Abstract We focus on a key IR Theory article by Alexander Wendt (Wendt, 1992) and two Jackson Pollock paintings. Our aim is to identify meanings Pollock’s art communicates and reveals for Wendt (1992). It derives from an appeal to visual imagination and a desire for semiotic interpretation of Constructivist view of anarchy. The visual sign is an association such that there is Wendt’s theoretical claim on the one hand and an abstract painting on the other. We do not gaze at Wendt’s claim, we read it. We do not read a painting, look at it. This remark does not imply a one-way relationship. We can argue that a specific painting comes to life in our mind where colored movements are inextricably mixed up when we read the constructivist claim. Both Pollock paintings selected for our sign-making effort confirm the dynamic character of Constructivism and reveal not only three but countlessly many anarchies in international relations. They foment our assessments of abrupt changes of intersubjectivity among states. Cyclicality of dripped paints provides an anchor to fix Wendt’s anarchy conceptualization in these structural-abstract paintings. As to Wendt’s concept of anarchy, it acts as a helper, as a standard, against which interpretations of Pollock’s artwork construct meanings.
This paper stands in the realm of semiotics intersecting the Discipline of international relations (IR) theory. It interprets constructivist claims of Alexander Wendt (Wendt 1992) by using Convergence and Blue Poles, paintings by Jackson Pollock. New interpretations demonstrate the extent to which the study of signs, that is, semiotics (Chandler 2007; Danesi 2018; Nöth 1990), broadens our understanding of Constructivism.

The paintings form signs according to the rule *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, that is, something stands for something else. They stand for Wendt’s claims by constituting signs that are associative and inextricable wholes. The paintings incorporate Wendt’s claims of dynamic anarchy and the inseparability of states’ interactions from social structures in terms of abstract art and contribute to the Discipline’s “Interpretive Turn” (Yanow, Schwartz-Shea 2012) by revealing a multiplicity of meanings of the claims.

Wendt’s arguments emanate from his criticisms of Structural Realism, an IR theory offered by Waltz (1979). They constitute a powerful bone of contention in the Discipline. Waltz assumes that the coexistence of sovereign states, that is, anarchy, is constant. There is no world government yet. Wendt’s first criticism is that Structural Realism lacks a concept of a dynamic anarchy. According to Wendt, anarchy is not a constant but a variable. Different social structures emerge out of states’ interactions. The structural realist axiom of constant anarchy conceals changes through a perpetual flux of ideational processes generating intersubjective and interactive contexts among states’ identities. For example, the anarchy between the United States and the United Kingdom differs from the one between India and Pakistan. The former can be argued to constitute an anarchy among “friends” while the latter an anarchy among “enemies”. Wendt’s second line of criticism is that one cannot assume the possibility of an excision of structures from interactive processes unlike Waltz does. He argues instead that they mutually constitute each other. Norms, ideas, and discourses constitute continually changing social complexity and structures. A question then becomes...
whether semiotics would offer a guide to evaluate these positions in abstract art terms. We try to answer the question by exploring the meaning of signs.

Signs constitute cultural components of societies. The Discipline forms a society consisting of individuals and theories they construct to explore international politics. It is therefore open to making signs possessing a distinct culture (Bal and Bryson 1991: 74; Gadamer 1975: 85; Güner, forthcoming). The culture encompasses both constructivism and Pollock “telling stories”, the former about IR and the latter about the intensity of human feelings (Lewison 1999). The intensity opens up Wendt’s claims as well. The stories meet and diverge at crossroads which bifurcate in a countless paths of meanings demonstrating ranges of interpretations. Accordingly, constructivist connotations and implications find home as reflexive delimitations in Convergence and Blue Poles. Abstract art and text come together.

All text have ambiguity (Derrida 1967). Any complexity and non-simplicity of Constructivist claims as text blend in and translate into Convergence and Blue Poles. The claims then become substantiated in the form of changing colors and ever changing cyclical moves. Ambiguity resurfaces in paintings through multiple and alternative interpretations matching intense human feelings and wider theoretical horizons. Hence, art does not constitute a mechanism of textual modification. Rather, semiotics functions as a combinatorial mechanism of binding cyclical colors, shapes and Wendt’s claims together. It generates rich interpretive axes serving as anchors and guides.

Similarly, any instability remarked in the paintings translate in Constructivism in terms of Wendt’s claims. The translation mechanism substantiates in the task of presenting “the unpresentable” (Lyotard 1993: 7). The unrepresentable constitutes a complexity as we affirm that interpretations through signs are non-unique but multiple, perhaps infinite. We are
not discouraged by this relativity. The interplay of abstract claims and abstract paintings producing signs supplant and enrich the Discipline.

**Signs**

Signs are arbitrary. Hence, the discussion of a meaningful correspondence between the selected paintings and Wendt’s assertions is subjective. Every individual can make her/his own visual meaning through reading a text. Another IR theorist would, for example, interpret Mona Lisa, a masterpiece by Leonardo da Vinci, or, Van Gogh’s painting of “The Starry Night”, as more appropriate in confirming or divulging Constructivist meanings. Such an attempt would however solve the mystery of whether Mona Lisa’s smile opposes or reinforces Wendt’s claims. If one opts for the Starry Night to reveal new constructivist meanings, then the moon, stars’ curly movements, and lights in the early morning sky in St. Rémy would become the bases of interpretation. Consequently, there are frontiers of subjectivity; not anything goes in interpretive tasks. To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is an experiential state (Hanson 1958, 11).

The visual language we develop places Constructivism in the heart of abstract art in semiotic terms. Principally, we demonstrate that paintings constitute systems of signs (Marin, 1969: 5). Convergence and Blue Poles “tell” more about Wendt’s anarchy concept and the inextricability of states’ interactions and social structures. Rouse (1987: 42) remarks that “many non-textual features of human life, such as actions, tools, social roles and individual lives, can and should be taken as meaningful in the same way as texts are.” Paintings are non-textual and can be at least as meaningful as textual assertions indeed. The text translates our plastic thoughts of what we read as connected with abstract art. In short, we produce signs in the field of IR Theory by using a language based on abstract art and visual elements.

We admit that there is a sense in which, say, two IR theorists do not perceive a correspondence between Pollock paintings and Wendt claims. The problem is not what they
see but what they think by looking at the paintings with constructivist or structural realist “eyes” or through the window of any other IR theory. While the theorists see the Convergence and Blue Poles, they might diverge in their interpretations. The problem then is to assess what they both think about or, more precisely, to locate an interpretive locus intersecting both views. Semiotics is a valuable tool to investigate and evaluate such a locus of convergent range of interpretations.

It is unlikely that the society of IR theorists either as a whole or in some majority believe that the two paintings represent Wendt. Yet, hints at such representations exist. Sylvester (2001: 549) selects Blue Poles to affirm a correspondence between Constructivism and Structural Abstract Art. Thus, convergent interpretations exist in the Discipline. To make this point more precise, think about an IR theorist who never saw the Convergence or Blue Poles. Could s/he make a connection between the paintings and Wendt’s claims? Conversely, one would also think about an individual who appreciates art but who ignores IR Theory. Could she agree with the opinion that a correspondence exists between the paintings and the claims? To complicate things a little more, we can ask whether she changes her mind if someone summarizes constructivist arguments. Hence, one can argue that the person who appreciates art but ignores IR theories must learn Constructivism before she can make an interpretation; otherwise, she would be considered as blind to the signs proposed. There would be no context, that is, no delimited realm of interpretation where she can think about what Blue Poles and the Convergence mean for the claims.

Furthermore, there could be those constructivists who would reject the sign making process involving the claims and the paintings in question. All this implies nothing but that “seeing is a theory-laden undertaking: observation of x is shaped by the prior knowledge of x” (Hanson 1958, 19). In our case, we do not have an “x” but a sign implying that an
observation of Pollock paintings and reading Wendt’s text is shaped by the prior knowledge of both Pollock and Wendt. Art and text are inextricably connected.

In Langer’s words, language syntax is not equivalent to artistic syntax (Langer, 1951: 86-89). Paintings are more subtle than texts. Colors, shapes, paths in the paintings replace words generating an abstract complexity at a higher level. They envelop and expand the claims. The uncharted textual implications originate from an interplay of the text and art. Art bolsters the text by attaching eye-opener meanings to the text. Thus, signs defy linguistic projections.

Signs do not however come out of the blue. We create signs using semiotics approaches of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, the two principal semioticians. The following discussion amounts to a child’s act of sign making but can be interpreted as generating additional insights (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 1).

**Binary Model**

Saussure (1916: 98) asserts that a linguistic sign emanates from an association between an abstract concept and an acoustic image. The sign is a product of a signifier and a signified:

“Le signe linguistique unit non une chose et un nom mais un concept et une image acoustique. Cette dernière n’est pas le son matériel, chose purement physique, mais l’empreinte psychique de ce son, la representation que nous en donne le témoignage de nos sens; elle est sensorielle, et s’il nous arrive de l’appeler “matérielle”, c’est seulement dans ce sens et par l’opposition à l’autre terme de l’association, le concept, généralement plus abstrait.” The signifier functions as a meaning generator. The signified is the meaning itself. It is more abstract than the signifier. Thus, we select between two abstract entities, namely Pollock’s paintings and Wendt’s assertions. Which one is more abstract? Our answer is that paintings are sensual, therefore they are signifiers. Wendt’s claims constitute the signified, the meaning part, of the sign. They hide features that are unlocked by Convergence and Blue
Poles. The selected Pollock works constitute an instrument to understand and expand claims’ meanings. Hence, in the context of the binary model, abstract artworks become less abstract than Wendt’s claims about international systems.

There exist another way to identify signifier and signified part of the sign. Suppose that one claims that the signifier-signified relations are blurry: the signified can become the painting itself as our mind selects Convergence and Blue Poles as representative of an abstract IR theory. Nevertheless, we can go in the opposite direction as well. The paintings can be considered as the signifier of the sign opening door to new interpretations. The anchor here is what we are after. Are we going to interpret an art work or Constructivism? We interpret Constructivism. Consequently, the Convergence and Blue Poles transform into signifiers in the process of semiosis through synesthesia.

Following Saussure, we need to evaluate the paintings Convergence and Blue Poles together with Wendt’s claims as forming signs. Convergence is produced below.

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1 Blue Poles is produced as the figure 2 below.
Signifier-signifier connection is related with synesthesia, that is, “a neurological condition such that a stimulation of one sensory/cognitive organ leads to automatic secondary sensory/cognitive sense” (Gombrich, 1977: 314). When we look at Convergence and Blue Poles we place them in a “semantic space” (Osgood et al. 1957) so that we think they correspond to constructivist assertions. Synesthesia serves to make correspondences between the domain of art and text combinations and the semantic space, that is, the range of meanings of each combination. Combinations of visual and sensual images emanating from the paintings and Constructivist claims do not only support original claims by Wendt but also mean perhaps Constructivist assertions unmade yet. This is not unlike looking at stars, identify constellations, and connect these constellations with animals, mythical creatures forming zodiac signs. Therefore, both paintings find a place in a range of the semantic space of Constructivism. They become connected with dynamic anarchy and inextricability of states’ interactions and social structures.

Synesthesia remains at the heart of processes generating meaning, that is, processes of semiosis. The signifier becomes Convergence while the signifieds become the concepts of dynamic anarchy and inextricability of states’ interactions and social structures. Nevertheless, both paintings help to assert additional constructivist claims, not only those advanced by Wendt.

One can attach the meaning of Wendt’s Hobbesian, Lockean, Kantian anarchies depending on colors and their mixtures in Convergence. Next to the primaries of red, blue, and yellow paths, black and white ones are dispersed. In a Hobbesian anarchy states identify each other as rivals. Each state must think about how to survive in an environment of *homo homini* lupus. In a Lockean anarchy states form an international system where some norms

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2 http://www.jackson-pollock.org/convergence.jsp
generate bounds to aggressive behavior. States, as they interact, come to terms with thoughts of rights to existence. In a Kantian anarchy, states privilege friendship and collective security. Thus, it constitutes a sharp contrast with the Hobbesian variety. Now, one can ask which colored cycles can be interpreted as corresponding to three anarchies Wendt theorizes about. If one interprets the color red as a sign of danger or black as a sign of imminent death in wars among states, then Hobbesian cycles surface in the painting. Similarly, if one interprets Lockean anarchy is somewhat between the Hobbesian and the Lockean anarchies, then one can pick the color white as representing the middle ground. Lockean anarchies now becomes visible and start to twinkle in the paintings. Finally, if one interprets that color blue means friendship, then Kantian anarchies reveal themselves. The mixtures and sudden turns of each of these color paths divulge Convergence as revealing a range of an infinite number of interpretations. Anarchies curl and shift directions and sometimes intersect so that one cannot be sure what anarchy type prevails at such junctures. The canvas then hints at an indeterminacy of Constructivism. Thus, the sign is not reduced to a subset or a point in an interpretive interval of the semantic space. It connotes multiple meanings across the canvas. Each part of both paintings is meaningful.

In a more detailed view, dynamic and cyclical color motions of the painting symbolize mutually constitutive relations among meanings flowing from states’ intersubjectivity, identities, and historical processes over time. It is difficult to assess where these motions finally end up, so social structures are not evaluated at a deterministic plane; social structures can abruptly end and transform through changing directions through colored hues of moves. Thus, if Constructivism does not logically imply alterations in social structures, the paintings do. So, forming mental images of Constructivism in Pollock’s oeuvre, we suddenly enter psychological realities. Klee’s words are reminiscent here: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible” (Klee, 1980: 34). Pollock, similar to
Klee, was after to make visible the invisible through his art work. Pollock resented that people were interpreting his drip painting a chaos: in response to an article in Time in 1950 with a headline ‘Chaos, Damn It!’ Pollock sent a telegram stating “NO CHAOS DAMN IT!” (Lewison, 1999: 42). In 1947, in a magazine called Possibilities, Pollock published the following remark: “I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through” (Lewison, 1999: 55). Art was seen as part of the social discourse and Pollock’s paintings were treated as social documents in the 1980s (Lewison, 1999: 10). “The modern artist,” he stated in an interview in 1951, “is working and expressing the energy, the motion, and other inner forces” (Lewison, 1999: 37). These very forces help us to interpret Constructivism.

In essence, words, texts, can be arranged to refer to different figures generating alternative representations (Foucault, 1982: 26-28). Here we propose the inverse: colors and cyclicalty of shapes can be subliminally arranged to refer to alternative representations of Wendt’s assertions. To illustrate, Convergence has no center, lower, upper, or other sections producing the sign. Each part of the canvas implies a meaning for the theory. Hence, the analogy between changing and interlocked anarchies and social structures and whirling, dripped paints blends the painting with Constructivism. In each segment of the artwork colors rotate and curl representing and meaning mutually constituted identities.

Coming back to Wendt (1992), we note that Wendt’s dynamic view of anarchies and inextricability are situated at theoretical/textual level. We observe cyclicalty of color, shapes and directions in Pollock’s paintings but there exists no direct hint at anarchies Wendt talks about. The three types of anarchies remain at an abstract realm difficult or impossible to make them connected with the realities of international relations and politics. An IR theorist looking for types of anarchies Wendt advances can only communicate with words. Yet, the text will never be free of theoretical presumptions showing the impossibility of theory
neutrality. Theories and their observations are always influenced by the very theories scientists would evaluate (Hanson 1958, Kuhn 1962). Thus, the unobserved becomes easier to interpret through abstract art. The observation of changing anarchies is sipped through the cyclicality of moves and colors in both canvases. The problem is that if anarchy by itself were observed as an existing object, the process of semiosis would prove more difficult to invent interpretive paths.

![Image](http://www.google.com.fr/imgres?imgurl=http://nga.gov.au/)

**Figure 2. Blue Poles (1952)**

Blue Poles is seemingly more explicit about anarchy as compared to Convergence. The eight dark lines signify varying anarchies with their different angles (Sylvester, 2001: 594). Indeed, we can imagine that if the painting is horizontally extended, as if it represents still other anarchies with additional vertical lines, we arrive at a similarity between the painting, and, say, a Babylonian cylindrical seal reproducing its contents as long as it is rolled over on fresh clay. Hence, constructivist approach indeed permits “a continuum of anarchies” (Hopf, 1998: 174). The number of anarchies increases in a wider semantic space.

Convergence forces the spectator to use his/her imagination to apprehend mutually constituted friend/enemy identity structures. It incites the gazer to think about social aspects.

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of IR while Blue Poles is a helper along this direction as the signified social structures easily find their place within the signifier. The Blue Poles composition expresses a right-to-left or a left-to-right movement instead of superposed color areas implying a dominance relation between the structure and state interactions. Here, a difference between Constructivism and Structural Realism becomes evident. The structure is the center-piece of structural realism and constitute the axis of abstraction displaying the dominance relation. In contrast, in constructivism, the abstraction referent shifts to the multiplicity and no-dominance relation among anarchies. The horizontal and the vertical expansions of Blue Poles can be interpreted to imply intricate anarchy-anarchy relations. We can support this claim by arguing that the lines have unequal length, thickness, and verticality. Thus, they can be associated with the idea that not only each being different, no anarchy has a superiority or similarity compared to others. And, unexplored by Constructivism, if we imagine that the painting is vertically extended up and down or horizontally extended to the right and the left, we can figure out that some of these anarchies will intersect at some point becoming identical for a limited space and time.

*Triadic Model*

Charles Sanders Peirce offers an alternative semiotics approach. He asserts that “a sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen” (Peirce, 1955: 99). Hence, Peirce discusses relations among three elements instead of two: the representamen which is perceptible as the signifier, the interpretant which
is the mental image the recipient forms of the sign as the signified, and the object which refers to something beyond the sign (Nøth, 1990: 42-47).

Peirce’s approach moves beyond the binary sign relationship Saussure proposes. While the representamen-interpretant relation is more or less obvious, we must now discuss how the representamen and the interpretant are related to the object. The answer comes through the referent question “what is represented?” An example eases our task. Suppose that you are standing in front of a handicap parking lot. There is a blue rectangular sign depicting in white a person sitting in a wheel-chair. The sign is physical, observed, and therefore becomes the representamen. You interpret the sign as people with no impairment cannot park their cars in that area. This is the interpretant. The referent or the object is the factual existence of handicapped people. In similar terms we can assert that the paintings are the representamen: they represent constructivist claims that are interpretants. The relation between paintings and claims stands for the referent/object.

Peircian triadic model enriches the sign through the Peirce’s concepts of icon, index, and symbol. The icon signifies a one-one relationship, called the category of firstness (Nøth, 1990: 121-127). Icon is a representamen and a sign by itself. It does not depend on an object implying a physical resemblance relation between the representamen and the interpretant. It is a sign that is linked to the representamen through similarity in appearance. To illustrate, you can look at yourself in a mirror, the icon is the image of yourself you see observing an iconic relationship. The selected paintings then become icons if such an objective likeness exists; should they constitute mirror representations of the theoretical claims. Do new gain information about Wendt’s claims by looking at the sign? The answer is affirmative. The cyclicality of colors in both paintings are iconic in their representation of dynamic anarchies. They can be interpreted as direct imitations of Wendt’s claims as reproducing ever-changing social constructions in IR in visual terms.
The other sign possibility is that each painting is an index. The index differs from the icon as its connection with the representamen is not based on analogy or a direct imitation (Nöth, 1990: 113). Each taken as an index, Convergence and Blue Poles show the evidence of the claims through the cyclicality of colors and moves of Pollock’s drip painting but they do not resemble them. According to Sebeok (2001: 10), “an index is a sign that refers to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time or space, or in relation to something or someone else.” Thus, the indexicality of Convergence and Blue Poles emanates from their pointing to the fact that Constructivism belongs to the class of abstract IR theories that displays the complexity of social structures varying in terms of time and space.

The remaining sign possibility is that the paintings constitute symbols. Sebeok (2001: 11) defines a symbol as “a sign that stands for its referent in an arbitrary, conventional way.” Therefore, paintings as symbols representing the claims means that they are arbitrary and must be learnt in cultural terms in the Discipline. Yet, no social conventions exist to qualify the paintings as standing for Constructivism. It is to be established that all, or in some majority, Constructivists associate Convergence and Blue Poles with Wendt’s claims. And this take time or it will never occur. As symbols, they can also represent critical readings of Waltz. Therefore, Convergence and Blue Poles can be interpreted as icons, indexes, and symbols. They communicate different meanings with respect to the position of Constructivism within the Discipline. They might sound as different musical notes to the ear.

The claim of the dominance of structural realism in the field is a central topic in the Discipline. The object then refers to all qualities of structural realism ranging from its dominance to its ahistorical, mechanistic nature, its theoretical bases in micro-economics, and its central place in the divide between positivists and post positivists. It comprises the divergence between positivist and post-positivist positions in epistemological and ontological terms. The connection of the paintings (representamen) with the discipline (referent/object)
acquires additional meaning. We observe the paintings, we make sense of them, and the referent leaves the realm of art and enters the field of complex acts of interpretation. In Peirce’s terms, the ground of the representamen contains positivist-post positivist rift. Hence, the discipline becomes informed of the drip painting signifying interlocking anarchies and changing identities and interactions. The revival and the interpretation of a static structural realist claim then stands in sharp contrast with constructivist claims corresponding to the correction of structural realism’s stasis. Wendt’s claims obtain visual backing from Pollock’s art. The strict discursive boundaries the debate generates are reframed. As a result, the positivist-post positivist axis becomes porous.

The referent is non-unique; it is not restricted to the division in the Discipline. Another referent/object is the “social” opposition to Structural Realism meaning a social criticism of Waltz’s approach to international relations. The omission of social aspects constitutes another referent due to misreading, no willingness to read, that is, skipping of Waltz’s concepts of socialization and competition processes (Waltz, 1979: 74). Thus, the triadic model of Peirce places the static nature and the micro-economic perspective of Structural Realism also in the referent/ground of the representamen by pointing out misunderstandings of the theory.

In making correspondences between Convergence, Blue Poles, and Wendt’s claims, both models require artistic interpretation as well. In words of Stent (1973): “Both the arts and the sciences are activities that endeavor to discover and communicate truths about the world. The domain to which the artist addresses himself is the inner, subjective world of emotions. Artistic statements, therefore, pertain mainly to relations between private events of affective significance. The domain of the scientist in contrast is the outer, objective world of physical phenomena. Scientific statements, therefore, pertain mainly to relations between or among public events. Thus, the transmission of information, and the perception of meaning in
that information, is the central content of both arts and sciences.” The correspondences we advance are therefore nothing but some communicative acts of individual interpretation and subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

Meanings are generated by subjectivity and interpretation. Paintings have no meaning unless they are interpreted. Connections between paintings and claims are not of conventional agreement but of subjective interpretation. Still, selected paintings by Pollock generate infinite articulations and meanings (Leja, 1993: 5). There is a wide distance between such an interpretative richness and the fragmentation of the Discipline where communication is usually broken. Visual semiotics can mend such communicative problems by generating alternative but converging theoretical views and interpretations.

The paper can be extended to cover up other IR theories. Distinct semiotics approaches constitute tools to enrich insights of any IR theory further as paintings can be assessed as nonlinguistic systems (Goodman 1968, 226). In this sense, the multiplicity of art works, like Convergence and Blue Poles, would signal and point to the existence of representational symbols differing from linguistic ones. Another extension would be statistical: interviews with constructivists around the world can be conducted to collect data on the association of Wendt’s claims, Convergence, and Blue Poles. Such a quantitative analysis would shed light on the prospects of the paintings becoming symbols of Constructivism.

To sum up, the paper proposes three findings. First, both paintings help to assert additional constructivist claims. Still other anarchies can be conceived in an international system. Hence, there exists a continuum of anarchies; not only three. Second, social structures can sharply end, change directions and transform. The paintings backs such an idea of abrupt alterations in social structures. Third, the positivist-post positivist divide in the
Discipline becomes porous, because interpretations functions as transboundary forces across both axes. Representational symbols, in this case two Pollock paintings, become signifiers opening up interpretive roads toward unexplored implications of Wendt’s claims. The findings demonstrate how semiotic approaches of Saussure and Peirce turn out to be tools of investigating meanings of Constructivism through abstract art. The semiotic representation of IR theories through abstract art contributes to the interpretive turn in IR.

**References**


