in IR is built on the intellectual openings provided by postmodernism, and the specific genre of play that I chose for my research also fits with this cultural tradition and with the rejection that the field of IR has a generally accepted integrating principle (Jackson, 2016, 3-10; Kurki & Wight, 2013, 15; Querejazu, 2016, 5-7), making the audience aware of our precarious and inexplicable positions in world politics. Because there is no consensus on how we can decide whether the philosophical underpinnings of diverging theories are true, the research process went on to imagine how to condone the conundrum that comes with the inexistence of one final truth in IR. It followed Shapiro’s (2013, 31-32) assertion that, in aesthetic inquiry, it is useful to investigate what juxtapositions and soliciting of alternative subjects will open up spaces for new political thinking. Therefore, it built upon a body of scientific literature that allows us to consider the different philosophical underpinnings of different theories in IR as philosophical wagers that we can consider according to their own assumptions (Querejazu, 2016, 3; Jackson, 2016, 26-35). Making the juxtaposition of liberalism, poststructuralism, and relational cosmology visible, through the performance of an absurd theatre play, as worldisms that sing into existence different worlds according to those different philosophical underpinnings (Smith,

2004, 499; Agathangelou & Ling, 2009, 85-87). Considering the pieces of information that we gain from this experience as snapshots, as partial information that can give us meaningful insights about the whole (Fierke's, 2022, 16-18). In doing so, the play adds to our understanding of how when we investigate world politics from different theoretical perspectives we come to different questions, have different conversations and find different answers, because it shows that different theories about world politics sing into existence different questions, conversations, and answers according to different philosophical underpinnings. This is why each act is different, even though it follows the same storyline.

Namely, in line with Shapiro's (2013, 11) concept of aesthetic subjectivity, the characters in the play do not have a unified personality. Instead, their personality changes according to the theoretical basis of the world in which they are embedded. So, their attitudes change in every act, not because of altered psychological states, but because the world makes sense differently in a liberalist, a poststructuralist, and a relational cosmology world. The characters that stayed somewhat unified are the respective professors of each theory, but even their attitudes changed in every act according to which theoretical perspective prevailed. So when they would have discussions amongst each other in every third scene after the storm had happened, they would always be representing their own theory, but each time in a different making-sense-of-the-world. Therefore, their attitudes would be different each time, and their possibilities for meaningful exchanges with each other would be different each time as well. In this way the study of world politics can indeed be as Choi et al. (2019) write "a science *and art* of facing, understanding and addressing difference" (p. 15).

Additionally, the idea of a phenomenological subject that develops through the writing and rehearsal process can also be tied to a relational perspective. As I mentioned before, I experienced that my thesis project relationally unfolded through my research, rehearsal process, the conversations I had with my actors and my supervisor, my readings, the performance of the play, my thoughts, and my writing. I think that every research project develops throughout the research process, but I think that the method of using the process of making a theatre performance underscores this process. In doing so, it allows more time and space for understandings to further unfold before they need to be specified and tied to already intelligible concepts. Perhaps a different genre of performance, for example an improvised musical composition between different instrumentalists and dancers, could highlight this aspect of experiential aesthetic methods even more.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This thesis started off by considering the field of IR as a study into what world politics could possibly be. It argued that since there is no definitive answer to that question, it would make more sense to find a way of navigating our vulnerability in this vast field of study instead of trying to find a definitive truth.

It considered that aesthetic approaches to the field - that acknowledge that there is always a gap between our representation of the world and that world – could offer us ways of doing research that allows us the room to develop ideas through the process of imaginative writing, and that provides us with a political subversion to make us rethink established orders.

To investigate this further, it went on to do a case study by making a theatre play in the genre of the Theatre of the Absurd; a genre known to make the audience aware of man's precarious and inexplicable position in the universe. With the experiential knowledge gained from the rehearsal process, by venturing into the unknown and by allowing for vulnerability, inner travel, empathic imagining and research, and by regarding fact and truth as an ongoing process, the theater play *World Politics; Three Times* disrupts what has been established in IR.

The play provides a more open-ended sensibility about the political, because it showed that our theories about world politics are ways of thinking, doing, and being that gave shape to that very world that they theorize about, and to what, as a result, comes to be considered as legitimate or sensible in that world. By allowing in imagination and sensibility as equal contributors to investigation as reason, it gives us a deeper understanding of how world politics comes into being through the very processes of representation that try to make sense of what it could possibly be.

To close off, when I link my project back to *the Politics of Exile* by Elisabeth Dauphinee, the discussions after the publication of her book were certainly as interesting as the novel itself (Dauphinee, 2013, 347-61; Edkins, 2013, 281-97). I leave those further discussions on *World Politics; Three Times* for the future. I will probably engage in them in whatever projects – academic or not, I will proceed to undertake. And I hope the play will inspire questions and discussion in others as well.

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## Appendix

To read the script: copy the [link](#) and fill in the password: fictionwritinginIR  
<https://worldpoliticsthreetimes.wordpress.com/2023/06/21/the-script/>