The Midway Review publishes informed, accessible essays featuring literary, cultural, and political commentary and criticism. It is a forum for serious reflection and civil discourse across a variety of intellectual perspectives. We are currently accepting submissions to be considered for our Spring 2014 issue. For submission guidelines, please consult midwayreview.uchicago.edu.

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After 9/11, literature is endowed with the ethical responsibility of building compassion through literary imagination.

To learn a new tongue is to put tremendous trust in symbols whose meanings we can never be certain to know.

Ofelia’s divergence from the norms of the fairy tales she herself admires reflects her departure from what is expected of her.

Journalists ought to be critically aware of their own limitations in retelling another’s local narrative.
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Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.
German theorist Theodor Adorno famously wrote in 1949 that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” A remark often misinterpreted and taken out of context, it nevertheless popularized Adorno’s theory that social consciousness fundamentally changes as a result of historical catastrophes. Here, Adorno uses poetry as a stand-in for art as a whole and its legacy of glorifying the triumphs of Western civilization; to write poetry after Auschwitz is to absolve that culture of its faults, which were revealed in the Holocaust. But his more radical ethical claim is that the Holocaust changed the very way we should live; his philosophical reflections on the Holocaust are even collected under the title Can One Live After Auschwitz? One wants to dismiss such a question as absurd, but for Adorno that would be a refusal to acknowledge the scar Auschwitz left on the world.

I want to ask whether such an approach could apply to a tragedy weighing on American consciousness today: the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Adorno’s theoretical project of delineating what changed after Auschwitz could only take place after the Holocaust had achieved enough historical closure to be considered as a distinct event from the rest of World War II. Today, it has been over twelve years since 9/11, the memorial at Ground Zero has recently been completed, and the affiliated museum is scheduled to open in May 2014. The two major wars 9/11 sparked are effectively over. America seems poised to enter a new phase of 9/11 remembrance, not unlike what happened with the Holocaust. The question is what this phase will look like. Will 9/11 come to be remembered as a truly epochal event? Will the
people of our generation take up the phrase “After 9/11”? And if they do, will this call for a reformulation of all of Western civilization, as Auschwitz does for Adorno, or affect us only as Americans?

One of the most prominent figures asking these questions today is Jonathan Safran Foer, a thirty-six-year-old Jewish-American writer whose two novels put responses to these very catastrophes in dialogue. Foer is uniquely positioned to comment on the status of 9/11 in a broader cultural context. As a New Yorker, he sympathizes with those Americans, especially children, for whom the event was uniquely traumatizing. But as the grandson of two survivors of the Holocaust and a writer who positions himself in its shadow, Foer also considers 9/11 in a comparative light. Foer’s response is therefore ambivalent, or, more precisely, double. His approach does not necessarily disqualify 9/11 from epochal status, but it does necessitate a move away from American exceptionalism and toward a more universal concern for human suffering.

FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO 9/11

On February 1, 2013, President Obama tapped Foer for the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the body that oversees the national memorial and museum, making him one of the youngest members ever appointed. This new title makes Foer’s literary status semi-official: the writer of catastrophe for his generation.

Foer’s engagement with catastrophe began with his first book, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), a fictionalized account of an event in Foer’s own life. One summer, while a philosophy major at Princeton, the protagonist (named Jonathan Safran Foer) travels to the Ukraine looking for the woman who had saved his Jewish grandfather during the Holocaust. He hires a translator and drives through the countryside looking for a lost shtetl, Trachimbrod. As it turns out, nothing remains of the town: its inhabitants and the site were completely destroyed during the war. But one woman who remains has miraculously preserved the Jews’ possessions and stories.
Everything is a story of loss, but also the wonders of coincidence and memory. The novel is written as a series of letters between Jonathan and his translator, Alex. The friendship they develop signals hope—from both perspectives—for Gentile-Jewish reconciliation. But Jonathan is also off on his own project: when he can’t recover the real history of the Jews of the town, he creates a mythology for them going back hundreds of years, complete with festivals, orgies, and founding folklore. Foer seems to suggest that this leap into imagination is just Jonathan’s way of mourning. When there’s nothing left of his real family history because it has been so completely destroyed, he must create it in order to achieve closure.

What’s really true in Foer’s story? Though Foer’s grandfather survived the Holocaust, he lost a daughter and his first wife, and that trauma is what Foer takes up in his writing. Crucial is the fact that Foer’s grandfather died long before Foer was born, so even the story of his grandfather’s survival is one level removed. Philippe Codde thus considers Foer representative of third-generation Holocaust victims: “those who were not directly affected by the event, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this traumatic past.” Codde also suggests that subsequent generations can become even more haunted by the traumatic event than the first, “due to the obsession that arises with the black hole, the hidden horror in their family history,” especially when the survivors do not share their experiences.

As Jonathan narrates in Everything, “The origin of a story is always an absence,” and he writes as if he had no choice but to fill that absence with narratives spun from the scraps of information he was left with. Dominick LaCapra would consider this a healthy response to trauma in that it constitutes “acknowledging and affirming, or working through, absence as absence,” rather than mistaking one’s ancestral loss for one’s own loss and thinking of oneself as a victim. For LaCapra, accepting absence and working through it “requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others.” It involves accepting anxiety about the past as one’s own and “opens up empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited, nontotalizing, and nonredemptive elaboration of institutions and practices in the creation of a more desirable, perhaps significantly

different—but not perfectly unified—life in the here and now.” Everything is the story of a hopeful young Foer working toward that uneasy acceptance of his family’s past.

Everything won the National Jewish Book Award in 2002 and established Foer as an important Jewish writer. Though the book is impressive, Foer delves even deeper into the aftermath of catastrophe in his 2005 Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Extremely Loud is on its surface the story of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar, who loses his father on 9/11. The story is told mostly through Oskar’s own voice; he exaggerates much of what he sees and uses phrases like “extremely hilarious,” which give the book its title. Oskar goes on a quest around New York City to find the lock for a key he found that he believes to be his lost father’s, sharing the story of his loss with the people he meets and achieving closure on his father’s death in the process.

The use of a disorienting, untraditional voice isn’t new for Foer, who wrote Everything partly in the equally-entertaining, Borat-like voice of Foer’s Ukrainian translator Alex, which brings unexpected humor to a tragic story. As if this weren’t enough, Foer disorients the reader of Extremely Loud by interspersing images Oskar collects for his scrapbook, “Stuff That Happened to Me.” Chapters narrated by Oskar alternate with unsent letters written by his grandparents, who fled Germany after the allied bombing of Dresden decades earlier. Between these several narrators, pages come in all varieties—some blank, others containing one word, some corrected with red pen, others totally full of numbers, and still others on which the letters get gradually closer together until the page is almost solid black with ink. The struggle of communicating trauma is made visible: sometimes there is nothing one can say, and other times there are not words to communicate what one needs to say.

These imaginative representational strategies are inspired by the many literary references Foer incorporates into his works. The name of Extremely Loud’s Oskar is borrowed from the protagonist of German writer Günter Grass’s The Tin
Drum, the story of another traumatized boy’s fantastical travels in the wake of World War II. The photographs of banal items scattered throughout Extremely Loud recall those in W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz, the story of a Jewish man who escaped the Holocaust as an infant from Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport to Britain. As Deborah Solomon remarked, “Foer might be called a European novelist who happens to be writing in America.”

WHY WRITE THE CATASTROPHE?

Foer remarked on the subjects of his novels in an interview: “Both the Holocaust and 9/11 were events that demanded retellings... The accepted versions didn’t make sense for me. I always write out of a need to read something, rather than a need to write something. With 9/11 in particular, I needed to read something that wasn’t politicized or commercialized, something with no message, something human.” Foer attempted to return to 9/11 and rethink it from the ground up. As he said on another occasion, “We need as many voices as possible because unfortunately our national storytellers about [9/11] have been politicians and they’ve been telling a story so different than most people I know experienced the day.” Foer’s personal response to 9/11 was more open-ended: “profound sadness,” as he put it, or, as Oskar frequently says, “heavy boots.”

Foer attempts to convey this open sense of loss indirectly by juxtaposing 9/11 with fictional survivor testimonies of the allied bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima during World War II. Oskar’s grandparents are survivors of the allied bombing of Dresden, and deeply traumatized individuals, though Oskar is too young to think of them as such. The reader learns of their trauma mostly through letters Oskar’s grandfather writes to his unborn son, who perished in utero during the bombings. In the course of a school project, Oskar then stumbles upon an oral testimony of a man who lived through the bombing of Hiroshima that Foer transcribes in the novel. These counter-narratives, hastily written off as “thrown in” and “in here, too, for good measure” by dismissive critics, serve the important role of situating 9/11 in a broader, more self-reflective framework.

“The way September 11 is talked about in America is entirely
after 9/11

without any kind of global or historical context,” Foer remarked. “It’s talked about in absolutes—absolute good and evil, absolute terror and justice—with no perspective...I thought including [Dresden and Hiroshima] was not only a way of introducing a kind of historical perspective but also to reiterate how awful it is when these things happen.”¹⁰ Foer thus describes Extremely Loud as a humanistic intervention into the 9/11 discourse, not a political one. But we can’t help but note that the bombings of both Dresden and Hiroshima were inflicted by America on other civilian populations. Roughly 25,000 civilians perished in the allied fire-bombing of Dresden, and the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima killed over 100,000. Nearly 3,000 Americans perished in the 9/11 attacks. We have by and large justified the former as a society in the name of winning World War II. Yet from the same limited American perspective, 9/11 seems anomalous and uniquely evil, paving the way for political arguments for American exceptionalism. By juxtaposing distant narratives of American-inflicted suffering with one of American suffering close to home, Foer puts moral closure on each of them into question.

WE DON’T NEED THE TRUTH

Critics reviewed Extremely Loud harshly, but not on account of Foer’s writing alone: many were apparently upset by what they perceived as an evasion of 9/11 itself in a novel about 9/11. Annoyed by the novel’s playful design and unorthodox narrative voices, one reviewer wrote, “A man like Thomas Schell”—Oskar’s father, whose perspective we get only indirectly, through the phone messages he leaves for Oskar while trapped in the burning towers—“has a riveting story to tell, after all. We don’t need gimmicks to keep our attention; we just need the truth.”¹¹ This criticism echoes across most reviews of Extremely Loud: enough with the literary gimmicks, we want the truth about 9/11—just set the scene, build the suspense, and vividly depict the terror and outrage of the version of 9/11 most of us remember.

But such a demand is not only unreasonable; it is also unimaginative. Foer circumlocutes the actual 9/11 attacks by delivering them through Oskar, a child who barely understands them. But this is no failure. Foer shows us that the task of good fiction is not to deliver some purported truth, but to make us search for it ourselves in new places,
precisely beyond the standard narratives we have already heard. That so many critics of *Extremely Loud* failed to take up Foer’s challenge exposes a deeper problem in American cultural consciousness. Over a decade after 9/11, established and unimaginative narratives of the event still dominate our attention. Architectural critic Michael Sorkin noted a year after 9/11 that the “endlessly ‘realistic’” language of competing views on memorializing 9/11 failed to acknowledge that “Every memorial invents the event it recalls. That ‘event’ of 9/11 cannot simply be absorbed into things as they are: a year later it still exceeds our ability to describe it.”

Joyce Carol Oates has noted a similar expectation of American audiences with regards to 9/11 narratives. While much survivor and eyewitness testimony had already appeared, she wrote in 2006, “few writers of fiction have taken up the challenge and still fewer have dared to venture close to the actual event; September 11 has become a kind of Holocaust subject, hallowed ground to be approached with awe, trepidation, and utmost caution.” In comparison to eyewitness accounts of such an inviolable subject, fictional accounts like Foer’s strike us as misplaced and inauthentic. “The popular bias for memoir in our time, even fictionalized memoir,” she goes on, “is this wish for ‘authenticity’ on the part of the author who has also been a participant in his story.” American audiences want the thrill of experiencing the event from a “true” or “authentic” perspective that initiates a chain of emotional overidentification with the narrator, unquestioning solidarity with one’s fellow readers, and finally the unearned closure of an easy, uplifting message at the story’s conclusion. But as a long tradition of the literature of catastrophe shows us, a genuine response to catastrophe is far more complex.

**THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVE EMPATHY**

Imagination is the instrument of compassion” is a line by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert that resonates deeply with Foer. In fact, it inspired an explicit “After 9/11” pronouncement from him: “Books have a very important function in the world—a function more important now than it was before September 11th—which is to tell stories of individuals, stories in which people in other cultures can recognize themselves.” Along with historical context, Foer suggests

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that such imaginative and morally complicating compassion—
trying to understand the suffering of Americans in light of suffering
Americans have inflicted on others—is what was missing from
America’s 9/11 response. Foer’s “After 9/11” statement is a plea for
cross-cultural understanding.

While Foer chose not to comment directly on the politics of
9/11, cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a fellow New Yorker and child of
Holocaust survivors, did so bluntly in his comic strips collected as
In the Shadow of No Towers, a series he drew in the months following
9/11. In his representations of 9/11, Spiegelman drew openly upon
his experience creating Maus, his Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic
narrative account of his parents’ experience at Auschwitz. At several
points in the comic on 9/11, Spiegelman represents himself as a
mouse, the same way he represents Jews in Maus (with cats as their
Nazi captors). At one point, having turned mid-strip into a mouse,
Spiegelman says, “I remember my father trying to describe what the
smoke in Auschwitz smelled like…The closest he got was telling me it
was ‘indescribable’...That’s exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan
smelled like after Sept. 11!” Spiegelman’s work makes evident the
way we process new experiences through the lens of past ones. Given
his secondhand experience of the Holocaust, Spiegelman witnessed
9/11 through the lens of his Judaism as well as his terrified position
as a New Yorker worried about his family.

Spiegelman openly expresses his political conclusions about 9/11
in several panels in In the Shadow of No Towers:

Nothing like the end of the world to help bring folks to-
gether...

But why did those provincial American flags have to
sprout out of the embers of Ground Zero?

Why not...a globe??!

He also narrates a patriotic scene with a telling caption:

By September ’04, Cowboy boots drop on Ground Zero as
New York is transformed into a stage set for the Republican
Spiegelman suggests that such remembrance efforts actually helped America forget 9/11 as a real historical event. For stereotypically proud, cocky New Yorkers, this meant moving on quickly from 9/11: “On 9/11/01 time stopped. / By 9/12/01 clocks began to tick again... / You go back to thinking you might live forever after all!” For all Americans, the “Genuine Awe” of the attacks was “reduced to the mere ‘Shock and Awe’ of jingoistic strutting.”

When I recently viewed newspaper front pages from September 12, 2001 on display at the Newseum in Washington DC, I observed just how common this sentiment was. The San Francisco Examiner ran the headline “Bastards!” across an image of the burning towers. Others ran the headlines “Outrage,” “Evil Acts,” “Mass Murder,” “War on America,” “It’s War,” and “Bush Vows to Strike Back.” (More measured headlines avoided these loaded labels and leaps to retaliation: “Terror,” “ Attacks Shatter Nation,” “Unthinkable,” and the poignant “We Mourn” allowed the tragedy to sink in—at least for one day.)

Ilka Saal considers Extremely Loud exemplary of the “universalizing” and “decentering” politics of the philosopher Judith Butler. Butler writes that “our collective experience of a cataclysmic event always emerges within a particular narrative frame, and it is this very frame that can either open up or preclude ‘certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries.'” For Butler, the narrative frame we adopt determines whether “the experience of violence and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution” or whether “something can be made of grief besides a cry for war.” With regard to 9/11, Saal says that “while the event momentarily disrupted the American nation’s narcissistic understanding of itself, providing it with an opportunity to acknowledge its interdependency with other nations, the narratives triggered in its wake immediately shored up a first-person perspective that reasserted impenetrable boundaries between self and other.”

17. Spiegelman, p. 10.
19. Ilka Saal, “Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer’s Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” Modern Fiction Studies vol. 47, n. 3 (Fall 2011): 454.
Rather than settling for first-person accounts, Foer takes up Butler’s challenge to “narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, to receive an account delivered in the second.” He delivers an account of 9/11 through the eyes of Oskar, a child too young to politicize the event, and his grandparents, conflicted witnesses who have suffered their entire lives on account of American-inflicted destruction. These narratives are themselves framed through Foer’s own encounter with the Holocaust, which appears in *Extremely Loud* as an ellipsis in the Grandfather’s narrative. In one of his letters to his unborn son, he mentions Simon Goldberg, a Jewish friend of his father-in-law, who after disappearing from Germany sent him a short, touching letter from Westerbork transit camp in Holland. While the Grandfather thinks he may have seen Goldberg after the war in New York, the reader knows how dubious this sighting would have been: detention in Westerbork usually meant deportation to Auschwitz.

These alternative, “decentering” narrative frames for 9/11 raise the question, as Saal puts it, “What...if the nation was to start the narrative not on September 11 but earlier by way of deciphering the very conditions that produced terrorism in the first place?” Butler hopes that inhabiting these decentered positions of vulnerability might prompt Americans to “endeavor to produce another public culture and policy in which suffering unexpected violence and reactive aggression are not accepted as the norms of political life.”

True to his goal, Foer humanizes 9/11 by portraying the suffering it caused intimately. Yet he similarly humanizes the suffering of Dresden and Hiroshima. Foer’s universalized, rather than exceptionalist, framing of suffering thus entails an unstated political conclusion. It is not simply the liberal flipside of the jingoism Spiegelman critiqued. It is a call for a human-centered outlook on suffering, no matter how much of an “other” the victim may be.

Foer’s work offers no direct commentary on the US government’s actions in the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, nor, for that matter, Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, it raises up a mirror to the reader and asks her to see the suffering of innocent people for what it is: unacceptable. Foer presents us with multiple catastrophes so
that we see how each one affected its victims with similar intensity. As Susan Neiman writes on 9/11 in relation to other catastrophes, “Dividing evils into greater and lesser, and trying to weigh them, is not just pointless but impermissible.” 24 Foer rightly avoids such comparison, but illustrates that each of the catastrophes in Extremely Loud entailed unacceptable suffering, no matter what the degree. Considering 9/11 through a wider narrative frame allows us to more accurately determine multiple things we find unacceptable about it, and to condemn this multiplicity of wrongs.

**LEARNING FROM THE PAST**

Widening the lens through which one thinks about a particular catastrophe also allows for more effective mourning, in addition to better history. While critics have focused on Oskar’s narrative, his story comprises only half the book, and we are meant to read his narrative in light of his grandparents’, and vice versa. His grandfather is traumatized into silence and speaks only through the tattoos “yes” and “no” on his palms and short written notes. Yet Oskar learns from his grandfather’s misery, even though the family is so dissolved that Oskar knows him only as “the renter” of his grandmother’s apartment. After the two dig up Oskar’s father’s empty coffin and fill it with the Grandfather’s unsent letters to him, “the renter reminded me that just because you bury something, you don’t really bury it.” 25 The past haunts Oskar, but he is on the path toward healing. Oskar’s generation (and Foer’s before his) has seen firsthand how psychically destructive his grandparents’ generation’s silence about their trauma was, and taken a different route.

The Grandfather is a remarkable character who embodies a deeply traumatized, and now largely lost, generation of those who suffered unimaginably in the war. After his fiancée dies in the bombing of Dresden, he marries her sister, Oskar’s grandmother. They live miserable lives, haunted by

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the past, and establish an impossible code of rules that keep them in separate “nothing spaces” so as to avoid the tragic reality of their lives. One rule is particularly damaging: as the Grandfather writes in one of many unsent letters to Oskar’s father, “Your mother and I never talk about the past, that’s a rule.” When he leaves Oskar’s grandmother, she asks, “Why are you leaving me?” He responds, in writing, “I do not know how to live.” “I do not know either, but I am trying,” she says. “I do not know how to try,” he writes back.26

These people are truly damaged by what they experienced. As is typical of victims of trauma, they cannot put what they experienced into words, even many decades later. As Cathy Caruth explains this phenomenon, it is because the traumatic event’s “violence has not yet been fully known.”27 In the way trauma is experienced by the individual, it is an ongoing process, not a singular event that ever achieves full temporal closure. Yet closure is still a goal worth striving for, and necessary for moving on with life.

Following Freud, LaCapra breaks responses to trauma into two types that characterize Oskar and his grandparents’ responses. First there is acting out, which fits the Freudian concept of melancholia. This form of remembering collapses distinctions of tense: traumatic memories flood into the present, which is experienced as a reliving of the past. By holding onto the past, the subject is unable to conceive of and work toward a livable future. For example, Oskar identifies his quest around New York City as a way for him to stay close to his father for a little longer. In acting out, one is unable to convert one’s traumatic memory into a narrative. This is made literal in the case of Oskar’s grandfather giving up speech entirely. Oskar is also initially stuck in this stage; he feels threatened by the world around him and wants to “zip...up the sleeping bag of [him]self.”28

On the other hand, working through fits the Freudian concept of mourning. It is a process of recalling the past but treating it as in the past, thus allowing the formation of retrospective narratives that make sense of it. Oskar’s quest around the city and encounter with other tragic narratives leads him to gradually stop acting out and start working through—to begin to make sense of his own trauma and situate it in the past. Though the quest begins as a way for Oskar to

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stay connected to his father, having to narrate his trauma to those he meets ultimately allows him to move beyond it.

The grandparents are clearly trapped in the process of acting out, unable to live day to day as the past floods into the present. This leads them to embody Adorno’s model of life fundamentally changing after Auschwitz. The reader observes a different outlook after 9/11 for the Grandmother and after Dresden for the Grandfather. The Grandmother writes in a letter:

My parents’ lives made sense.

My grandparents’.

Even Anna’s life.

But I knew the truth, and that’s why I was so sad.

Every moment before this one depends on this one.

Everything in the history of the world can be proven wrong in one moment.\(^9\)

Even the life of her sister Anna, who died in Dresden, makes sense to her, but after losing her only son on 9/11, the latter event becomes uniquely important and from the Grandmother’s perspective invalidates her entire life before it. As the Grandfather similarly says in his account of Dresden, “one hundred years of joy can be erased in a second.” He remarks at another point that after what he has lived through, “Life is scarier than death.”\(^30\) What is so tragic here is that even though these victims feel the same way, and are married, they are so trapped in their individual pasts that they are unable to share their thoughts with one other. Busy acting out, they are unable to work through their pasts together, and so remain painfully isolated through the end of the novel. “Every relationship in the book is built around silence and distance,” Foer said. “Extremely loud and incredibly close is what no two people are to one another.”\(^31\)
Disappointingly, in the film adapted from Foer’s book, the grandparents’ parallel narratives of living through catastrophe were cut entirely. This greatly reduced the film’s potential to say anything serious about 9/11. Without the backstory of Dresden to explain his muteness, the Grandfather is in the film made into a silly puppet. This element frustrated many reviewers, including Roger Ebert, who, though he credited Foer with humanizing 9/11, nonetheless focused on finding the truth. Bashing several of Foer’s plot elements as “the stuff of fairy tales,” Ebert writes, “There must be a more plausible story to be told about a boy who lost his father on 9/11.”

“The events of 9/11 have left indelible scars,” Ebert concludes. “They cannot be healed in such a simplistic way.” In fact, Foer’s vision of healing is, through his book’s different narrators, quite multivalent. This complexity was cut entirely in the film adaption, which ends with the sentimental reconnection of Oskar and his mother—an ending Ebert rightly found too easy. One gets the sense from reviews that most readers focused in on Oskar’s happy ending and found the book cathartic. Note, however, that the grandparents are excluded from this final healing. The unharmonious failure of the grandparents’ lives disqualifies Extremely Loud from Ebert’s accusation of it as a story of totalized, simplistic healing, which, in LaCapra’s words, “deny the trauma that called them into existence” by prematurely “harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios.”

Extremely Loud ends with the line, “We would have been safe,” followed by a reverse flipbook of a man falling up back into one of the towers. Saal argues that the “we” here is a return to the single perspective of Oskar’s self as a New Yorker, and it is easy to read Extremely Loud as a neat story of personal healing. Oskar has not forgotten his father’s death, but rather learns to accept it; he never quite gets over his post-9/11 fears of skyscrapers, public transit, and elevators, but he learns how to live with them. But the unresolved narratives of the traumatized grandparents, and above all, of Simon Goldberg, can never be erased or healed. Even if the primary narrative conclusion of Extremely Loud is uplifting, these specters leave us with a sense of the irresolvable complexity of such tragedies.
A side from Foer, I want to give two telling examples of what I’ll call catastrophic genius: drawing upon catastrophes of the past in working through ones in the present.

First, the designer of the 9/11 memorial, Michael Arad, is Israeli. Though born in London and educated in the United States, he lived in Israel for nine years and drew upon his familiarity with Holocaust remembrance sites in his winning design for the memorial, Reflecting Absence, which was completed last year. Arad’s memorial testifies to the importance of public remembrance sites for healing, a message learned from the Holocaust, but not, for him, unique to the Holocaust. As he said in an interview with a Jewish newspaper, “I can talk about memory and loss of life—it’s something I grew up with a sensitivity to. But I’m always hesitant to hold these out as a foil against some other kind of remembering. They’re universal.” Arad’s finished memorial resembles two gaping wounds—permanent scars—where the towers once stood. But it is also a space for collective remembering and even beauty with its enormous illuminated waterfalls pouring into deep pools. Arad’s memorial applies the aesthetic practices used to commemorate the Holocaust to 9/11 in a natural way.

Second, Adam Zagajewski, the so-called poet of 9/11, is well-versed in catastrophe. Zagajewski wrote the poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World,” which was featured in the first issue of The New Yorker after 9/11 (which also featured Art Spiegelman’s black-on-black silhouette of the towers on the cover) and widely reproduced in remembrance materials. A December 2001 article on Zbigniew Herbert’s fellow countryman and Nobel Prize-winner Czeslaw Milosz, noted the choice of Zagajewski’s work, as Milosz’s literary descendent and fellow “poet of ruin,” for the 9/11 issue: it was “as if America were entering the nightmare of history for the first time and only a Polish poet could show us the way.” Matthew Kaminski writes that Zagajewski avoids glorifying suffering but does see value in writing about it. In “the past in general and not only in Europe,” Zagajewski says, “the rule was to forget, to move on. There’s a relatively new idea that you have to work on it—that you have to keep everything in our memory. Which I like. It’s changing us.”

According to Kaminski, the historical events foremost on Zagajewski’s mind are “the Holocaust and Stalin’s purges and Gulag Archipelago—more so than 9/11, which he says didn’t fundamentally change his worldview.” Zagajewski’s so-called 9/11 poem is based upon a trip he took with his father through Ukrainian villages forcibly depopulated by the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of World War II. “This was one of the strongest impressions I ever had,” he says. Describing the abandoned village in ruins being reclaimed by nature, he remarked, “It became in my memory this mutilated world, these villages, and at the same time they were beautiful. It was in the summer, beautiful weather. It’s something that I reacted to, this contest between beauty and disaster.” And so the major poem of 9/11 was written far from New York, years before the attacks. What does this tell us about the human response to catastrophe if not that it is universal, somehow woven into the fabric of human experience?

The universal messages of these cultural borrowings from other catastrophes brought to the mourning of 9/11 testify to the value of Foer’s comparative approach. They leave us with an understanding of suffering as universal that encourages genuine healing and steers us clear of cheap political and moral palliatives. The approach worked for Oskar without him even realizing it, and it has done much for Americans’ mourning of 9/11 as well. After 9/11, the priority of storytelling not only renews literature’s importance; it endows it with the ethical responsibility of representing the other and, as the quote from Herbert suggests, building compassion through literary imagination.
The Greater Harmonies

Jake Bittle

In Italian writer Tomasso Landolfi’s book Gogol’s Wife, there is a fascinating story called “Dialogue on the Greater Harmonies.” The story concerns a man, Y, who takes Persian lessons from a charismatic English captain. An aspiring poet, Y thinks that having even a basic grasp of Persian will enable him to compose more compelling and beautiful poems in Persian than he would be able to write in his native language. When he tries to read a work by a famous Persian poet, however, he discovers that the language the captain has taught him is not actually Persian. Not only is it not Persian, though—it is not any known language. When Y writes to the captain demanding an explanation, the captain claims he does not recognize any of the symbols or sounds Y is using in his poems.

This past year, I, like Y, encountered a totally foreign language for the first time. In the fall, I took a beginning-level course in Arabic, which shares an alphabet with Persian. I was drawn to Arabic, I think, because of the fact that its symbols and sounds were, at first, incomprehensible to me. After spending five weeks learning the alphabet, however, and another five learning basic vocabulary and grammar, I became comfortable enough to start jotting down tiny Arabic poems in my notebooks. I immediately found myself sympathizing with Y’s wonderful claim in “Dialogue” that “having at his disposal rich and varied expressive means is, for an artist, anything but a favorable circumstance.” In writing three-line pieces composed almost entirely of noun-verb and noun-adjective sentences (if they were sentences at all), I discovered, with Y, that “anyone who
does not know the right words to indicate objects or feelings, is forced to replace them with circumlocutions, that is with images—with what great advantage to art, I leave you to imagine.”

I rarely compose poetry in English because of exactly the same problems Y describes. Spending a lifetime speaking one language tends to wear out, in a way, the freshness and beauty that its words innately have as conglomerations of sound. When one does not have to use a language for essential communications during the day, it is easier to find in it more youth, play, and novelty. At first, when I spoke Arabic, I had to be slow and deliberate, “[shuffling] out three or four strange sounds,” like the captain in “Dialogue,” but by the end of the term I had internalized the basics of the language enough to attempt artistic expression. The first few times were accidental: when we learned a new word in class, I would write a meaningless sentence with it in a page of my notebook. The first such “poem” I wrote was this:

اذهب صبحا
الي الشجرة الاسود

This tiny piece of verse, which five months ago would have meant absolutely nothing to me, translates loosely as: “I go by morning / to the black tree.” In both English and Arabic, it is an incredibly elementary piece of writing. A few weeks later, I already had a better grasp of Arabic grammar. The second poem I wrote ran thus:

في اي شريع
في هذه مدينة قديمة
كانت الامرأة
من طفولتي?

Roughly translated, the poem reads: “On which street / In this old city / Was the woman / From my childhood?”
In “Dialogue,” Y and his friend, who is also the narrator, go to see an eminent literary critic in order to solve the conundrum of Y’s lost language. The rest of the text of “Dialogue,” not so much a narrative as a forum for philosophical inquiry, is devoted to the ensuing conversation between Y, his friend, and the critic. They quickly become embroiled in a debate over whether Y’s poems have any real meaning. Y and his friend are doubtful that Y’s “Persian” can ever be said to have any meaning, but the critic protests that even though only two people spoke the language, and then only for a few months, it nevertheless has a definite existence. He advises them to regard it as a “dead language,” and he objects to the idea that “the attributes of reality of any language cannot be identified outside of the grammar, the syntax, and...the lexicon.” Even “completely indecipherable” languages, says the critic, “have a right to our esthetic respect.”

If the critic in the story is right, what does that mean for the non-speaker of Arabic, who probably glossed right over the Arabic versions of the poems I transcribed above? What if I had not provided any translations? It is difficult for me to imagine being able to appreciate a poem, even my own, which I had no idea how to read. Unlike Y, I never had cause to doubt that the language I was being taught existed outside of my classroom. I suppose it is conceivable that the authors of my textbook and my professor could have been writing in “an idiom so crippled and defaced as to have nothing in common with the language that inspired it,” as was the captain in “Dialogue,” but this is unlikely. I have never been to an Arabic-speaking country, and I do not know any Arabic speakers outside of my class, but random encounters with Arabic in the world have validated the meaningfulness of the symbols I have learned in class. When I wrote the poems, I felt like I was communicating something with them, not because I thought anyone would ever read them, but because I knew that they could be read. Y, too, wrote poems under the (mistaken) notion that someone else in the world could find them meaningful. The sudden realization that he was the only one who spoke his “Persian” is what
caused him to approach his friend “gripped by great excitement” and “deepest dejection.”

The narrator in “Dialogue” responds to the critic’s contention that Y’s poems have meaning with a counterargument that seems to echo the later work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The narrator argues that even dead languages, of which we have only one or two artifacts or inscriptions, were once part of a societal structure. These past languages, indecipherable now, were once embedded within a “complex of norms and conventions,” from which “they gain their very significance,” whereas the language Y learned was “a momentary whim...which has not been codified in any manner and which has vanished as irremediably as it arose.” The narrator insists that “ethnic knowledge” lends legitimacy to dead or indecipherable languages. “Behind an inscription,” he declares to the critic, “there is an entire people!” Wittgenstein says something similar in the *Philosophical Investigations*. “The common behavior of mankind,” he writes in section 206, “is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.” We need a societal context, then, in order to determine the meanings of a language’s symbols. Artifacts from dead languages, such as scrolls and carvings, present evidence in favor of these meanings having existed, but Y’s language is different: he has no evidence of its meaningfulness except for the three poems he wrote on a whim, and which he is barely able to read anymore, having forgotten much of the language.

In a few other places in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes reference to something he calls “forms of life.” In section 241, he writes, “It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.” A form of life, Wittgenstein seems to think, is some kind of context in which we place a language, or a system of behavior that gives rise to a language. Earlier, in section 19, he imagines “a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle...And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” That is to say, any meaningful language must be embedded within a culture or a system of behavior.

Arabic has a centuries-old history and is deeply rooted in the cultures of the Middle East. From its standard greetings (سلام, which means “peace”) to its expressions of grief or piety (لا إله إلا الله, which means “there is no god but God”), Arabic expresses the character of entire cultures. But what are we to make of Y’s language, which, even if it was at one point the result of a “form of life,” now has no fluent speakers and only one remaining document that gives evidence of its existence? Y’s “Persian” might be a language per Wittgenstein because one can argue that the exchange between Y and the captain constitutes a “form of life,” but if that form of life no longer exists, we will have trouble arguing that the language is still meaningful. Regarding the meanings of this language’s symbols, we have only Y’s word to go on, and the translation he gives of one of his poems, he admits, “does not give the faintest notion of the original.” In fact, since Y has forgotten some of the language in which he wrote the poems, “he is, strictly speaking, in no position to know what he wanted to say.” Therefore even Y does not grasp the original meaning of the poems he wrote. Furthermore, even if he did, he could never disclose to anyone the poems’ essence without compromising their original meaning through translation. Do his poems, then, even have any meaning? If they did, how could we prove it?

In further search of meaning in language, the debate in “Dialogue” quickly turns away from sociology and archaeology and towards a more esoteric discussion of semantics and aesthetics. The sentiments expressed on both sides of the debate are highly reminiscent of the moods and ideas of the great fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, with whom Landolfi is often compared. The narrator points out, as I have just done, that since there is so little information about Y’s mysterious language, there is almost no way to determine anything about the language itself. Actual dead languages, of course, leave behind numerous documents and inscriptions, but all that is left of Y’s language are three poems. This means, says the narrator, that from the poems “it might be possible to construct or reconstruct not one but a hundred languages...each dissimilar from the others and from the first.”
But the critic does not see any issue with this. “What does it matter to you,” he asks, “that a poem might turn out to be written in more than one language at the same time?” A work of art, he reminds the narrator, is “free not only from linguistic conventions but from all conventions…it creates its own rules.”

“Therefore,” reasons Y, “a work of art can also not have a common meaning; it can be made up of musical impressions alone and suggest to a hundred million readers a hundred million different things.” This wonderful passage brings to mind Borges’s story “The Library of Babel” (published only three years before “Dialogue”), in which he imagines an endless library containing every possible combination of the twenty-two letters in the Spanish alphabet (plus the period, comma, and space), meaningful or meaningless. If one travels for long enough, one will eventually find every conceivable book written in every conceivable language. It follows from this that even the books that contain complete nonsense must mean something in some one of the infinitely many languages, for which the library must eventually contain manuals for reading. “An $n$ number of possible languages,” says Borges, “use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol library allows the correct definition…but [in some languages] library is bread or pyramid or anything else...You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?”

Borges thus points to a startling realization: if the words we use can be interpreted an infinitude of ways (even, perhaps, as sentences in other languages which we do not know), then we can never be totally sure of the meanings of the things we say. An English speaker, for example, who walks along singing “la, la, la,” would sound to an Arabic speaker as if he were saying “no, no, no,” since the Arabic word for “no” is pronounced “la.” When one considers language acquisition in this light, learning Arabic—or Persian—suddenly becomes nothing less than profound. Practicing a new language is often thought of as a mechanical task, something one does by rote memorization and daily drilling. But to learn a new tongue, Borges would say, is actually to put tremendous trust in symbols whose

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meanings we can never be certain to know. It is to take something meaningless and imbue it with meaning for ourselves. With each new word we add to our vocabulary, we loosen and stretch the conceptual links we have with objects in the world. When I first learned the Arabic word "كرسي," I associated it with its English translation, "chair," and then with the idea of a chair. In time, however, the thing-for-sitting I saw in the world became both chair and كرسي.

No word can be perfectly translated from one language to another. The history and essence of the word "كرسي," though similar to the history of the word "chair," could never be exactly the same. And even if it were, the mere aesthetic differences between the two words are enough to inspire appreciation, if not awe, for the way language works: one thing in the world inspired two words radically different in both visual appearance and phonetic rhythm. By doing Arabic vocabulary drills, I am connecting the idea of a thing-for-sitting with a symbol which was formerly meaningless. I am solidifying the bridge between a word and a meaning on the tenuous assumption that the world will agree with me tomorrow that "كرسي" means what it does. The world may corroborate me time and time again, but at the end of the day, thinkers like Borges and Wittgenstein and Landolfi, writing in the very languages they question, can make me doubt the stability of the language I use to delineate my place among others.

I reproduced my poems above in order to demonstrate that they lack definite meaning in at least two ways: as meaningful symbols, but also as works of art. Regarding the first, both Borges and Landolfi would agree that there is absolutely nothing that proves to a non-reader of Arabic that my poems are composed of actually meaningful symbols, other than my claim that they are. Unless she bothered to have the foregoing sentences translated, someone with no experience in Arabic would have no way of determining if they were not gibberish, or even that they were actually Arabic at all. But, more interestingly, there is very little within these poems that identifies them as poems, to speakers and non-speakers of Arabic alike. A speaker of Arabic would find them empty of particularly powerful images, without any kind of rhyme or meter. Were it not for the
arbitrariness of their imagery, they might be indistinguishable even
to a speaker of Arabic from the practice sentences in my textbook.
They are poems primarily because I wrote them intending for them
to be read as poems. A non-speaker of Arabic, though, would be even
less able—that is to say, totally unable—to distinguish my first poem,
which was meant as an artistic composition, from a garbage sentence
such as “اذهب الى السينما / مع صديقي,” which means, “I go to the movies
with my friend.”

This problem, while it may seem minor at first glance, becomes
a matter of utmost importance to Landolfi. As “Dialogue” reaches
its final pages, the conversation between the narrator, Y, and the
critic drifts toward the subject of art itself. Though the conversation
between the three men has thus far concerned itself chiefly with the
meaning of the symbols Y used in his poems, it suddenly arises that
the secret to puzzling out the poems’ meanings is in their nature as
works of art. To the critic’s contention that a poem can be written in a
million different languages and mean a million different things (the
same contention Borges grapples with in “The Library of Babel”), Y
desperately asks if this means that a poet can “start with the sound instead of the sense” in composing works of art. The critic replies in the affirmative. “A poem, gentlemen, can also not have meaning. It must only, I repeat, be a work of art.”

Temptingly, inevitably, this leads the reader to the critical question: but what is art? The critic contends that even gibberish poems, as long as they are works of art, still have legitimacy or “meaning” in a broader way—they can still be approached, interpreted, and made sense of. If he is right about this, it follows that a text composed of complete gibberish might not actually be meaningless if we think of it as a work of art. A nonsense text’s status as a work of art can give it a certain kind of meaning even though its component parts are empty of semiotic significance. This hints at a broader definition of “meaning” than the ones we have discussed so far: a meaning, that is, that can dwell even in meaninglessness. But if we do not know what is art and what is not, then we cannot be sure which gibberishes have this broader “meaning” and which do not. This generates uncertainties about where we can find meaning in language in an even more extensive way than our doubts about the validity of individual signs and symbols.

Landolfi teases us for two pages, baiting us along as he darts around the essential question of art. Then, at the end of the conversation, the narrator tries to refute the critic last more time.

I was not at all satisfied and before leaving I tried again:

“But art…”

“Art,” the great critic broke in, with amiable impatience, “what art is everyone knows.”

If this wonderful story has a greatest moment, where Landolfi’s genius reaches a zenith, it is this line. The weight of this question, the question of art, is the center of gravity of the entire story, and Landolfi leaves it wildly unresolved. The last thing we hear of Y is that he has gone mad, tormented by the ineffability of the three poems he has written in the language that no longer exists.
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The conversation between the three men starts with a mystery and ends with an even greater mystery. It mimics the trajectory of all philosophical inquiry, be it linguistic or aesthetic: in attempting to solve a problem, we pull out from underneath ourselves the underpinnings of all we take for granted, but when we finish we find ourselves no closer to an answer (yet still somehow further along). The denouement of “Dialogue” is entirely unsettling, but it takes something truly unsettling to make us change the way we view the world. After reading Landolfi’s story, when I learn a new word in Arabic, or, as Arabic would have it, a كلمة جديدة, I think of Y and wonder what it really is that I am writing. When a non-speaker of Arabic looks upon a poem I have written in Arabic:

I cannot help but wonder if what they are seeing is actually a poem at all—for them, for me, or for anyone.

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حيث أقرأ الكلمات

من إجدادي
The Case for Fairy Tales
Tradition and subversion in Pan’s Labyrinth

Angela Qian

Magic slippers, glass coffins, witches who live in the woods, and princes with swan wings—we’ve all heard these stories, repeated time and time again; we’ve grown up with them. The versatility of fairy tales stems largely from their simplicity and ubiquitous cultural presence, which enables them to be reworked into any number of different frameworks. Out of all genres, fairy tales are, perhaps, the stories that lend themselves to the most retellings. Disney, for instance, has milked fairy tale retellings for all they are worth in a long tradition of brief, feel-good commercial successes. But on the other side of the spectrum, novelists and artists admit to drawing from a childhood love of fairy tales to produce significant works charged with cultural or political messages. Recently, for example, there’s been Eowyn Ivey, whose novel The Snow Child sets a Russian fairy tale in a broader pioneer setting. Or there’s The Path, an indie-art horror game that tackled stereotypes of female sexuality with a remake of Little Red Riding Hood.

But the most compelling example of the fairy-tale framework’s effectiveness in recent history is Guillermo del Toro’s 2006 dark fantasy film Pan’s Labyrinth, which subtly turns the traditional framework on its head to make a complex political point about finding agency in oppressive circumstances, such as under a fascist regime.

Two narratives make up the movie: Ofelia and her mother move in with her new stepfather, Captain Vidal, who supports the Fascist
regime in Spain and is fighting against insurgents who hide in the forest around his base. Ofelia’s mother, Carmen, is pregnant with Captain Vidal’s son. Unhappy in her new home, Ofelia takes refuge in a magical labyrinth in the woods, where she meets a faun named Pan, who tells her that she is actually Princess Moanna of the Underworld, and that if she completes three tasks, at the full moon she will be restored to her true father, the King.

The magical elements and parallelism to traditional fairy tales are obvious. The movie’s opening sequence begins with the well-recognized fairy-tale words “A long time ago,” and when we first see Ofelia, in a car with her mother, she is carrying a book of fairy tales. As critic Jennifer Orme points out, Ofelia’s appearance—her black hair, pale skin, dress, and pinafore—reflects that of fairy-tale heroines such as Snow White or Dorothy of The Wizard of Oz. In a similar vein, Laura Hubner notes that Ofelia sees her first fairy in the woodlands, and it is in the woods that the fantastical elements of Ofelia’s story begin to play out. The symbolism of the wilderness is familiar from the journeys of characters like Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. Like those characters, Ofelia must also undertake an expedition into the wilderness to complete her three tasks. The number three itself is another fairy-tale trope appearing in the film, along with that of the full moon as a bridge between the earthly and otherworldly, and—perhaps most obvious—that of an ordinary girl turned into a princess.

Hubner argues that Pan’s Labyrinth has a “simple,” essentialist understanding of gender, citing Ofelia as the archetype of the good and innocent girl and Captain Vidal as the two-dimensional evil villain. But I would like to propose an alternate view: the process of subversion that allows for the disposal of the evil villain at the end of the film is a complex one. The process of undermining traditional fairy tale tropes mirrors the overt rebellion against the Fascist regime, a dual process of subversion that allows Ofelia to choose to not participate in the Fascist world represented by Captain Vidal.
Unlike feel-good fairy tales, Pan’s Labyrinth shows that magic does not provide a simple, happy answer to a story’s conflict. In both the real world and the fantastical, the “right” answer is frequently ambiguous; there is no clear-cut path. Like other fairy tale heroines, Ofelia receives a guide—the faun—who, like the traditional fairy godmother or wizened wise woman, is supposed to help her navigate the pitfalls and strange logic of the magical realm. Ofelia first meets the faun at night, in the labyrinth in the forest where the rebels hide. But though he serves as a counterpoint to Ofelia’s unhappiness with Vidal, the faun certainly does not seem to pose a safe or easy alternative. The faun’s appearance, like those of the fairies and other fantastical creatures in the film, is eerie, even verging on grotesque. The tasks he sends her on—to go into the lair of a giant toad or the dungeon of a cannibalistic Pale Man with eyes for hands—are similarly grotesque, and certainly dangerous. In this, the film clearly draws upon the disturbing violence of the Brothers Grimm or older myths with themes of blood sacrifice and dark magic, as opposed to their sanitized Disney counterparts. The fantastical world is therefore not a means for Ofelia to escape; this realm is just as dark and dangerous as her reality, and fraught with potential pitfalls and reversals of trust.

The dangers of the fantastical realm parallel Ofelia’s struggles with mentorhood in the real world. Ofelia’s most obvious role model—her mother—is, as is typical in fairy tales, largely out of the picture. Sickly and bedridden, Ofelia’s mother cannot effect much change; indeed, she has married Captain Vidal and borne his son in an effort to save herself and her daughter, rather than rebelling against the regime. This creates a moral complication: we cannot exactly approve of Carmen’s decision to marry the cruel Captain Vidal. She made this choice in what she thinks are the best interests for her family, but by submitting to Captain Vidal, Carmen
the case for fairy tales

encourages an authoritarian regime and forces her and her daughter to conform to subdued, passive roles. The only role Carmen can serve, therefore, is that of a plot device, though the complexity of her moral decisions reflects that of the choices Ofelia must make.

Hubner points out that Pan’s Labyrinth alludes “to the actions of fathers and forefathers...here, troubling practices are transferred onto the evil stepfather” as opposed to the trope of the evil stepmother found in stories like Cinderella or Hansel and Gretel. In those stories, the absent father allows for the degradation of his children; his crime is incompetence and obliviousness. Here, however, Carmen is the one absent, and Vidal in all his cruelty is very much present. Carmen, submissive to Vidal, cannot actively protect her daughter or unborn son; she can no longer act as a mother or a role model. Moreover, we see that Ofelia and her mother do not understand each other, despite their love. When Carmen gives Ofelia a dress, Ofelia is not enthused; she wants books while her mother wants her to stop reading fairy tales and get a hold of reality. Carmen wants Ofelia to accept her surroundings and try to live as comfortably as she can through Vidal’s

4. Ibid., p. 53.
system. Ultimately, however, Carmen dies—giving birth to the son Vidal has always wanted, who will inherit his name.

Why would del Toro choose to reverse the gender roles of the stepparent and parent here, in a narrative set during a time of overt patriarchal family structures when women like Carmen were relegated to restrictive stay-at-home-wife roles? This is one example of how he twists the traditional fairy-tale narrative to illustrate a political point about gender hierarchies. Vidal, the father figure, actively creates oppression rather than passively letting it happen. But, in a crucial reversal of traditional tropes, Ofelia does not try to get out of her situation by trying to emphasize her feminine desirability.

A frequent contemporary critique of traditional fairy tales is that the heroines are saved or rescued from their situations by princes; therefore all their happiness and success is dependent on being married off, bearing children, and living happily ever after. Pan’s Labyrinth takes this narrative in a different direction. It shows with Carmen’s case that marriage often does not end happily. Rather than emphasizing the fairy-tale heroine’s sexual desirability, Pan’s Labyrinth shifts the focus to parenting (or the lack thereof); the moral takeaway of the narrative is therefore allowed a much broader scope.

Instead of a knight or young farmer boy going on a quest to complete three tasks to save a princess, it is the princess herself who must go on a journey. In fact, the story of Princess Moanna focuses not on a romantic arc but on her attempt to be reunited with her parents. Indeed, the story takes the child of the fairy tale and transforms her: more than a mere journey through space, her journey becomes a psychological journey towards adulthood.

Without her mother as an active role model for Ofelia, the narrative has room for a new maternal mentor. Captain Vidal’s household turns up Mercedes, a female servant who steps into the empty space of Ofelia’s maternal guide—singing her lullabies, telling her about fairy tales, and including Ofelia in the secret rebellion against Vidal.

Mercedes serves as a sharp contrast to Carmen. Unlike Carmen, who, exasperated, tells Ofelia she must stop believing in fairy tales no
matter how much it hurts, Mercedes does not refute Ofelia’s belief. Mercedes plays the role of a native—one of the land who knows the myths and legends as well as she knows the woods. It is she who finds Ofelia coming out of the woods after her first encounter with the toad, and she who goes into the woods to signal to the rebels. We are reminded again of Hubner’s point, that the rebellion takes place in the woodlands, the locus of the magic. On the other hand, Vidal and Carmen’s aversion to the woods marks them as intruders. The woods intimidate Vidal, and thus he loses his advantage there. Similarly, Vidal cannot make sense of or control magic, and therefore refutes it, as in the scene where he throws the mandrake root into the fire. Carmen never leaves the house and is angry at Ofelia for getting her dress dirty while in the woods. These characters, unlike Mercedes, do not know how to tread the line between mysticism and reality.

And of course, Mercedes is part of the insurgent movement seeking to dispose Vidal. It is because Ofelia has Mercedes that she understands another option is presented to her, one intuitively more satisfying than Carmen’s choice in following Vidal, and the route she ultimately takes: rebellion.

In traditional fairy tales, growing up is usually glossed over quickly; character development falls to the wayside in favor of magical obstacles and tasks. In Cinderella, for instance, Cinderella doesn’t need to grow up—all she needs is to have her goodness recognized via the glass slipper. Snow White never needs to learn to say no to suspicious old women selling apples and corsets; the plot will carry her through.

But this reliance on deus ex machina leaves little room for compelling characters. Ofelia does have to grow up, and when she does, she no longer lets the fairy tale control her. This twist in the case for fairy tales.
traditional framework allows del Toro to make a much larger political commentary on how a heroine might take control over the forces of a fantastical plot (and in del Toro’s case, fascist Spain) seeking to shape her path. Ofelia’s divergence from the norms of the fairy tales she herself admires reflects her departure from what is expected of her; we see her ability to deviate from the fairy-tale narrative offered to her in her rejection of Captain Vidal and his authoritarian rule. *Pan’s Labyrinth* uses Ofelia’s individual choices as a springboard into the broader implications of how one might question, criticize, and rebel against restraints and expectations.

Having listened to the faun’s instructions for the majority of the film, Ofelia follows a path that theoretically should take her back to the Underworld. At the climax of the film, Captain Vidal, who has been surprised by an attack from the insurgents, chases Ofelia and her baby brother into the labyrinth. At the portal to the Underworld, the faun asks Ofelia for the blood of an innocent: just a little blood, he asks, from her baby brother.

But Ofelia says no. The faun, in disbelief, asks if she will give up her right to return to the Underworld for this child; Ofelia again refuses to give him up. Meanwhile, Vidal has followed her into the labyrinth. He only sees Ofelia talking to empty air. He aims a gun at her and asks her to return his son to him. When she refuses, he shoots her. Ofelia falls, dying; it is her innocent blood that is shed. Though the movie ends with a shot of her standing in front of her royal parents in the Underworld, del Toro leaves it up to us whether or not this fairy-tale ending actually happens.

Ofelia’s death at the end of the movie completes a coterie of images tied to blood throughout the film. Richard Lindsay has noted the widespread use of uterine imagery and bloodletting throughout the film to argue that Ofelia’s journey is one familiar to most women—that of initiation into womanhood, a passage marked by a girl’s first period. For instance, the very opening shot of the film shows Ofelia lying with blood on her face; the red stands in vivid contrast to a palette otherwise subdued by hues of blue and gray. This is the first hint we receive of the importance of blood—both literal and figurative—throughout the narrative. When Carmen begins

to bleed as she is about to give birth, Ofelia sees the spreading of blood through the magical book the faun has given her. Del Toro has admitted the tree the bloated toad lives in intentionally parallels the shape of the ovaries, a feminine image; the chamber Ofelia finds the toad in looks like a womb. And the final task asked of Ofelia is for the blood sacrifice of an innocent, of her baby half-brother.

What work does creating these implicit connections between Ofelia’s girlhood and her navigation of the real and fantastical worlds do? Lindsay argues that it is an usurpation of the traditional heroic narrative:

The tradition of blood sacrifice used in religion, including the Christian cycle of crucifixion and resurrection, comes in part from the attempt of men to create a ‘pure’ that is, non-female, form of bloodletting that has the same power over life and death as the bloodletting of menstruation and birthing...The hero’s journey thus represents the blood sacrifice of the male warrior, a descent into death, and a resurrection into semi-divinity without the spiritually ‘tainted’ blood of a woman. In appropriating the hero’s journey as a metaphor for female menstruation, therefore, del Toro transgresses the patriarchal cycle of womanless regeneration.7

Traditionally, blood sacrifices come from innocent women—that is, virgin girls. The faun, however, makes no such demand; indeed, the faun first asks for the blood of Ofelia’s younger brother. Though Ofelia herself becomes the sacrifice, this decision is hers. She decides to protect her younger brother, and, in taking his place, wins passage to the Underworld.

Ofelia’s choice is the culmination of her growth throughout the film. In allowing her blood to be shed, she is, for the first time, taking part in bloodletting. This could be read symbolically as a stand-in for her first period, but even if we do not take such a reading, we can see how the choice is symbolic of Ofelia becoming an active shaper of
her own narrative. It is the first moment in which Ofelia has outright defied the rules she has been told to follow.

She has disobeyed the faun, a symbol of the magic world; she has defied Vidal, who asks her to return his son. Meanwhile, her mother, Carmen, is dead, and she gives up hope of returning to any magical parents in her decision to not give the baby to the faun. In protecting the child, she has assumed an agency in her narrative that is shared by one other female character—Mercedes. By this act of defiance, Ofelia has completed the arc of subversion of the traditional fairy tale narrative and stepped into the active maternal role herself. At the end of the fairy tale and the film, therefore, Princess Moanna returns to the Underworld and rules.
If we look at *Pan’s Labyrinth* in this way, the film becomes remarkable for its take on what could have easily become either a generic historical drama or a simplistic fairy tale retelling. Del Toro’s genius lies in how he not only makes the fairy-tale framework the most accessible point into a historical conflict that some viewers otherwise may have difficulty relating to, but also in how he does not let the fairy tale overpower the political or moral takeaways (or vice versa). Even at the end of the film, the viewer remains unsure whether the magic was real at all, whether Ofelia died and went to the Underworld, or whether she died and the fairy tale is merely a last dream. Del Toro leaves us with this ambiguity, letting us, like Ofelia, make our own choices as to what to believe. The power of *Pan’s Labyrinth* lies in this meeting of maturity and childhood nostalgia, of hard reality and our yearning to believe in magic. Del Toro is able to renew the timeless relevance of fairy-tale tropes in his film, but also go a step beyond that and show us, in his masterful execution, how such classic stories can be refashioned into a new breed.
An Occupy Retrospective

Matthew Walsh

By the first week of October 2011, the Occupy movement had garnered national media coverage. Initially ignored by major news outlets, mass arrests of protestors in New York grabbed the nation’s attention—and its headlines. Discussion of the movement eventually expanded out of news articles and into the opinion pages, where prominent voices weighed in on the movement. These voices, carrying the authority and legitimacy of their respective news organizations, came to dominate the conversation. Pockets of consensus emerged around these voices, as new opinions established themselves in relation to the existing conversation, thus cementing the influence and import of those first voices. This progression through the news cycle is not unique to the Occupy movement—the same progression could describe the Tea Party before it or gay marriage after it. What is unique to Occupy, however, is that nobody within the Occupy movement spoke on behalf of the movement itself. The Occupy movement lacked a unified voice. This curious fact makes the Occupy movement, despite being yesterday’s news, an interesting case study today for the ways in which journalists, columnists, and editorialists—indeed the entire news media apparatus—engage with their newsworthy subjects and with one another.
The Occupy movement was both fruitful and problematic for journalism. As a movement, Occupy remained intentionally vague. Journalists were, in turn, divided in their approach to dealing with that ambiguity: it created an empty space into which an author could force an interpretation and out of which flew conflicting reports of the movement’s purpose, structure, and ideology. Serge Schmemann, the editorial editor of the International Herald Tribune, explained: “[Occupy] has no [Julian] Assange of WikiLeaks behind it to burden it with ideology or purpose; it lacks even the idealism and hope of its ancestor, the flower-power protests of my formative years. Like Malevich’s White on White, it is pure feeling on which most any analysis, interpretation, reaction—or op-ed—seems valid enough.”

But perhaps the difficulty lies less with Occupy and more with the perspective of journalists like Schmemann.

We view journalism as a ground-up discipline from which we can glean facts about the world. We turn to editorials and op-eds to inform our own view of the world through the perspective of a reliable source—a source who has the kind of relationship with his subject to warrant the claims he makes about it. But in the case of the example above, it seems that Schmemann’s warrants are a set of preexisting assumptions about the historical narrative of political protests instead of a genuine relationship with the Occupy movement. He uses his familiarity with “the flower-power protests” of his formative years as qualification to discuss Occupy; in his mind, Occupy is a subsequent stage in the same narrative. There is a problem, then, if the narrative itself dissolves under scrutiny.

Postmodernism, a school of thought that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, argues that narratives such as the one evoked by Schmemann will always dissolve under scrutiny. The Occupy movement, which famously resisted interpretation, is a good demonstration of that dissolution. The alternative to forcing the Occupy movement into a larger history is to consider it independently, at a local level: first understand the movement apart from geography,
history, and ideology, and then look for the relationships that exist between various instances or sites of Occupy.

Postmodernism provides a way of understanding the world, and therefore also a way of writing about it. In the essay that follows I reframe journalism as an application of postmodernism, demonstrating with the Occupy movement that postmodern journalism eliminates many of the issues that I described above, and that it provides a more accurate account of a historical event than much of the journalism on Occupy that was written.

AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTMODERNISM

In the latter half of the twentieth century, political theorists developed a vocabulary and framework for the discussion of latent but unexplored frustrations with their field. These thinkers took issue with the universal aspirations of modern political theory. Indeed, at fault was even the notion that there are consistent enough relations between things to constitute the “human sciences” of economics, sociology, psychology, and history.²

These aspects of modern political theory took root in journalism, as well. As we saw with Schmemann above, a false sense of historical consistency compelled journalists to make tenuous comparisons between past and present, and to project those comparisons into the future. The universalizing tendency in academic thought that postmodernism responded to is no less troubling in a discipline like journalism. If there are foundational problems with the celebrated theories of Marx and Kant, then there must also be problems when those philosophies spill into popular culture and influence the way the everyman understands the world—and the way the journalist writes about it. The presence of these problems in journalism is indeed more damaging than their presence in academia, because the audience of the former is so much wider than that of the latter.

A central assumption of both modernism and postmodernism is that the world can be broken down into discrete narratives: units of historical measurement that contain distinct beginnings and ends. But the difference lies with how each theory treats them.

**Metanarratives**

Modernism posits that all narratives share the same fundamental principles; therefore, the goal of modern theories is to locate those principles and trace their influences across time. Examples of such principles include, but are not limited to, various definitions of human nature, progress, or reason. Modern theory then tries to explain the relationship between individual narratives as a function of those fundamental principles. Thus, a larger story develops to describe this movement; this larger arc is referred to as a metanarrative.

A metanarrative can trace a period of time in the past, or it can be extended into a hypothetical future that is the logical conclusion—the telos—of whatever set of principles has been put forward. Simply put, a metanarrative is a narrative about narratives.

A familiar example of modernism is Marx’s theory of human history, epitomized by the opening line of his “Communist Manifesto”: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” Marx argues that there exists a fundamental human nature universal to all people. Certain social arrangements (class structures) alienate individuals from their fundamental nature, and that alienation causes friction within those social arrangements. Eventually and unavoidably, society will be rearranged to eliminate that friction and to reunite man with his fundamental nature—that is the metanarrative. Marx traces the metanarrative through changes in class structure, from feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism, and to communism. Within communism, the friction from alienation due to social arrangement will be eliminated, thus ending that metanarrative. Some other force may arise to move history forward, but that would be the beginning of another metanarrative.
Local Narratives

In theoretical opposition to the metanarrative is the local narrative, of which postmodernism is a proponent. Local narratives privilege the single narrative instead of trying to unify multiple narratives through a given principle. A local narrative is formed by accumulating as much information as possible about a single narrative, so long as that information is derived from the narrative itself instead of imposed onto the narrative in the form of interpretation or generalization.

Local narratives have a voice, meaning they are experienced from the perspective of a single person or entity; often, many local narratives are necessary to fully describe a single historical event. They are exclusive, meaning that they cannot be explained by—or even fully understood by—anyone but the owner of the narrative. Local narratives are contextualized, meaning that a single local narrative is not considered in isolation, but rather in collaboration with other relevant local narratives. These common features of local narratives complement one another: local narratives are exclusive because each has a different voice, and they need to be contextualized because they are exclusive, and they have different voices because the contextualization affects each differently. Together, local narratives can be used to understand many complicated details of a historical event.

Postmodernism is interested in the relationships that form between local narratives. It may compare multiple narratives along some variable, such as identity or power, asking, for example, “what influence did the hierarchy of the organization have on this person’s ability to communicate her ideas?” or, conversely, “how did the organization alter its hierarchy in response to her ideas?” The first
question is answerable only from the perspective of the individual, and the second question is answerable only from the perspective of the organization itself. Questions like these must be answered by the voices of the local narratives themselves. If there is no such voice, then the question must remain unanswered. For example, because the Occupy movement refused to appoint a single voice to speak on its behalf, the second question from above could not be answered as posed. The hierarchy of an Occupy site may change, but the change will be observable as the summation of many local narratives, not a decision by the organization itself.

Additionally, by seeking out voices themselves instead of attempting to speak on behalf of a person or event, postmodernism appreciates otherness and marginality as valid perspectives on experience. Indeed, postmodern theorists often focus on the marginalized, the exceptions to historical metanarratives, narratives inassimilable into modern theory. Because journalism is so often interested in reporting on the disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed, it makes sense that the discipline should assume the methods of a theory that champions those very views, as opposed to one that often overlooks them while condensing historical events into universal theories.

Finally, understanding an event through its local narratives preserves the autonomy of its participants. Jean-François Lyotard, a postmodern thinker, worried that encyclopedic volumes of world history would erase the names and identities of the different subgroups of humanity whose “little stories” combine to make the “great story” of history (in attempting to address the whole scope of humanity). Applying metanarratives to journalism similarly effaces its subjects. In Occupy’s case, the movement and its participants risk becoming just another chapter in a history of the financial crisis or in a history of social movements of the twenty-first century.

Interestingly, some participants in the Occupy movement took especial precaution against being swept into an impersonal metanarrative. The movement’s ostensibly faceless slogan, “We Are the 99%,” which seemed poised to homogenize its participants, began as an online movement of people taking pictures of themselves holding up personal stories next to their faces. These are the specific
stories that are erased when journalism focuses too broadly on the Occupy movement as a whole, as opposed to focusing narrowly on the local narratives that identify with the movement.

A POSTMODERN ACCOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE

The conclusions that postmodernism draws are specific to the circumstances it observes; in this way, postmodernism presents a complete approach to studying history, both over long spans of time and for unique historical events. Journalism ought to participate in this pursuit of knowledge, but the dominant approach in the field today builds clusters of affirmation around what I call dogma, instead of generating new pieces of knowledge that can be used to understand the world.

In opinionated journalism, dogmas are those opinions that come to dominate the discussion of an event. They may not be true, but they are deafeningly present. In Occupy’s case, the dogmas were the various popular interpretations of the movement: as an attempt for millennials to find their place in the world, as a demonstration against economic inequality, as an evolution of the protest as a democratic tool.

Dogma evinces a general difficulty with understanding an event as it is unfolding. All of the above examples attempt to use the Occupy movement to further explain another phenomenon, but they do little to explain the movement itself. Dogma cannibalizes a newsworthy event before true knowledge about that event can emerge. Further, dogma asks for a level of abstraction from an event that may not be warranted. There is a difference between searching for the motivation for an event and imposing a motivation that explains as much of the event as possible. Knowledge is born from the former, while dogma is confirmed by the latter. Finally, dogma actually impedes the generation of knowledge instead of merely competing with it. The nature of opinionated journalism is such that less prominent voices do not have a place in the press. Letters to the editor are one of the few ways for unaffiliated voices to enter the discussion, and even then the voice is a response instead of a unique idea.
To further explain dogma in journalism, I borrow from Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. In a concluding chapter titled “The Anthropological Sleep,” Foucault alludes to Kant’s claim to have been awakened from a “dogmatic slumber” by Hume’s skepticism of causality and reason. Kant responds to Hume that man’s mind is capable of actively shaping sensory information through deductive reasoning such that it conforms to *a priori* knowledge that exists independently of experience. Thus, all knowledge and all observations of history are fundamentally centered within man as subject: man reasons, man deduces, and man discovers knowledge. However, when this approach is applied to man himself—as in anthropology for Foucault or journalism for us—it creates a logical inconsistency: man as subject, from which knowledge is created, is reified into man as object, about which knowledge is desired. The subject tries to comprehend an object that is one and the same as itself. In Foucault’s words: “an attempt is made to make the man of nature, of exchange, or of discourse, serve as the foundation for his own finitude.”

This defeating maneuver bred for Foucault an unawareness and complacency in anthropology that was similar to the dogmatism from which Kant was awakened. In journalism, this complacency is evident when a journalist commits the offenses I described above: cannibalizing an event in order to explain a separate phenomenon, ascribing a motivation or explanation to an event before the event has fully developed, or resting on one’s stature as an established columnist. In short, dogma in opinionated journalism is apparent when journalists use coverage of an event as a platform for their own opinions.

Knowledge, on the other hand, is generated when a journalist’s opinions are actually born out of the event itself. This happens through a careful selection of which and whose narratives go to print, as well as a general openness towards the ensuing discussion. This is the purview of editors and columnists alike.
Postmodernism argues that journalists should fully develop as many local narratives as possible. In Occupy’s case, this means living with the protestors, discussing their lives and their movement with them, and overcoming the temptation to conflate the movement with something familiar.

Journalists also ought to be critically aware of their own limitations in retelling another’s local narrative. Journalists frequently employ anecdotes to relate the experience of an event to their readers, and often these anecdotes are not their own but are gathered through interviews or observation. But recall that local narratives are exclusive, meaning that they can only be understood and explained fully by the owner of the narrative. It is impossible for the journalist to identify imaginatively and sympathetically with a local narrative that is not her own. Therefore, the journalist should be wary of how she wields others’ local narratives. Specifically, the journalist should not retell another’s story in a way that constructs an argument about that person’s involvement in that person’s own narrative or in a way that injects the journalist’s own voice into the individual’s personal story.

Bernard Harcourt takes this recommendation a step further. In addition to the prescription that one not misrepresent another’s personal narrative, Harcourt argues that one cannot directly engage with another’s narrative unless both voices have shared in the experience. Specifically, he writes that one cannot address the Occupy movement directly and normatively without physically, mentally, and emotionally taking part in the movement. He writes:

Normative statements about Occupy Wall Street—claims about what the movement should do—are functionally inaudible unless the speaker is physically occupying an occupation. [Peter] Hallward [of The Guardian] cannot audibly tell anyone what Occupy Wall Street should do—any more than The Wall Street Journal could—unless Hallward is physically occupying an Occupy space. And you can’t occupy sitting at your computer, publishing an editorial, or writing in this journal. You cannot occupy at a distance from an occupation.7

AN OCCUPY RETROSPECTIVE

Thus, if journalism aims to pursue knowledge, it must be similarly critical of its own mode of address to Occupy and other events.

Many pieces written about the Occupy movement, however, were not suitably critical of their own mode of address. Consider this excerpt from a New York Times piece by Andrew Ross Sorkin:

The problem with the movement, as many other columnists have pointed out before, was that its mission was always intentionally vague. It was deliberately leaderless. It never sought to become a political party or even a label like the Tea Party.

By the second or third time I went down to Zuccotti Park, it became clear to me that Occupy Wall Street, which began with a small band of passionate intellectuals, had been hijacked by misfits and vagabonds looking for food and shelter.

Given the way the organization—if it can be called that—was purposely open to taking all comers, the assembly lost its sense of purpose as various intramural squabbles emerged about the group’s end game.8

There are facts within this excerpt: the Occupy movement was leaderless, it never sought to become a political party or label, it was attended by both intellectuals and vagabonds, it was open to newcomers. However, these facts take on new meaning when they are funneled through the author’s virulent interpretation. “Misfits and vagabonds” provide unwanted local narratives, diluting the narratives of the founding “passionate intellectuals” that Sorkin prefers. Sorkin correctly describes the movement as “leaderless,” but then he uses this fact to reaffirm his own dogma by suggesting that “leaderless” might as well mean “in disarray.” Ultimately, what we’re left with is not knowledge in the sense of an accurate description of the movement and the factors that motivated it, but one man’s affirmation of his own dogma. As the postmodern thinker Giles Deleuze explains, in the postmodern approach, an analysis of an event “never consists in interpreting.”9 Events such as the Occupy movement do not present themselves for interpretation, but interpretations are nevertheless imposed upon them.


A postmodern approach to journalism creates a problem for opinion pieces such as Sorkin's. Many news organizations have a core group of columnists who are asked to provide their opinions on recent events. Readers come to identify with a particular voice or set of voices. But sometimes, according to a postmodern approach, a columnist may be unqualified to comment on a particular event. In the case of Sorkin, who admits to be writing from the outside of the movement looking in (“By the second or third time I went down to Zuccotti Park...”), his voice is illegitimate.

For an example of a more legitimate voice, consider Keith Gessen’s article, “Central Booking,” published in The New Yorker, in which the journalist tells the story of being arrested during an Occupy protest. After explaining how he was arrested, he offers these thoughts about the criminal justice system:

I learned more than I expected to. To be on the other side of the law-and-order machine in this country is awful. It is dehumanizing, and degrading, and deforming. It fills you with a helpless rage: because, once there, you can only make things worse for yourself by speaking up. From the brown phone in our cell at the Tombs, I’d called Emily a few times, and I called the office of n+1, the magazine where I’m an editor. But it felt like those people, my friends, might as well have been on a different planet. They could do what they pleased when they pleased. We could not. I left the world of jail with plenty of relief but more than anything with a sense of unease that I still can’t quite shake. We will be judged as a society and as a culture by how we treated our meanest and most vulnerable citizens. If we keep going the way we’re going, we will be judged very, very harshly—and sooner, perhaps, than we think.

These opinions come out of Gessen’s personal experience within the New York City jail, which he spends most of the article describing. Unlike Sorkin, Gessen does not have to adopt the personal narratives of vagabonds or intellectuals to make his argument; he can defer to his own narrative, about which he may legitimately speak.
AN OCCUPY RETROSPECTIVE

CONCLUSION

The discipline of journalism is not on trial in this essay, merely the approach taken by some journalists. If journalism is interested in the pursuit of knowledge, then journalists should be circumspect when expressing their opinions and editors should be judicious about which narratives they send to print. Postmodernism provides a good set of principles to guide journalists and editors in doing so: employ local narratives whenever possible, avoid dogma, and resist interpretation.
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