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The Mahler was warmly received.
A CRITIQUE OF AN ÆSTHETIC IDEAL:
A REVIEW OF THE ECM RECORD LABEL

Joey Brown

INTRODUCTION

Around halfway through the fall of 2010, I became determined to check out and listen to the University library’s collection of ecm (Edition of Contemporary Music) recordings. I did this because I like the music on this label. I can’t be blunter than that. Halfway through this endeavor it became clear that something needed to be written. ecm is like no other label, and the same may be said of its crisis. I hate cautionary tales; there isn’t always a lesson to be learned, and there especially isn’t one here. This is simply the explanation of how something has gone wrong. It is a failure on the part of the label, the artists of ecm, and of Manfred Eicher, the founder and figurehead, to be fair to themselves—the aesthetic they have created overtime has obfuscated the real freedom of musical expression that once composed the teleology of ecm.

SOME HISTORY

Manfred Eicher, the founder and figurehead of the label, was born in 1943 in southern Germany. He dedicated his life early to music, studying the violin as a child and later the double bass and classical music at the Academy in Berlin. His education in jazz was autodidactic: he bought records at g.i. stores, received them from relatives in America, listened to Bill Evans at the Village Vanguard, played double bass in jazz bands, and visited with different artists of the 1960s improvisational (“free”) jazz movement like pianist Paul Bley and trumpeter Leo Smith.

In 1969 a chance meeting with free jazz pianist Mal Waldron led to Eicher’s first opportunity to play the producer and together the two of
them released *Free at Last*. The immediate success of the recording convinced Eicher to remain in production, finding new artists and ceasing his own performances. With virtually no funding, experience, or strategy he launched ** ECM on the outskirts of Munich with local businessman Karl Egger. Its initial purpose was to serve as a platform for jazz.

Eicher's reputation grew as a producer interested in developing a new sound for American musicians, one that was influenced by classical chamber music. His reputation also grew widely in relation to his pursuit of a European notion within the world of jazz, recruiting such artists as Tomasz Stanko from Poland and Jan Garbarek from Norway early on. The attention to free-improvisation was enormous and constant: it was a motivation to improvise free from all previous music restrictions, free from standard licks and trills, and into a realm where the deepest and most unexpected can happen.

There were no long-term contracts binding musicians exclusively to the label. Thus, independent artists were responsible for the unique sound of ** ECM as much as Manfred Eicher. The label also became a ‘thing’ unto itself. French-African drummer Manu Katché and Norwegian trumpeter Nils Petter Molvær have discussed how much listening to ** ECM as youths inspired their style of playing and their sound. There is no doubt that a certain recursive aesthetic, beyond the artists and Eicher, has become self-perpetuating.

In 1984 ** ECM launched a subdivision, New Series, providing a platform at first for Arvo Pärt’s *Tabula Rasa*, a pinnacle of Holy Minimalism (that is, minimalist music with a distinctive religious subject matter). But what the New Series served as became less...
distinct over time. Post-Soviet composers certainly found a home there (Pärt, Kancheli, Schnittke, Silvestrov, to name a few). Performers of ‘early music’ have been embraced by the Series as well. Masters of ‘hard modernism’, such as Cage, Kurtág, Stockhausen, Berio and Holliger have been well represented. Significantly, film and theater-related recordings have been important staples. Jean-Luc Godard’s _Histoire(s) du Cinéma_ and _Nouvelle Vague_ as well as DVD anthologies of shorter films have made the Series. Eleni Karaindrou’s music for the films of Theo Angelopoulos is also consistently presented.

“THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SOUND NEXT TO SILENCE”

People often talk about ECM in the context of the ECM ‘sound.’ But what is it? Eicher responded in a 1999 interview that, “All that can really be said about the ECM ‘sound’ at this point is that the sound that you hear is the sound that we like.” But this is surely the wrong way to start explaining what the ‘sound’ is. The depth and breadth of the ECM catalog is enough to make anyone trying to describe what Eicher likes to think twice.

From the inception of the label, attention was given toward the achievement of abnormally transparent sound; mixes in which the musical interaction was newly illuminated, every nuance and every timbre registered. Perhaps the best way to describe the production of each album is that production itself is initially imperceptible. There is nothing ‘basement-tapes’ish about it; nothing to suggest that the sounds you listen to are first translated mechanically into a recording. Some music recordings rely on the noise generated in the recording apparatus as a sign of authenticity. ECM is just the opposite.

Reverberations of the recording spaces are clear as well, intending to transport the listener to a time and place. The

Hardy’s ethnographic research clearly reveals the markers of surrealist auto-orientalism. (NB: the major seconds in the second line.)
recording of Arvo Pärt’s *St. John Passion*, for example, integrated the wind of a brewing thunderstorm that accidentally whistled in key. The natural acoustics are a part of the aural experience.

The ecm ‘sound’ is equal parts melancholic and phlegmatic. With each album we expect an invitation to a quiet and slow music, deeply introspective, periodically haunting, and quasi religious. It demands more than listening for pure pleasure (most often), and instead, sober reflection. Or at least that’s what it demands of those acquainted with the recordings. What kind of listening is demanded of those completely unacquainted is different. When I asked peers of mine previously unexposed to ecm what they thought of the music, at least one of them described it as “crap.” Contemporary music seems to receive this condemnation far more often than deserved, no matter how much the automatic response infantilizes the voice of the critic.

That being said, I’ve come to realize in my explorations that the idea of a ‘sound’ of ecm also betrays so much of its own music that is not melancholic or soberly reflective. Herbert Henck’s album of Conlon Nancarrow and George Anthill’s piano music is at some moments light and whimsical, while at others, thrashing in an unfocused rage. Multiple listens did little to convince me that this album really had much in common with Alfred Schnittke’s *Songs of Repentance* or even Ghazal’s *The Rain*. Perhaps an attention to silence unites them. Does this really suggest a sort of sonic congruency? Are we wrong to think that Eicher and ecm artists have made any appeal for a certain æsthetic and only produce what they like, which happens to be quite a lot of different things?

Unfortunately the answer to the latter question is yes. And I say unfortunately because the idea of the ‘sound’ persists. If you dig a bit into the recordings, the ‘sound’ begins to break down. We are left with Eicher’s personal tastes and odds and ends of an incredibly diverse musical world. The dregs of ecm make up the ultimate scatter-brained mix-tape. I wouldn’t hesitate to say that the implicit demand that these works be considered part of the ‘sound’ as well is self-destructive.

Hard hitters with the label help to perpetuate the ‘sound.’ Tomasz Stanko’s trumpet is not predatory as some have put it. It is a wail, a piercing cry into the gray skies and lava fields that is always faltering. It is cracked and beautiful, and every time you listen to his work the skies are cloudy and landscapes are mist-ridden. Or it is night. And the moment this splintered tone rises above his ensemble you can’t help but think of glaciers and chain-link fences
and ‘what could have been’; it is the creak on the stairs, the flickering match held up to a frosted window pane, the half-remembered childhood birthday party, the underside of a granite boulder; it is a profound sense of saudade, a nostalgia for something you’ve never seen or could understand. It is exactly what the ecm ‘sound’ is.

Red Sun and Samul Nori’s collaboration *Then Comes White Tiger* is anything but: a new-age-ish European jazz ensemble teaming up with a South Korean drumming troupe in the early 90s. The tracks on this album are fantastic and sui generis. Charles Lloyd’s collaboration with Zakir Hussain, *Sangam*, is just as inspirational as it is indescribable. Recordings of small ensemble works by Steve Reich are fantastic. The only thing these three have in common among them, or even with Dino Saluzzi’s *Kultrum* (a free-experimental album featuring Saluzzi’s unique Bandoneon sound) is the ecm label. I have to dash any sort of fantasies of a singular aural æsthetic for ecm that I once believed in.

What I love now is ecm’s consistent way of surprising me as I have travelled deeper into its benthic regions. But why was I led astray to begin with? How did it happen that I once believed in the ‘sound’? It certainly came from heavy listening to Jan Garbarek and Tomasz Stanko and Tord Gustavsen…but it also came from the cover design of the albums….

**Audible Landscapes**

I mentioned earlier that some seasoned/initiated ecm listeners know what kind of sound to expect when picking up any one of the albums. This is only half true. Almost anyone who
Joey Brown picks up an ecm album will know almost immediately what to expect. Just as ecm has thought very carefully about the kind of music to produce, the level of thought put into the physical design of the albums is exceptional. The designs of the first albums were deeply concerned with writing and language. The main designer, Barbara Wojirsch, admits to having been heavily influenced by American calligraphic-style artist Cy Twombly and it shows. Some of the earliest ecm album covers are adorned with experimental typography, incomprehensible and senseless scribbles. Lars Müller writes that, An essential and stylistically distinctive feature of Barbara Wojirsch’s artistic work lies in the expressive power of her drawing. Starting with her delicate, lacy handwriting, she has developed a language of signs, a written painting of imaginary sounds that forms a visual equivalent to the music.3

We might say that this is the first phase of design for the label, when the covers were often narrative and representational, perhaps going almost as far as obliquely illustrating the title of the album. Even so, it is oblique as it gets. The albums covers are vague and confused. Perhaps the silhouette of a bass in Music for Two Basses (1971) or the title of the album written as a shadow cast on sand for In the Light (1974) are good examples of this representational element. But what is notably consistent is that the musical content is not explicitly described in any way. As Barbara Wojirsch began to design a smaller share of the albums and Eicher’s interest in film began to wax, the quasi-representational elements in album covers quickly died. Müller and Eicher now dispute that any representational elements are exhibited at all in the album covers today. Stolid. Gray. Non-representational. Inviting. Simple. These are the qualities embodied by most of the recent ecm album covers. Much of this was influenced by some of Wojirsch’s last covers, notably, Thomas Tallis: The Lamentations of Jeremiab (1987) and Paul Hillier: Proensa (1989). In the former we see in grayscale a cliff looking out to the ocean. Land, sea, and sky are all we get and nothing else. Is this to suggest what is in the jewel box4: just music? The cover for Giya Kancheli’s Vom Winde beweint (1992) shows us only the interior wall of a room as light bursting in through the just-so opened door forms a neat little triangle of brightness in the foreground. The image is utterly abstracted from the musical content.

What these images really invoke is a certain approach to the music contained within it. There is a certain slowness when opening up the
album, a certain deliberate focus on the artistic qualities of the music once we have made it past this first hurdle. These photos aren’t meaningless. They invoke a sort of pseudo-intellectual self-congratulatory feeling when you pick these CDs up—‘I must be so smart because I am consuming something abstract, something formless.’ There is no way ECM is the only victim of this attitude. The publication housing this essay, indeed, published an issue last winter of a pile of snow with some sticks poking out. Are we being deeply artistic and inspiring our admirers/readers/listeners to approach the material with a deeper motive of critical evaluation when we adorn our work with these kinds of black and white images? Or are we just being lazy?

Certainly the artwork was a contributing factor to my approach to the ECM ‘sound.’ Tord Gustavsen Trio’s Being There (2007) while abstract, is also forlorn. It is a picture that looks as though it was taken from a speeding boat. “The sea, the spume and a slight reflection of the evening sun lie underneath thick, gray clouds, and the water seems to be both absolutely present and beyond reach.” It is truly a brooding and morose picture, and ironically goes against those non-representational desires by provoking the same emotions when listening to Gustavsen’s mourning piano. Like quite a bit of the music ECM has produced, “every picture comes across as if extracted from a universal silence, every motif appears like a sudden appeal against the profane and its ubiquity, and every object that catches the viewer’s eye looks as if it might still be there in ten or a hundred years’ time.” Just as Arvo Pärt’s Tabula Rasa starts and ends in fits of silence, so do the images on the cover imply a singular prologue and epilogue: a lament, distant voices, the loss of the will, a tired resistance, and finally silence. It is morbid, brutal, and all encompassing. We know the rapturous moments of the music to only be fleeting. What is constant is the gloomy silence.

Finally, there is a certain landscape that is appealed to in these photos. It is that of the north. Terje Rypdal, Arild Andersen, Jon

\[5 \text{ The Editors of this 'esteemed' publication sincerely apologize for giving out 'piles of snow.'} \]

\[6 \text{ Thomas Steinfeld in Windfall Light 2010: 36} \]

\[7 \text{ Ibid., p. 38} \]
Christensen, Jan Garbarek, and many others are a part of this angst-driven quest for meaning with a simultaneous reverence for the topography of a musical Hyperborea. Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Munch, and Sibelius are invoked as precursors. The music is sparse yet devotional, and the land is awesome and mythic. We imagine Iro Haarla’s understated yet resonant meditations on the harp in *Northbound* (2005) as exactly the same as the cover photograph: the calm sea, the deepest of greens, and the sky dark gray while pierced by a horizontal break in the clouds—a futile effort of the sun in such a desolate arena.

The drive to this stolid æsthetic has gotten out of hand. The cover of Gary Burton and Steve Swallow’s *Hotel Hello* (1975), which originally featured the intense orange disc of the sun before setting was reissued in black and white in 1993. Was it wrong to originally publish the cover in color? Had it at first betrayed the metaphor improvisation of the music or was it in the least inappropriate?

Apparently we live in a bleaker and tougher time for the creative musician. Topography returns over and over again. Steve Lake cannot help but reprint a short poem by Dag Hammarskjöld in one of his essays and frankly, neither can I:

*The seasons have changed*
*And the light*
*And the weather*
*And the hour.*
*But it is the same land.*
*And I begin to know the map*
*And to get my bearings.*

And like the subject of the poem, the images on the albums are navigable in the same way because we see images like this all of the time, and not just on ECM’s covers. Desolate land- and seascapes exclusively populate ECM’s later recordings, especially on ECM New Series. What this really betrays is the non-uniformity of the music, the absence of that false ECM ‘sound.’ It utterly obfuscates some of the free-improvisation values the label was born into and continues to embrace. In an attempt to present the material in a serious way, to cultivate an audience of intellectuals who will seriously and soberly approach this ‘sound,’ ECM damned whatever it once claimed to value straight to hell. We all approach this material in the same way.
...It is the path ECM has chosen. Eicher and all of the others involved in the production of this label perhaps are creating 'what they like.' But the metaphor for free improvisation has not changed, from color to grayscale, as ECM has implicitly claimed. What we are claiming to say about our artists’ deepest emotions (which, as Eicher has said in a recent interview with mono.kultur, are organized as sound within time—this is what music is) when the visual representation of their work is so depressed, so utterly and irreparably entrenched in melancholy, is that their music is a part of the ECM melancholic aesthetic. It is not the case that the ECM ‘sound’ is even real, or at the very least, representative of all of the recordings under the label heading. If Eicher really made and produced music that he liked, he would not suffer them this forced categorization, shrouding some of the most jubilant and fanciful contemporary music ECM has produced in shawls of mourning.

The ECM aesthetic, this thing exterior to both Eicher and his artists’ control, has taken advantage of loose reins. The demons of ECM’s past, and not its angels, have begun to eat away at its present. Artists who make music for ECM are continuously borne out of the crucible of the ‘gray skies over Europe’ synesthetic, the sound and the image. It has become perpetuating beyond the purview of Eicher’s control. ECM’s music always tries to be born free, but every time for the last twenty years, it has been in chains.

9 Kuchenbeiser, Bernd, ed. “Manfred Eicher Recording ECM.” Mono.kultur #26 2010/2011: 1-36 (note: mono.kultur is a German magazine in which each issue is an interview, no more no less. The latest issue (winter 2010/2011) focused on Manfred Eicher. Previous issues have featured such artists as the GZA, Dave Eggers, and the Dutch architecture firm MVRDV. It’s the kind of high-brow stuff that manages to work Slavoj Zizek’s name into each interview and directly competes with n+1.)
The way Americans learn American history resembles a pendulum. In elementary school and, in most cases, high school, we learn a thickly sugar-coated version of our past. In college and graduate school, we swing to a much more pessimistic history, discounting the previous version as patriotic myth. The problem is not that this initial swing occurs, but that the pendulum gets stuck in the pessimistic position for most college and graduate students, who then erroneously see the pessimistic accounts as the most accurate. The pendulum of American history needs to swing back to a much more moderate position so that students of history can understand the good and bad in their country's past without seizing on one or the other as the truth.

The optimistic narrative of American history is deeply engrained in the mind of the average school-age American. When they study the American Revolution, they focus on the noble rhetoric and heroic characters of the founding fathers. They learn how intrepid pioneers settled the West, how Lincoln freed the slaves, and how the US saved the world from fascism and communism in the 20th century.

Most Americans who never study history at a higher level or do not take the time to read history on their own probably remain entrenched in this nationalistic view of history. For those who do study history in college and beyond, the emphasis of American history changes significantly. They take in a much more nuanced portrait of the past in which the negative aspects of American history bubble to the surface. The figures of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are suddenly tarnished by the fact that they owned slaves. The Founding Fathers become a cabal of rich, white males who
Joseph stieb

entrenched their domination of women, other races, and the poor in the Constitution. They are called to question whether the US fought the World Wars and the Cold War out of a sense of moral obligation or coldly calculated interest. These students discover America's skeletons, lurking behind the noble myths: the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, how Lincoln may have been a reluctant emancipator, the firebombing of German and Japanese cities, and Vietnam.

The disillusionment deepens in graduate school. One of the main tasks of the graduate student in history is to evaluate people, arguments, historical documents, and historiography for flaws and contradictions. Naturally, this causes them to be even more pessimistic because they become fixated on the mistakes or misdeeds of historians and historical actors. The demand that graduate students meaningfully contribute to a question of historical scholarship requires that they critique historical narratives. The sugar-coated versions of American history, including those shaped by racist and sexist viewpoints, are easy targets for dismantling. With the field's recent shift towards social and cultural history, graduate students tend to seek out the history of the losers and the oppressed, which pushes them further away from the powerful. When a young historian studies the situation of women or slaves during the American Revolution, it becomes difficult to see the founders as noble or just. Equipped with an enhanced understanding of how history is written, graduate students believe that the mainstream narratives have little more to offer outside of being targets for revision because they were written by politically, socially, economically, and sexually dominant people who often used history to justify their actions. Graduate students fall deeper into the undergraduate trap of thinking that a more pessimistic narrative of American history is inherently more accurate.

The solution most college and graduate students adopt is objectivity. They dismiss the myths they learned in childhood, avoid patriotic sentiments that could blur their judgment, and set themselves to critically and impartially analyzing American history the same way they would look at Chinese, Egyptian, or Italian history. I applaud the elite few who can truly achieve such objectivity. However, I am skeptical that

The curve BG represents the inverse power law of the law of Power.

Nothing more need be said about that.
neutrality about American history is possible for most Americans. I be-
lieve that the process of disillusionment about our country’s history and
the transition to a pessimistic outlook is not merely academic, but deeply
personal. Country is an intimate part of identity. Young students’ par-
ents take them to Fourth of July celebrations and baseball games where
everyone reverently stands during the National Anthem, some with tears
at the corners of their eyes. They are told that people all over the world
want to come to America to enjoy freedom and prosperity. They are told
about past generations who fought and died for us and for America in
great wars. They are saturated with these ideas before they even know
what they really mean because the more optimistic version of American
history dominates mainstream culture. These views are hardwired into
the identities of most Americans. The idea that young historians as phi-
losopher-kings can dismiss this world in the name of objectivity without
any personal repercussions is highly dubious. Ultimately, we as college
and graduate students of history will be forced to emotionally reconcile
ourselves to the good and bad deeds of our ancestors. As a patriotic
person and a committed historian, I find this to be a constant challenge.

The overwhelming realization of the many negative facets of our
history causes many students to disparage primary and secondary
school days as the jingoistic mythologizing of history. They mistak-
enly seize on this more pessimistic narrative as “the truth” that their
parents and middle-school teachers patronizingly hid from them.
All too often, they fail to apply the same critical judgement used to
tear down the whitewashed histories to the accuracy of these narra-
tives. The disillusionment with American history emerges as part of
the general disillusionment with life that comes in early adulthood.

I am not suggesting that the euphemistic portrayal of Ameri-
can history is somehow better than the disenchanted one. In fact, it
too often leads to a notion of exceptionalism that overlooks the dark
chapters in American history, demeans other countries, and contributes to foreign policy fiascoes. What I do wish to suggest is that simple pessimism and disillusionment about our history and our prospects for the future does not signal intelligence or accuracy.

I aim to illustrate the idea that there is a happy medium between myth and disenchantment with a true story about two Americans. One is Robert E. Lee, who in April of 1865 had to choose between surrendering the Army of Northern Virginia to the Union forces and sending his troops into the bush to fight a guerrilla warfare. Some of his officers encouraged him to choose guerrilla war because it was the only possible way to save the Confederacy. Lee’s objection to this course of action is worth quoting at length:

We must consider its effect on the country as a whole. Already it is demoralized by the four years of war. If I took your advice, the men would be without rations and under no control of officers. They would be compelled to rob and steal in order to live. They would become mere bands of marauders, and the enemy’s cavalry would pursue them and overrun many sections they may never have occasion to visit. We would bring on a state of affairs it would take the country years to recover from. And, as for myself, you young fellows might go bushwhacking, but the only dignified course for me would be to go to General Grant and surrender myself and take the consequences of my acts.

There are a dozen ways to undermine the character of General Lee. He owned slaves. He fought for a government which was devoted to preserving the immoral institution of slavery. He took part in a culture which oppressed blacks and women. Can one still call Lee a hero, despite these flaws? I think yes. Or at least, at this moment, he acted heroically. His decision quite possibly saved the United States from several additional years of war, but this time of the peculiarly barbaric guerrilla variety. Anyone who knows what happened in Missouri during the Civil War should be grateful to Lee for not bringing this fate upon the rest of the country. He took the responsibility of whatever punishment the Union might have handed out on himself and no one else. Through this single act, Lee helped the United States start the slow journey to becoming united again.

The other story is about Ulysses S. Grant, who exhibited the highest respect for Lee and his defeated army at Appomattox Court House by donating rations to the starving Confederates, allowing
them to return home rather than be taken as prisoners, and letting
them keep their personal baggage and side arms. Grant even ordered
that his men cease cheering, later saying, “The Confederates were
now our countrymen, and we did not want to exult over their down-
fall.” The Union Army then formally saluted their defeated en-
emies as they turned over their rifles and ammunition. The soldiers
themselves socialized and traded with each other whereas merely
weeks before they had fired volleys of lead into each other’s chests.

I took these historical anecdotes from Jay Winik’s *April 1865: The
Month that Saved America*. Winik argues that a number of great states-
men like Lee and Grant made crucial decisions in April 1865 which
helped put the country back on the rocky road to unity and avoided
several potentially disastrous outcomes. I found Winik to be a tenta-
tive optimist about American history. He sees that the war was horrific
and that despite the emancipation of the slaves, it was followed by the
retrenchment of white domination over blacks. Nevertheless, he con-
vincingly portrays that if not for the courageous and selfless actions
of people like Lee and Grant, our country could have been riven even more
deeply by violence and lasting hatred. Imagine if Lee had ordered his
troops to fight a guerrilla warfare, or if Grant had humiliated or impris-
oned the haggard and downtrodden Confederates. How much longer
would the war have lasted if there had been an insurgency? Would the
South ever have forgiven the North for disgracing Lee’s army? Would
the smoldering embers of the first civil war have given rise to a second?
Winik dares his readers to reflect on these awful hypotheticals and
appreciate the people who helped prevent them from coming to pass.

*April 1865* was a popular bestseller and the book that former
President George W. Bush took with him to Camp David after Sep-
tember 11th. It also received a lot of criticism from historians and
students of history with whom I have discussed the book. They
criticized it for romanticizing the Civil War and glossing over the
plight of minorities and women during and after the conflict. The
most damning jab was that it was popular history which catered to
the market demographic of patriotic white male Civil War buffs
who wanted to hear flattering stories about their favorite heroes.

I do not necessarily find these criticisms invalid, although I de-
fended Winik then and still defend him today as a legitimate historian.
What concerns me about these critiques is that most of these students
would not have gone after the anti-Winik’s version of the end of the
Civil War with the same verve. The anti-Winik would write about how
systems of economic, racial, and sexual exploitation were a fundamental
part of wartime life. The anti-Winik would demonstrate about how Lee, Grant, and other prominent figures in the war's ending were hardly heroic but were more likely willing participants in the rampant injustices of American society. I do not mean to say that the anti-Winik would be a bad historian. These would be perfectly valid arguments to make about the end of the Civil War. What concerns me is that my fellow undergraduate history majors, my fellow graduate students in history, and I suspect, a great deal of the history faculty at the University of Chicago and many elite universities, would call the anti-Winik's work serious and innovative history but dismiss Winik's book as unserious popular history. They would do so because they tend to view more pessimistic and critical versions of history as accurate and consider the more optimistic versions to be unserious myth-making. I believe this is a mistake.

In the history of warfare, countless conflicts have ended with massacres, rapes, the burning and pillaging of cities, and vindictive peace treaties. The conclusions of civil wars are often particularly nasty. Consider that at the end of the Spanish Civil War General Franco executed roughly 30,000 of his real and imagined enemies. Yet the conclusion of our bloodiest conflict, while imperfect, stands out as a remarkably singular moment of compassion and dignity. Cannot a historian point this out and still be considered legitimate and serious? Does the fact that this historical point has resounded with a popular audience undermine its scholarly bonafides? I say that a work of history takes on greater esteem when it challenges the thinking and excites the imagination of both the expert and the general reader.

Winik and more optimistic historians do not ignore that the Civil War included the bloodiest battles in American history, cruelty to civilians, vicious guerrilla skirmishes, and hellish prisoner-of-war camps. Nonetheless, they also see that there was nobility, compassion, and courage. The minds of the average young historian should be advanced enough to understand that there was both tremendous good and terrible evil during this event. The act of seizing upon only the good or the bad as the truth is a descent into illusion and extreme bias. The reality of that event exists somewhere on the vast spectrum between absolutes. The same goes for any other chapter in our history, including the present day.

Over the course of our lives as students, the pendulum of the way we judge our own history has swayed from euphemism to disillusionment. As undergraduate and graduate students, we must make our first strides towards intellectual maturity, and swing the pendulum back towards the middle.
Societal interaction can be thought of as movement within the framework of theatre, with individuals being cast into certain roles and acting within the framework of those roles. The church, the town square, and the marketplace can act as different micro-sociological settings within the larger macro-sociological process of theatre. However, a setting which is often ignored as a form of citizenship and society building is the playing field, and specifically in this study, the basketball court.

Basketball at the recreational level is played not for income or fame, but instead as a leisure activity. However, within this leisurely activity there lies a rigid societal process by which individuals act either in accordance with, or in resistance to, certain roles. These roles are driven by an intangible process which pushes players into the roles through which they can best benefit the game as a whole. Winning is undoubtedly important, and a key aspect of what drives many of the players, but winning is not the sole motivation. Players attempt to win, but only within the context of the sport itself. Destroying the fabric of the game to win is looked down upon and forced out of the social space.

Basketball is only a microcosm of the societal process of individuals attempting to navigate their roles within the larger societal theatre. The ability to be a competent actor within this social scene is not a given; rather, it is a talent which can be developed and honed. On the basketball court this is analogous to an individual actualizing his role and understanding the different dynamics which make for beautiful play. In doing so he strengthens not only his own stage presence on the court, but also increases the overall beauty of athletic interaction. Within society, role

Mahmoud Bahrani is a third-year in the College double majoring in Economics and Sociology.
actualization and understanding the dynamics of interaction is similarly important in bolstering the community as a whole. The building up of these traits, then, becomes a form of citizenship building. Basketball, and sport in general, is a powerful way of instilling these traits, and subsequently acts as an efficient and effective form of citizenship building.

To prove this point, I will rely on observations of individual players, drawn from my own experiences playing pick-up basketball at the Ratner Athletic Center in the evenings. All names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

The above is a diagram of the pick-and-roll, perhaps the most basic scoring play in basketball. “One” is a guard, a smaller, quicker player with strong ball handling skill and the ability to shoot the ball from outside. “Five” is a forward or center, a strong, larger player who can take a hit and still finish around the basket. Five comes up and sets a screen on one’s defender, here marked by an X. Five’s defender has to follow, or else one can simply dribble around the screen and will have a wide open jump shot, which guards are quite adept at hitting. One dribbles around the screen and tries to drive to the hoop, but five’s defender is there to block his path. Finally, there is the ‘roll’ portion of the pick and roll, in which Five turns and slashes towards
the hoop. If Five has set the screen and turned correctly, then One’s defender should be behind him, so one simply has to pass the ball around Five’s defender and Five will have an easy lane to the hoop.

The pick-and-roll, when executed correctly, is one of the most awe-inspiring plays in basketball. In theory it is incredibly simple, but it requires perfect coordination and cooperation by the two players involved in order for it to work. The pick-and-roll is beautiful because of this dynamic. It is simple in design, and yet remains incredibly difficult to master. Continuing with the theatre analogy, there is a very obvious distinction between an experienced actor who knows how to act angrily and a novice who has yet to master the skill. Anger, in and of itself, is a very familiar and well-understood emotion. Yet portraying it masterfully can send audiences into rapturous applause.

Beautiful play, then, is not simply defeating your opponent, but doing so the correct way, in a way that is aesthetically pleasing to the audience. Scoring off a pick-and-roll is the offense overcoming the defense because of perfect execution, not because the defense made a poor play. Similarly, the protagonist of much theater is meant to defeat evil, but only because he is truly better than evil, and not simply because evil happened to make a misstep. This relationship manifested itself in the form of exceptionally good players; players who were, in a sense, too skilled to be playing with the group.

Derrick was one such player. Derrick was extremely skilled, both offensively and defensively. His jump shot seemingly never missed—he shot it high over his head, with a very steady, but extremely powerful flick of the right hand, thereby giving the ball a good amount of backspin. He also shot at the apex of his jump, and not as he jumped, like most players, which made his shot effectively unblockable.

However, Derrick ultimately had a detrimental effect on the overall game because there was no counter to Derrick’s dominance. He was, in a sense, like the dominant actor, whose performance was almost too strong, thereby making the audience forget the other actors on the stage. Derrick played with such grace and effortlessness that he made the game irrelevant. Indeed, he began to score with such
ease and efficiency that my team stopped keeping track of the score because we knew that we were going to lose. Good is supposed to vanquish evil, but destroying evil means nothing if there was no struggle involved. A protagonist with no conflict ceases to be a protagonist at all.

Derrick’s play began to change, however, as the game went along. Strangely, Derrick seemed not to want the ball anymore. However, he was not completely avoiding play. He would still shoot the ball, but only when he was open, in situations created by smart plays from his teammates. Whether Derrick was open or not was previously unimportant. Even if he was being guarded, he would still be very much able to make almost any shot on the court. Derrick changed the way he was playing in order to adapt to the social setting, so that the game could continue along without the rest of us becoming frustrated and angry. Eccentricities can only be developed among a sphere of similarly talented individuals. Derrick was unable to shine within the context of our mediocrity because doing so would damage the community as a whole. External pressures from our tiny society of basketball players limited Derrick’s individual ability, but allowed the game, as a whole, to become more enjoyable due to increased balance.

This returns us to my earlier point that winning must be done the right way. The play cannot end without a spectacular ending, because that is the part that will stick with the audience long after they leave the theatre. Indeed, many plays are made or broken by the last scene, as a play can be spectacular for 89 minutes and still fall short of audience expectations if the last minute disappoints. Similarly, a win feels cheap if the last shot is created by a defensive mistake. A win is only earned if the offense is able to outmaneuver the defense, utilizing quick ball movement and screens to yield a wide open shot.

All these examples serve to illustrate the point that one is not looking only to win in pick-up basketball. Rather, he is looking to win the correct way, by overcoming defense through his own
mastery of a certain skill. Mastering a certain skill on the basketball court is analogous to fitting into a certain role in the theatre. When the actor finds the correct role, the result is more beautiful than the actor or the role could individually ever hope to achieve.

The above is a diagram of the screen roll. Like the pick-and-roll, it is a simple play. Unlike the pick-and-roll, however, the play can be guarded quite easily; that is, unless Two is an impressively competent shooter. Four and Five set double screens across the paint, and Two is supposed to quickly maneuver around the screens and lose his defender. He must then receive the ball and shoot from the perimeter in one fluid motion. His defender, even with the screens, will be trailing him by only a second, and Two must be able to release the jump shot accurately and swiftly. If Two is able to do so consistently, the play is nearly unstoppable.

Finding and fitting into a role on the court plays a vital part in the beauty of the game. Beating an opponent by actualizing the traits of one’s specific role allows each individual on the court to shine, just as a supporting actor or actress's strongest performance is the one that does not overwhelm the rest of the play. In the previous section I discussed the concept of a player, Derrick, who was too good for the social setting. In the example, Derrick had no role. He was simply better than all the other players in every facet of the game, and his presence overwhelmed everyone on the stage. Outside pressures, as well as Derrick's own internal mechanisms, helped Derrick fit into a role specifically as a shooter, a player who reliably could hit his open shots.

A player who fails to understand his role singlehandedly disrupts the team dynamic. Teddy was one such player. Teddy thought himself a shooter, and felt that any place beyond the three point range was within his range. Even when Teddy was guarded he felt that his shooting skills were strong enough to make virtually any shot. As a result, Teddy became a black hole. Clearly this is not conducive to

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3 The paint is the area below the free throw line and in between the two lines which constitute 'the lane.' This area is called the paint because generally in professional arenas this section of the court is painted a different color than the rest of the court.

4 The idea of a black hole basketball player comes from the astrological phenomenon in which gravity is so strong that even light cannot escape its grasp. Similarly, whenever the ball goes to the black hole player, it is essentially a wasted possession, because the ball will not escape his grasp.
success if the player is not a proficient shot maker. Forcing a roll outside of one’s capabilities is the antithesis of beauty on the basketball court. The player who overvalues himself causes the ball to stagnate and leaves other players angry and frustrated because they are not allowed to engage in the game. The individual tries to steal the show, and in success or failure, irritates his fellow actors.

In another game a larger player named John was continually shooting and missing three pointers. This offense was especially egregious because of his size. John stood at six feet two inches and was much stronger than his defender. Had John attempted to utilize his size and force his way inside, he would score much more efficiently. The conflict with Teddy was subtly different than the conflict with John. Teddy could very well be a shooter; it was just that he thought himself too good a shooter. The extent of the role, in addition to the type of role, must be understood. A play can only have so many leading roles, and a basketball court can only have so many star players. John, on the other hand, was potentially a star, but refused to accept the role that he had been given, and instead tried to force a different role that was more to his liking. However, as is the case in basketball and in life, occasionally individuals need to accept the roles that they have been assigned for the greater societal good.

Acceptance of a role is demonstrated by its proper execution. In times of failure, profuse apology is used as a means of demonstrating to the other players that the player maintains an understanding of

'Sacred' Hulman monkies. The activity Browning et al. identify as "pius illuminatis fecalum" (reproduced here from p. 263) is in fact nothing more than garden-variety taedium.
his or her role. One night, I played with an individual named Mark. He was an extremely talented and well-rounded player, but was having difficulties finishing the strong drives that he was making to the hoop. Interestingly enough, Mark found fault with various parts of his body while refusing to blame himself: “Man, I can’t get anything right now,” he complained loudly after one particularly bad shot. “What’s wrong with my right hand? I can’t even hit the basket!”

Apology serves as a means of reconciling one’s role. It is a simple, powerful way of letting the others on the court know that the failure was atypical and only temporary. Mark was not the best player on the court that night. However, even though I did not play with Mark except for in this one occasion, it was clear from the way that the other players treated him that he was a capable player who was simply having a subpar day. He was sure to apologize after every bad play, and indeed, the very next play he would look to correct the mistake he just made. His honesty and dedication to filling both his extrinsic role as a playmaker and scorer and his intrinsic role as a leader was immediately apparent, and subsequently earned him the respect of all those in the gym.

Once all the actors have been cast, whether properly or improperly, it becomes the role of the directors to create the story. Storytelling and conflict creation are necessary parts of theatre, because without conflict, there is nothing for the protagonist to overcome. Occasionally conflict can be created simply by the inability of certain players to accept their roles, or other players breaking out of pre-assigned roles. However, occasionally all the players understand their roles, and conflict needs to be created from an outside source in order to push the story along.
The above is a diagram of the classic shell defense. The doctrine of the shell defense is, “One pass away, deny. Two passes away, help.” The defense is designed to send players to the baseline and either trap them or force them into causing an offensive foul. This defense, like the pick-and-roll, is perfect in theory. However, even the slightest miscommunication causes the defense to break down. The shell defense can adapt to any offense, but it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who is one pass away and who is two passes away. Miscommunication in these cases often leads to finger pointing and conflict.

Repeatedly, one of the main instigators of conflict was Joe. Joe filled the role of mentor, director, shooter, and trickster all at once. Joe was a dominant figure in the social space. He knew seemingly every player on the court and every player on the court worth knowing also knew him. Joe took pride in his intelligence and knowledge of the game. From an outsider's perspective, his play would seem lazy and slow. However, all the players on the court knew that what appeared to be laziness was really just supreme confidence. Joe understood the game and could see several moves ahead, like a chess master mysteriously moving his queen into harm's way and then checkmating his opponent the very next turn.

Joe filled the archetypal role of the mentor and trickster. The trickster breaks the rules of the social scene intentionally, embattling the protagonist in the process. Initially, the trickster appears as a malicious character because of his heinous treatment of the protagonist. However, resolution of the trickster-made conflict ultimately leads to a process of self-realization for the protagonist, thereby allowing him to ascend to a new level of understanding. Standing not much taller than five feet, Joe utilized his strength and physicality to make up for his physical limitations, often using his physicality as a means of conflict initiation.

During one game, I was guarding a player named Jim who was much stronger than me. He was able to utilize his body to establish position down near the basket, and I was not strong enough to push him off the spot. His teammates would loft the ball into him on every possession, and Jim would simply turn his shoulder into my body to

5 The prime mark indicates the position of the ball.
create space and knock down the easy layup. Joe approached me after this had happened several times. “You want me to take him? Do you think you’re strong enough to guard him?” he asked. “In all honesty, Joe, I don’t think I am,” I replied, and Joe switched onto Jim on defense. Immediately the game took a very physical turn, as Joe would push, shove, and elbow Jim, using any and all of the tricks in his defensive toolbox to prevent Jim from getting an easy layup. Fouls were rightfully being called on every play, and Jim’s team had possession for a five minute stretch because whenever Jim caught the ball near the hoop Joe would tie him up and a foul would have to be called. After this had been going on for quite some time, Jim ran out to the perimeter, received the ball, and drove angrily toward the hoop. Jim ran into Joe and Joe blatantly elbowed Jim right in the chest. After initially being quite angry, and after what looked like the start of a confrontation, the two hugged and started laughing, and then continued playing.

Fights seldom break out on the basketball court. In the time that I played, Jim’s confrontation with Joe was certainly the closest any two individuals got to an altercation. Joe would often use his physicality as a way of disrupting the social setting, only to encourage an individual to tap a different area of his potential. A few scores after the altercation had Jim’s team on the verge of winning. Jim caught the ball on the perimeter, and instead of driving to the hoop or attempting to post up inside, Jim lofted a soft floater into the net, ending the game. Joe was a mentor as much as he was a trickster. By initiating confrontation, Joe allowed Jim to expand a vital part of his game, forcing him to take a perimeter shot that he would never have taken if I was still guarding him.

Storytelling is the beauty of the game in motion. Graceful play on its own is enjoyable, but it becomes increasingly impressive as it overcomes the various obstacles that lay in its path. Joe was actor, audience, and director all at once. His understanding of the game, shaped by years and years of experience, allowed him to subtly shape the way each of us played, nudging us into certain roles, using confrontation, if necessary.
Learning to navigate certain social spheres such as the church, town hall, and marketplace is necessary for citizens attempting to integrate themselves within a larger society. Individuals attempt to navigate their communities by realizing certain roles which are solidified in the aforementioned social spheres. Sport is not commonly thought of as an inherently important segment of the community, but the social inner workings that play out on the basketball court are mirrored in daily interaction. Sport, like the church and the town hall, is another arena through which individuals can better learn how to actualize their roles within a society.

Basketball teaches individuals how to maneuver their social arenas. Players are prodded and nudged, sometime physically, into the various roles for which they are suited. When players exist outside of their roles, the game's structure attempts to force them into their proper role. Players who accept and realize their role become assets to the community, as the game improves as a whole when players extend themselves within the scope of their roles. Therefore, the realization of these roles benefits not only the player in specific, but also the greater society in general. Further analysis on what constitutes a citizen would be necessary to ultimately push this point forward further. However, it is in the author's opinion that a good citizen benefits his society as a whole by playing the part that benefits his society the most, regardless of whether this comes at the expense of personal success and glory. If citizenship is defined this way, then sport can then be thought of as a form of citizenship building, because it teaches the individual how best to support the community around him.
WHEN WRITING HISTORY, THE DIFFICULTY is knowing where the past ends and history begins. The historian must continually remind himself of this distinction in order to guard against the seductive impulse to impoverish his craft—for history is not only the study of past events, but also of how those events are communicated in the present. In order to draw some sense of meaning from the overwhelming multiplicity of reality, historians invent a language of civilizations, countries, and chronologies with which to relate their narratives. Our language of historical understanding, manufactured in the milieu of the here-and-now, is thus in some part a function of our present: our translations of the past into current idioms through the cipher of history necessarily diverge depending on what we know (or believe we know) about ourselves and our times. To write history with anything approaching completeness then, it is essential to first confront the question: What is at stake for our present in the representations of our past?

In the Balkans, perhaps more than anywhere else, issues of history and memory impact daily life with a startling immediacy. Borders on all levels of abstraction—from nations to neighborhoods—shift along lines of historical representation. One need look no further than the highly-publicized conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo to see how representations of the past, invested with such extensive meaning for the present, can easily offset the fulcrum of war and peace, death and life.

My concern at present is not Kosovo, however, but its neighboring republic of Macedonia. Here, during the course of my three-month stay as archaeologist-in-residence in the city of Strumitsa, I encountered...
the manufacturing of historical memory, and came away with a better understanding of how telling stories about the past influences the way we recognize ourselves and our place in the world around us.

Strumitsa itself is located on the frontier of Macedonia, at the point where it converges with Greece and Bulgaria. Like any good nationalists who find themselves on the margin of their nation-state, the people of Strumitsa (known as Strumitski) are all the more conscious of their identities as Macedonians due to their proximity to those commonly perceived as other. Faced with the threat this nearby other poses to the solidarity of the national group, many Strumitski turn to history as a tool for consciously reaffirming their own national character, and for reminding themselves of the imagined lines of division which would otherwise be indiscernible in the continuum of everyday life. The notion of shared historical memory is invoked to bind people together in their common Macedonianness by firmly delineating an exclusive space for historic Macedonian culture in the present. Conveniently, the Strumitsa valley played host to the battle of Kleidion, a decisive battle of world history, with enough blood, bravery, and general epic quality to serve as an inexhaustible wellspring for nourishing a common Macedonian identity in the minds of modern Strumitski.

The historical facts are as follows: on July 29, 1014, the Byzantine army under Emperor Basil II met with the forces of the Bulgar Tsar Samuil in the narrow Kleidion pass, where the Belasitsa and Ograzdhen mountain ranges meet (now on the border between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia). Samuil constructed a palisade and ditch across the pass, initially rebuffing the Byzantine offensive. However, part of the Byzantine army managed to cross the high Belasitsa Mountains to the south of Kleidion, and surprised the Bulgar force from the rear. Surrounded, the Bulgars panicked and a full rout ensued, with Samuil only barely escaping. The Byzantines followed up their success by taking control of the region and besieging the strategically vital city of Strumitsa.

It is the aftermath of this battle which has most entrenched itself in the popular imagination. In order to leave his fellows home
following his victory, Basil II ordered all 14,000 Bulgar prisoners of war to be blinded, leaving one out of every 99 men with one eye in order to lead his fellows home. This possibly apocryphal (but nonetheless memorable) act of calculated psychological warfare earned Basil II the sobriquet “Bulgaroktonos”—the Bulgar-Slayer—among later Byzantine historians. According to the historian John Skylitzes, who wrote almost a century after the battle, Samuil went into cardiac arrest upon seeing his sightless army return home, and died two days later.

The validity of this legend aside, Samuil did die shortly after the Battle of Kleidion, initiating a violent succession struggle between his heirs and leaving behind a vulnerable and leaderless state at the mercy of Byzantine arms. Hard fighting between Byzantium and the Bulgars continued until 1018, when the last tsar fell in battle and the Bulgar nobility submitted to Byzantium en masse. Hence, while the Battle of Kleidion itself was a relatively minor engagement, its results shifted the tides of war and brought to bear a series of events that ultimately climaxed in the annexation of all Bulgaria to Byzantium, ending over 400 years of Bulgar autonomy.

On clear days, from where I sat writing this in the city of Strumitsa, one can see the pass of Kleidion and the area where the battle raged 996 years ago. To my left is a little village where the local peasants claim that Basil II blinded his Bulgar captives—its Macedonian name translates literally to “the Place Where Eyes are Taken Out.” Nearby, the modern village of Bansko sits atop the ancient village of Termitza, incinerated by Byzantine soldiers. The imposing fortress of Tsarevi Kuli looms overhead, besieged by Basil II in the aftermath of Kleidion. Old men sit at the coffee houses in town and gossip about Byzantine gold hidden on the slopes of Mount Belasitsa. Were I to climb to the top of Belasitsa today, I would look out on a landscape of
large mountains sheltering small villages of small farmers, where wares are still transported to local markets by horse-cart. In some ways, the land and its people have changed very little over the last millennium.

Like the physical elements of rural life, the memory of Kleidion lingers throughout the Strumitsa valley, preserved in the consciousness of its inhabitants. To a Strumitski, nearly every village, every stream, every rock reverberates with the aftershocks of that day in 1014 when their world shook upon the battlefield. Local villagers physically par-


ticipate in history by claiming some piece of the battle as their own. An arrowhead passed down through the generations, or a coin found out in the fields, grace nearly every Strumitski’s mantelpiece. These historical artifacts give the townsmen of Strumitsa something to point to with pride and say “Belasita battle, Tsar Samuil” when they encounter a foreigner (like me). More than a devotional piece to be cherished in private, such material is a tool in the public effort to construct a national pedigree—one of such respectable antiquity that it justifies the impoverished, twenty-year-old Republic of Macedonia as an equal and deserving member of the European Club in the eyes of its most powerful members: France, England, and the other nations of Western Europe. It represents an imagined collective suffering which belongs solely to the Macedonian, and thereby functions as an illustration of uniquely Macedonian strength and courage in the face of abject adversity. Pointing to an old arrowhead or coin in this context is the same as saying: “Yes, the nations of Western Europe may have great economic wealth and power, but the glorious defeat of Kleidion proves that we Macedonians have a different kind of wealth: a great richness of spirit.”

This remains true beyond the confines of Strumitsa: Macedonians in general hold up the tragic fate of Samuil as a symbol of historical
self-worth in the face of modern impoverishment. For many, the act of laying claim to this one bloody summer afternoon validates their modern collective struggle for the historical pedigree implicit in nationhood by cordoning off a unique geographic and moral space in the past. And indeed, according to the logic of nationalism, if the Macedonian has a unique space in the past, he must likewise deserve a unique space in the present.

As I type these very words, hundreds of miles away in the Macedonian capital of Skopje, masons are hard at work sculpting an enormous statue of Samuil for the city's main square, to go alongside those of Alexander the Great and Justinian—the ruling party's latest attempt to construct a shared Macedonian national identity stretching back to earliest antiquity. By adorning modern Macedonia with the iconography of Samuil's empire, the lines between past and present are blurred. The kingdom of the Medieval Bulgars takes on the idealized sheen of an exclusively Macedonian Eden—a promised land stripped away and dismembered by Byzantine aggressors which may all too easily be conflated with the Ottoman, Bulgarian, Yugoslav, and (most recently) Greek aggressors that have successively prevented the Macedonian nation from reclaiming its lost paradise.

Yet back in Strumitsa, away from parliament and the politics of national ideology, Kleidion also functions on a more intimate and personal level as a wellspring of tradition for the people of this region to draw upon in order to make sense of the various trials of daily life. On this more personal level the remembrance of Kleidion is not only a way of venerating the past, but a guidebook for navigating the present. History, in this sense, is very much alive: it is in a perpetual cycle of birth and rebirth as it is invested among new rocks and springs and villages. Drawing the novel and the alien into an ordered pattern makes them intelligible to those who derive self-worth by reciting stories wherein everything new is but a reprise of something which has happened before. By fitting all that is unfamiliar into recognizable
patters, until the whole world is composed with poetic familiarity, the Strumitski give themselves the tools to meet despair, pain, death, and all the other tragedies embedded in the human experience. Hence, the frighteningly incomprehensible and inexplicable vicissitudes of life are brought into a realm in which they can be understood and controlled. Everything that is beyond human expression is given a face and a name by being grafted into the experience of Kleidion, which in itself has become a symbol for the experience of even the most mundane element of everyday life for the people of the Strumitsa valley.

This use of history to harness the past for a sense of direction in the present, both on a national and personal level, may seem foreign to the more “rational” states of North America or Western Europe. Yet in the invocation of the Boston Tea Party by modern-day political dissidents, we can see how history is similarly deployed in American politics to harvest our past, understand our present, and control our future, even if we are less conscious of such usage. Both Kleidion and the Tea Party draw on narratives of glorious resistance against overwhelming odds to justify modern-day political struggles (that the American Revolution was a glorious victory, while the Battle of Kleidion was a glorious defeat, does little to mitigate the core invocation of heroic resistance to a monolithic aggressor at issue in these examples of modern revisionism). Each one attempts, in its own ways, to reinterpret the past and categorize history by means of a standardized ideology—be that ideology geared towards an economic doctrine or nationalistic dogma. And thus, by marrying a narrative of the past to a belief system of the present, both employ historical imagination via comparable means in order to color our immediate experience.

It is within these parallels of use that one may catch a glimpse of something fundamental about the idea of history. The concrete events of the past serve to intrinsically limit the range of possibility for historical expression, for history cannot be history without bearing some relation to the facts of the past. Yet within those limits, the act of composing a historical narrative reads meaning and purpose into the progression of mere facts. Constructing history is the process of selecting and integrating past events in such a way as to reflect some aspect of our understanding of reality, and ultimately give our thoughts, actions, and selves some sort of purposeful coherence. To understand history, then, is more than merely accumulating knowledge of past events, more than a decoration of paideia. Rather it is a great tapestry, produced by weaving together the disparate threads of the surrounding world to represent a version of reality in which the forms of our
lives can be recognized. This recognition of our existence as framed among the rich patterns of historical tapestry gives our thoughts and actions a significance borne of continuity, and awakens meaning in a life that would otherwise be incomprehensible in its isolation.

Everybody needs something to point to—a fixed point around which to orient our experiences of the world. History teaches us how to point to ourselves.

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