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Inter-Textual Relations

The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict between Narrative Types

ERIK RINGMAR

ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyse the unexpected quarrels and strange new alliances that formed in response to the United States' decision to go to war against Iraq in the spring of 2003. Telling different stories about Iraq, about themselves and about the nature of world politics, decision-makers reached different, conflicting conclusions. As is the case with all stories, these accounts are best analysed with the help of literary theory. Pursuing such an investigation I find that the stories follow closely one or the other of four classical narrative types: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. I explain the quarrels and strange new alliances as a problem of inter-textuality.

Keywords: emplotment; inter-textuality; Iraq War; narrative

Introduction

The United States' decision to go to war against Iraq in March 2003, the war itself and the subsequent occupation of the country, led to unexpected quarrels between old partners and to strange new alliances. In the United States, foreign-policy hawks teamed up with foreign-policy doves to oppose the war, while other hawks joined left-wing idealists in advocating it. Notoriously, a new gulf opened up between the allegedly Venus-like Europeans and the more martially inclined Americans, and between 'old Europe' and its new, and presumably more Americanized, other half.¹ European left-of-centre politicians and defenders of international law found themselves endorsing the pre-emptive war of a right-wing US president. Unexpected and strange, these outcomes are in need of an explanation.

A first step is to analyse the very different interpretations of the conflict arrived at by decision-makers in the countries concerned. They told different stories about the intentions of Saddam Hussein, about the position of their own country, about the nature of world politics, and about the likely outcomes of the various actions they were contemplating. If we are to make sense of the quarrel, it is with these conflicting stories that we should begin.



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Understanding stories, to continue this train of thought, is the task of literary theory more than anything else; it is with the help of tools drawn from literary theory that we analyse texts and relations between texts. Treating the decision-makers as story-tellers, in other words, the conflict between them becomes a problem of inter-textuality.

The aim of this article was to undertake such an investigation. As literary theorists have pointed out, from the ancient Greeks onward all narratives are emplotted in predictable fashion; they are constructed according to a certain narrative type.² This is why the story grabs and holds our attention, and why we as readers or as listeners are able to make sense of it. Although, in practice, there may be mixed forms, there are nevertheless no more than four main narrative types: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire.³ Telling our stories about international politics, or about the Iraq War, we are in principle required to choose one of these four and to follow the requirements the narrative type imposes on us.

Narratives are often incommensurate with each other. Taking their departure from the same basic facts, the interpretations they reach often vary and the conclusions differ. As a result, stories present different agendas for action and thereby different moral choices. Consequently, it is not surprising that decision-makers who tell different stories end up disagreeing with one another. The first task of this article is to document these disagreements and to show how they have their origin in the incommensurability of narrative types. A second task is to try to explain why it is that a certain narrative was chosen by a particular decision-maker. Briefly, the argument will be that narratives are best analysed as social and cultural products and only incidentally as chosen by individuals themselves. A further and final question concerns the extent to which disagreements between narratives can be avoided or resolved. Although no perfect agreement is possible, we conclude that there are ways in which narratives may be combined and occasions when story-tellers abandon their narratives. Narratives are never completely incommensurate with each other, and while many different stories may be true, some are far less plausible than others.

Narrative Types and Theories of International Relations

Let me begin by briefly discussing the classical typology of narrative types and how this relates to theories of international relations. Romance is a good place to start.⁴ Today, we know romances above all in the form of love stories from Hollywood, but understood as a narrative type the romance is best exemplified by the adventure story. Most adventure stories are organized around a quest undertaken by a chivalric knight, a brave explorer, an ardent lover, or some other heroic figure. The hero is dashing and daring; he represents spring, dawn, fertility and youth, and the story unfolds as he searches for something or someone, or tries to conquer something or someone.⁵ Often there are three stages to the quest: first the perilous journey, next the struggle or the conquest, and finally the exaltation of the hero. In all these respects the enemy is the hero's opposite. The enemy represents

winter, darkness, confusion, sterility and old age. The remaining characters are either for or against the hero, and obviously there is never any doubt about whose side the audience is on.

Romance is the most common form of the fairy-tale, and according to Christianity it is the narrative form constituted by a human life or, according to Hegel and Marx, the form taken by world history. As far as analyses of international relations are concerned, romance is the narrative favoured by idealists and world-improvers of all kinds. This is how Wilsonians, free-market enthusiasts, anti-Communist crusaders, Greenpeace activists, Esperanto-speakers and anti-globalization protesters usually talk about world affairs. These are people who believe that evil can be defeated, that the world can be made into a better place, and usually also that they are the very instruments chosen by God, Providence or History to carry out this task. Occasionally, the romantics are pacifists, but more often they are war-like and fully prepared to fight for their beliefs. The world as they see it presents a struggle between good and evil, and evil must be annihilated for good to prevail.

Despite the commotion it is likely to stir up, romance has often been popular with political and social elites.⁶ Defining themselves as the heroes of their own quests, political leaders can make themselves look good; they are on a mission, they know who their enemies are, and they demand that people join up behind them. In this way the romantic narrative serves a legitimating function and helps shore up claims on power.⁷ The romance is nevertheless a risky choice for a politician. As soon as the situation turns out to be more complicated than initially thought — or if the enemy cannot be found, or if found, cannot be defeated — the crusading hero will start looking distinctly foolish.⁸ At this point the political leader will immediately lose credibility and public support.

Tragedy provides an entirely different plot structure.⁹ Here too there is a hero, but a tragic hero is someone who rebels against the established order and who is destroyed as a result. The tragic hero — *Œdipus*, *Antigone*, Arthur Miller's *Willy Loman* — has a 'flaw' that sets him apart from others; he is proud, passionate or obsessed with some fanciful idea.¹⁰ Following his own mind, he comes into conflict with the laws of society or nature, and as the social or natural order is re-established the hero is relentlessly crushed. In the end no one escapes and no one gets away with anything, no matter how good the intentions. In fact, the better the intentions, the more decisive the defeat will be. The conclusion of the tragedy leaves the audience with the sense that justice has been done — 'the hero must fall!' — but also a feeling of profound pity — 'why did the hero have to fall?'

In the study of international politics, it is above all students of the so-called Realist school who are the tragedians.¹¹ In an anarchic realm of sovereign states, they tell us that insecurity is a permanent condition and the search for security characterizes everything that states do. If we want peace we have to prepare for war, and only we ourselves can guarantee our own preservation. This is a law of international politics that human beings struggle in vain to alter. No progress is possible in relations between states; instead the same basic patterns endlessly repeat themselves. Individuals or

states who defy these laws are doomed.¹² Fighting for our ideals may be a noble thing to do, but it is also foolish, and the hubris of the romantic hero is always the cause of his fall.¹³ Hubris distorts our judgment and makes us embark on badly considered ventures.¹⁴

Next, take comedy. For most of us, comedy refers to a performance or some piece of writing that makes us laugh. As a narrative type, however, comedy is to be understood in the sense of a ‘comedy of errors’, as exemplified by the classical comedies of William Shakespeare, Molière or Ludvig Holberg.¹⁵ Here, comedy is more than anything else an account of oppositions and misunderstandings which in the course of the narrative are resolved thanks to some fortuitous intervention. Perhaps a young man desires a young woman, but his wishes are frustrated by a tyrannical father. In order to help him get his way, a shrewd man-servant conceives of a cunning plan, or perhaps the young man suddenly inherits a large fortune which changes the father’s opinion of him. The comedy lies in the twists and turns that the plot takes as the happy ending gradually comes into sight. In the end, all obstacles are removed and the final scene is a ritual feast, such as a wedding party, where the protagonists drink to each other’s health. What the audience has witnessed is a transition from one society to another — from a hidebound and hierarchical gerontocracy to an egalitarian and youthful republic.¹⁶ The festive ritual is a celebration of the new order.

In world politics, reform-minded institution-builders usually make their case in comic mode.¹⁷ Although they may be just as idealistic as ever the romantics are, they undertake no zealous quests and engage in no heroics. As they see it, the problems of the world are mainly the results of misunderstandings, and for that reason the most important task is to provide some means by which states can sort out their differences. Our enemies should not be destroyed, but instead engaged in conversation; hence the importance of international organizations and fora. Working through the European Union, the United Nations or the International Monetary Fund, a new and better world can indeed be created but only in small steps and through painstaking and profoundly non-glamorous effort.¹⁸ Somewhat more abstractly, peace can be achieved through the gradual spread of an institution such as liberal capitalism.¹⁹ One by one our enemies will come to see the advantages of our social model and abandon their old ways. Our enemies are mistaken rather than evil, and we should interact with them rather than kill them.

Finally, there is satire.²⁰ Since satire assumes an ironic stance towards the world, it is parasitic on other narrative forms, and since it lampoons the established social order its aims are subversive rather than constructive. The basic strategy is to turn other plot structures inside-out, upside-down, or to deconstruct and reassemble them in unrecognizable patterns. The loose plot of the medieval carnival — with its inverted hierarchies and general atmosphere of licence — is an archetype of the satirical mode, but classical satires such as Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, François Rabelais’s *Pantagruel* or Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* operate in the same manner.²¹ Since romance is the narrative that takes itself most seriously, it has always been

the satirists' favourite target. And since romance is popular with members of the establishment, many satires have an anti-establishment thrust. Taking the trousers off the romantic heroes — figuratively, and sometimes also literally — their pretensions are effectively deflated.²² In this way, the satirist argues, a space of freedom and interpretative opportunities is opened up.

International relations in a satirical mode is what H. J. C. von Grimmelshausen, Stendhal and Leo Tolstoy wrote with their descriptions of the confusion and senselessness of military battles, and many contemporary war movies elaborate on the same themes. Given that official accounts of wars are often written in the romantic mode, satire is anti-romantic and anti-war.²³ Accounts that are critical of the hegemonic pretensions of empires — be they Roman, British, French or American — are written as satires for the same reason. While political and social elites may dismiss these accounts as 'irresponsible' or 'obscene', they are also often afraid of them. They know that if the official narrative fails to unfold as the leaders envisioned, the satirical narrative will quickly gain credence. The moment politicians are made into fools, their power quickly dissipates.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the above. First, many different stories can be told about the nature of world politics and the bare facts of the matter are not necessarily able to arbitrate between them. Although some stories certainly can be falsified, an existing body of facts is usually compatible with a number of separate stories, and each story can easily be elaborated on to deal with inconvenient facts.²⁴ Secondly, narratives are to a large extent incommensurate. The logic of a plot developed according to one narrative type often has no counterpart in another narrative type. Yet incommensurability is not necessarily complete. It is sometimes possible to mix narrative types — there are 'romantic comedies', after all, and 'tragic comedies'. Thirdly, the narrative types present very different agendas for action and thereby also entirely different moral imperatives. What a romantic hero must do is exactly what brings about the downfall of a tragic hero, and so on. Hence it is not surprising that politicians who tell different stories also end up disagreeing with each other.

Narrating the Iraq War

All four narrative types are represented in the discussions regarding the war in, and the subsequent occupation of, Iraq. Very roughly speaking, the Bush administration and Tony Blair were the romantics, the traditional American foreign policy establishment were the tragedians, the old Europeans were the comedians, and critics of the war — in addition to many of the newly liberated Iraqis — were the satirists. Telling very different stories about themselves, their preferred actions were quite different, and, not surprisingly, they had serious problems communicating with each other.

The most common version of the romantic narrative presented Saddam Hussein as a tyrant who had to be eliminated for freedom and democracy to be secure in the Middle East and the rest of the world.²⁵ Saddam harboured terrorists and produced weapons of mass destruction; he started

wars on his neighbours, gassed Kurds, and treated his own people with oppression and contempt. The fact that leaders like him still existed, and the fear that they could give encouragement to others, left the US with no choice. Slaying this dragon was the job of the brave American leaders and the leaders of a few other equally courageous nations.

The outlines of this story were put in place by the Bush administration shortly after the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001. As the president made clear to his fellow Americans, their country was about to embark on a mission of world-historical proportions — to spread freedom, to rid the world of evil and bring peace to all nations.²⁶ Chosen by God to carry out his master plan, the US was ‘the greatest force for good in history’.²⁷ This sacred mission applied particularly to the Middle East. If only democracy and freedom were successfully exported to the region, the administration believed, peace and prosperity would follow. Only in this way could terrorism conclusively be defeated. This narrative is what justified unilateral military action and what gave the Bush administration a reason to flaunt international law.²⁸ Those who failed to understand the importance of the mission were fools, Old World cynics or tacit supporters of the terrorists.

The Bush administration was not alone in embracing this romantic tale. Its promise to spread assorted liberal values across the globe explains why some progressives supported the project, including some progressives in Europe.²⁹ Although thoroughly unsympathetic to the domestic agenda of Bush’s White House, they nevertheless hoped that a swift war would bring beneficial changes.³⁰ The British Prime Minister Tony Blair was particularly quick to associate himself with this interpretation.³¹ Other European leaders — in Spain, Italy, in Central and Eastern Europe — ended up embracing the same story, although never as passionately and always in the face of massive popular opposition.³²

For the tragedians of world politics, the actions of Saddam Hussein were in no way surprising.³³ By the first years of the twenty-first century, they explained, Saddam was a seasoned practitioner of the art of power politics, and for that reason was more than likely to be deterred by traditional military means. The Iraqi military had been thoroughly demoralized by the first Gulf War, the northern, Kurdish, part of the country was de facto independent, and Baghdad lacked control over a third of its airspace. Saddam did not have the ability to assert himself in the region and could hence easily be contained. The notion that the Iraqis were supporting terrorist groups was highly implausible simply on the grounds of power politics. The fundamentalist terrorists, after all, were bent on overthrowing precisely the kinds of regime which Saddam Hussein represented.

This was the outlook of the traditional republican foreign-policy establishment in Washington, associated with names like Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger and Brent Scowcroft.³⁴ This had also been the view of decision-makers in the Clinton administration who more or less had ignored Saddam Hussein throughout the 1990s. As far as they were concerned, Iraq had already been dealt with.³⁵ A war against the country was unnecessary, foolhardy, and simply not in the national interest of the US.

According to the traditional foreign policy establishment, the Neo-Conservative programme was not conservative at all, but instead revolutionary; it was irresponsible adventurism sold to the American public with the help of cheap patriotic rhetoric.

A similar view was held within the foreign policy establishments in many parts of Europe.³⁶ Foreign policy professionals were surprised that the White House had ignored the views of Middle East experts, and they failed to understand why action in Iraq was urgent when the Soviet Union, which had constituted a far larger threat, had been successfully contained for decades. Beneath the surface there was more than a hint that the Europeans in their time had been far more sophisticated imperialists than the Americans.³⁷ More surprisingly given their legacy as romantic storytellers, a tragic narrative was also embraced by many people on the political left.³⁸ They feared unilateral US action and some felt that the Bush administration had stolen, and distorted, their own agenda.³⁹ Freedom and democracy, these leftists explained, were unlikely to be propagated by a militaristic US administration in cahoots with oil interests and big business corporations.

In a comic vein, the story of the Iraq War is best told as a series of rather unfortunate misunderstandings. According to this view, although Saddam Hussein was indeed a tyrant, he was not a monster, but instead more like the hard-headed fathers one would find in a classical comedy. As such, he could surely be brought around to a different way of thinking. A combination of military and economic pressure, applied by a united international community, would eventually convince him of the need to mend his ways. The *deus ex machina* capable of effectuating such a reversal was the UN, or, more precisely, Hans Blix, the UN's chief arms inspector, who here played the role of the shrewd man-servant with the cunning plan.⁴⁰ Once Saddam was convinced of giving up his weapons of mass destruction, the sanctions could be lifted and a new era could begin. No doubt some summit meeting would then be convened — corresponding to the ritual feast of the classical comedy — where the various political leaders would make high-minded speeches and propose celebratory toasts.

This comic narrative was common in Europe, above all among the many millions of ordinary people who took to the streets to demonstrate against the impending war in the spring of 2003.⁴¹ But similar views were held by policy-makers too, above all in Germany and France. As the German government had concluded after the attacks of 11 September, the only thing that could stop further acts of terrorism was a 'new era of engagement' with the Muslim world, including real action on poverty reduction and increased cultural exchanges.⁴² Despite having promised 'unlimited support' in the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York, Chancellor Schröder now spoke eloquently against the Iraq War. France may have taken a less pacifist stance, but its conclusions were substantially the same.⁴³ Although the EU was completely sidelined by these discussions, its representatives made clear that they embraced the same comic narrative.⁴⁴

Satire is the traditional narrative type of all anti-war protesters, and so also in the case of the protests against the war in Iraq. In contrast to the

story told in comic mode, the satirical mode has no constructive intent, only deconstructive. One strategy was to reveal the foreign policy of the Bush White House as a cover for personal or corporate greed. The name 'Halliburton' — the defence contractor with links to vice-president Dick Cheney — was often mentioned in this context.⁴⁵ Another strategy was to show how the brave heroes secretly cooperated with the enemy. Thus photographs appeared of Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense, shaking hands with Saddam Hussein and rumours linking the Bush family and the Bin Ladens.⁴⁶ Often these arguments were consciously incomplete or vastly exaggerated. For the purposes of satire, however, this was quite irrelevant — what mattered was the deconstructive effect.

As it turns out, satire is also what many Iraqis fell back on after the US occupation — at least judging by many English-language Iraqi websites.⁴⁷ An ironic stance may be the best way of coping with a situation where the price of freedom is counted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths and where the electricity supply is still not reliable enough to run an air-conditioner.⁴⁸ Yet there were Iraqis who preferred romance to irony. Romance was the narrative mode of the new Iraqi leadership, at least when addressing foreign audiences.⁴⁹ There is no doubt, they argued, that the removal of Saddam Hussein had given Iraq a new future and that all problems were only temporary. Romance was also the preferred mode of many of the elusive insurgents who saw themselves as engaged in a battle for the honour and survival of Islam. The Iraqi soldiers were 'an army of apostates and mercenaries that [had] allied itself with the Crusaders', and, as such, a legitimate target for attacks.⁵⁰

Explaining the Competing Narratives

The next, and more difficult, question is how these narratives should best be explained. Why, in other words, is it that we end up embracing one particular story rather than another? Clearly, the answer is not simply given by the facts of the matter. Not one of the stories is necessarily more plausible or more true. The disagreements do not arise from a dispute over facts, but instead from an incommensurability between narrative structures. Furthermore, the existence of a story is not best understood purely as the result of individual choice. You tell a certain story in order to communicate with fellow members of your society, and the story, to be convincing, must therefore always address their preconceptions, hopes and fears.⁵¹ Stories, as a result, come to exist in the rhetorical space created between a speaker and his or her audience, and they are as a consequence best explained by the interaction between the two.

One possibility is that stories have a material basis, to be found for example in economic resources or military hardware. Thus the romance told by the White House could simply be a consequence of the military superiority of the US.⁵² The US thinks of itself in heroic terms, since it needs legitimation for its foreign policy, but also since its military arsenal allows it to do so. The Europeans, conversely, see the world in non-confrontational terms,

since they are weak and divided. Another possibility is that the stories are determined by institutional constraints, by features of the political system or by considerations such as upcoming elections or the need to keep political coalitions together.

Although there is surely something to explanations of a material or institutional kind, they are clearly not conclusive. There have been many powerful states — the Chinese empire comes to mind — which have had no romantic ambitions. In addition, there are plenty of utterly powerless groups who embrace the most romantic of stories. Somehow romance seems to be for the powerful, the powerless, but not for states in between. For the same reason, institutional imperatives are rarely sufficiently constraining to result in only one narrative type. The institution must be interpreted before its imperatives become constraining and interpretations will necessarily vary from one society to the next.

Although stories may have a material or institutional basis, it is clear that they draw heavily for their shape and content on the cultural presuppositions of the societies in which they originate.⁵³ Take the case of the Bush administration. The story it tells about America, Iraq and the world is in many ways only the latest instalment of the serialized romance which is the history of the US.⁵⁴ Previous chapters included among others the story of the initial settlers, of the ever-expanding western frontier, of the apocalyptic struggle against Communism and the exploration of outer space. All these were adventures and quests, and by being endlessly told and retold, first in books and then in movies, the same basic plot structure came to be deeply embedded in popular culture.⁵⁵ The current US administration, in other words, is simply telling the kind of story Americans like to hear and are most likely to respond to. This is also why some American liberals have ended up supporting Bush's foreign policy. What they share with the White House is not a political position as much as a narrative concerning the role of their country in the world. Although they may disagree on most other issues, the story they shared brings them together in support of war.

But not all American presidents have been romantics. Indeed, the traditional foreign policy establishment in Washington were more than anything tragedians, and it is instructive to understand how this came about. The tragic narrative was above all imported with immigrants from Germany who gained prominence in academia in the 1950s — people like Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger, even Reinhold Niebuhr, although he was an immigrant of the second generation. The Germanic outlook, *Realpolitik*, was based on century-old maxims developed in the European system of states.⁵⁶ In a world of decentralized sovereignty, everyone is forced to look after themselves, and caution is rewarded as surely as romantic extravagance is punished. The tenet of the balance of power doctrine is the immutable law which states violate only at their own peril.

Given its innate sense of optimism and very different geopolitical environment, it is surprising that this rather bleak teaching met with such success in the US. Yet at the end of the Second World War, with American troops stationed on five continents and faced with an immanent Soviet threat, the US was for the first time forced to contemplate the problem of

how to assure world order. This was when the European, Germanic, tradition came to be embraced, and before long was established as the orthodoxy of Washington insiders — among people, that is, with enough sophistication and education to ignore their innate romantic instincts. President Nixon was the pre-eminent exponent of the tragic doctrine, and his trip to China was the ultimate triumph of European-style balance of power politics.

Contrast Ronald Reagan. By all accounts an inherently optimistic person, he does not seem to have understood the logic of the tragic worldview.⁵⁷ He did not follow the ground rules of the doctrine of 'mutually assured destruction', and saw himself instead, in a romantic mode, as a champion of freedom and as an opponent of the 'evil empire'.⁵⁸ During the Bush senior administration, the tragedians made a return to the White House and they remained in power during the Clinton administration. But with Bush junior, the Reaganites were back.⁵⁹ George W. Bush talks, as Reagan did, about a world of black and white; he too is a crusading hero embarking on a romantic quest.

Meanwhile Europe had moved on. The Second World War in particular had a profound impact on policy-makers. A common post-war conclusion, drawn throughout Europe, was that both the tragic and the romantic narratives had failed. Romance had come in the form of the Nazi and the Communist programmes for world transformation, and both had revealed their inherently destructive power and their moral perversity. Yet the tragic narrative was dangerous too. Influential analyses blamed the outbreak of the Second World War on the failures of balance of power politics, such as escalating arms races and the retaliatory use of economic tariffs. A majority of Europeans concluded that what was needed was more international fora where reasonable people could sit down together and resolve their differences in a peaceful manner. What was needed, that is, was a Coal and Steel Union, an EEC, an EC and an EU.

More of a puzzle was why the political leaders of Eastern Europe could be persuaded to join the US-led war in Iraq. After nearly fifty years of communism they too should have been thoroughly inoculated against romantic narratives.⁶⁰ This, it seems, was indeed largely the case. At least the general public throughout Eastern Europe was thoroughly against all pre-emptive wars, and few of the political elites reiterated more than snippets of the official US story.⁶¹ Instead, the political elites had their own reasons for siding with the Americans. Above all, they were highly suspicious of the comic narrative told by countries such as France and Germany.⁶² The idea that agreement could be brought about through international mediation had worked badly for them during the long years of Soviet domination. For the same reason they were sceptical of tragedy. After all, it was the alleged immutability of the laws of international politics that had guaranteed the status quo during the Cold War. Left to form their own opinion, the leaders of Eastern Europe may have turned to satire, but in the end the cost of antagonizing the US was too high. Instead, they ended up as romantics despite themselves.

There are exceptions to this general pattern of West European comedy

and reluctant East European romanticism. Some Polish intellectuals who had associated themselves strongly with the Solidarity movement were convinced that the same romantic tale of liberation and democracy applied in the case of Iraq, too.⁶³ Perhaps this narrative would have been more widely shared throughout Eastern Europe if not for the hardships imposed on ordinary people by the transition to a liberal market economy.

Another exception is of course Tony Blair. The leader of a country well known for its satirical wit, he was unlikely to do well selling a romance to his domestic constituency. Compare how Harold Wilson, in the face of strong American pressure, had kept the country out of Vietnam, and how millions of demonstrators took to the streets of London to protest against the Iraq War in the spring of 2003. Blair nevertheless chose to reiterate the American narrative with added emotional emphasis and what appeared to be real conviction. The best explanation is surely to be found in personal factors. From the time he first started in politics, Blair had seen himself as someone capable of taking 'hard decisions', and doing what was right even in the face of stiff opposition. Ignoring doubters and Cassandras, he was hell-bent on writing himself into the history books as the man who brought peace and democracy to the Middle East.

Meanwhile, people in both Europe and North America who felt ignored by their political leaders increasingly turned to satire. When the Iraq War started going badly the leaders were endlessly lampooned — and with real effect in opinion polls and in elections. Bush won a second term in 2004 certainly, but neither José María Aznar, the Spanish Prime Minister, nor Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian PM, were re-elected, and the once sky-high popularity of Tony Blair was in tatters.⁶⁴ Much the same conclusion was drawn by the newly liberated, and newly disillusioned, people of Iraq itself. For them the material basis of the satirical plot structure was only too obvious.⁶⁵ When everything is supposed to get better and nothing does — when bombs are going off around you and the electricity never works — only with satire can sense be made of the situation. Unless of course you are sufficiently devout to put your trust in God and to see yourself as the weapon he has chosen for exacting revenge on foreign crusaders.

A Common Story

Disagreement is not necessarily a bad thing, and on complex issues such as wars there is certainly no reason to expect everyone to think alike. If anything, disagreements are beneficial since they provide a plurality of viewpoints and thereby improve our collective ability to analyse a situation. Yet it is at the same time important to understand why we disagree. There are unnecessary disagreements that lead to unnecessary conflicts and quarrels that may spiral out of control. At least for a while the quarrel over the Iraq War provided a good illustration. In concluding this article, let us consider how much common ground we can discover. Is there a way of making the various narrators agree on a broadly shared common story?

One possibility is that policy-makers take into account the existence of new facts — most obviously perhaps the failures of the occupation. Yet it is unlikely that new facts alone will result in an agreement. The narrators have too much invested in their stories. The stories form the basis of their worldview, their identity, and the basis for their claims on meaning and authority. Giving up a story is therefore no easy matter. There are also numerous ways of saving a failing narrative. It is always possible to add another twist to the plot or even another chapter. Thus the romantic quest can be extended and the hard-headed father-in-law of the classical comedy can be given another chance. The Iraq War provides abundant illustrations of such fudges. The Europeans persisted with their conciliatory gestures towards Saddam Hussein even when a comic solution to the conflict seemed highly unlikely. Similarly, Bush and Blair continued to look for weapons of mass destruction even when it was obvious to everyone else that they did not exist.⁶⁶ The weapons were narratologically required and hence the quest went on *ad absurdum*.

Some narratives are of course occasionally abandoned. Usually this happens in response to some shock — a loss in a war, for example, or a major attack such as that on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. But even here it is not really that the previous narrative is falsified but rather that it fails in terms of its practical consequences. If too many people die in the course of the unfolding of a certain plot, its audience is likely to grow increasingly weary. And if the government refuses to change its story the electorate is likely to change the government and replace it with one that has a better story to tell.

At the same time it is clear that not all narrative types are equally likely to result in such reversals. Tragedy, for example, is relatively immune to failure. If you expect the worst to happen, you may miss out on various exciting opportunities, but you will not be surprised when things actually go badly. Much the same applies to satire with its deconstructive rather than constructive intent. Listeners who expect the world to be senseless and bizarre have few illusions to lose and plenty of evidence to support them, especially during times of war.

Romances and comedies are far more likely to run into problems. The *raison d'être* for the romantic hero is the quest, and if the quest fails the hero is immediately demoted. Comedies too will go horribly wrong if the *deus* never emerge from the *machina* and the expected resolution never materializes. The Iraq War is evidence of both outcomes. The comic, European, narrative was too optimistic — the situation in Iraq both before and after the war was far more intractable than most Europeans were ready to admit.

Above all, however, it is the American romance which is in trouble. As it turned out, there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and never any connections between Saddam Hussein and international terrorists. While ordinary Iraqis surely were happy to see the end of the dictatorship, unhappiness with the occupation has spread. As a result of the war, tens of thousands of innocent civilians have died. Unable to respond properly to the situation, American soldiers have cowered in their fortified camps and

only ventured out for occasional, and often quite indiscriminate, raids. Meanwhile Iran — a traditional arch enemy of the US — is steadily gaining influence in the country.⁶⁷ Under such circumstances it is difficult to be a knight in shining armour. Not surprisingly perhaps the White House has recently decided to stop using the phrase ‘war on terror’, since ‘if you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution’.⁶⁸ Instead, the new strategy is assumed to be ‘more diplomatic, more economic, more political than it is military’.

When comedies and romances fail, tragedies and satires are the obvious fall-back options. The stories, that is, are likely to turn both darker and more ironic. As we have said, tragedies and satires are not necessarily more accurate descriptions of world politics, or of the Iraq War, but they are less likely to suffer reversals and are for that reason alone more attractive. In this sense it is easy to understand why the most persuasive stories of international relations have often been told in these two modes.

Notes

1. On this contrast, see Kagan (2002).
2. See, for example, Bal (1997).
3. Frye (1957: 131–239). The classical treatment is Aristotle (1996). For a contemporary discussion, see White (1973); Alker (1996); de Jong, Nünlist and Bowie (2004).
4. Frye (1957: 186–206).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7.
6. Frye (1957: 186). For a contemporary example, see Jewett and Lawrence (2004).
7. Compare ‘charismatic authority’ discussed in Weber (1948/1991: 245–52).
8. As Weber notes: ‘his divine mission must “prove” itself in that those who faithfully surrender to him must fare well. If they do not fare well, he is obviously not the master sent by the gods’. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
9. Frye (1957: 206–23); Aristotle (1996: 10–31).
10. Aristotle (1996: 20–4). On the Antigone myth as discussed by Hegel, Goethe and Kirkegaard, see Steiner (1984: 37–66). *On the Death of a Salesman*, see Miller (1949/1993: 1461–4).
11. The seminal statement is Morgenthau (1948); compare Thompson (1984: 21–31). See also, for example, Kissinger (1957).
12. Mazarr (2003: 505). Compare the tragic view of the Biblical prophets discussed in Jewett and Lawrence (2004: 44–54).
13. Thompson (1984: 30–1).
14. Morgenthau (1948: 13).
15. Frye (1957: 163–86). ‘Comedy’, from the Greek *kômos*, denoting part of a Dionysian festivity, was originally used for all theatrical performances regardless of genre. Compare Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, Honoré de Balzac’s *La comédie humaine* and the French theatre company Comédie-Française.
16. Frye (1957: 164–5).
17. The classical statement is Kant (1795/1985), see esp. pp. 117–18.
18. Compare, for example, David Mitrany’s (1943) notion of ‘peace by pieces’, which inspired the first precursors of the EU.

19. A classical statement is that of Angell (1910), thoroughly ridiculed by Carr (1939: 41–62). A contemporary state is Friedman (2005), criticized by Gray (2005: 13–15).

20. Frye (1957: 223–39).

21. Bakhtin (1963/1984: 122–37).

22. Cervantes provides the seminal example, sending his hero off to fight wind-mills rather than giants and not giving him enough money to pay for his accommodation. Cervantes (1604/1950: 68–75, 316–24).

23. As Paul Fussell puts it: ‘Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected’ (1975: 7), see op. cit., pp. 4–35. Compare *Manifesto of Surrealism* of André Breton, who had served in a French psychiatric ward during the First World War.

24. Lakatos makes an analogous point regarding research programmes. See Lakatos (1974: 134–8).

25. For the way in which this decision was reached, see Woodward (2004: 236–74). For a public statement, see Powell (2003).

26. Judt (2004: 38) 22 September 2002.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 38. On history being on the side of the United States, see Rice (2000: 46, 49, 60).

28. Compare Secretary of State Colin Powell’s address to the Security Council of the United Nations (2003).

29. Examples include Michael Ignatieff, Adam Michnik, André Glucksmann. See, for example, Ignatieff (2004), Cushman (2004), OpenDemocracy (2003).

30. The journal *The New Republic* provides an example. See, for example, the collection of articles in *The New Republic* (2003).

31. Describing 11 September as a ‘wake-up call’, see Blair (2005); compare Blair (2001). Discussed in Kampfner (2004: 107–220).

32. In Spain, 77% of those polled were against an intervention and 42% objected, even with UN backing; in Italy, 78% and 32%, respectively. Public opinion in Eastern Europe was even more hostile. In Romania, only 38% supported a war even with UN backing, and only 28% of Bulgarians and 20% of Estonians did the same. See BBC News (2003).

33. For a good summary, see Mearsheimer and Walt (2003a, b).

34. Purdum and Tyler (2002); on Eagleburger, see also CNN.com (2002); on Scowcroft, see Kessler (2004).

35. See, for example, Woodward (2004: 10–12).

36. By former British, if Conservative, foreign ministers such as Douglas Hurd and Malcolm Rifkind, associated with institutions such as the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.

37. This argument is made explicit in Ferguson (2005). Compare also Lieven (2002).

38. See, for example, Socialist Worker On-Line (2003) and Cockburn (2005).

39. Compare Kaplan (2003); see Klein (2003).

40. Blix (2004).

41. BBC News (2003).

42. As summarized in Buras and Longhurst (2004: 231–40).

43. Gaffney (2004: 250–1).

44. Compare Patten (2003).

45. See, for example, Klein (2003).

46. Examples include Moore (2004) and Unger (2004).

47. Including *Baghdad Burning*, *Raed in the Middle* and *The Angry Arab*.

48. Compare *Baghdad Burning*, Friday 1 July 2005.

49. See, for example, Allawi (2004).

50. According to a statement by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi quoted on *Aljazeera* (2005).
51. This is a *locus communis* of classical rhetoric. See Aristotle (1991: 75–6).
52. For a seminal statement of this view, see Kagan (2002).
53. For a similar argument see, for example, Williams (2003: 287–307).
54. Jewett and Lawrence (2004: 55–78).
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–54.
56. The seminal summary is Friedrich Meinecke's *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (1924); see Meinecke (1957/1998: 409–33). Compare Morgenthau's condemnation of the Vietnam War (1968: 29–34).
57. See, for example, D'Souza (1999).
58. Reagan (1982). He was also a sometime comedian who believed that the Soviet leaders would abandon communism if they could only see the 'clean and lovely homes' of middle-class America, 'with a second car or boat in the driveway'. Quoted in Mazarr (2003: 513–54). Compare the exasperation with this view expressed in Kissinger (1994: 769).
59. Bill Keller, quoted in Mazarr (2003: 515).
60. Sedivy and Zaborowski (2004: 187–213).
61. Hence also the corresponding ease with which for example the Polish prime minister has admitted that nation-building in Iraq has 'totally failed'. See *BreakingNews.ie* (2005).
62. Sedivy and Zaborowski (2004: 187–213).
63. Adam Michnik is an example; see the interview in Cushman (2004).
64. On Blair's falling popularity, see MORI (2004); Kampfner (2004: 331–87); Ryan (2005: 34–7).
65. For a kindred example, compare the satirical wit of post-Soviet writers such as Tatyana Tolstaya. See, for example, her 'Russian Roulette', *New York Review of Books*, 45: 18, 19 November 1998.
66. Compare Tony Blair's insistence, in December 2003, that 'the Iraq Survey Group has already found massive evidence of a huge system of clandestine laboratories, workings by scientists, plans to develop long range ballistic missiles'.
67. See Galbraith (2005).
68. According to General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referring to the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Quoted in *International Herald Tribune* (2005).

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