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WINE, NATURALLY

Rachel Monroe, in her article about the rise of natural wine, is right that such wine has become a symbol of virtuous consumption (“On the Nose,” November 25th). But it’s not just so-called natural-wine-makers who are seeking to convey a sense of place in their wines; that’s the goal of all authentic winemakers. I recently attended SommCon, a leading wine conference in San Diego. There were offerings from Washington, Oregon, California, France, Portugal, Italy, New Zealand, and elsewhere; we learned to distinguish characteristics imbued by land, weather, winemaking practices, and the many other factors that go into crafting a bottle. The bottom line for wine drinkers is: Forget the ratings! Keep exploring, and, if you like it, it’s good.

Tom Gable
Del Mar, Calif.

Monroe correctly points out that to call a wine “natural” is to make a “general claim of virtue,” and not much more. As a manager at a winery in Sonoma, I have found that the category is more stylistic than substantive: it has little to do with the farming practices of the vineyard or the compounds present in the product. As I see it, the “natural” label is mainly a marketing strategy to attract health-conscious consumers—a trivial repackaging.

Corey Louis
Napa, Calif.

INTERPRETING THANKSGIVING

Philip Deloria, in deconstructing the myth that comity existed between Pilgrims and Native Americans, would have done well to acknowledge the existential threat that the English settlers confronted during their first years in the North American wilderness (A Critic at Large, November 25th). The Pilgrims’ cruel double-dealing with the Wampanoags must be imagined in this fearful context. Their desperation does not excuse savagery and deceit. But both the sentimentalized Thanksgiving myth and Deloria’s indignation are products of a more modern America, with its relative comfort and security; neither sprang out of the darkness of the seventeenth-century New England forest.

Spencer Harrington
Brooklyn, N.Y.

CO-OP CULTURE

Reading Alexandra Schwartz’s article about the eccentricities of the Park Slope Food Co-op, I found myself thinking that some things never change (“Bounty Hunters,” November 25th). I joined the Co-op in the mid-nineteen-seventies, and was a Saturday-morning squad leader and then an “expert” cheese cutter. Since moving to California, in 2000, I have kept three momentos of my New York life: my 917 area code, a subway token, and my Park Slope Food Co-op member card.

Arline Krebs
Monterey, Calif.

While trying out a career in modern dance, in 2011, I was a member of the Park Slope Food Co-op, and I nanned for several sets of parents who had fallen into the abyss of missed shifts. I’ve held on to a dark Co-op secret for the past eight years: a fake divorce plot. One father, in a survival mode particular to new parents of twin infants, meticulously forged a set of documents to support the claim that he and his wife were living apart. The ploy would buy them an extra year of parental leave from Co-op shifts. In reality, they were crammed together in their South Slope apartment, the kitchen full of hormone-free milk, gooey dates, and goat cheese.

Virginia Byron
New Orleans, La.

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If your preferred holiday flavor is more dry Martini than eggnog, consider celebrating the season with the cabaret diva Meow Meow, who channels Ute Lemper, Édith Piaf, and other totems of jaded glamour in her mascara-heavy persona. She’s part of a neo-cabaret scene that spikes nostalgia for bygone chanteuses with the danger and urgency of performance art. (She has been known to crowd-surf.) Born Melissa Madden Gray, in Australia, she comes to BAM’s Harvey Theatre, Dec. 12-14, with “A Very Meow Meow Holiday Show.”
Since 1995, Jingle Ball—the annual mega concert put together by iHeartRadio—has made it a tradition to pack some of radio’s heaviest hitters onto a single stage. This year’s event, on Dec. 13 at Madison Square Garden, is no exception. Leading the lineup are Lizzo, who tops the current Grammy nominations following the success of her major-label début album, “Cuz I Love You,” and her viral hit “Truth Hurts”; the Jonas Brothers, the massively popular sibling trio that reunited, in February, after a six-year hiatus; and Taylor Swift, who is still riding the pastel wave of her seventh release, “Lover.” Headliners such as Niall Horan and Camila Cabello, former members of the boy band One Direction and the girl band Fifth Harmony, respectively, continue the parade of shiny stadium pop.—Jylyssa Lopez

**Night Life**

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it’s advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

**Christian McBride**

**Village Vanguard**

A nineties wunderkind who has fulfilled his early promise, the extraordinary bassist Christian McBride began as a staunch defender of mainstream jazz. His forays into such far-flung terrain as free improvisation and electrified funk notwithstanding, he always returns to where his heart lies. His Inside Straight ensemble is a taut quintet that includes the saxophonist Steve Wilson and the vibraphonist Warren Wolf.—Steve Butterman (Dec. 10-15.)

**Mr. Carmack**

**Music Hall of Williamsburg**

The producer Mr. Carmack has spent most of his public-facing career behind the boards, crafting bassy electronic music replete with hip-hop influences. Recently, he began stepping out from his laptop-and-d.j.-booth setup to accentuate his high-energy sets with lush live piano and trumpet. This year, he started another chapter as a singer. “VIISTA,” his newest album, is jazzy and soulful, and the first release in which he’s both the soundscape and the primary vocalist. This performance spotlights his mastery of old and his frontiers of new.—Briania Younger (Dec. 12.)

**Motor City Drum Ensemble**

**Knockdown Center**

The German house d.j. Danilo Plessow, who works as Motor City Drum Ensemble, has a deep and fluid sense of how not to make side of dance-music history not just talk but cohere. His “DJ-Kicks” mix CD, from 2011, intertwines records by Sun Ra, Aphex Twin, and the Afrobeat bandleader Geraldo Pino into a chugging groove and a ceaselessly alluring soundscape. His production work echoes that spinning style, leaning heavily on roughly chopped samples.—Michaelangelo Matos (Dec. 13.)

**Jubilee**

**Nowadays**

The Brooklyn-based producer Jubilee, born Jessica Gentile, has long commingled straight-forward house and techno with the more bumptious ends of hip-hop and dancehall. Spearheaded by the singer Jesse Malin, the annual Clash tribute Gates of the West salutes “London Calling” on its anniversary with a crowded bill that extends from punk originators (Debbie Harry) to descendents (Eugene Hütz) and parodists (Fred Armisen).—Jay Ruttenberg (Dec. 14.)

**Mount Eerie**

**St. Ann & the Holy Trinity**

Phil Elverum has never shied away from stark, unwaveringly honest portraits of grief, nostalgia, heartbreak, and loss. His raw way of writing, along with the bruised quality of his vocal delivery, became a defining trait of his early project the Microphones, and, as Mount Eerie, his music continues to feel naked in its sincerity. On his most recent album, “Lost Wisdom pt. 2,” a collaboration with the artist Julie Doiron, he reckons with the end of a relationship while finding peace in solitude.—Jylyssa Lopez (Dec. 14.)
**Slumberland 30th Anniversary Union Pool**

Some small record labels seek enlightened sounds of varied stripes; others chase an elusive air of cool. Slumberland Records, however, has mostly organized itself around an aesthetic: hazy guitar pop that manages to convey softness through its din. Hatched in 1989, Slumberland toast its anniversary not by glowing in its rearview mirror but with a slate of younger bands. The concert includes Jeanines, Pale Lights, and the headliners Peel Dream Magazine—whose name alludes to John Peel, the tastemaking d.j. who tacitly serves as the label’s patron saint.—J.R. (Dec. 14.)

**Mariyah Carey Madison Square Garden**

Mariyah Carey’s smash single “All I Want for Christmas Is You” turned twenty-five this year, and it may still be the last song to enter the holiday canon, now as embedded in the musical fabric of the season as “Jingle Bells.” Her album “Merry Christmas,” which was released last month, remains the best-selling album of its kind. There are few living artists who embody and absolutely own the festivities the way this diva extraordinary does—a dance in any decade.—B.Y. (Dec. 15.)

**DANCE**

**New York City Ballet David H. Koch**

This time of year, Tchaikovsky’s “Nutcracker” music becomes ubiquitous. It’s easy to roll your eyes, but, once you sit in the theatre and hear the first strains of the overture, a thrill inevitably kicks in. Boris Asafiev, an early-twentieth-century Russian musicologist, called it “a symphony of childhood”: many of the sensations we feel as children—fear, extreme excitement, an attraction to things we don’t understand, the desire to grow up and the simultaneous desire to remain a child forever—are reflected in the music. The choreographer George Balanchine understood this and made a ballet, in 1954, that is still performed by the company today. In “George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker,” fun and coziness are tinged with terror, and the world of the imagination is just as real as the Biedermeier furniture and the dancing children.—Marina Harss (Through Jan. 5.)

**Juilliard Dance / “New Dances” Peter Jay Sharp Theatre**

Last year, the Dance Theatre of Harlem and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre alumna Alicia Graf Mack took over the dance division at Juilliard; this is the first edition of “New Dances” she’s curated. As in other years, each class has had the opportunity to work with a professional choreographer to create a new dance. This time, the roundup includes Andrea Miller, an alumna of Juilliard who leads her own contemporary-dance company, Gallim; Stephen Petronio, a veteran of the modern-dance scene; Amy Hall Garner, who also graduated from Juilliard; and Jamar Roberts, who was recently named resident choreographer at Alvin Ailey.—M.H. (Dec. 11-15.)

**Alvin Ailey City Center**

In the second week of the ever-popular troupe’s annual residency at City Center, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre unveils two company premieres of older works. Assure Barton’s “Busk,” a short version of a 2009 piece, is a performance about performance: hooded figures seduce the audience to Ro- ma-tinged music by Ljova and the Kontraband, Camille A. Brown’s “City of Rain,” a revision of a 2010 effort, is a mournful yet driving response to the unexpected death of a friend. The rotating programs also feature last year’s standouts, Ronald K. Brown’s “The Call” and Rennie Harris’s “Lazarus,” as well as classics by Ailey himself.—Brian Seibert (Dec. 11-15 and Dec. 17. Through Jan. 5.)

**Gandini Juggling Alexander Kasser Theatre**

The people responsible for the attention-getting juggling in the recent Metropolitan Opera production of Philip Glass’s “Akhnaten” return to Peak Performances, in Montclair, New Jersey, for the second year in a row. “Spring,” choreographed by Alexander Whiteley, with a jumpy strings-meet-electronics score by Gabriel Prokofiev, is a pure-perform collaboration between six businesslike jugglers and four contemporary dancers. In jokey interludes, the performers address the audience on the topic of color, and, throughout the hour-long show, Guy Hoare’s lighting illuminates all the meticulously tossed and caught balls, rings, and Indian clubs in many hues.—B.S. (Dec. 12-15.)

**NYTB / Chamber Works Florence Gould Hall**

This abridged version of “The Nutcracker” by the company formerly known as New York Theatre Ballet, is for younger kids who aren’t eager to sit through a two-hour piece. All the important parts are still included, from the dance for the Mouse King to the Russian dance. An ingeniously designed set allows characters to move onstage and off in the blink of an eye.—M.H. (Dec. 13-15.)

**“The Yorkville Nutcracker” Kaye Playhouse**

Besides the now classic “Nutcracker” at New York City Ballet, there are other, more intimate versions around town, many of them featuring excellent student dancers. Francis Patrelle’s “Yorkville Nutcracker” has been performed for decades and is a local institution in its own right. The setting is New York, circa 1895, with scenes at Gracie Mansion, Central Park, and the New York Botanical Garden. Various historical characters appear, including Teddy Roosevelt. The Sugarplum Fairy and her Cavalier are Abi Stafford and Ask la Cour, guest from New York City Ballet. The music is taped.—M.H. (Dec. 13-15.)

**Sheku Kanneh-Mason Weill Recital Hall**

If it were possible to steal focus from Meghan Markle, the Duchess of Sussex, on her wedding day, the cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason would have been the one to do it. The poised nineteen-year-old musician entertained a guest

**TAP DANCE**

Like anything beloved enough to be indispensable, “The Nutcracker” can grow overwhelming. That’s why people keep coming up with new versions. Few reimaginings of the Tchaikovsky score equal the 1960 jazz suite by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, sparkling in its details—and swinging, too. It’s the basis for a new “Nutcracker” by Dorrance Dance, the good-humored, abundantly talented tap company led by Michelle Dorrance. At about thirty minutes long, this take can’t include everything, but audiences can expect quirky emphases and an enchanting Sugarplum Fairy, the elegant Josette Wiggan-Freund. At the Joyce, Dec. 17-Jan. 5, this première is supplemented by different repertory each week, saving the best for last: collaborations with the comic Bill Irwin, himself a classic.—Brian Seibert
list of royals and celebrities, plus millions of viewers at home, as Markle and Prince Harry signed the register, and Twitter bestowed the sobriquet “cello bae” upon him for his efforts. Now Kanneh-Mason makes his New York recital début—accompanied by his older sister, the pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason—with sonatas by Barber and Rachmaninoff, Lutoslawski’s “Grave,” and Beethoven’s delightful variations on an aria from Mozart’s opera “Die Zauberflöte.”—Oussama Zahr (Dec. 11 at 7:30.)

Éliane Radigue
Pace
The French composer Éliane Radigue spent the first four decades of her career creating long-form electronic works that teem with vibrant life beneath their placid surfaces. Having turned to acoustic instruments, in 2004, she continues to fashion uncanny aural experiences whose impact approaches the metaphysical. Here, in a two-night engagement produced by the nomadic curatorial organization Blank Forms, four of Radigue’s closest instrumentalist collaborators play selections from “Occam Ocean,” a swelling œuvre of immersive pieces that flow and fuse with liquid mutability.—Steve Smith (Dec. 13-14 at 7.)

Wet Ink Ensemble
St. Peter’s Church
Having recently returned from an engagement at the respected Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, in England, New York’s Wet Ink Ensemble presents selections from the programs it played abroad. Included are works by Charmaine Lee (with the composer as the guest vocalist), Eric Wubbels, Bryn Harries, Pierre Alexandre Tremblay, and Kristina Wolfe—all U.S. premières.—S.S. (Dec. 13 at 8.)

“Der Rosenkavalier”
Metropolitan Opera House
Robert Carsen’s elegant production of Richard Strauss’s “Der Rosenkavalier,” a jewel of an opera that elevates a romantic farce to the sublime, returns to the Met with the lustrous mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená in the title role. Kožená is surrounded by a strong cast—including Camilla Nylund, Golda Schultz, and Günther Groissböck—for her first performances at the company since 2011; her husband, Simon Rattle, who stepped down from the prestigious Berlin Philharmonic last year, conducts. Also playing: The Met’s family-friendly “Magic Flute” (Dec. 15 at 3), abridged and performed in English translation, commences its holiday run.—O.Z. (Dec. 13 and Dec. 17 at 7.)

John Zorn
Roulette
Continuing what has been an extraordinarily fecund year, the famously prolific composer John Zorn presents “Heaven and Earth Magicks,” a clout of fresh pieces designed for an ensemble modelled on the Modern Jazz Quartet. In a characteristically Zornian exhibition, the pianist Stephen Gough, the vibraphonist Sae Hashimoto play precisely notated parts, with the bassist Jorge Roeder and the drummer Tyshawn Sorey improvising on the fly.—S.S. (Dec. 14 at 8.)

“Rayyane Tabet: Alien Property”
Metropolitan Museum
This Lebanese artist interweaves his family’s history and that of the now far-flung pieces of a ninth-century B.C.E. frieze, carved from stone for the Neo-Hittite palace of Kambaria, in Tell Halaf, Syria. In his grandparents’ Beirut apartment, Tabet found clues connecting his great-grandfather to the site and its excavation, in 1911, by the German diplomat and amateur archeologist Baron Max von Oppenheim. On display are four reliefs from the frieze, which were stored in New York by Oppenheim and acquired by the Met after they were seized, pursuant to the Alien Property Custodian Act, in 1943—the same year that fourteen other parts of the frieze were destroyed by Allied bombings in Germany. (Many of the nearly two hundred pieces remain lost.) But the core of this fascinating show, which also includes archival materials and Tabet’s family tree, is not the artifacts, it’s the artist’s inventive

IN CONCERT

Singers can’t resist the melodies and seasonal quality of Schubert’s song cycle “Winterreise” (“Winter’s Journey”), which traces its narrator’s movements through the snow and his unhappy circumstances over twenty-four songs. The mood is despondent yet gripping in its narrow focus: two-thirds of the selections are in minor keys, and they’re so tightly written that a portrait emerges of a melancholic protagonist at once adrift and alive to the shifts in his emotional experience. A classic Romantic-era piece, “Winterreise” is de rigueur for lieder singers, and opera stars with an affinity for the subtleties of the song genre also take it up. This week, the bass-baritone Eric Owens, performing with the pianist Jeremy Denk at the 92nd Street Y (Dec. 13), and the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, with Yannick Nézet-Séguin at Carnegie Hall (Dec. 15), explore the work’s wintry landscape.—Oussama Zahr

JACK Frontiers Festival
Tishman Auditorium
The JACK Quartet has devoted unflaging energy and ingenuity to expanding horizons for the string-quartet idiom; now the celebrated group inaugurates its own festival to further that agenda. The first evening’s program is devoted to the world premiere of a single work: “divisio spiralis,” by Catherine Lamb. The second concert features recent noteworthy compositions by Clara Iannotta, Lester St. Louis, and Tyshawn Sorey.—S.S. (Dec. 17-18 at 7.)

ART

This Lebanese artist interweaves his family’s history and that of the now far-flung pieces of a ninth-century B.C.E. frieze, carved from stone for the Neo-Hittite palace of Kambaria, in Tell Halaf, Syria. In his grandparents’ Beirut apartment, Tabet found clues connecting his great-grandfather to the site and its excavation, in 1911, by the German diplomat and amateur archeologist Baron Max von Oppenheim. On display are four reliefs from the frieze, which were stored in New York by Oppenheim and acquired by the Met after they were seized, pursuant to the Alien Property Custodian Act, in 1943—the same year that fourteen other parts of the frieze were destroyed by Allied bombings in Germany. (Many of the nearly two hundred pieces remain lost.) But the core of this fascinating show, which also includes archival materials and Tabet’s family tree, is not the artifacts, it’s the artist’s inventive
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“Soy Isla” is the title of a buoyant retrospective of Zilia Sánchez at El Museo del Barrio (through March 22), and, indeed, a trio of islands—Cuba, Manhattan, Puerto Rico—shaped the career of this soulful hybridist, who is finally in the spotlight she has so long deserved. (The show arrives after a triumphant run at the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C.) Born in Havana in 1926, Sánchez lived in Manhattan for a few years, in the early nineteen-sixties, where her efforts shifted from competent, earthy abstractions, inflected by Art Informel (seen early in the exhibition), to radical shaped canvases, which she has continued to refine for the past fifty years in her longtime home of San Juan. These pared-down bicolour symmetries, which protrude and recede—imagine a Rorschach test co-designed by Lee Bontecou and Ellsworth Kelly—are at once carnal and cosmic. Not exactly paintings but not really sculptures, they float something new, in a restrained palette of black, white, peach, and fathomless blues. The untitled canvas above, from 2000, is on view through Jan. 17 at Galerie Lelong, in an exhibition of Sánchez’s more recent works.—Andrea K. Scott

Matthew Wong
Karma
DOWNTOWN In this Canadian painter’s two-part show “Blue”—titled for both its palette and its melancholic undertow—moonlit landscapes and interiors are rendered with hypnotic pointillism, rhythmic stripes, and seamlessly blended areas. The effect is both crisp and somnolent. (One gallery is filled with large canvases; the other space, on the same block, presents small works on paper.) Wong wore his influences on his sleeve: the dramatic vista of “Starry Night,” from 2019, nods unabashedly to van Gogh, with its turbulent sky over a bucolic village, though it is more restrained and methodical than its famous precursor. Painted from memory and inspired by walks in Sicily with his mother, Wong’s unpeopled nocturnes often feature streamlike paths, serenely winding their way to a vanishing point on the horizon. Wong died in October, at the age of thirty-five, making this transporting body of work from his brief blue period a tragic swan song.—J.F. (Through Jan. 5.)

“Otherworldly”
Parsons School of Design
DOWNTOWN Performa, the three-week triennial of live-action art, ended last month, but its spirit endures in this marvellous adjacent show, organized by the art historians Francesca Granata and Charlene K. Lau. A concise selection of costumes and videos unites three shamanic New York–based performers whose medium is masquerade. Rammellzee, who died in 2010, at the age of forty-nine, is a cult legend—a Far Rockaway native and a linchpin of the graffiti scene of the nineteen-eighties, his pantheon of alter egos (Gasheoler, Cruc the Monk, Vain) inhabited handmade junk-yard-chic costumes so elaborate that they could be Afrofuturist robot replacements for the Big Chiefs in a Mardi Gras parade. Machine Dazzle (who was profiled in this magazine by Hilton Als, in 2018) bends gender and genre in wearable sculptures so creatively realized (and politically pointed) that they leave no question that drag is high art. Narcissister—surely the only masked avant-gardist to be promoted to the next level on “America’s Got Talent”—steals the show in a videotaped performance of her 2016 piece “Forever Young,” which compresses a woman’s path from cradle to grave into five comic, heartbreaking minutes.—Andrea K. Scott (Through Dec. 15.)

IN THE MUSEUMS

The Theatre

Ragen Moss
Donahe
DOWNTOWN The Los Angeles sculptor follows up her appearance in the recent Whitney Biennial with an intriguing new series in acrylic, polyethylene, aluminum, and steel. Suspended from the ceiling, the works initially suggest alien pods on the verge of hatching, but, when viewed up close, their torsolike forms are more mammalian than extraterrestrial. (The association is underscored by the show’s title, “8 Animals.”) They’re mostly transparent—with occluded areas of bright colors, patterned, and opaque shapes, including a riff on the Nike swoosh—but these qualities don’t outweigh the corporeal references. Moss exploits the viscous, membranous potential of her plastic materials to emphasize interior space; the pieces contain other sculptural elements, like bodies housing organs. The addition of hand-scrathed texts—“alarm alarm,” “making contact”—can strike angsty or saccharine notes when viewed straight on, but, from other angles, they gain a murky dimension or a sardonic edge. Moss’s partial reconstruction of the frieze. Charcoal rubbings of thirty-two carvings (housed in Aleppo, Paris, Baltimore, and Berlin, as well as in New York) are arranged to represent their original placement on the palace exterior. These rough, dark imprints render the imagery—of mythological creatures, hunters, and trees—shadowy and semi-abstract, an apt visual metaphor for the frieze’s history and the mystery of its missing elements.—Johanna Fateman (Through Jan. 18.)

A Christmas Carol
Merchant’s House Museum

One reason for the popularity of “A Christmas Carol” is that you can present it in many ways. This season, for instance, New Yorkers can see it padded with lengthy backstories and a star-studded cast on Broadway, or in a one-man show at the Merchant’s House Mu-
seum, an 1832 Victorian building in the East Village. The conceit of the latter adaptation, by Rhonda Dodd (who directs) and John Kevin Jones (who acts), is that we are in the nineteenth century and we are listening to Dickens read his own text. Jones ably brings to life and differentiates the tale’s various characters—Jacob Marley’s ghost takes huge, ragged breaths, and Ebenezer Scrooge starts off pinched and judgmental. At times, Jones seems a bit like the uncle who inflicts his party trick on family gatherings every year, but there’s no denying the fit between his traditionalist approach and the setting.—*Elizabeth Vincentelli* (*Through Jan. 5.)*

**The Half-Life of Marie Curie**

**Minetta Lane Theatre**

It’s hard to beat a dynamic duo, and the two brilliant ladies in this Audible production, Marie Curie (Francesca Faridany) and Hertha Ayrton (Kate Mulgrew), might very well be invincible. Written by Lauren Gunderson and directed by Gaye Taylor Upchurch, the play tells the story of Marie and Hertha’s friendship—and Hertha’s attempts to help Marie recover from a career-wrecking scandal and sabotage from her self-destructive image.

“Radium is a cold heat, a dark light, a force of nature,” Marie says at the opening of the play, which serves plenty more poetry alongside a delirious amount of wit. Occasionally, the characters are subordinated to the themes—feminism, scientific inquiry—and the way the show accords the women’s final decades into its last few minutes is a bit disorienting. But the delectable performances by Faridany and Mulgrew—the latter with enough warmhearted spunk to envelop the entire theatre—give a radium-worthy glow that even Marie would admire.—*Maya Phillips* (*Through Dec. 22.*)

**The Illusionists**

**Neil Simon**

The theatre has become a lot more receptive to magic shows, and the most successful ones tend to be of the brainy variety, performed by gifted storytellers such as Derren Brown and Derek DelGaudio. There’s nothing highbrow about “The Illusionists: Magic of the Holidays,” which gleefully embraces a gaudier aesthetic sourced from Las Vegas and “America’s Got Talent.” But, as delightful as some of this group’s past Broadway shows have been—most notably “Turn of the Century,” in 2016—the current outing is on cruise control. The six-member roster does not exude charisma, though the British mentalist Chris Cox comes close, paradoxically thanks to his aggressively nerdy approach. The real issue, however, is that the production’s slick imagery works against it: when it comes to fooling a live audience, a certain old-fashioned hands-on approach tends to trump the use of computer-generated visuals.—*E.V.* (*Through Jan. 5.*)

**The Independents**

**The Theatre Center**

The Independents was the name a group of Parisian artists—including Renoir, Cézanne, Monet, and Pissarro—preferred over the Impressionists. They were led by the aloof, acerbic Edgar Degas (André Herzegovitch), who, in the eighteen-seventies, invited the American expatriate Mary Cassatt (Natasa Babic) to join the group, in a show of rebellious alternatives to the more rigid formality imposed by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Christopher Ward’s two-hander imagines the relationship between these brilliant, mostly mismatched spirits. Degas is a chauvinist in every sense of the word—of intellect, nationality, painterly skill, and gender—but Cassatt gives as good as she gets, and the performances do throw off some sparks. Yet the exposition-laden dialogue, though informative and laced with period gossip, often comes off as a costumed art-history lesson, and Ward’s direction lacks rhythm and bite.—*Ken Marks* (*Sundays through Jan. 5.*)

**The Inheritance**

**Ethel Barrymore**

Matthew Lopez’s audacious and highly entertaining play in two parts (seven hours total, directed by Stephen Daldry) is based on E. M. Forster’s 1910 masterpiece, “Howards End.” Forster himself, here called Morgan (Paul Hilton), is a kind of spiritual godfather who helps tell the story of the wild, impulsive writer Toby Darling (Andrew Burnap) and his stable, openhearted boyfriend, Eric Glass (Kyle Soller), who live in a rent-controlled apartment in New York. They befriend an older couple, the real-estate magnate Henry Wilcox (John Benjamin Hickey) and Walter Poole (Hilton again), who, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, bought a house upstate where Walter cared for friends as they died. The theme of cultural transmission between the demolished older generation and the thriving younger one is everywhere in the play; the first part ends with a wonderfully moving piece of stage magic, a communion of the living and the dead. Regrettably, in the second, Lopez’s fleet comic tone turns maudlin and preachy as he doles out tragedy, followed by a redemption that too neatly coddles his audience’s point of view.—*Alexandra Schwartz* (*Reviewed in our issue of 12/2/19.*) (Open run.)

**MOVIES**

**The Aeronauts**

Tom Harper’s film takes a true story, inflates it, and lofts it into the realm of the tall tale. Eddie Redmayne plays James Glaisher, one of the Victorian scientists who were responsible...
for putting meteorology on the map. It was in pursuit of this scheme that, on September 5, 1862, he rose in a balloon to a height of some seven miles above the Earth. The movie re-creates this vertical odyssey, and the cinematography, by George Steel, unveils cloudscapes of splendor and breadth. In a brave departure from historical fact, Glaiser is accompanied on his adventure by Amelia Wren (Felicity Jones), who pilots the balloon and also, when required, crawls to its summit to save the day—a fantastical but spirited invention. Would that the scenes on the ground were half as much fun. With Tom Courtenay as the hero's father, whose mind is on higher things.—Anthony Lane (Review in our issue of 12/9/19) (In wide release.)

A Hidden Life
When a giant stumbles, the thud is colossal. Terrence Malick breaks a long streak of masterworks with this Second World War drama, based on a true story, that strains at exaltation and sometimes lapses into self-parody. It's centered on Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl), a farmer from a remote Austrian mountain village who is drafted to serve in Nazi Germany's Army. Though he grudgingly reports for duty, he refuses to swear loyalty to Hitler; claiming conscientious-objector status, he is arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and prosecuted. Meanwhile, his wife, Franziska (Valerie Pachner), ostracized by their village, does her best to fend for their children. The drama is rooted in plain gestures and stark principles, yet Malick depicts it with eye-rolling grandiosity—and his familiar repertory of roving wide-angle shots and nature imagery seems unusually effortful. Stereotypes abound, as when heroes speak English and villains are rendered as central-casting Nazis barking in German. The immensely empathetic view of Franz is overwhelmed by vague spirituality and vaguer politics; the impressionistic methods dispel the story's powerful and noble specificity.—Richard Brody (In limited release.)

Portrait of a Lady on Fire
An artist named Marianne (Noémie Merlant) journeys to a remote house in Brittany, where she has been hired to paint a portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), a young woman on the brink of marriage. To begin with, however, the subject refuses to pose; Marianne has to do the painting in secret, so that Héloïse won't know what she's up to. From these furtive beginnings, Céline Sciamma's new film, set in pre-Revolutionary France, fans out into a love story of startling openness and power—one zealously performed, edited with great concision, and concluding in a barrage of unforeseen and barely manageable emotion. With Valeria Golino as Héloïse's mother and Luâna Bajrami as Sophie, the family's loyal maid. Sophie has troubles of her own, which, far from being ignored by her social superiors, are assuaged, in a stirring show of female solidarity. In French.—A.L. (12/9/19) (In limited release.)

Richard Jewell
Working with a script by Billy Ray, Clint Eastwood delivers a pained, complex, and pugnacious dramatization of the woes of the title character, a real-life security guard at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics who discovered a bomb amid a crowd and helped to clear the area, but was wrongly accused by the F.B.I.—and the media—of having planted it in order to be hailed as a hero. Paul Walter Hauser offers an intricate portrayal of Jewell as immature and vain, bighearted and deeply compassionate. His prior misjudgments as a campus officer and his awkward personality count against him in the eyes of a by-the-book agent (Jon Hamm). As the investigation continues, an unprincipled journalist (Olivia Wilde), in a needless and smarmy plot point, propositions the agent in exchange for a hot tip. Eastwood, whose career-long theme has been the danger of demagogy, elides ideology (including, unfortunately, that of the actual bomber) in this seeingly paranoid drama; this tale could have fit the nation's 2016 obsession with Hillary Clinton's e-mails just as easily. With Kathy Bates as Jewell's anguished but unshakeable mother and Sam Rockwell as his lawyer.—R.B. (In wide release.)

Uncut Gems
Adam Sandler's frantic and fidgety performance as Howard Ratner, a diamond-district jewelry dealer scrambling to stave off calamity, provides the emotional backbone for the brothers Josh and Benny Safdie's recklessly audacious and wildly accomplished blend of crime thriller, family melodrama, and sports drama. Howard, a compulsive gambler, is deep in debt to loan sharks, one of whom (Eric Bogosian) is menacingly persistent. Howard has left his estranged wife (Julia Fox) and is trying to set the whole mess aright with the sale of a smuggled stone, in which a distinguished client, the professional basketball player Kevin Garnett (playing himself), takes an interest. The supercharged action—from a script by the Safdies and Ronald Bronstein—intrigues intertwines real-world sporting events and real-life characters (including the Weeknd) with sharp-eyed scenes from the high-pressure gemstone business, the gambler's tightrope walk, and the habits and rituals of suburban Jewish New Yorkers. The movie's pinball-rapid combinations rise to a frenzied pitch that's exhilarating and awe-inspiring.—R.B. (In limited release.)

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/going-on-about-town
There’s a strong argument to be made that the types of glassware in which champagne is most often served—the flute and the coupe—are exactly the wrong ones. The tall, narrow shape of a flute constricts the wine, keeping it super carbonated but preventing it from swirling around and fully releasing its aroma and flavor. You could swirl champagne in the wide, shallow bowl of a coupe, but you’d almost certainly slosh it, too; plus, it’s more likely to overaerate and lose a significant amount of its fizz. Flutes and coupes are, like champagne itself, instantly recognizable as celebratory. But what if champagne were treated more like other wines, as appropriate for an ordinary weeknight as for a special occasion, as perfect with a meal as for a toast?

This is the question posed by the Riddler, a new champagne bar and restaurant in the West Village. It’s an outpost of a popular place in San Francisco, opened by Jen Pelka, who also runs a food-and-drink marketing agency. It’s an interesting concept, and there’s a lot to admire about its execution, starting with the fact that all of Pelka’s investors are women, and, on the by-the-glass menu, she spotlights female winemakers, who are still a rarity—as is the practice of heralding them. Her delicious champagnes are served in carefully chosen white-wine glasses, and there’s a small but complete food menu that’s designed to be paired with them.

But, if part of the goal is to make champagne more accessible, the staff could do with some training in how to talk about it. One night, a server helpfully told me that a blanc de blancs was tart, like a green apple; he was absolutely right, and I loved it. But then he described a brut rosé as “focussed.” Focussed on what? Was it studying for a test? On another night, a different server leaned heavily on the term “precision-driven,” and, as I sipped the taste he’d poured me, he said, “So, did I nail the notes? A little bit of precision?” Perhaps a sommelier would understand what this was supposed to mean; I still have no idea.

There are no tasting notes on the wine list. I guess you already know—or don’t care—what a forty-five-hundred-dollar bottle of 2000 Krug Clos d’Ambonnay tastes like if you have forty-five hundred dollars to spend on a bottle of 2000 Krug Clos d’Ambonnay. The rest of us are welcome to sample by-the-glass offerings until we land on something we like, but, personally, I’d appreciate the opportunity to actually learn something about champagne, beyond the claim that one of the female winemakers is “a total doll” or that one of the male winemakers plows his fields with horse-drawn wagons.

I’d also appreciate a food menu that took bigger risks, at a lower cost. If you can afford the splurge, the seventy-eight-dollar kaluga caviar, which comes with Lay’s potato chips and crème fraîche, is lovely. Pretty much everything else is just O.K. It’s hard to argue with fresh oysters, or a straightforward shrimp cocktail. But I ordered a dish of scallop and cucumber—diced and tossed with a bit too much black pepper—twice because I had no memory of trying it the first time. A bowl of crudités, featuring a few sad sticks of bell pepper and carrot and a couple of radishes on a bed of crushed ice, was frankly insulting, especially at thirteen dollars.

A cheeseburger with raclette and rosemary fries, a decadently rich risotto with brown butter and shaved truffles, and a pot de crème that comes in a caviar tin round out the litany of luxury clichés. Those in the know can order their extra brut in an off-menu “Chambong,” which is “like a beer bong, but for Champagne,” according to the Riddler’s Web site, where you can also buy the wretched vessel, plus a mug that reads “Of course, Champagne … but first, coffee.” Any regular who has ordered a hundred bottles will be presented with a bomber jacket with her name embroidered in gold. Some people will find all of this charming and fun. It leaves me a little flat, like bubbly in a coupe. (Dishes $13–$78.)

—Hannah Goldfield
“Electrifying” People · “Masterly” The Guardian · “Magic” TIME
“Dramatic and memorable” The New Yorker · “Ingenious” The Financial Times
“A gonzo literary performance” Entertainment Weekly · “Delicious”
“The New York Times · “Rare and splendid” The Boston Globe · “Remarkable”
USA Today · “Book groups, meet your next selection.” NPR
COMMENT
GUNS AND 2020

On September 12th, a little more than a month after the weekend that a shooter killed twenty-two people and wounded twenty-four more at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, and a man killed nine people and wounded seventeen outside a bar in Dayton, Ohio, there was a moment of thrilling moral clarity during the Democratic Presidential debate. The former Texas congressman Beto O’Rourke, speaking about the kind of semi-automatic weapons used in the massacres, made it clear that he stood by his proposal not only to ban such weapons but to institute a mandatory buyback of them as well. As he put it, memorably, “Hell yes, we’re going to take your AR-15!”

Now O’Rourke is out of the race and the mandatory-buyback idea seems to have exited the stage with him. (Former Vice-President Joe Biden and Mayor Pete Buttigieg have endorsed voluntary buybacks; all the Democrats currently running support an assault-weapons ban and universal background checks.) With Michael Bloomberg, the former New York mayor, who founded Everytown for Gun Safety, now a candidate, there will be at least one Democrat making gun violence a central campaign issue. But all the Democrats seeking the Presidency would do well to channel some of the passion it provokes.

Public support for stricter gun laws is substantial, and growing. This isn’t surprising in a country as haunted as ours is by gun violence. As of December 6th, there have been more mass shootings in the United States in 2019—three hundred and ninety-one—than there have been days in the year, according to the Gun Violence Archive, a research organization that tracks these incidents. (The G.V.A. defines a mass shooting as one involving a minimum of four victims.) At the beginning of this school year, TuffyPacks, a company that makes “bullet-resistant” backpacks for schoolchildren, reported that its sales were up three hundred per cent. The C.E.O. told USA Today, “A lot of parents go, ‘This is a great product and a great idea’ and the other half go, ‘What a sad world that we have to think about this for our children.’” And, after decades of increasing longevity, Americans are dying at younger ages, a phenomenon in which the rising number of suicides—made possible, in many cases, by easy access to guns—plays a key role.

Despite the relentless efforts of special-interest groups such as the National Rifle Association to defeat virtually any gun regulation, many Americans will no longer accept a brittle and suspect interpretation of the Second Amendment at the expense of human lives. A Fox News poll taken in August, after the killings in El Paso and Dayton, showed that two-thirds of Americans favor a ban on assault rifles and semi-automatic weapons. In a survey of likely 2020 voters, conducted earlier in the summer by the polling group GQR, more than one in four said that their views on guns had changed during the past five years, and, of those, seventy-eight per cent said that they had shifted toward stronger laws curbing guns. Asked if they would support a voluntary-buyback program of the kind that Australia instituted in 1996, encouraging people to give up their assault-style weapons, forty-two per cent of the likely voters said that they “definitely” would, and twenty-nine per cent said they “probably” would. Other polls have shown overwhelming support for universal background checks and gun-owner licensing.

The movement for stricter gun legislation has been revitalized in recent years by new organizations and younger voices. For a Presidential candidate, supporting such measures need no longer entail the kind of political risk-taking, or solicitude for the gun lobby, that it might have even five years ago. Yes, some gun owners will go to defiant extremes—in Virginia, for instance, dozens of rural counties have declared themselves “Second Amendment sanctuaries,” following the election of a
Democratic-controlled state legislature, which will assume office in January and is expected to pass gun restrictions. But such stunts aren’t likely to win many people over: the measures that the legislature will probably take—such as restoring a law that limited individuals to one handgun purchase per month—have broad, bipartisan support.

Nor do the courts pose an insurmountable obstacle to sensible gun laws. It’s true that the 2008 Supreme Court ruling in District of Columbia v. Heller established an individual’s right to keep a gun in the home, outside the context of the “well-ordered militia” stipulated in the Second Amendment. It was an extraordinary reinterpretation of the Court’s previous jurisprudence on guns. In 1991, the conservative former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, referring to the expansionist view of the Second Amendment that Heller later enshrined, called it “one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word fraud, on the American public by special-interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.” The retired Justice John Paul Stevens published a book last summer, shortly before his death, in which he called Heller, a 5–4 ruling whose majority opinion was written by Antonin Scalia, “unquestionably the most clearly incorrect decision that the Supreme Court announced during my tenure on the bench.”

But even Heller contained important caveats and, partly because of them, in the years since, state courts have upheld the vast majority of gun-safety laws they’ve been asked to rule on. (Last week, for the first time in nearly a decade, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a Second Amendment case, New York State Rifle and Pistol Association v. City of New York, New York. But, because the city had repealed the law before the case came before the Court—lifting the restrictions that the gun-owner plaintiffs in the case objected to—it may be moot, and therefore unlikely to yield a substantive ruling.) In Heller, the Court noted examples of the kinds of constraints that would be “presumptively lawful”—“laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms,” for example, or those banning guns in certain public places. “Like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited,” Scalia wrote. It is not “a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose.”

Those are words that gun lobbyists often choose to forget, though they were written by a man who must be a hero to them. The Democrats still running for President shouldn’t let them forget. Stronger gun laws are popular and necessary—and they’re also constitutional.

—Margaret Talbot

HERE FOR THE HOLIDAYS
EL SONERO DE LA NAVIDAD

Fifty years ago, Mike Amadeo, a composer and musician from Puerto Rico, bought a record shop on Prospect Avenue in the South Bronx and renamed it Casa Amadeo. It’s now a mecca of Latin music and a landmark on the National Register of Historic Places. The street signs out front read “Miguel Angel (Mike) Amadeo Way,” and Amadeo himself, eighty-five, is still behind the counter, six days a week, selling CDs, LPs, musical instruments, and Boricua knickknacks. Cash only, hand-Sharped price tags, boom box blasting the salsa monga of Víctor Manuelle, El Sonoro de la Juventud.

The other day, two members of the band Los Lobos, briefly in town, stopped by for a look. They’d heard some things about Amadeo, but he knew nothing of them. “They’re Mexican?” he said. “Then no.”

Mexican, in a way. One of the visiting Lobos was the percussionist, guitarist, and songwriter Louie Pérez, who had formed the group, in the mid-seventies, in East Los Angeles, with a few high-school classmates, including David Hidalgo. The other was the saxophonist and record producer Steve Berlin, a Philadelphian who joined the band in 1983, while it was recording its first release on a major label, “…And a Time to Dance.” Amadeo paid them little mind when they came in to browse.

“More cowbell,” Pérez said, gesturing toward a glass case full of cowbells painted with the colors of the Puerto Rican flag. Another case held bright-hued maracas. “We do the same thing with our cars,” he said.

Amadeo brought out some claves, and he and Berlin compared the timbre of a few, taking turns tapping along with the music on the boom box. Berlin bought a pair, along with some goatskin maracas, a plastic guiro with a scraper, and a CD featuring the saxophonist Chombo Silva. “Sax players are rarely featured in Latin music,” Berlin said. “Chombo was, like, the only one.”

Pérez fiddled with Berlin’s maracas. “Get your own pair,” Berlin said. “Just fourteen bucks.”

Los Lobos started out as a “hippie Chicano” outfit, then passed through an East L.A. punk phase before settling into the Mexican-inflected folk rock that it became known for. Along the way, the group began exploring a wider array of traditional Latin music. Pérez, pointing at the walls of CDs of almost exclusively Caribbean music, said, “We listened to this stuff later on, when we got more sophisticated.”

In October, Los Lobos released an album of Christmas songs, “Llegó Navidad.” They’d been talking about doing one for years but had recently got a nudge from Rhino, their label. They brought in two friends—Gustavo Arellano, who until recently wrote a nationally syndicated column called “Ask a Mexican!,” and the writer and historian Pablo Yglesias, a.k.a. DJ Bongohead—to dig up a batch of potential songs. They wound up with a hundred and forty-six; ultimately, Los Lobos recorded and released a dozen. The specimens range from the son jarocho of Veracruz to Freddy Fender Tex-Mex and Venezueln salsa from the seventies. There are a couple of old novelty hits (“¿Dónde Está Santa Claus?”), Pérez-Hidalgo original, and, naturally, as a closer, “Feliz Navidad.”

“When it comes to a Christmas hit, all you need is one,” Berlin said. “Look at Mariah Carey. Or José Feliciano.” He wasn’t necessarily expecting one for Los Lobos this time around. “If I make what I spent on my MetroCard, I’ll be
happy. That’s what, two million streams?”

Pérez marvelled at the size of the shop’s section of CDs labelled “Música Navideña.” The vinyl stacks, too, were full of Christmas albums. A random pull: “Navidad en Puerto Rico con Los Millonarios,” which, though undated, looked to be about the age of the shop. The cover was a photo of a woman in a top hat and tails with a pile of presents, including—lookie here—a saxophone. The album’s sixth track was one that Los Lobos had recorded on their album: “Amar-ga Navidad,” by the old ranchera singer-songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez. (The fifth track on the Los Millonarios album, “White Christmas,” was attributed here to “Berlin-Godino.”) “I’m sure Irving Berlin would have been thrilled to share the credit,” Berlin said. He has observed, incidentally, that Latin music and the Hebrew-school music he grew up with share similar distinct minor-chord progressions. He said, “They all come from the same place: Sephardic Spain.”

After a while, Berlin and Pérez said goodbye and rode the 2 train to midtown. At a touristy Mexican restaurant in the theatre district, they ordered tacos, enchiladas, and guacamole. Pérez lightly chided the waiter, in Spanish, about the absence of agua fresca on the menu, while Berlin tried to identify, over the clamor of the dining room, the music coming from the speakers. “It’s actually Cuban,” he said. “A drummer once told me, ‘If you go into a Mexican restaurant and they’re playing Cuban music, leave immediately.’” This time, they hung around.

—Nick Paumgarten

Commemoration Dept.
Beyond the Blue

Liza Womack is a first-grade teacher in her fifties, with wide, rectangular glasses and hair parted down the middle, Patti Smith style. She lives in Huntington, Long Island, in a three-bedroom house with a “Bernie 2016” sign in the front window, a “Workers of the World, Unite!” poster on a wall, and a paperback copy of “Zapata and the Mexican Revolution” on the coffee table. “I’ve read chunks of it and enjoyed it, but I’ve never been able to finish it,” she said the other day. “Too close to home, I guess.”

The book is by her father, the Marxist historian John Womack, Jr. Shortly after it was published, in 1968, he got tenure at Harvard, where one of his closest friends was a fellow Rhodes Scholar from Oklahoma named Terrence Malick. When Malick made his first feature film, “Badlands,” he cast John Womack as a grizzled state trooper. “My dad and Terry are still as close as brothers,” Liza said. “A few years after I finished school”—also Harvard, also history—“I went to Paris, and Terry was there, and he brought me to all sorts of dinner parties and introduced me to counts and countesses, which I thought was pretty cool.”

In late 2017, when Liza was facing a film-related predicament, she called Malick. The predicament was born of tragedy: Liza’s son, Gustav Åhr—known to friends and family as Gus, better known to the world as the emo rapper Lil Peep—had just died, of a drug overdose, at the age of twenty-one. Handsome, charismatic, prolifically tattooed, and photo-genically sad, he had been on the brink of international fame, and he left behind a cache of unreleased footage, both audio and video. “I was frozen with grief,” Liza said. She kept getting calls “talking about how there was going to be a documentary about Gus’s life, and the first few times I just said no, or ignored it. Then I called Terry and told him, ‘If this is getting made one way or the other, I’d rather have you be in charge of it.’”

Which is how Malick became an executive producer of “Everybody’s Everything,” a new documentary that makes Lil Peep’s talent legible even to viewers who might not consider themselves fans of either emo or rap, much less both at once. The film’s spiritual core is the artist’s relationship with his family, especially his grandfather. “I split with Gus’s father when Gus was in high school,” Liza said. “Gus started acting out—punching walls, that kind of thing—and I’d call my dad, freaking out, and he’d say, ‘I’ll write him a letter.’” Gus didn’t always respond to his grandfather’s letters, Liza said, “but I know he read them, and I know they reached him in a deep way.” At one point, Gus posted a photo on Instagram: John Womack, looking stern, seated in front of a bookcase and a portrait of Lenin. “This is my grandpa he is a retired professor of Latin American history at Harvard and a badass communist,” he wrote. “#vivarevolucion.”

On a rainy Sunday afternoon in Huntington, Liza carried a plastic tub of Gus’s effects downstairs to the living room. She opened a manila folder marked “Jack’s letters.” “Every time I found one of these lying around the house, I was sure to save it,” she said. “My thought was, when my father died, Gus would want them.” Her voice broke. “Happened the other way around, I guess.”

One letter, written on yellow legal paper, began, “Dear Gus, dear grandson, my prophet, my tattooed poet of the sweet heart.” From another letter, also on legal paper: “I know the gold in you, how good you are at heart.” Another, this one typed, ended with “Is there any particular Johnny Cash CD you’d like?” Gus appreciated Johnny Cash, but not the CD format; two years later, for Christmas, his grandfather gave him a book called “How Music Got Free,” about the MP3 revolution.

“Everybody’s Everything” includes an interview with Gus’s high-school girlfriend. “Gus literally told me once, if he was to die, he thinks Jack would be the person welcoming him into Heaven,” she says. Near the end of the film, there’s a long, close shot of John Womack, in his office in Cambridge, talking about grief and eternity—“Gus
is gone. . . He's way beyond the blue”—followed by an orchestral swell and a sweeping overhead shot of a deep, endless ocean. “He had work to do, and he wanted to do it,” John continues. “To say what he had to say. A real, bell-ringing truth.” It’s a very Terry moment.

—Andrew Marantz

THE PICTURES

LAPEL ARCHEOLOGY

Like Robert De Niro gaining sixty pounds to play Jake LaMotta in “Raging Bull,” which Martin Scorsese directed, in 1980, the budget for Scorsese’s latest film, “The Irishman,” ballooned, reportedly, from a hundred and twenty-five million dollars to a hundred and fifty-nine million dollars. This increase was in large part a result of the special effects required to make De Niro, who is seventy-six, and is onscreen almost constantly for the movie’s three and a half hours, look as young as he was when he filmed “Raging Bull.”

Sandy Powell, who was a costume designer on “The Irishman,” which spans five decades in the life of Frank Sheeran, a hit man for the mobster Russell Bufalino, took a less expensive approach to de-aging De Niro for his costume-fitting photographs. “It was very distracting, with his face and his gray hair,” Powell explained the other day, at Angels Costumes, a film- and TV costume-rental company in northwest London. “So I actually got pictures of him from ‘Goodfellas,’ or whatever, and literally stuck the head on the photo, and it really made a difference. With the older, real head, it’s, like, ‘Oh, that’s weird.’ But then you put the younger head on, and it worked.”

De Niro had a hundred and two clothing changes for “The Irishman,” based on selections from the thousands of garments that Powell pulled from racks at costume-rental companies in New York and Los Angeles. These range from the suit Sheeran wears at one of his children’s baptisms—“that’s a fairly cheap-looking fifties suit, before he got a bit more money and started wearing better-quality things,” Powell explained—to the sweatpants he wears while parked in a wheelchair in the nursing home where he spends the years before his death, in 2003. “We made those a bit oversized,” Powell said. “We spent half the film making him look bigger”—Sheeran was six feet four, while De Niro is five-ten—“and then at the end we wanted him to shrink and be aged.” The elderly Sheeran’s outfit is Powell’s favorite costume in the movie: “There’s something really sad about it, because he is still making an effort—he’s got a nice pressed shirt on, but with horrible track pants.”

Powell’s job in dressing De Niro—and his septuagenarian co-stars Joe Pesci and Al Pacino—was made easier by the fact that their characters came of age in the middle of the twentieth century, when men dressed formally from the onset of adulthood. “Everybody looked much older in the fifties, didn’t they?” Powell said. “My mum was twenty when she had me, and you look at pictures of her then and she looks like she’s in her late thirties.” Powell, who is British, was born in 1960, and got her start in costume design in the early eighties, working with Lindsay Kemp, the late choreographer; Powell has received fourteen Academy Award nominations and has won three times (for “Shakespeare in Love,” in 1999; “The Aviator,” in 2005; and “The Young Victoria,” in 2010). She has vivid orange hair, cut short, and was wearing baggy black pants and a jacket with slashed panels across the shoulder blades, both by Comme des Garçons. “I love Comme des Garçons—you can wear it forever,” she said. It was just as well, she remarked, that she wasn’t trying to dress senior actors in the clothes worn by young people today. “Jeans that are low slung, on somebody who’s like seventy?” she said, with a trace of distaste.

In “The Irishman,” the actors’ faces and hands were digitally de-aged by the visual-effects supervisor, Pablo Helman—the technique involves eliminating lines, raising eyes, and diminishing jowls—but, when it came to de-aging the actors’ bodies, Powell had to resort to more analog measures. She encouraged the men to wear elasticated undershirts—essentially, Spanx for the torso—under their clothes. “Sometimes they wore them, and sometimes they didn’t,” she acknowledged. When it came to the nether regions, the actors were allowed to wear the underwear of their choice. “Provided it wasn’t distracting—so long as you haven’t got boxers that are crammed into something that’s too tight,” she said.

The most important challenge for older actors playing younger is to remember to move like a young person, Powell went on: “Head up instead of forward, shoulders back instead of rounded, even walking on your toes more than schlumping. It’s just sort of a lighter walk. Swinging your arms—if you have a swing in your arms when you walk, it makes you look younger.” What’s revealed by the costumes of “The Irishman” is that, aside from the slightest widening of a leg or of a lapel, the clothes De Niro and his peers wear have changed much less than the bodies inside them. “I can see a suit changing,” Powell said. “But, for the general public, they will just see a bloke in a suit.”

—Rebecca Mead

DISCOVERIES DEPT.

MOHONK’S HOME MOVIES

In 1869, Albert Smiley, a nature-loving Quaker schoolteacher, bought a property at a good price: a few hundred acres surrounding a lake and a tavern in New Paltz, New York, in the Shawangunk Mountains, on a ridge “covered in charred stumps,” Priscilla (Phil) Smiley said the
other day. Pril, a retired electronic-music composer who favors phrases like “properly irreverent,” is among the Smileyse who now own the place that replaced the tavern: Mohonk Mountain House, a castlelike lakeside resort hotel of Edwardian and Victorian design, surrounded by bucolic views and very few charred stumps. Mohonk has remained nature-focussed and low-tech; guests hike, do puzzles, exfoliate with Shawangunk Grit, and engage in a practice called “forest bathing.” (Mindful, plein-air, clothes-on.) But, for its sesquicentennial, this year, Mohonk created an app. Its origins are unlike those of other apps.

A few years ago, when Pril and Mohonk’s archivist, Nell Boucher, were going through Pril’s late father’s basement during a black-mold crisis, they discovered a metal cabinet, long ignored, full of film cannisters. “There were about a hundred reels,” Pril said, in a third-floor office at Mohonk. Nell assumed that they were “natural-history things, like films of squirrels and their behavior.” (Pril’s father, Daniel, was a noted ecologist.) But the films weren’t Daniel’s. “There, in my grandfather’s particular blue pencil that he wrote everything in,” Pril said, were intriguing labels: “1929,” “Toscanini.” (The Maestro had spent his seventy-fifth birthday at Mohonk, in 1942.) She wanted the films to be digitized, so she brought them to a film-transfer specialist at a local comic-book shop; the process took a while. (“The shop was going under,” she said.) Finally, she saw the results: films of Mohonk from before her time. They ended in 1945, and the Smileys of today hadn’t known that they existed.

The films are silent and mostly black-and-white. “My grandfather had a good sense of aesthetics, and he was documenting everything—people, projects, family members,” Pril said. She cued up a film on a laptop. “That’s my great-grandfather getting out of a carriage,” she said, pointing to a man in a top hat at Mohonk’s entrance. “This is 1929. Pril’s great-grandmother Effie welcomed viewers to a garden. A spring sequence contained mountain laurel (“there are many reels of mountain laurel”), a goat in eyeglasses (“this is Professor Goat”), and Pril’s great-grandfather’s famous horse, Sunshine, who appears in portraits around the hotel. Summer revealed woollen tank-style swimwear and lakeside der-
In the final days of 1999, Konstantin Ernst prepared to film the Russian President’s annual New Year’s address, just as he had every December for several years. Ernst, who was thirty-eight, with floppy brown hair and a look of perpetual bemusement, had recently become the head of Channel One, the state television network with the largest reach, a post he retains today. The position makes him one of the most powerful men in Russia, with the ability to set the visual style for the country’s political life—at least the part its rulers wish to transmit to the public.

The ritual of the New Year’s address began in the seventies, under Leonid Brezhnev, who sat stolidly atop the Soviet hierarchy for two decades, and continued in the eighties under Mikhail Gorbachev, the architect of perestroika. After the Soviet collapse, Boris Yeltsin, the first President of independent Russia, kept the tradition alive. Yeltsin began his term as a charismatic advocate of democratic reform, but, by the late nineties, he seemed aged and defeated. Russia was only a year removed from a devastating financial crash that led the government to default on its debt, and its troops were fighting their second costly war in a decade in Chechnya, a would-be breakaway republic in the Caucasus. Yeltsin seemed primarily concerned with leaving office in a way that would keep him and his family immune from prosecution. On December 29th, Ernst and a crew from Channel One made their way to the Kremlin to film his address.

Ernst watched as Yeltsin sat in front of a tinsel-covered fir tree in a reception hall and held forth on the opportunities of the New Year, which included, in the spring, a Presidential election that would determine his successor. As the Channel One staff was packing up, Yeltsin told Ernst that he wasn’t satisfied—he was hoarse, and didn’t like the way his words had come out—and asked if they might record a new version in the coming days. Ernst agreed to go back on New Year’s Eve at five in the morning.

When he returned, he was handed a copy of the new address, and tried to contain his shock: Yeltsin was about to resign, voluntarily giving up power before his term was over, an unprecedented gesture in Russian history. His chosen successor was Vladimir Putin, a politician whom most Russians were just getting to know: Putin had risen from bureaucratic obscurity to become the head of the F.S.B., the post-Soviet successor to the K.G.B., and had been named Yeltsin’s Prime Minister only four months earlier. Ernst had a production assistant enter the text of the speech into the teleprompter without letting the rest of the crew in on the news. It would come as a surprise to everyone.

Yeltsin spoke with the labored cadence of a tired man. “I said that we would leap from the gray, stagnating totalitarian past into a bright, prosperous, and civilized future,” he said. “I believed that we would cover the distance in one leap. We didn’t.” He went on, “I am leaving now. I have done everything I could.” He rubbed a tear from his eye. Someone from Channel One started to clap, and soon they were all giving him a standing ovation. A woman cried, “Boris Nikolayevich, how can it be?” Yeltsin and the journalists drank champagne, and marveled at the scene they had shared.

Soon after, Channel One filmed a New Year’s address from Putin, which would air after Yeltsin’s. “The powers of the head of state have been turned over to me today,” Putin said, his tone calming and businesslike. “I assure you that

Ernst’s work combines cosmopolitan savviness with subservience to the state.

LETTER FROM MOSCOW

CHANNELLING PUTIN

The TV producer behind Russia’s new era of propaganda.

BY JOSHUA YAFFA

Illustration by Chloe Cushman
there will be no vacuum of power, not for a minute.”

Ernst got into a waiting car with recordings of Yeltsin’s and Putin’s speeches and, with a police escort, sped through the capital to Ostankino, a sprawling complex of television studios. At noon, as night fell in Russia’s Far East, he gave the order to broadcast Yeltsin’s address. Yeltsin was hosting a luncheon with his ministers and generals in the Presidential quarters at the time. “The chandeliers, the crystal, the windows—everything glittered with a New Year’s glow,” Yeltsin recalled later, in his memoirs. A television was brought in, and his guests watched the announcement in silence. Putin’s wife at the time, Lyudmila, was at home, and didn’t see the broadcast, so she was confused when a friend called to congratulate her; she assumed that the friend was offering a standard New Year’s greeting. Later in the day, a news segment showed Yeltsin and Putin standing side by side in the Presidential office. “Take care of Russia,” Yeltsin told Putin as they left the room.

The following morning on Channel One, after a kitschy variety show, the network cut to breaking news from Chechnya. Putin had gone on a surprise trip to visit Russian troop positions, where he wore a fur-trimmed parka and handed out hunting knives. He told the soldiers that the war they were fighting was “not just about defending the honor and dignity of the country” but also “about putting an end to the disintegration of Russia.” Ernst worried that the separatism in Chechnya could spread, and believed that Russia’s institutions of power were atrophied and vulnerable to collapse. “In moments when everything has gone to hell, a person shows up, who might not have known of his mission ahead of time, but who grabs the architecture of the state and holds it together,” he told me recently. He thought that this person was Putin.

In the lead-up to the election, Channel One, under Ernst, portrayed Putin as Yeltsin’s inevitable successor, and relentlessly attacked his rivals, presenting them as infirm, corrupt, even murderous. Putin’s poll numbers began rising by four or five points in a week, and he quickly went from an unknown entity to the most popular politician in the country. Channel One had backed politicians before, but this was something new: the invention of a candidate from thin air, a television phenomenon from the start. Putin won handily and, afterward, Ernst began to craft a visual language for his Presidency. He suggested that the inauguration be moved from the State Kremlin Palace, a modernist concrete box, to St. Andrew’s Hall, an ornate tsarist throne room that would provide an imperial spectacle. He felt that the old era, for both Russia and Channel One, was giving way to another. As Ernst put it, “We would find a new intonation together.”

Ernst was born in 1961, the son of a well-known Soviet scientist. He was bright and ambitious and, by the time he was in his twenties, bristled at the restrictions imposed on citizens by the country’s decaying gerontocracy. From a young age, Ernst was obsessed with film. In 1986, when he was twenty-five, he left a senior post at a state genetics laboratory and, inspired by the convulsions of perestroika, drifted among Moscow’s quasi-underground directors and filmmakers. He shot several music videos, including a concert by Aquarium, the godfathers of Russian rock, who, in 1988, performed in Leningrad with Dave Stewart from the British pop band Eurythmics.

I met with Ernst in the summer of 2018, in a voluminous conference room at Channel One. He described his early days with vibrating enthusiasm. A central part of his self-image is clearly still grounded in that period, when he was not an all-powerful television demigod but a scrappy outsider. “I felt like a person who was deceiving everyone,” he told me. “The Soviet Union was still in full force—and yet there I was, with no formal education as a director, filming some Western musicians, not to mention my rockier friends, who themselves had been banned only two or three years before.”

In 1988, he became a director at “Viewpoint,” a news-magazine program that gained a devoted following for its earnest discussion of topics that weren’t covered elsewhere: corruption in the Communist Party, the failing Soviet war in Afghanistan, the fledgling class of millionaires. Viewers in the late Soviet era had become accustomed to a heavy lexicon of bureaucratese and boosterism that verged on the absurd. In his book on the paradoxes of the time, “Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More,” Alexei Yurchak, a Russian-American anthropologist, describes how, for decades, during the televised funeral of a Soviet dignitary, announcers would note that the official was “buried on Red Square by the Kremlin wall.” Eventually, space on the square became scarce, and high-ranking functionaries were instead cremated and their ashes placed inside the wall itself. Viewers could see that the action on their television did not match the voice-over, and state linguists petitioned the Central Committee to update the text. Amazingly, the appeal was rejected. “Since nothing about the representation of the world was verifiably true or false, the whole of reality became ungrounded,” Yurchak writes.

“Viewpoint,” by contrast, spoke honestly and clearly, pushing the country to “verbalize things that were impossible to say before,” Ernst told me with pride. In August 1991, when a cabal of Communist hard-liners in the security services mounted a coup to put an end to Gorbachev’s perestroika, the crew of “Viewpoint” hid equipment in their apartments and went on the air with emergency programming. The coup failed, and, soon after, the Soviet Union fell apart. That December, cameras filmed the Soviet flag being lowered at the Kremlin for the last time.

Ernst once told an interviewer that, compared with “Viewpoint,” perhaps “only Boris Yeltsin himself played a larger role in bringing down the Soviet state.” But, when we spoke at Channel One, Ernst emphasized that the “Viewpoint” team members didn’t see themselves as revolutionaries, even if history pushed them in that direction. “When you’re taking part in a big historical process, you don’t always understand how it will develop down the line,” he told me.

In 1991, he launched an arts-review show called “Matador” (he simply liked the sound of the word), which was unlike anything previously seen on Russian television. Ernst appeared with long hair and a motorcycle jacket, and narrated segments on such topics as the avant-garde filmmaker Rainer Werner
Fassbinder and the running of the bulls in Pamplona. The show, which aired at a time of mass bewilderment, was a captivating distillation of Ernst’s idiosyncrasies. “As always, during any great rupture, cracks and openings appear in the system, which allow just about anyone to enter,” he told me.

Four years into Yeltsin’s Presidency, with the country still reeling from the Soviet collapse, Ernst produced dozens of public-service advertisements called “The Russian Project,” which used sentimental scenes to teach basic lessons: cherish your loved ones, take pride in your work. In one, an elderly man hears buskers on the metro playing an old military march and recalls a wartime love affair. As the music swells, the tagline appears: “We remember.” “People felt lost, as though they had been discarded,” Ernst told me. “It was important to let them know that not everything in the past was bad, that we still held something in common.”

His most popular project from the nineties was “Old Songs About Important Things,” a faux-retro musical set on a Soviet collective farm, in which actors crooned tunes from the Soviet songbook. Leonid Parfyonov, who collaborated with him on the program, told an interviewer at the time, “It’s about admitting that there were things that were good, that there is nothing to be ashamed of, and that we don’t have any other history.”

In 1995, Vladislav Listyev, a beloved television host from “Viewpoint,” was made the director of Channel One and put Ernst in charge of drawing up a plan for new programming. But, just five weeks after Listyev took over, he was killed in the stairwell of his apartment building. His murder, never solved, was rumored to be connected to his decision to change the way the company bought ads, potentially cutting out gray-market middlemen. Channel One’s main shareholder, Boris Berezovsky, a rapacious oligarch with interests in everything from oil to automobiles, proposed that Ernst take over. At first, Ernst resisted—he found Berezovsky distasteful and untrustworthy—but eventually he agreed to become the channel’s chief producer.

During the 1996 Presidential race, Channel One joined other outlets in openly supporting Yeltsin’s campaign and disparaging his revanchist Communist opponent. On the eve of the election, the channel aired an ominous spot that ended with a timer counting down to voting day. Anna Kachkaeva, a television critic, saw Ernst a few days afterward and asked him about it. “From the brainwashers, hoping for your understanding,” she recalled him saying, smiling mischievously. Kachkaeva told me that, even as Ernst “retained a sense of hooliganism,” he came “to understand what kind of instrument he held in his hands, that he is a person of the state.”

In October, 1999, Ernst agreed to take on the role of general director at Channel One. His relations with Berezovsky, for whom the network served as a personal playground, were tense, but Berezovsky thought of Ernst as a “very sensible, well-educated person” with great potential. “That all turned out to be true,” Berezovsky told the weekly magazine of Kommersant, a Russian newspaper, in 2005. “But, as subsequent events showed, he has no real political position. That would be well and good in a stable democracy, but is absolutely dangerous in a transition to a totalitarian regime.”

Berezovsky backed Putin’s candidacy in 2000, and even claimed credit for engineering his ascent. But after Putin gained office the system that he began to construct had little tolerance for cocky and unruly power brokers, and Berezovsky’s ego didn’t allow him to bend to the new rules. Things came to a head eight months into Putin’s Presidency, when a torpedo exploded in the bow of the Kursk, a nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea, killing a majority of the hundred and eighteen men aboard. Twenty-three survived, and waited for rescue. Russia’s attempts to reach them were unsuccessful, and it initially refused foreign help. Nine days later, after Putin relented, Norwegian deep-sea divers opened the hatch and found everyone dead.

Berezovsky unleashed his network, which hammered away at the Kremlin’s incompetence and compared its handling of the Kursk disaster to the government’s fumbling response to the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, in 1986. Channel One’s flagship news program broadcast scenes of anguished relatives subjecting government officials to scathing criticism. Putin was livid. He and his advisers claimed that the more inflammatory clips were manufactured, or at least grossly manipulated, as part of an information war carried out by Berezovsky. When Putin finally visited the bereaved relatives, he lashed out at the media: “Television? They’re lying! Lying! Lying!”

According to reports in the Russian press, Ernst, in private discussions with

“That’s a coat. That’s a coat. That’s a jacket. That’s a coat…”
Putin, encouraged one of the more noxious conspiracy theories floating around the Kremlin: that a number of the grieving women shown on television were actors. Ernst adamantly denies that he said any such thing. But, while Kremlin officials ordered Berezovsky to unload his shares in the channel, they held Ernst in great esteem. “He is a very talented journalist,” Alexander Voloshin, Putin’s former chief of staff, said, in 2011. “All we had to do was free him from Berezovsky’s influence.” When I spoke to Ernst, he echoed this version of events. Under Berezovsky, the channel’s news staff was “waging some kind of political battle rather than doing reporting work,” he said. At the height of the fallout over the Kursk disaster, Ernst—whether acting on his own initiative or with instruction from above—fired a number of staffers close to Berezovsky.

Under duress, Berezovsky fled to England, where he hardened into a strident, although not always reliable, critic of Putin. (He died, apparently by suicide, at a manor house outside London, in 2013.) However, he never managed to develop a real hatred of Ernst. “Ernst could not exist without relying on the state,” he told Komsents, from exile. “He made a choice not so much against me personally but for Putin. It was a choice in favor of power.”

Put in charge of the largest platform in the country, Ernst set about realizing his creative vision, which skillfully combined a certain cosmopolitan savviness with ultimate subservience to the state. Ernst considers himself a gesudarstvennik—a statist—a term many in Russia’s ruling class, including Putin, use to describe their belief in the inherent virtue of the state. “It would be strange if a channel that belonged to the state were to express an anti-government point of view,” Ernst told me.

Under Ernst, Putin’s subsequent inaugurations became ever more ambitious productions, involving several hundred cameramen as well as cameras mounted on helicopters and overhead tracking cranes. Ernst also reimagined the annual Victory Day parade, a celebration of the defeat of Nazi Germany, putting cameras in the cockpits of bomber planes, to create shots reminiscent of “Top Gun.” According to Arina Borodina, a journalist and media critic in Moscow, Ernst has no equal in creating the spectacles that the country’s rulers covet. “Who else is going to make their illusions, their myths, their beauty?” she said.

“For Ernst, a sense of immense visual scale was always important,” Andrei Boltenko, a producer and director who worked at Channel One in the early two-thousands, said. Russia was emerging from the confusion and deprivation of the nineties, and the mood was hopeful. Viewers wanted a story of resurgence. Boltenko told me, “The scale of the television form matched the scale of belief in the state.”

In December, 2001, Channel One aired its first call-in show with Putin. Ernst told me that, when he introduced the idea to Putin, “he listened and said, ‘That’s interesting.’” The live broadcast—in which Putin fields questions from citizens, often for more than four hours—has appeared nearly every year since. At one moment, he might promise a new children’s playground; in the next, he might conjure up months of withheld salaries for laborers building a cosmodrome. Ernst described the show as a particularly Russian phenomenon: “The Russian mentality stipulates that the leader of the country, no matter what this person is called—President or tsar, Prime Minister or General Secretary of the Communist Party—is seen to answer for everything, that there is one person who symbolizes the entire state.”

Under Ernst, the network took pains to avoid the sins of the Berezovsky era, as the Kremlin understood them. In September, 2004, Chechen terrorists seized a school in the town of Beslan, in the North Caucasus, and government officials claimed that there were just three hundred and fifty-four hostages when, in fact, there were more than a thousand. Channel One cited the lower number. On the third day of the standoff, when a frenzy of shooting left more than three hundred people dead, foreign media covered the events live, but Channel One aired just a few minutes on the crisis before returning to the Brazilian telenovela “Women in Love.” Ernst defended his coverage. “Today, the main task of the television is to mobilize the country,” he told the Financial Times, in 2004. “Our task No. 2 is to inform the country about what is going on.”

Over time, Ernst and Parfyonov, his former collaborator, began to diverge professionally, even as they remained friends. Parfyonov prized his independence, which left him with fewer opportunities on federal airwaves; Ernst took the other route. “Kostya wanted to be both an artist and a creative director,” Parfyonov told me. “But it would prove impossible to be a creative director without serving the state in one way or another.”

Yet, even as Channel One transmits the official narrative, it does so with a measure of taste and restraint, at least compared with its two main competitors: Rossiya, which is wholly owned by the state, and NTV, now owned by a holding company with ties to Putin. Rossiya is home to Dmitry Kiselev, the most sulfurous personality on Russian television, who holds forth on topics including the arms race (Russia is the only country that can turn the United States into “radioactive dust”) and gays and lesbians (“They should be banned from donating blood or sperm, and if they die in a car crash, their hearts should be burned or buried in the ground as unsuitable for the continuation of life”). NTV is known for pseudo-documentaries that disparage opposition figures and hint at all manner of foreign conspiracies.

Such offerings rarely appear on Channel One—not because of Ernst’s deep ideological opposition but because they do not correspond to his vision of what is beautiful and worthy. Yulia Pankratova, a news anchor on Channel One from 2006 to 2013, told me that, during her tenure, the network’s employees prided themselves on the sense that “you can do propaganda, but you can’t let yourself fall below a certain level.”

Ernst has directed most of his energies toward entertainment programming. “The news is momentary and ephemeral,” he told me. “But the artistic realm, this is something deeper. It can stay in people’s minds forever.” It is also the sphere in which he has the most freedom. Ernst told me that, while his interlocutors in the Kremlin pay close attention to Channel One’s news coverage, they let him make creative series and films with virtually no oversight. He
has championed shows far edgier than otherwise appear on state airwaves. In 2012, Ernst aired “Anton’s Right Here,” a documentary about an autistic teenager living in a cramped apartment with his ailing mother. Autism is given little attention in Russian society, and the film treats the young man with a rare degree of dignity, which earned it praise from many liberals who are generally wary of Channel One. In 2013, Ernst broadcast “Thaw,” a dramatic series set in the nineteen-sixties, during a brief period of relaxed control over culture and politics. During one episode, viewers learn that a likable main character is gay. The show came at an acute moment of conservative revanchism in Russia’s politics, when the parliament had just passed a bill outlawing so-called “homosexual propaganda.” Ernst continues to indulge his art-house tastes, even as he’s keenly aware of the lines that can’t be crossed. In 2017, he aired the American series “Fargo,” dubbed into Russian, but a few disparaging lines about Putin were altered to refer to the leaders of North Korea.

Ernst has managed to retain the affection of many liberal cultural figures, who praise the artistry and integrity of some of Channel One’s programming. He is no less at ease among the country’s political class. “He knows how to seem one of the gang everywhere,” said Nikolay Kartozia, a producer who has known Ernst for years. “You can spend three hours talking to him, and you’ll see you have so much in common you’ll be sure you’re from the same circle. I have the sense it works quite the same in the Kremlin.”

Putin’s administration hosts weekly planning meetings for media bosses which are the subject of much speculation. Kachkaeva, the television critic, told me that Ernst “hints at such conversations, but he never gives details, never talks about what is asked of him.” Among the producers at Channel One, the Kremlin meetings are known as “going behind the ramparts”—a reference to the crenellated fortress walls. When we spoke, Ernst downplayed the meetings as largely administrative. “They might tell us: ‘Here is the President’s schedule,’ or some other upcoming events, or maybe the government is planning to impose a new tax, or raise the pension age.” But it is evident to the channel’s staff that Ernst and other top television bosses are given some guidance, though perhaps only as vague hints and shrugs. “Nobody comes back from those meetings and says, ‘Now we have to do this,’” Pankratova, the former news anchor, told me. “Maybe later that afternoon you see the top editor for a particular show call over one of the hosts to say something, to give some instructions. Or maybe you notice that a certain Russian region suddenly gets more coverage.”

Part of what makes Ernst so good at his job is his ability to pick up shifts in the official mood and to subtly pass them along to his staff. He occasionally gives clear directives; Vladimir Pozner, the host of a major talk show, has said that he and Ernst agreed on a blacklist of a dozen people who were not to appear on his program. But Pankratova told me that, more often, she was expected to intuit the rules rather than have them spelled out, a system that made everyone on the side of caution. Later in her tenure, she didn’t even think to inquire whether she could mention protests organized by Alexei Navalny, an anti-corruption activist who had emerged as the country’s leading opposition politician. When I asked Ernst whether certain topics or people were off-limits, he said, “No one ever tells you, ‘Don’t show Navalny, don’t use his name.’” Instead, he explained, “such messages aren’t conveyed with words. After all, federal television channels are run by people who aren’t stupid.”

In 2007, Russia was chosen to host the 2014 Winter Olympics, which would be held in Sochi, a resort town on the Black Sea. Putin promised to spend billions to introduce a “new Russia” to the rest of the world. Ernst was put in charge of producing the opening ceremony. “We wanted to show that Russia is part of the global cultural village,” Andrei Boltenko, Ernst’s Channel One colleague, who became the creative director and screenwriter of the ceremony, said. As time went on, the show became more ambitious, and the main stadium had to be redesigned to accommodate its technical complexity. “In certain moments, Ernst had to convince Putin personally,” Boltenko said.

In February, 2014, Ernst watched the ceremony from a control center high above the stadium in Sochi. It opened with a troika of translucent horses lit up in white neon galloping across the night sky, gliding along invisible rails hung from the ceiling. Balloons in bright colors stood in for the onion domes of St. Basil’s Cathedral; Peter the Great’s ships sailed across a dark and wavy ocean seemingly printed with an inkyl woodcut. A steam locomotive bathed in red light barreled down, a reference to Stalin’s industrialization drive. The Second World War was represented by the rumble of approaching airplanes. The postwar years were rendered as an era of athletes, cosmonauts, students, and strihy—Soviet proto-hipsters who liked jazz and dressed in Western fashions.

As the show concluded and chants of “Ro-ssi-ya!” echoed through the stadium, Ernst leaped from his chair in the command center. “We’ve done it!” he yelled. The ceremony was received rapturously, even among those hostile to the Putin state. Navalny called the immediate afterward “Nice and unifying—excellent.”

Ernst did not have long to savor the fantasy he’d brought to life. By the time the stadium in Sochi hosted the closing ceremony, which he also produced, two and a half weeks later, street protests in Kyiv, Ukraine, had overthrown the government of President Viktor Yanukovych, who had fled and left a power vacuum in his wake. Putin was incensed—he had long seen Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation as a proxy struggle with the West—and was intent on exacting revenge. Within days, Russian special-forces soldiers in unmarked uniforms appeared in Crimea, and, within a month, Russia had annexed the territory. Western opprobrium, sanctions, and attempts at isolation followed, deepening after the outbreak of war in the Donbass, in eastern Ukraine, where Russia spurned on a separatist insurgency, supplying funds, weapons, and diplomatic cover.

Back home, the Russian media adopted a hysterical and bellicose tone. The country was seizing its birthright as a superpower by standing up to the West. Channel One’s news programs were consumed with talk of a coup in Kyiv, NATO’s dark intentions, and the supposed neo-fascists who took over.
after Yanukovych. Ernst had imagined that the Olympics would mark a bright new era for Russia, and he was taken aback by the abrupt change in tone. Boltenko told me that the production team saw it as “a clear and ringing collapse of all of our hopes.” When I spoke to Ernst, however, he rejected the idea that the new narrative had been forced on him from above. “We—us at Channel One, as the citizens of the country—felt deeply offended, and we didn’t need any additional motivation,” he said.

In July, 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, headed from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was shot out of the sky as it passed over eastern Ukraine, and all two hundred and ninety-eight people on board were killed. The Dutch launched a years-long multinational investigation, which eventually identified Russia-backed separatists as having fired the missile and traced the anti-aircraft system used in the attack to a Russian military unit. As the inquiry proceeded, state media went into a fury, giving voice to every other possible theory: that the Malaysian airliner had been targeted by the Ukrainians in the mistaken belief that it was Putin’s plane; that it was hit accidentally as part of an air-defense training exercise gone wrong; that it was downed by the Ukrainian Air Force. In November, 2014, Channel One aired what it called “sensational” footage: a satellite image, supposedly taken by Western intelligence services and passed to Russia by an American scientist, that purported to show the plane being attacked by a Ukrainian fighter jet. “The image supports a version of events which has hardly been heard in the West,” a host said.

The picture was quickly outed as a fake. The time stamp didn’t match that of the incident, the plane had identifying markings that distinguished it from the Malaysian aircraft, and the terrain underneath was clipped from photos posted online two years before. When I asked Ernst why his channel gave voice to something so easily disproven, he said that it was a simple error: “Yes, we’re human, we made a mistake, but not on purpose.”

Baldly false stories, in the right doses, are not disastrous for Channel One; in fact, they are an integral part of the Putin system’s postmodern approach to propaganda. In the Soviet era, the state pushed a coherent, if occasionally clumsy, narrative to convince the public of the official version of events. But private media ownership and widespread Internet access have made this impossible. Today, state outlets tell viewers what they are already inclined to believe, rather than try to convince them of what they can plainly see is untrue. At the same time, they release a cacophony of theories with the aim of nudging viewers toward believing nothing at all, or of making them so overwhelmed that they simply throw up their hands. Trying to ascertain the truth becomes a matter of guessing who benefits from a given narrative.

In this case, the state’s approach seems to have worked: a year later, a poll showed that only about five per cent of Russians blamed their government or the separatists for the disaster. When I asked Ernst about the official Dutch report, he told me that our disagreement came down to a matter of belief: “You believe the Dutch report is true, and I believe the Dutch report is unprofessional.” It was as if we were arguing about religion or aesthetics rather than a set of facts.

As a young man, Ernst told me, he watched “All the President’s Men,” the 1976 film about Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s investigation of Watergate for the Washington Post. He was enraptured by the film’s portrayal of journalism’s moral force, its critical distance and independence. Like many in his generation, he was frustrated by the stifling controls of the Soviet system, and presumed that everything was more honest in the West. But when the barriers between the two worlds collapsed Ernst began to see the blind spots of the media outlets he once worshipped. “I grew up and travelled all over, and, especially in recent years, it’s become increasingly clear to me that justice, democracy, the complete truth—they don’t exist anywhere in the world,” he said. Ernst wears his cynicism as a sign of enlightenment. It would be impossible to convince him that today’s CNN and the BBC don’t have the same partiality as Channel One, or are not also following an agenda. “People who make television are citizens of a specific country, from a certain nationality, with particular cultural codes,” Ernst told me. Channel One must play
the game the way everyone else does.

In recent years, the space for free-wheeling and irreverent programming on Channel One has shrunk, and the intensity of propaganda has grown. But Ernst has stuck around. The unique power of television remains seductive. “I can make an impact on the place where I was born, on the people with whom I share a language, a history, and an understanding, share the same smells and songs and movie quotes,” he told me. “I know these people and can understand them. I love them.”

In September, 2014, six months after the annexation of Crimea, a new program appeared on Channel One called “Time Will Tell,” a crass debate show covering the issues of the day, which usually revolve around how the West is keeping Russia down. When, in August, 2016, a producer called me to ask if I would appear as a guest—it’s hard to find Russian-speaking Americans in Moscow willing to get yelled at for an hour on live television—I sat in a makeup chair and endured a heavy dusting of powder. The audience numbered about a hundred people, who were given the signal to clap when the show returned from commercial break, or when one of the pro-Kremlin guests made a particularly acerbic point at the expense of one of the show’s villains—in this case, me. We discussed the Russian Olympic athletes facing bans for doping allegations and the conflict in Syria, where both Moscow and Washington had forces deployed. All of the questions were leading ones. The United States carries itself with an air of impunity, one of the show’s hosts told me—“Isn’t that disastrous?” Another posited, “Obama referred to Russia as a ‘regional power.’ Can’t we say that’s when all our problems between the two countries began?”

I returned to “Time Will Tell” every now and then over the next few months, on each occasion certain that this would be the day I would manage to say something subversive and devastatingly convincing on Russian state television. Of course, that never happened: not only was I outnumbered by a dozen other guests but I could interject only a few words at most, and had to huff and puff and raise my voice. In the end, I came across as just another agitated talking head. Even my most forceful protests made issues of fact seem muddy and unknowable, proving that everything is a question of perspective and allegiance. The program offers viewers a crude carnival sideshow: one of its co-hosts is famous for having once brought out a bucket labelled “Shit” and dashing a Ukrainian guest to eat from it. (It turned out to be chocolate.) I had a hard time imagining Ernst, the discerning auteur, being pleased with such antics; they seem to embody the ways that his channel has changed to accommodate the mood of the new era. In its loyalty to the official narrative, however, the show is in keeping with the model he has built.

“Time Will Tell,” like much of the Russian news, is obsessed by the United States, a consequence of the Russian ruling class’s simultaneous fascination with and revulsion for the American political system. This became all the more true in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. election. Ernst told me, “Of course everyone here was pleased with Donald Trump. He seemed to represent a change in the American political trend.” Trump openly favored a transactional style of politics, with little appetite for values or norms. Here was a person with whom Putin could sit down and divide up the world, as Soviet and American leaders had done at Yalta, in 1945.

After Trump’s surprise victory, “Time Will Tell” reflected the Russian state media’s initial euphoria; then its hostile mockery of the notion that Russia, through hacking or trolls, might have had anything to do with that result; and, finally, a creeping sense of confusion and disappointment as Trump proved unable to single-handedly cancel sanctions and reconfigure U.S.-Russian relations. During one broadcast on which I appeared, when we were discussing an address that Trump had made to the United Nations—Channel One’s news program had called it “lengthy and rather pompous”—I asked the hosts if they felt any regret that the Russian media had favored Trump.

One of them, Anatoly Kuzichev, who had a bald head and a permanent smirk, turned the question back to me: “Imagine there are two candidates. The first says, ‘I hate Russia and will do all I can to destroy it.’ The second, however, says, ‘I will do everything possible to be friends with Russia.’ So, who would you root for in Russia’s place?” I pushed again. Did Kuzichev have any regrets? “Yes, we are sorry,” he said, his voice rising. “We’re sorry that everything was just words. Yes, we were rooting for Trump. I can confirm that. We acted like fools who naïvely believed a bunch of words.”

Channel One has embraced the line that Trump is being undermined by political elites and the so-called “deep state,” a position that allows its presenters to explain his inability to improve relations with Russia, while also revelling in how the American government has devolved into a self-injurious political circus. This narrative has only gained strength since the beginning of the recent impeachment hearings in Congress. “Let them fight amongst themselves,” a host on “Time Will Tell” said on a recent episode. A Channel One anchorman declared, “With impeachment, Congress has guaranteed that the 2020 Presidential election will be the most beastly in American history.”

The hosts on “Time Will Tell” seem as confused as Trump is about why there would be anything wrong with linking military aid money for Ukraine to political favors. Isn’t that how American foreign policy has always operated? Watching the show, I was reminded of conversations with Ernst, in which he seemed eager to show that he is alive to how the world really works, unlike those idealists—perhaps me included—who remain blinded by naïveté. It is a world view grounded in some truth, but it has the effect of excusing all manner of behavior as simply routine. On a recent episode, from mid-November, when a steady stream of witnesses were testifying in Congress, one of the hosts turned to an American journalist and mocked the idea that the Democrats had uncovered anything incriminating. “Where is the evidence? Why don’t they produce it?” the host asked. The American guest responded, “You just don’t show it on this channel, like they don’t show it on Fox News.” The host smiled, and pretended to act afraid: “Quick, cut to commercial break!”
According to a recent Gallup poll, ninety-four percent of Americans would vote for a woman for President. So why haven’t we had a female in the White House? Simple! We haven’t had the right candidate.

The eatable female candidate reaches across the aisle with soft, moisturized hands. She knows how to fire a gun, but also has never held a gun, and doesn’t know what a gun is. She’s becoming a vegan, but stands behind Arby’s in its commitment to the Meats.

She would never eat her salad with a comb, because she knows that the only acceptable non-hair-related uses of a comb are scratching your back and playing it like a kazoo. She has never taken a DNA test, because she already knows that she’s a hundred per cent that bitch.

She has the charisma of a charlatan but the integrity of Charlie from “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” She’s able to radically reshape society, but moderately. She was raised on a farm in the middle of Central Park.

Her paternal grandfather is Ronald Reagan. Her maternal grandfather is F.D.R. Her son is Keanu Reeves. Her other son got on the U.S.C. crew team by practicing. She went to Harvard, but hated it.

She has a diversified portfolio with a healthy annual yield of eighteen per cent, even though she invests only in companies that turn Styrofoam cups into schools in Africa. She plans to donate her estate to charity upon her demise, which doctors say won’t happen until at least 2039. She pays herself only ten per cent less than what she pays the men who work for her.

She promises to make a golden retriever her Veep. His name is Buddy, and he has only three legs, because he lost one in Nam. Buddy is socially liberal but fiscally conservative.

She’ll implement universal health care but fund the entire program herself by holding a gluten-free bake sale. She enjoys cooking festive dinners for her family and obliterating North Korea with nuclear weapons.

When she gets an iPhone-update alert, she installs it immediately. She never posts screenshots of her fortune-cookie fortunes on Instagram, because she knows that no one cares. She does not aspire to host her own comedy podcast one day. She survived the Sooper-DoooperLooper at Hershey Park.

She is Beyoncé.

She knows how to change a tire, fix a 3-D printer, launch a torpedo, un-launch a torpedo, and juggle wet bars of soap. She’s a boomer, but she has a great sense of humor about the phrase “O.K., boomer.”

She wears sensible shoes that are hot. She can bench-press two-fifty but has the lean muscles of a Zumba instructor. She’s six feet tall and a quarter of a foot wide. Her breasts are large but not obscene. Her rear is juicy. The only symptom of her period is that it makes her skinny. She glows in the dark, but in an extremely healthy, nonradioactive way.

She loves babies, even the ugly ones, although she has never participated in a gender-reveal party.

She is everything to everyone.

She would be pleased to be the President, but she is not ambitious enough to run.
ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

OUTSIDE SHOT

The Safdie brothers’ new film is a dizzying ode to New York—and maybe a hit.

BY KELLEA SANNEH

During every New York Knicks home game, the scoreboard at Madison Square Garden displays a message asking fans to refrain from disruptive behavior. It is a reasonable request, but on a recent night it was not enough to dissuade a wiry man with a beard and a ball cap, who was standing up, cupping his hands around his mouth, and yelling, “Hey, Aaron! Aaron Smith!”

A security guard, a few rows closer to the court, gestured downward with his palms: Quiet, please.

“I’m just trying to get my friend’s attention,” the man said.

“Text him,” the guard said.

“I can’t,” the man said. “He’s reffing.”

Aaron Smith was indeed one of the referees that night, working a pre-season game between the Knicks and the New Orleans Pelicans. But the man shouting his name was not a friend, just a mischievous Googler—who also happens to be one of the most acclaimed film directors in the world. His name is Josh Safdie, and he is thirty-five; he and his brother, Benny Safdie, who is two years younger, have directed a series of movies that have been increasingly ambitious and increasingly popular. In 2017, they made “Good Time,” starring Robert Pattinson, a jittery, hallucinatory crime drama, which, once you got over the jitters, was perhaps also a comedy. Their latest, “Uncut Gems,” is a hectic and soulful film largely set in New York’s Diamond District, and starring Adam Sandler as Howard Ratner, a gem dealer and sports gambler who spends two hours making progressively more frantic transactions, in search of a payoff big enough to retroactively justify the risks. Variety compared the film, admiringly, to a “protracted heart attack,” though the Safdie brothers seem to think of it, like its predecessors, as a loving and realistic portrait of their home town. Residents and visitors alike routinely complain that the city is not as interesting as it used to be; the Safdies’ work is devoted to the proposition that any place can be interesting, especially New York, provided you look carefully enough.

It was a few weeks before the opening of “Uncut Gems,” and the Safdie brothers had taken a break from pre-release screenings (Telluride, Toronto, the New York Film Festival) to steal a glimpse of Zion Williamson, the Pelicans’ No. 1 draft pick. The Safdies are obsessive about basketball; in “Uncut Gems,” Howard’s fortunes rise and fall with the outcomes of the games he bets on. But Williamson had foiled their plans by tearing his meniscus, so the brothers had to find other ways to entertain themselves. Of the two, Josh Safdie tends to be the instigator, driven by instinct and daring. Near one of the

“Movies are against nature,” Josh Safdie (in ball cap) says. “It’s the most perverted art form. It’s trying to replicate life.”
baselines, he spotted James Dolan, the
team's widely reviled owner, sitting next
to a muscle-bound young man whom
he recognized as Dolan's son, Quentin,
a bodybuilder, to whom Safdie had once
anonymously AirDropped a photograph
of a monster flashing a devil's-horn
sign—he likes sending strange pictures to
strangers.
A young boy was sitting directly in
front of the Safdies, and Josh made
a semi-successful effort to moderate his
language. ("Move the ball! What the
fuck are you doing?") Seated next to
the boy was a man eating French fries,
who soon became the unwitting star of
a short film. Josh, raising his iPhone,
zoomed in on the man's fingers: he was
neatly applying a line of ketchup to each
fry, like toothpaste on a toothbrush. The
brothers are always looking for ways
to combine scripted storytelling with
scenes from everyday life. They typically
cast experienced actors alongside first-
timers, which is to say, "real people"—
although the Safdies would probably object that the term insults the first-
timers, by implying that they're not ac-
ting, and also the professionals, by im-
plying that they're not "real." Still, view-
ers who found themselves transfixed by
the faintly menacing professionalism
of the bail bondsman in "Good Time"
might have been pleased to discover
that he was played by the proprietor of
American Liberty Bail Bonds, in Kew
Gardens, Queens.
Sometimes the Safdies seem to know
everyone in the city, although not ev-
everyone in the city knows them. When
they were recognized at Madison Square
Garden, during the fourth quarter, it
was by a student from New York Uni-
versity's graduate film program. "I just
want to say, you guys are my favorite
filmmakers in the world," he said, be-
fore shyly sprinting away.
"I swear to God we didn't plan that,"
said Benny Safdie, who is short-haired
and clean-shaven, and a bit bigger than
Josh. Benny is the quieter of the two,
but he is the more dedicated performer.
For a few years he tormented the city's
comedy clubs, in character as a fretful
failed comedian named Ralph Handel;
naturally, the brothers captured these
appearances on film. (Nowadays, Ben-
ny's schedule is slightly less flexible: he
is married, with two young sons.) When
the brothers are on set, Josh generally
takes a position behind the monitors,
shouting out suggestions to the actors.
Benny customarily holds the boom mi-
crophone, talking quietly to the actors
and—directly into the microphone—
even more quietly to his brother.
"Yo, Kane!" Josh shouted. "Kane
Fitzgerald!" He had identified another
referee.
"I'm telling you, they're like the
Queen's guard," Benny said. "They're not
going to pay attention."
"No—I'm telling you, I get them,"
Josh said.
"Enough," the guard finally said,
sternly.
Josh turned plaintive. "We're not al-
lowed to cheer?"
When the game was over—a one-
point Knicks loss, not that it mattered—
Josh couldn't resist descending a few rows
to talk to the guard who had shushed
him. Like many people who like to get
into a bit of trouble, Josh has a corre-
sponding knack for talking himself out
of it. The guard, turning conspiratorial,
told him, "If it was me, I don't give a shit.
It's an N.B.A. rule. You're not allowed
to bother the refs, and you can't bother
the players during time-outs."
The brothers were listening intently,
but they were also watching, noting not
just the guard's pungent white-New York
accent but also the fit of his jacket, and
the purposeful way he gripped the rai-
ling when he descended to the section
below. Maybe one of these days they'll
need someone to play a Madison Square
Garden security guard.
Sandman!" Josh Safdie said, picking
up his phone. "What's going on?"
He and his brother were in a sound studio
in midtown, making last-minute alter-
ations to "Uncut Gems." On the screen, an
image of Sandler, in character as How-
ard, was frozen in mid-patter. Josh talked
quietly for a few minutes, then hung
up and turned to his brother. "Sandler
couldn't believe we were back in the mix," he
said. The Safdies love crosstalk and
ambient sound; they hate the idea of
forcing actors to deliver credible dialogue
in artificial silence. Now they were pre-
paring a special mix for the Dolby Atmos
system, which allows filmmakers to cre-
ate the sensation that sounds are ema-
nating from specific places in a room.
For years, the brothers were do-it-
yourself visionaries, finding ingenious
ways to make their little movies seem
big; they used the city as their sound-
stage in part because it was free. When
they began shooting "Uncut Gems," last
year, Josh was annoyed to see that
his crew had posted flyers with filming
permits on Forty-seventh Street; he was
hoping to keep a low profile, in order
to capture life in the district. Then he
saw the platoon of trucks parked around
the corner and remembered that he was
involved in a major production, much
too big to be surreptitious. For street
scenes, the Safdies assembled about a
hundred extras, who mingled with peo-
ple going about their business. If the
extras caught someone gawking at San-
dler, or at the camera, they were in-
structed to create a simple distraction:
approach the gawker and, posing as a
tourist, ask for directions to the nearest
subway station.
"This is very new—this whole expe-
rience," Benny Safdie said. For "Uncut
Gems," they commissioned a score by
the electronic musician Daniel Lopatin,
who records as Oneohtrix Point Never.
The sound is neoclassical, inspired, at
various points, by Haydn's Symphony
No. 88 and by Vangelis, the pioneering
synthesizer wizard. And yet the most
memorable sound is the raspy buzzer of
Howard's shop, which serves as the film's
irregular heartbeat. On this day, the
brothers were trying to make the mix a
little clearer, to allow viewers to separate
the voices from the noise. They worked
for a long time on a moment near the
end of the first act, when an African-
American character named Demany,
played by Lakeith Stanfield, issues a
pithy summation of Howard, the hero:
"He just a fuckin' crazy-ass Jew."
The Safdie brothers spent a decade
trying to make "Uncut Gems," driven
by their abiding affection for Howard,
who is, some early reviewers have no-
ticed, something of an asshole. A critic
on IndieWire called him "the most con-
temptible character" Sandler has ever
played, which means that he outranks
both title characters of "Jack and Jill,"
Sandler's 2011 comedy, about a man with
an annoying sister, which currently has
a three-per-cent positive rating on the
review site Rotten Tomatoes. Sandler
says that he was impressed by the script
The Safdies’ father, Alberto, a Sephardic Jew who grew up in Italy and France before moving to New York, worked for a time as a runner and a salesman on Forty-seventh Street, bringing jewelry from the district to shops in the boroughs; he would come home with stories of all the Howards he met. Alberto Safdie was by all accounts an unpredictable father; the brothers remember spending days at home alone, locked in a small bedroom, with a pile of comic books and basketball cards. But he transmitted to his sons an attention to the characters of the city, and an obsession with film. Not long after Benny was born, Alberto bought a video camera and began making home movies. In search of exciting footage, he would send the boys hurtling down too-steep ski slopes, or goad them into reenacting fights from the previous day. Sometimes they became aware that he had been secretly filming them, which made them both self-conscious and curious. Which moments did their father consider worth filming? Partly in self-defense, they started commandeering the camera to make their own films: goofy horror movies, parody documentaries, even an anti-smoking propaganda film, starring Josh as a smoker who suddenly dies.

Alberto split with the boys’ mother, Amy, when the brothers were young; to explain the situation, he instructed them to watch “Kramer vs. Kramer,” the brutal 1979 custody drama, leaving them to work out for themselves the complicated relationship between the filmed world and the real world. The Safdies spent their boyhood shuttling between Queens, with their father, and Manhattan, where their mother lived with their stepfather, who worked in finance. Their upbringing was “very fucked up,” Josh says, but they endured—becoming, in Benny’s words, “not just normal brothers” but also fellow-survivors. They graduated from Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, a private institution on the Upper West Side; in the early two-thousands, they arrived, a year apart, at Boston University. By then, they had co-founded a do-it-yourself filmmaking collective called Red Bucket, and begun paying special attention to films that blurred the line between fiction and documentary. Their boyhood favorites had included action movies like “48 Hrs.”; now they were discovering films like “Close-Up,” from 1990, by the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, who used both archival footage and reenactment to tell the real story of an obsessive fan who impersonated a celebrated director. In Boston, they studied with Ted Barron, a historian of contemporary independent American film, who was impressed by their industriousness. “They were always making stuff,” Barron says. “The other students would only make films when they were told to.”

This was the era of “Jackass,” the MTV show built around silly and painful stunts, and the Safdies brothers’ early work could be prankish. In one short film from 2008, which they describe as a “social experiment,” Benny plays a dickish businessman on a city bus, voicing increasing annoyance at a crying baby; eventually a long-haired Good Samaritan pushes him out the rear door, to the delight of fellow-passengers. Most of the people were innocent bystanders, but the Samaritan was a friend of the Safdies’, Casey Neistat, who was then emerging as a kind of online auteur. (Neistat and his brother Van made imaginative viral videos, including one in which Van illegally cycled through the Holland Tunnel; a few years later, they got an HBO show.) Neistat remembers the Safdies as adventurous but cerebral. “They were coming from a far more informed, intellectual, kind of academic side of the film world,” he says. It’s not hard to imagine a longer Safdie film that followed the baby’s mother, slightly freaked out by the outburst that interrupted her ordinary day.

Benny Safdie graduated in 2008, but he skipped the ceremony to fly to Cannes, where his short film “Acquaintances of a Lonely John” was screened, alongside Josh’s début feature, “The Pleasure of Being Robbed.” The films had been selected independently, and the programmers were surprised to find that the two directors were brothers. The early Safdie films were nearly twee, because the main characters tended to be wistful and a little restless. (In “Lonely John,” Benny plays an unmoored young man with a small apartment who likes to hang out at his local gas station.) But the brothers were determined to avoid easy sentiment and easily sympathetic characters. After Cannes, with some financing from a French company, they started work on an unabashedly autobiographical project, “Daddy Longlegs”: a feature about a young father, loving but wildly unreliable, trying to make it through a two-week visit with his two young sons. The mood shifted unpredictably from playful nostalgia to menace and back again, or nearly back again; once you’ve seen a character chopping up a sleeping pill to keep his children in bed longer, it’s difficult to view him as a well-meaning guy trying his best.

One afternoon, at a cheap Thai restaurant in midtown, Josh Safdie tried to explain his complicated feelings about his chosen profession. “I think movies are against nature,” he said. “It’s the most perverted art form.” He was talking about how filmmakers manipulate the world around them, using viewers’ voyeurism to trick them into caring about an invented reality. “It’s trying to replicate life,” he said. “Which is fucked up—and so powerful.”

The brothers’ mixed feelings about their medium often center on actors in particular. “Actors have a certain amount of psychotic energy,” Josh says. “They want to be other people.” Instead, the Safdies often cast people who seem incapable of being anything other than themselves. In the new film, Sandler’s girlfriend is played by Julia Fox, a glamorous figure from New York’s downtown bohemia, who is essentially making her acting début as the female lead in
one of the year’s most anticipated films. The Safdies have found that a useful tension is generated when professional actors are forced to contend with people playing themselves. “When Adam goes into that jewelry store and talks to two real jewellers, they’re not used to being on camera,” Benny says. “But he’s not used to being in jewelry stores.”

As the Safdies were casting “Daddy Longlegs,” Josh noticed two young boys on the street who seemed perfect. They turned out to be Sage and Frey Ranaldo, the sons of Lee Ranaldo, the Sonic Youth guitarist, and Leah Singer, an artist; the boys agreed to act in the movie, and their parents appeared as their stepfather and their mother. To play the father, the Safdies cast Ronald Bronstein, who was known for directing an intimate, black-hearted 2007 drama called “Frownland.” Josh met Bronstein on the street, at the SXSW festival, and loved his twitchy energy and his long, expressive face—he bears a faint resemblance to Kramer from “Seinfeld.”

Bronstein had been impressed by one of Safdie’s early short films, “We’re Going to the Zoo,” in which Josh plays a free-spirited hitchhiker. “It was just so light on its feet—it was like a helium balloon,” Bronstein says. “My balloon was filled with lead.” But he had no special interest in acting, and he didn’t want to embarrass himself, so he agreed to star only if he could consult on the script. The brothers agreed, and after the shoot they asked him to help them edit. Bronstein’s performance was widely celebrated: in 2010, he won Breakthrough Actor at the Gotham Independent Film Awards, beating Jennifer Lawrence and Greta Gerwig. But he has done almost no acting since then; instead, he has become the third member of Team Safdie. They have an elegant basic arrangement, Bronstein says: “I write with Josh, Josh directs with Benny, Benny edits with me.”

Bronstein has an office at Elara Pictures, the brothers’ production company, a few blocks south of Herald Square. On a recent afternoon, he was sitting in a chair on lime-green carpet, undistracted by the city noises leaking in from two sources: Broadway, through the window, and a cluster of editing screens, through the door. An assistant editor poked his head into the office, wondering whether to take home a copy of “Uncut Gems,” to do more work overnight. Bronstein considered the worst-case scenario. “What if you get mugged on the subway?” he said. “You have no idea how awful it would be.” The film stayed in the office.

“We’re all anxious people, in different ways,” Bronstein says, of himself and of the Safdies. A decade older than the brothers, Bronstein can serve as a figure of restraint. “I don’t get carried away by life as easily as they do,” he says. While the brothers orchestrate spectacles, his job has often been to make sure that quiet, intimate moments ring true. Bronstein describes the difference between the brothers in bluntly Freudian terms. “Josh is maybe the most analytically repulsive creator that I’ve ever come across,” he said, admiringly, in a documentary produced by Criterion. “He’s always shitfing everyhing out; he’s also always taking in new influences.” By contrast, he said, “Benny is, like, continence incarnate”—more circumspect, at least most of the time. Bronstein recalled that, when he was trying to film a follow-up to “Frownland,” Benny, who was one of his stars, had a tendency to interrupt rehearsals with bouts of weeping.

“Daddy Longlegs,” their first project together, was a critical hit: in 2010, it won the John Cassavetes Award (given to a film with a budget of less than half a million dollars); in the Times, A. O. Scott called it a “lovely, hair-raising film.” The Safdies imagined that “Uncut Gems” would come next. Josh began hanging out on Forty-seventh Street, trying to penetrate the world of jewelers, while also turning out short films and documentaries. When the brothers were hired by the Turtle Conservancy, a conservationist group, they produced a series of standard celebrity public-service announcements, and then something very different: a four-minute fake documentary about a rare-animal smuggler in a hotel penthouse in Hong Kong, which was so realistic that the Conservancy

“Hi! I’m the worst possible thing you could say at any given moment. Mind if I just hang out here in front of your face for your entire life?”
had to issue a statement reassuring view-
er-s that although the problem was real, the film was make-believe.

One way of describing the years after “Daddy Longlegs” is to say that the brothers kept getting sidetracked. When a producer asked if they would be interested in looking at some old footage of Lenny Cooke, a legendary New Jersey high-school basketball star who never quite managed a professional career, they said yes, and then found themselves spending years delving into Cooke’s life. The film they made has no narration, and it avoids the temptation to draw any lessons from Cooke’s thrilling boyhood (we see him scoring over a fellow-phenomenon, LeBron James) or his bittersweet adulthood. Near the end comes an audacious scene, enabled by special effects, that makes viewers wonder if anything else was fake.

In those years, Bronstein was working as a projectionist at Lincoln Center, and one day Josh Safdie stopped by to tell him that he had met an intriguing young woman on Forty-seventh Street: Arielle Holmes, a jeweller’s apprentice who turned out to be part of a community of homeless young people battling addiction. Safdie paid Holmes to write her life story, which she did, often by using display laptops at a nearby Apple Store. With Bronstein, the brothers turned her memoir into a movie: “Heaven Knows What,” an astonishingly grim film that Benny Safdie once described as a “nonfiction drama.” Holmes played a version of herself, pretending to use heroin while she was actually using methadone. (The brothers arranged for her to go to rehab once filming was done.) Caleb Landry Jones, an emerging movie star, played her abusive but somehow mesmerizing part-time boyfriend, Ilya. The real Ilya was by all accounts a volatile figure; he died of an overdose before the film’s première. Jones disappeared into the role so completely that people on the street sometimes mistook him for the real Ilya and, accordingly, tried to either calm him down or fight him. The Safdies filmed outside during a brutally cold winter fortnight, subsisting largely on trail mix made by a member of the crew; by the end of the shoot, they looked about as ragged as the people on the other side of the camera.

The unvarnished look of “Heaven Knows What,” which makes most other films about homeless characters seem ludicrously contrived, can obscure the brothers’ sophisticated approach. They worked with Sean Price Williams, one of the most celebrated cinematographers in independent film, who shot with long lenses, from a distance, so as not to disturb the actors or alert the authorities (there were no filming permits involved); the action unfolds in tense, unsteady closeups. In the film, as in life, Ilya’s musical tastes were extreme: we see him in a public library, listening to the black-metal band Burzum on YouTube. But, for the soundtrack, the brothers drew heavily on “Snowflakes Are Dancing,” the 1974 album by the Japanese electronic musician known as Tomita, which consists of otherworldly synthesizer versions of Claude Debussy’s compositions. The idea was to create a film that felt romantic, without romanticizing the addiction and the violence in it. “We know it’s not for everybody,” Josh Safdie said, around the time of the film’s release. But he felt confident that it would find an audience. “I think there’s eight kids in every high school in America that would freak out over this movie.”

One person who freaked out was Robert Pattinson, a star of the “Twilight” movies, who was looking for challenging new roles. Mesmerized by an image of Holmes from the film, heavy-lidded and lit in purples and pinks, he e-mailed the Safdies to say that he wanted to work with them. The brothers were still trying to make “Uncut Gems,” and they knew there was no role in it for a boyish English heartthrob. So they resolved to create something new for him. With Bronstein, they started thinking about a heist film, “Good Time,” in which a nervy lowlife named Connie tries to carry off a bank robbery. To balance Pattinson’s character, they gave him a brother with unspecified intellectual disabilities, someone to conspire with and also to take care of. They considered casting an actor with intellectual disabilities, but the film had to be emotionally and physically gruelling, and they worried that they wouldn’t be able to get the performance they wanted without subjecting the actor to real-life stress. Benny Safdie decided to play the role himself. When the film’s financiers expressed skepticism, he made an audition tape in character as Nick, growing agitated as he asked the casting director why she was filming him and what was going on. In the film, Benny makes Nick intensely thoughtful, even though we usually can’t be sure what he’s thinking.

For the Safdies, “Good Time” was a way of showing the film world that they could be trusted to make bigger movies. (Thanks to the marketable presence of Pattinson, the film had a reported budget of about four and a half million...
dollars.) To viewers who didn’t know the backstory, “Good Time” might have looked more like a crowning achievement. Connie and his accomplices tear through Manhattan, Queens, Long Island, and Brooklyn, showing us parts of New York that don’t always appear onscreen. One scene is a frenzied sprint through the New World Mall, in Fishing; the brothers had permission to shoot there, but they showed up without warning and shot largely with hidden cameras, as if they were still running a guerrilla operation. “Good Time” craftily updates the Safdie template: if their early movies sometimes felt improvised, this one had evident narrative momentum, supplied by a main character who is always on the run—and, therefore, constantly improvising. Many viewers may have been too dazzled by the action to notice the obstacle that the brothers put in their own path. To underscore the sense of physical push and pull, they managed to make a violent action movie with no guns.

Most of the reviews of “Good Time” were enthusiastic. But there were some dissenters, notably A. O. Scott, the Times critic. Scott, who had loved “Daddy Longlegs,” conceded that the brothers were “clever and crafty,” but he found himself repelled by the new movie, especially by the way Pattinson’s character mistreats a series of black characters. “This pattern does not seem accidental,” Scott wrote, and he wondered whether the brothers meant to hold up for critique Connie’s “bottom-of-the-barrel white privilege,” or whether they were merely trolling—engaged in “coy, self-disavowing provocation.” He concluded that it didn’t much matter. The movie, he wrote, was merely “a rickety genre thrill ride.” At its heart, it was “stale, empty, and cold.”

The brothers have said that these racial disparities were intentional: they were filming in 2016, and wanted to reflect the cruelty and confusion that they perceived all around them. And yet you need not agree with Scott’s critique in order to acknowledge that he identified something true. (For anyone sick of redemptive Hollywood fare, Scott’s condemnation—stale! empty! cold!—might even have sounded like an unintentional endorsement.) The Safdies have long resisted the idea that filmmaking should be morally instructive, with admirable heroes and clearly identified villains. Instead, they take an approach that is at once more generous and more unsparing, refusing to either condemn their characters or prettify them. Most of all, they resist the idea that movie characters must learn and grow; their heroes tend to be stubbornly stuck. “I don’t know many people who change—in particular, who change over a short span of time,” Josh Safdie says. “That’s just not how life unfolds.”

The Safdies aim less to edify audiences than to envelop them: they want to create immersive experiences, which generally requires that they immerse themselves. In order to make a film as unflinching as “Heaven Knows What,” Josh Safdie spent so much time in Holmes’s world that he scarcely registered its bleakness. (“Once you’re in the darkness, your eyes adjust,” he said.) On the press tour, Jones, their star, was mumbly and glassy-eyed, as if he were having trouble getting out of character.

When the film was released, Safdie proclaimed Holmes a “movie star,” and her life suddenly grew more glamorous; she modelled in a fashion shoot with Lady Gaga, and had a role in “American Honey,” the well-reviewed film about travelling magazine sellers. Since then, though, Holmes has faded from view. Buddy Duress was another first-time actor, gangly and charismatic, who appeared in “Heaven Knows What,” and again in “Good Time,” which was informed by his time in jail. He had a number of acting opportunities, but ended up back in jail on drug charges. “He’s so talented,” Safdie says. “He was doing so well. And he just got sucked back into that world.”

This is another thing that makes some people uneasy about the Safdies: they like to surround themselves with interesting and sometimes troubled characters, who help inspire their movies, and who don’t necessarily find their own lives transformed in the process. But it would be wrong to suggest that the brothers’ unblinking films reflect a lack of compassion. The true subject of “Good Time” is fraternal love, passionately expressed and imperfectly demonstrat. The Safdies seem to sustain close friendships with virtually all their collaborators, and with each other; if Josh hears Benny say something that he likes, he often responds by rubbing Benny’s ear or squeezing his arm.

“Uncut Gems” may not mollify critics of the Safdies’ tendency to appropriate styles and poses from real life, or to let their characters make bad decisions without authorial censure. It is partly a film about Jewish identity: Howard, the hero, is, in Sandler’s words, a “bad-ass Jew,” living in a Jewish enclave on Long Island. Like James Caan’s similarly badass character in “The Gambler,” from 1974, Howard is infatuated with basketball. The Safdies’ jewelry movie is also a basketball movie, set in 2012: Kevin Garnett, the retired Celtics star, convincingly plays himself, a prospective customer of Howard’s and also an important figure in Howard’s betting strategy. Scott Rudin, one of the producers, said he was drawn in partly by the “race politics”: Howard is a Jewish man whose clientele is largely African-American, and whose prized possession is a black opal stolen from an Ethiopian mine. When Garnett suggests that Howard exploited the Ethiopians by underpaying for the opal, Howard defends himself with a basketball analogy. “I see you out there when the fuckin’ stadium’s all booin’ ya, you’re thirty up, you’re still going full tilt,” he says. “Come on, K.G.—this is no different from that.” Through the Safdies’ eyes, we watch Howard fondly but not quite credulously. This is just how he is.

In October, “Uncut Gems” screened at Lincoln Center, as part of the New York Film Festival. On the red carpet, Sandler worked the media alongside many of the colorful characters who fill out the film. Mike Francesa, the sports-radio fixture, plays a bookie; Wayne Diomand, an astonishingly tanned fashion designer, plays a high roller; Keith Williams Richards, a former longshoreman, plays a tough guy—his first acting job, though possibly not his first time acting tough. The film radiates outward from Howard, who revels, Safdie-like, in travelling between worlds: we follow him to a Passover Seder, where
he encounters the ten plagues, and to a night club, where he encounters the R. & B. star the Weeknd. The film radiates inward, too: it is only a mild spoiler to reveal that “Uncut Gems” both starts and ends with the viewer tunnelling through Howard’s body. When it was over, and the audience was happily dazed, the Safdies and their collaborators shuffled onstage.

Garnett, during his playing days, liked to present himself as an implacable warrior. Asked about his acting work, he gave an earnest reply: “I wanted to be very present.” His wide-eyed intensity matches the film’s mood, but he was not the first basketball player the brothers considered. One early version featured Amar’e Stoudemire, whom they met while working on the Cooke documentary, and who usefully complicated the film’s view of identity by being both African-American and Jewish. (Stoudemire was not cast, partly because he declined to shave his dreadlocks, which he did not have in his playing years.) For a while, they talked to Joel Embiid, the Cameroonian star of the Philadelphia 76ers, but then it turned out that the movie would be shooting, inconveniently, during basketball season. Each time the player changed, the script needed to change, too. The brothers used N.B.A. footage without permission, and are planning to offer a “fair use” defense if the league objects; to strengthen their hypothetical case, they present the games exactly as they occurred, taking no license with the outcomes or the chronology. (Moviegoers hoping to avoid spoilers should avoid learning anything about the 2012 playoffs.)

The bigger challenge was casting Howard: he needed to be Jewish, and he needed to be riveting, but beyond that the brothers were flexible. They tried to get the script to Sandler. When that didn’t work, they pursued Harvey Keitel; they eventually decided that Howard should be younger, although not before having a convivial Seder with Keitel and his family, at Stoudemire’s house. For a while, Jonah Hill was attached, but then the brothers decided that he was too young, right around the time Hill decided that he was too busy. So they returned to Sandler, this time with extra muscle: Martin Scorsese, who had signed on as executive producer.

If you’re going to film a love letter to an unlovable character, it helps to have a star whom audiences already adore. The Safdies, like most people who were teen-agers in the nineteen-nineties, grew up on Adam Sandler, whose seemingly simple comedy is driven by a feral spirit. In his best roles, Sandler is stubbornly and sometimes unsettlingly irrational, an Everyman who insists on doing precisely what he feels like doing, even if he can’t quite explain why. During a recent conversation with Brad Pitt, which was filmed for Variety, Sandler conceded that Howard might sometimes be “unlikeable,” but Pitt stopped him. “He was never unlikeable,” Pitt said. “Never.” The trailer for “Uncut Gems” went viral as soon as it was released, in September. It showed Sandler, resplendent in big white teeth and little rimless glasses, stalking the streets of the Diamond District, alternately triumphant and pathetic, as people shout his name. The Safdies were gratified to see images on Twitter of fans dressed as Howard for Halloween—six weeks before the movie came out.

In the course of filming, Sandler came to be treated as an honorary member of the Forty-seventh Street fraternity. On the “Tonight Show,” he proudly explained to Jimmy Fallon that the jewellers had given him a professional-grade loupe. “I started looking at everybody’s jewelry, to see if it was good or bad,” he said. “And then—this is the weirdest thing—I discovered, because of the loupe: I have a penis!” He smirked. “And, guys: it’s also ‘uncut.’”

As Fallon collapsed into hysterics, Sandler finished the bit. “But I have to report to you, sadly: it’s not a ‘gem’.”

Sandler brings a trace of laziness to everything he does, as if he were always looking for a corner to cut; in this film, he often seems to be moving slightly slower than everyone else. Even so, there is no shortage of motion or sound. When not comparing “Uncut Gems” to a heart attack, critics have called it “a merciless assault on the senses,” offering earnest and divergent opinions about which sedatives might best help viewers recover.

The brothers have grown used to responses such as these. But, Josh Safdie says, “the whole point of it is not to assault people—the whole point of it is to create a feeling of what that world is.” For “Uncut Gems,” the Safdies brought in the cinematographer Darius Khondji, who is renowned for an elegant style, which the brothers both admired and wanted to disrupt. (Josh Safdie liked to torment Khondji by sending him images of buildings by the architect Michael Graves, who is known for exuberantly flouting conventions of good taste.) The Diamond District—which sprang up during the Second World War, when a cohort of Jewish gem dealers fled Europe—is not a cozy place, and the film is full of sharp angles, glass surfaces, and harsh light. The brothers’ bet is that, if they get enough details right, and create a vivid enough character, we will find this world as engrossing as they do—and maybe as lovable, too.

“Just filming something stupid,” Josh Safdie said, when a curious onlooker asked what he was doing. He was on West Forty-fifth Street, near Times Square, aiming a handheld camera at a human statue—a man dressed in gold from head to toe, with gold paint covering his face. The man walked over and conferred with the brothers: “Everybody had fun comments to say to me when I walked by. They said, ‘Stay golden!’”

If people had looked closely at the man in gold, he might have seemed familiar. Another member of the crew referred to him as “Sandman,” and Josh Safdie frowned. “Just call him Howard,” he said.

Sandler befriended the Safdies during the filming of “Uncut Gems,” and when he heard them talking about making a quick short film he asked if he could take part. A few years earlier, Benny Safdie had starred in “Solid Gold,” a five-minute film about a rather unsteady human statue. (Passersby, none of whom knew they were in a movie, tended to be encouraging and compassionate.) And so, on a recent night, the brothers made a trip to Times Square to film a sequel: now Benny was all in silver, and slightly better at standing still; Sandler, in gold, was the new wobbler. The brothers seemed energized by working the way they once did, without permits and without much of a script.
The group headed across Seventh Avenue, into the heart of Times Square, doing their best to act like strangers: just two human statues and a handful of onlookers with cameras, who could easily have been tourists. Eventually, the two statues had a confrontation, with Sandler shoving Benny Safdie down the street. Spectators gathered, tensing slightly the way people do when disorder is erupting. Sandler retreated to a side street so that Josh could capture some more footage, but Benny stayed put and stayed in character.

“Everybody was looking at me, like, ‘Was that real?’” Benny said, when he rejoined the group.

Josh was grinning. “Someone came up to me and was, like, ‘Was that guy with you?’” he said. “I was, like, ‘Nah.’ He turned to his wife and said, ‘That was real violence!’”

“The whole point is for people to go home thinking it’s real,” Benny said.

The brothers are compulsively productive, which is why they were making a tiny film even while finishing their big film. They admit that they had been dreaming of “Uncut Gems” for so long that they hadn’t really planned what to do afterward. “It feels like we won, but we lost—because it’s not ours anymore,” Josh said, at the Lincoln Center première. The brothers have a few new projects underway, including a rogueish travel show for television, partly inspired by “Fishing with John,” the 1991 cult classic. A few years ago, they began work, with the comedian Jerrod Carmichael, on a remake of “48 Hrs.;” since then, the planned remake has evolved into a stand-alone film that could be their next major directing project. They may produce another documentary, and they’re also thinking about a movie set in the world of rare-animal smuggling—the turtle project got them hooked.

“Uncut Gems,” which is distributed by the indie-film powerhouse A24, opens on December 13th. The Safdies haven’t yet figured out how much the film will change their lives, although the early signs are encouraging. It earned five nominations at the Film Independent Spirit Awards, including Best Feature and Best Director, and last week, at the New York Film Critics Circle Awards, the brothers were jointly named Best Director. Ted Barron, their former professor, attended a première in Toronto, and searched for an appropriate comparison. “The reaction to ‘Reservoir Dogs’ reminds me of the way people seem to be reacting to ‘Uncut Gems,’” he said. Except that the Safdies are already veterans. “They’ve been so much more prolific than Quentin Tarantino was at that stage of his career,” Barron said.

Back at Elara, the brothers filmed Sandler in the building’s grimy first-floor washroom, rubbing gold off his face. Josh Safdie pounced on the door, and Sandler roared, “Somebody’s in here!”

Benny offered a note. “A little bit more relaxed on the ‘Somebody’s in here,’” he said. “Like you’re kind of dejected.”

Afterward, Sandler went upstairs to get cleaned up, and the brothers headed back outside to shoot some more. They walked to Herald Square, and suddenly they seemed to be filming a different movie: the area was largely deserted, except for a volunteer serving soup to some hungry people who looked as if they didn’t have anywhere to go. Josh Safdie filmed scenes of his brother, still in silver paint, walking down Thirty-fifth Street. There was a police car, with its lights on, sitting behind a truck that was making a delivery to Macy’s. The back of the truck was empty and unattended. “Benny, get in the truck,” Josh shouted. “What for?” Benny said. “It’s your home.”

So he climbed in, sat down, and hung his head. He sat there for a long time, his shiny suit illuminated by red and blue police lights; when the driver returned, he asked Benny to stay there longer, so that his boss could see the spectacle.

If you spend enough time in the brothers’ world, the city starts to seem like one of their films. As they walked back to their office, some of the hungry people formed a chorus, singing an impromptu theme song: “Silver man! Silver man! Herald Square!” Benny passed a father with his young daughter, who prevailed upon him to do a brief show, and who didn’t seem to notice that his miming skills were distinctly second-rate.

“That was amazing,” Benny said, when the father and daughter had gone. “That kid was, like, over the moon.”

“It’s like a Superman cape,” Josh said. They figured they probably had enough footage for their short movie. “It looked beautiful in the truck,” he said. “It’s a little shaky, but—”

Benny finished the thought: “But sometimes that’s O.K.”
A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE ACT OF PROTEST

Struggling against Beijing, Hong Kong tries to define itself.

BY JIAYANG FAN

A cloudless mid-September afternoon in Hong Kong. At City Hall, two flags—one of the People’s Republic of China, the other of Hong Kong—flap halfheartedly in the wind coming off the harbor. Inside, university students are engaged in intense debate. A moonfaced young man, his thick hair pulled up in a bun, rises from his seat at a long white table to attack the formula known as “one country, two systems,” which was deployed in the early eighties, by the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, as he negotiated with Britain for the handover of Hong Kong. It seemed to guarantee that after the handover, which took place in 1997, Hong Kong would continue to enjoy distinct political and socioeconomic freedoms for at least fifty years. The young man, however, declares that the formula is nothing but a “rhetorical coverup” for an erosion of liberties. Given the city’s compromised autonomy, hasn’t the central government, in Beijing, broken its promise to the people of Hong Kong?

Suddenly, a bell rings, and a woman sets out with prosecutorial vehemence the dangers of rejecting the “one country, two systems” principle. “If we fight the current framework, we will lose the existing rights and freedoms,” she says.

“What happens after fifty years?” the man counters. “Should we bid farewell to our current way of life?”

“We still have twenty-eight years to find a path of survival,” she replies, referring to the end of the fifty-year transition period, in 2047. This date, when Hong Kong is likely to be wholly integrated into the People’s Republic of China, inspires enormous foreboding.

Debates about Hong Kong’s fate are convulsing the city—at family dinner tables, online, and, above all, in the streets. Since June, demonstrations sparked by a bill to allow extraditions from Hong Kong to the mainland have drawn unprecedented numbers of protesters determined to resist Beijing’s influence. But the debate at City Hall—which, despite its name, is mostly a performance venue—was actually a piece of semi-documentary theatre called “The First and Second Half of 2047.” Much of the script was written by the students who performed it, in a process that the director, Wu Hoi Fai, described to me as “sometimes like shooting a documentary on the stage.”

As the show progressed, it reached back in time. Suitcases were strewn around the stage, and then stacked to represent the city’s skyline, conjuring the land of opportunity that drew successive generations of immigrants and refugees from mainland China. Wu explained that this material came from interviews with older people; one actor had interviewed his father, a staunch opponent of the pro-democracy protests, and now spoke his words onstage. Wu, who is fifty, said he has become increasingly aware that young people have only vague notions about Hong Kong’s past. Many of the actors in the play hadn’t even been born at the time of the 1997 handover.

After the show, I talked to the cast. A graduate of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts mentioned that work on the play had started in the summer, not long after the beginning of the current wave of protests. She found herself thinking how odd it was to be inside rehearsing a play about protests when you could just go outside and join a real one. Many of the actors were involved in the street demonstrations, and some rehearsals had been rescheduled to accommodate particularly significant rallies. Taking off their stage costumes at the end of a show, they donned others: the all-black clothing, gas masks, and helmets that have become the de-facto uniform of the uprising.

The company’s motto was “We work
July, during the first weeks of the largest protests in Hong Kong’s history.
in theatre, we keep an eye on society,” and the sense of reality and art blurring was enhanced when I wandered outside during intermission and came across a protest in full swing. A stage had been set up. College and high-school students were taking turns at an open mike, speaking to an audience in much the same terms that the actors inside were.

“It is only through acting that we come to discover our identities,” another cast member told me. In the same sense, the protesters were finding their voices on the streets of the city. Yet, as blazingly alive as these artistic and political voices were, they were shadowed by futility. The territory has its own parliament, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, but only half its seats are elected by a direct democratic vote. (The other half are reserved for the representatives of various industry groups.) When pro-democracy candidates won a landslide victory in the District Council elections, two weeks ago, the jubilation made it easy to forget that the councils have no legislative role.

When I asked protesters what they thought should happen, they often had trouble articulating an endgame. By now, the extradition bill that had sparked the protests had been withdrawn, but the movement had come up with a list of demands, which included amnesty for arrested protesters, an independent inquiry into police brutality, and universal suffrage. Some people I spoke to were even talking about fighting for independence from Beijing, though few believed it was a possibility. The absence of any sense of what a viable compromise might look like encouraged people to be unyielding, and they voiced the principles at stake—democracy and freedom of expression—with fierce purity.

Meanwhile, creativity expressed itself everywhere: performances, graffiti art, songs, slogans, memes. And in this artistic impulse one could see Hong Kongers striving to establish an independent sense of identity, and to insulate it against mainland influence. Wu, the director, described the Hong Kong of his youth as “a cultural despot.” In a territory geared toward making money, most art that flourished was wholly commercial, like Cantopop and popcorn cinema, and was tailored for consumption across Asia rather than for a domestic audience. Wu’s approach was proudly local. “How we narrate this city’s past has meaning, and the meaning is political, because art is political,” he said. “Not least because, in Hong Kong, the past is literally a different country.”

The cast of “2047” thought constantly about the relationship between self-expression and political action. “When and how does news become art?” an actor in his late twenties asked. “We artists are always rehearsing in the privacy of our studios, but we need to move our performance to the public. Society should be our stage.” On October 1st, the seventieth anniversary of Communist rule in China, as the city was roiled by some of the bloodiest clashes since the protests began, the actor was arrested and his arm was broken by the police. Because Hong Kong has started using a colonial-era statute to charge arrestees with “rioting,” he faces a maximum prison sentence of ten years.

It was a little more than a year since I’d last been to Hong Kong, and I was struck by its transformation. Graffiti mottled the pavement. Protest songs blasted in the public parks. The spirit of open defiance, while jarring, felt curiously festive. Previously, the city, endlessly obliging to its rotating clientele of businessmen and tourists, had seemed aloof and polite, like a hotel concierge. Now it had the vibe of a sweat-soaked busker, determined to play his music to all passersby.

On my first Sunday in town, I went to a rally and march with Antony Dapiran, a lawyer who has written a history of protest in Hong Kong. The march, which began at noon, set off from Victoria Park and Causeway Bay, in the heart of the commercial district. We proceeded west, tracing the curve of Victoria Harbor, past Wan Chai to Admiralty, an area that includes many government offices and the Hong Kong headquarters of the Chinese military. Riot police lined the streets. The police had not issued a permit for the march, making it technically illegal, but none of the young parents, secondary-school students, and retirees I spoke to seemed fazed by the danger. A Vietnamese grandmother who had moved to Hong Kong half a century earlier told me that the youngest of her five children was a police officer. The night before, the family had gathered for a Mid-Autumn Festival dinner. Today, he was on the streets, working.

Dapiran had been attending protests for months, and said that they tended to happen in phases, the first of which was a peaceful march like this one; later, the crowd would thin and the violent confrontations would begin. Nonviolence was a hallmark of the previous large-scale protest movement, in 2014, which included sit-ins that paralyzed parts of central Hong Kong for months. The Umbrella Movement, named for the umbrellas that protesters deployed to protect themselves against tear gas, aroused worldwide admiration. But it did not achieve its stated aim, electoral reform, and, since then, its student leaders have been repeatedly jailed on a variety of charges. The violence of the current protests comes out of this sense of frustration, as does the movement’s notable lack of identifiable leaders. The protesters make their decisions in a decentralized way, communicating anonymously via social media, mostly using the encrypted messaging app Telegram; their watchword is “Be like water.”

When the crowd grew smaller, in the late afternoon, we ducked down a quiet side street to get our protective gear ready for the second phase. As I tugged on my gas mask, I caught sight of my reflection in the window of an Audi dealership. Inside, a wealthy-looking couple, engrossed in a discussion with one of the salesmen, glanced at me.

When we rejoined the rally, most of the remaining protesters were clad in black, their faces covered in masks or wrapped in scarves, and carried open umbrellas. Young men passed by pushing trolleys stacked with bricks that they had dug out of the sidewalk. Others pulled up iron gratings and barri-
caded the middle of the road with them. We stood on one of the city’s many footbridges and watched the crowd pass beneath, a torrent of open umbrellas. People on other footbridges stretched out their arms toward the protesters and chanted their support. Reflexively, I took out my phone to snap a picture, even though it was an image I’d seen in a dozen newspapers. Then I noticed a thicket of tripods and cameras pointed at the footbridge I was on. TV crews and photojournalists had determined that the outstretched arms above the battle-ready figures made a compelling picture.

Behind us on the bridge was a group of Filipino and Indonesian women sitting on flattened cardboard boxes—domestic workers who, on their one day off, usually gathered in the public squares that were now given over to protests. The women had moved to the elevated bridge to chat, stretch their legs, and snack on sunflower seeds. They looked on with expressions of equable semi-curiosity. No one looked at them.

It was clear that the main action would take place on Tim Wa Avenue, which runs between the headquarters of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army and the offices of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam. M mobile stations had been set up to hand out water and other supplies. Riot police patrolled behind barriers, looking almost imprisoned in their bulky gear. At a few minutes before five o’clock, the police raised a black flag, the warning signal that they were prepared to use tear gas to break up the demonstration.

Soon, tear gas was misting around the crowd in great gray plumes. The protesters hurled bricks and a few Molotov cocktails at the police. Lines of flame flashed on the street. A water cannon sprayed an obscenely beautiful arc of aqua blue. Before long, I heard the pop of beanbag rounds and rubber bullets being fired. At one point, a tear-gas cannister landed by my feet. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. A first-aid worker doused me with saline and told me to take shallow breaths, as deeper ones irritate more lung tissue.

The next phase of these confrontations invariably comes after nightfall, when the main front between protesters and police splinters into smaller skirmishes—a game of Whac-A-Mole played out on the city streets. Where people ran in the next hour was determined by what they were reading on their phones—updates via Telegram groups, Twitter feeds, and L.I.H.K.G., a local messaging board. There were reports and rumors of arrests, beatings, and small, temporary victories. Where we were, in the main shopping district, the action was garishly illuminated by the LCD displays of global brands.

Soon, the action shifted to North Point, where a band of Fujianese men, possibly intoxicated, wielded butcher knives when they saw protesters approach. Elsewhere, protesters surrounded a man suspected of being an undercover officer. There is a kind of logic to the way the crowds move, react, and move on. Wherever there was a commotion, reporters and camera crews rushed in, followed by legions of curious onlookers brandishing selfie sticks. Eventually, the police would show up, but by then another commotion had usually broken out somewhere else, and the scene would shift.

Away from the protests themselves, the most potent expression of Hong Kong’s burst of creative dissent is at the so-called Lennon Walls, which have sprung up around the territory. The walls are covered in protest art ranging from Post-it mosaics to life-size installations. (They take their name from a wall in Prague that was made into a memorial after the murder of John Lennon.)

One Saturday, I visited Tai Po, a coastal suburb in the New Territories, an area of Hong Kong that borders mainland China. Situated in an underground passageway, Tai Po’s Lennon Wall seemed like a psychedelic mashup of a bazaar and a contemporary art “happening.” The surface was so thickly covered that the layers of Post-its and flyers seemed organic, like mold or ivy. Someone had made hundreds of black shirts out of origami paper, accompanied by the words “We

“Don’t worry. It’s lemming fur.”
walk together.” An unnamed ironist had appropriated a quotation from Mao about revolutionary war as “an antitoxin” that “eliminates the enemy’s poison” and offered it as a rebuke of the solemnity of Communist propaganda. This brand of sly, subversive humor has become a hallmark of the Hong Kong protests.

There were outbreaks of self-aware kitsch (cartoon characters of every provenance wearing gas masks), flamboyant irreverence (Carrie Lam’s name lends itself to a pun involving gonorrhea), and lacerating satire (a missing-person notice for “good Hong Kong cops,” a death certificate for Hong Kong democracy). The sheer diversity of references—Japanese anime, Hollywood classics, Tang-dynasty poetry—was dizzying, and the sardonic delivery, laced with anger, cynicism, and wit, embodied the exuberant swagger of the movement. This was twenty-first-century agitprop, steeped in globalized culture and designed for digital virality.

Some of the posters, cartoons, and graffiti on the wall were hard for me, as a Mandarin speaker, to decipher. Although Mandarin and Cantonese speakers generally read the same scripts, sometimes the written text reflects the divergences of the dialects. Hong Kongers speak Cantonese, but in school they are taught to write using the vocabulary and the grammar of standard written Chinese. When Beijing made spoken Mandarin a compulsory subject, some students increasingly used characters unique to Cantonese, which were incomprehensible to Mandarin speakers. Language became politicized, and Cantonese writing proliferated—on posters, on university campuses, and in online pro-democracy news outlets. The Umbrella Movement has an alternate name that uses one of these characters, a symbol of resistance to mainland, Mandarin-speaking authority.

The growth of this us-and-them mentality was evident everywhere. At the Tai Po Lennon Wall, I saw posters denouncing mainlanders as “mainland cunts.” Mandarin speakers often told me how unwelcome they were made to feel, and sometimes went on to talk about Cantonese speakers in vituperative terms. I experienced this animus myself a few days later, at a daytime rally in a park, when a group of peaceful protesters grew suspicious of me because I spoke Mandarin rather than Cantonese, and had a distinctly mainland accent. (I was born in Chongqing and immigrated to the United States when I was eight.) Everyone was sure that Beijing had operatives on the ground covertly monitoring the demonstrations: who was to say that I wasn’t one of them? When I told the group that I was an American journalist, they challenged me to prove it. The most worrying moment came when I pulled out my passport and American press credentials. Surrounded by a tight ring of people yelling that I was almost certainly a Communist Party agent, I could feel a nasty momentum building. Eventually, I began to record the scene, which helped disperse the crowd. But hostility lingered: I was definitely not one of them.

One night, at the Sham Shui Po subway station, in Kowloon, two protesters in their twenties met behind a pillar. One opened a backpack and furtively pulled out several pairs of gloves and some gas masks. The other quickly stuffed them into his own bag. He had weak lungs, and his friend was worried about him, because he coughed convulsively whenever there was any smoke or tear gas in the air. They knew each other since college, where they shared a dorm room, and they now worked in the same office building.

I’d met the first man earlier that evening, after messaging with him on Telegram. His screen name was No Name, and we agreed that that’s what I would call him. This kind of reticence was common among the protesters, who knew that they were dealing with a technologically sophisticated police force. It had taken days to persuade No Name to meet in person, but eventually he instructed me to go to a restaurant in Kwai Hing, a neighborhood in the New Territories. He said he was available only after 10 p.m.

When I arrived, I checked my phone to see if I’d got the right place: a public-housing complex with a series of gray, brutalist columns looming above narrow alleyways, where older folk sat on bamboo stools, playing cards and eating barbecue. The street lights were so dim that it took me a moment to make out the rats scurrying on the asphalt. It looked like the outskirts of any third-tier city on the mainland—indeed, it reminded me of the Chongqing of my childhood, thirty years ago. It was a world away from the luxury towers that most people associate with Hong Kong.

In the restaurant, I texted No Name to say that I had arrived and was wearing a green short-sleeved shirt. I was still looking at my phone when a voice above me said, “That’s not green, it’s blue.” I looked up and saw a young man wearing a black T-shirt and wire-frame glasses. He looked no more than sixteen and held himself with a coiled energy. He took a seat and asked for my press credentials. For the past four months, he said, he had not missed a single protest.

Of the 1.7 million people who are thought to have marched in the protests (around twenty per cent of Hong Kong’s population), No Name estimated that there were about ten thousand who could be considered frontliners. Of those, perhaps eight thousand had set up roadblocks, painted graffiti, or neutralized tear-gas canisters with traffic cones. He considered himself one of the hard core—some two thousand “proactive” protesters, who were willing to escalate confrontations with the police and to engage in activities, such as throwing Molotov cocktails or sabotaging surveillance cameras, that could result in serious prison sentences. He coordinated his efforts with about a dozen fellow front-liners via Telegram. Some members of this group had been arrested recently, he said, but there was no shortage of others to take their places. The bigger problem was guarding against infiltration by informants. During the summer, he had set up a screening process for people who wanted to join the struggle. He checked their I.D.s, quizzed them on their backgrounds, and asked them if they had thought through the possible consequences. Everyone should know that arrest and injury are not only possible but almost probable, he told me.
PASSION

Your dog gnaws the rug you made love upon for the last time.
When your lover left and you rolled yourself inside the rug to sleep in agony your dog stayed with you.
Your dog chews out the armpits of your lover’s shirt and shreds the underwear you were wearing when he touched you. That’s devotion.
The dog chews your pen and stains his tongue then licks the white pillows.
His way of writing you a poem.
He eats the spout off the blue plastic watering can.
He starts on the porch, a rotted board, and soon that board rips away from the wicked red nails.
Your dog eats the nails and does not die.
Although you have no porch, no lover, no rug, no underwear, you understand.
The dog is trying to eat your grief.
In helpless longing to get close to you he must destroy what’s close to you.

—Louise Erdrich

I mentioned some recent reported instances of vigilante justice, in which protesters had launched attacks on other civilians. “We don’t beat up innocent people,” No Name said, fixing me with a stare, before going on to express a common belief that thugs were sometimes deployed to attack protesters while police turned a blind eye. “If the police don’t do their job, we must send a warning through our actions to those who abuse us,” he went on. “What we protesters are practicing is not violence but force. If you abuse force, that’s violence—but you can also use force to express justice.”

Most of the prospective front-liners he’d interviewed came, as he did, from working-class families, which he thought reflected the fact that Hong Kong’s wealthiest citizens insulated themselves from politics. “Plus, would the wealthy permit their children to get hurt or, if it comes to it, to die?” he said. I asked if he was willing to die for the cause. He did not hesitate to answer. “I don’t mind being the one to die if my death has a purpose and makes an impact,” he said. “If destiny chooses me, so be it.”

Our food arrived, and, as No Name attended to a plate of sweet-and-sour chicken, he loosened up somewhat. He was born in the mid-nineties, he told me, to a couple from a Guangdong fishing village. In the eighties, the family had managed to sail to Hong Kong. His mother is illiterate, and his father, who worked in construction, has a primary-school education. They never talked about the past, he said, but early on they were so poor that they survived by foraging for food in the mountains that make up much of Hong Kong’s landmass.

Growing up, No Name frequently defied authority at home and in school. “I never liked to be forced into doing something without explanation,” he said. “I was the smart-ass always asking questions. I was always getting beat.” He clashed with his father, who was hot-tempered and governed the family with his belt.

Despite having fled Communist China, No Name’s father, who was proud of his own father’s service in the People’s Liberation Army, was a stickler for order and hierarchy, and gradually the father-son confrontations acquired a political cast. As a high-school student, No Name joined demonstrations against a Beijing-backed plan to introduce a national education program, which many protesters believed would amount to indoctrination. During the Umbrella Movement protests, he spent many nights at the sit-ins. That’s when his father delivered an ultimatum: “If you’re going to protest against the government, don’t bother coming back home.” But, by then, No Name was in college, living in a dorm. His father, he said, “no longer had the power to lock me out, and he couldn’t beat me into submission.”

After dinner, No Name and I walked around the neighborhood, and stopped by an all-night 7-Eleven for a cold soft drink. We stood outside, drinking and chatting on the empty sidewalk, but after a few minutes he abruptly lowered his voice, saying that we should go elsewhere—there might be surveillance cameras in the store. “We aren’t doing anything wrong,” I said.

“They’ll get you if they don’t like you, no matter if you are doing anything wrong or not,” No Name replied. By “they,” he meant the police, the government, the transit authority, and “everyone who colluded with them in their coverups.” He started talking about the so-called August 31st incident, at the Prince Edward subway station, when riot police were filmed storming the terminal, rushing into subway cars, and assaulting passengers with batons and pepper spray. The transport authority closed the station, denying access to journalists and first-aid services. Although ten people were seen being taken to the hospital, the number of injured was later reported as seven. Ever since, among many protesters, it’s become an article of faith that those people were beaten to death.

I asked No Name if he believed that theory. He took a gulp from his soda
and told me it was very possible. Still, could the police successfully silence the family and friends of three people indefinitely? No Name looked at me hard under the dim lamplight. “Do you know how easy it is for the police to just disappear people?” he said. “You have no idea what they are capable of.” Distrust of social institutions had spread like a contagion among the young. “On some level, it doesn’t even matter if the deaths are true,” he said, with a shrug. “The possibility of these deaths gets people riled up and will keep them coming out.”

“The truth doesn’t matter?”

“The system is rigged,” he said. “The truth is that the government doesn’t give a shit about exercising brutality against unarmed citizens.”

It was late and beginning to rain. We had wound our way back to the restaurant where we’d met. A few men remained, smoking and swigging beer, their shirts rolled up, revealing slack, pale bellies. Now, five hours into our conversation, No Name told me that this neighborhood was where he’d grown up: “Many people here still want to live the way they lived in their home villages—they haven’t assimilated to Hong Kong life.”

And yet wasn’t life in Hong Kong about a sense of upward mobility? I suggested that, whatever his reservations about his father, the man had done something impressive in coming to a foreign place and raising six kids who graduated from college. And all of them were fluent in four languages: Cantonese, Mandarin, Southern Min (the local dialect of their parents’ home village on the mainland), and English. No Name was in no mood for generosity. “When he was in his twenties, he risked everything to go to a strange place to find a better life,” he said. “How can he not understand that I’m fighting for a better life now?”

I thought of No Name a few days later, during a conversation with a pro-democracy activist and prominent businessman, Jimmy Lai, who came up with a familial analogy for Hong Kong’s struggle. The Communist Party, he said, saw the insurgent territory as a bratty child bringing shame on the family name; Hong Kongers saw mainland China as an abusive parent. In 1989, when Deng Xiaoping ordered the Army to put down the Tiananmen uprising, the Communists were able to mete out punishment behind closed doors, just as No Name’s father had done. But concealment is impossible in an age of smartphones and social media. “Now the door is open,” Lai said. “The neighbors can hear what’s going on. China has to find a way to pinch them hard but secretly.”

In Beijing-influenced media outlets, it’s become common to paint the protesters as a fringe group of disaffected youth; they are described not as idealists but as people merely frustrated by Hong Kong’s declining economic status relative to that of the booming mainland. When China took over, in 1997, Hong Kong’s G.D.P. accounted for 18.4 per cent of the country’s total; a number that, within two decades, had shrunk to 2.8 per cent. Still, survey data show that, while more than fifty per cent of protesters are younger than thirty, a notable number are in their fifties and older. But the Confucian parallel be-
tween the state and the family remains strong in China, and Beijing’s emphasis on the protesters’ youth betrays its inability to see political resistance as anything other than filial disobedience.

“The intra-household, intergenerational struggle in Hong Kong is something that’s almost unprecedented,” Ryan Manuel, a political scientist who runs a research center in Hong Kong, told me. “Many parents of today’s millennials were refugees fleeing from poverty or political chaos—their one goal is survival and stability. But their children were raised in one of the world’s most cosmopolitan cities. They grew up in the epicenter of globalization, privy to first-rate social services, medical care, and most of the pillars of a liberal society. They speak three languages at least. They’re culturally sophisticated, and have a sense of themselves as individuals.” Older generations, whether in Maoist China or colonial Hong Kong, grew up without any expectation of political empowerment. Out of a sense of self-preservation, they kept their distance from politics. To their children, this position seems like unforgivable quietism and complacency.

“I would be happier if my mom went to pro-government rallies or if she lashed out at me,” a twenty-six-year-old protestor named Sa told me. “You can’t argue with a void.” An only child who’d had little contact with her father growing up, Sa had an extremely close relationship with her mother, which she described with a proverb: Xiangyi weiming (“Mutual reliance for existence”). But, in June, when the police teargassed crowds for the first time, she was in a restaurant with her mother, and, as she started to sob—friends were sending her texts from the scene—she noticed that her mother became suddenly passive, even playing a game on her phone to avoid acknowledging that anything was amiss.

Sa knew that her mother was unsympathetic to the protests. The two women had always avoided talking about politics, but now Sa decided that things had to change. “I thought that I needed to show the impact of politics on her insulated, domestic sphere,” she said, describing how she later told her mother that a loss of Hong Kong autonomy could have terrible economic consequences and deplete her life savings. The older woman merely shrugged, saying that, even if this happened, there was nothing she could do about it. Sa tried again: “If you don’t care about yourself or your savings, how would you feel if someday the police came to arrest me?” Her mother shrugged once more, and said, “What can I do but let them take you?”

“I felt completely cut open,” Sa told me. The years of Xiangyi weiming were obliterated, and, as the two women tried to pretend that nothing had happened, Sa had the uncanny feeling that they were merely acting out their roles of mother and daughter. Within a few weeks, they had stopped talking altogether.

Even away from the demonstrations, Hong Kong life had become fractional, piously political. Cabdrivers, shopkeepers, hotel doormen: everyone had an urgent opinion and pressed me for mine. I tried to sound neutral, the better to elicit the opinions of others, but anything you said—whether you referred to “protests” or to “riots,” for instance—was bound to upset someone. If I spoke Mandarin, people assumed that my sympathies lay with Beijing; if I spoke English, I was clearly a Western liberal hostile to the Communist government. At the airport, when I told a cabbie where I was going, he responded in Cantonese: “If you can’t speak Cantonese, I can’t speak Mandarin.” I switched to English, but he didn’t seem to speak it. A dispatcher approached to find out why we hadn’t moved and soon started yelling at the driver in Cantonese. I could just make out the gist, which was that the man could speak Mandarin but was refusing to do so. I offered to take another cab, but no one was listening; the argument had developed a life of its own.

In the polarized atmosphere, people talked about how they could no longer face going to a certain shop, or restaurant, or barber, because the owner’s views outraged them. Apps and social-media groups have sprung up that mark local businesses as blue (pro-government), yellow (protest-supporting), or green (neutral), to help users navigate the increasingly divided city.

One day, I stopped by a massage place in a shopping district at the southern tip of Kowloon. I was the only customer, and a giant flat-screen TV was set to TVB, Hong Kong’s largest broadcaster, which is mistrusted by protesters for its perceived pro-Beijing bias. My masseuse, a middle-aged woman who went by Ah Ying, had tattooed brows and wide cheekbones, and smiled when I spoke in Mandarin. I learned that she was from a farming village in northern Hunan, and didn’t know or care much about the protests. To the extent that she thought about them at all, it was to lament their effect on business. Working twelve-hour days, six days a week, she was used to at least a dozen customers a day. Now she was lucky if she got six.

Ah Ying was one of many mainlander who, after 1997, came to Hong Kong hoping to make good in a wealthy city. Between China’s continued boom and a slowing of the territory’s economy, however, she’d begun to feel that she’d made a bad bet. She had family back in Hunan who, thanks to government resettlement subsidies, were doing better than she was. When she showed me to the bathroom, we passed by the windowless room, the size of a janitor’s closet, where she and her husband slept.

Ah Ying mentioned her daughter, who worked as a waitress nearby and had recently given birth to a boy. Although her daughter liked Hong Kong, Ah Ying preferred the mainland. Even after a decade and a half, she didn’t feel as though she had assimilated. What did her daughter make of the protest movement? I asked. Ah Ying shrugged. It wasn’t something that they discussed. Did she know if her daughter had joined any of the marches? For the first time in our conversation, Ah Ying tensed visibly. “I would beat her to death if she dared,” she said.

A while later, a man clutching a cup of tea wandered in from the back, where he’d been playing mah-jongg with another masseuse. Speaking to Ah Ying in Hunanese, he turned up the volume of the TV, which showed protesters burning the Chinese flag. “Fucking terrorists,” he muttered. Turning to me, he repeated the statement in Mandarin, perhaps expecting an easy nod of agreement. When I said that I was still trying to make sense of the situation,
his brows creased. “Don’t you know what’s going on?” he said. “They’re mad—men destroying this city. It’s clear you aren’t a patriot, otherwise you’d pay more attention to matters of the state.”

Before I left, a friend of Ah Ying’s stopped by, a stout, round-faced woman, also from the mainland, bearing a satchel of fruit. She passed around some grapes while she complained about the steep decline in customers at the food stall that she ran. It had been like this for two months, she said. The women consoled themselves by talking about a trip they would take back to their respective home regions for the Chinese New Year, in January. Hong Kong, they agreed, never felt festive. People kept to their tiny apartments. There was no —a phrase evoking a collective human spirit. Ah Ying’s friend nodded, and said, “It just never feels like home.”

On the thirty-second floor of a skyscraper in Hong Kong, a financier in his mid-sixties led me to a conference room with a view of Victoria Harbor, the sun glittering on the water and on the expensive real estate, with a thin ridge of mountains visible in the distance. He took a seat at the head of the table, his fingers lightly playing over the white case of his AirPods.

The financier was one of a handful of prominent businessmen who have been instrumental in bringing Western ideas about capital and management to China. Born in Beijing, he came of age during the Cultural Revolution, which deprived him of the opportunity to attend high school. But, thanks to Deng’s reforms, he was among the first batch of Chinese students given the chance to study in the United States. After attending graduate school in California, he worked at a series of establishment institutions and American banks. When he returned to China, he gained a reputation not only as a formidable dealmaker but also as someone culturally attuned to both the East and the West—in a sense, a quintessential Hong Konger.

The financier began by inquiring about my own history: how I’d landed at a place like The New Yorker; why I hadn’t taken an English name. It was clear that he was more comfortable asking questions than answering them, but I steered the conversation toward what I’d come to discuss: Hong Kong’s economy and its evolving relationship with China. He asked what my angle was. I said that I didn’t have one yet, and that interviews were a way for me to absorb multiple perspectives. “So let me save us some time,” he said, putting up a hand. He called out for his secretary to print a copy of an op-ed that he’d written. I read it while he fiddled with his phone.

I asked him about his assertion in the article, in opposition to the protests, that democracy meant compromise. He sighed with impatience. “I’m not into debating,” he said. “Everyone is entitled to their opinion, whether there is a basis or no basis.” I asked what he made of the protesters’ demands. “I don’t take very seriously the demands by a small group of people who engage in violence,” he said, and called the appeal for amnesty “totally ridiculous.” After all, he said, Hong Kong “prides itself on law and order.”

In his view, the pro-democratic politicians in the Hong Kong Legislative Council had had an opportunity to gain universal suffrage in 2014 but bungled it. That proposal, however—which it set out the possibility of a direct plebiscite for the position of Chief Executive—mandated that all candidates be endorsed by a nominating committee that tends to be loyal to Beijing and the city’s business elite. When I brought this up, the financier studied me for a long moment.

“To suggest that there is this idea—that Hong Kong wants universal suffrage that Beijing doesn’t want—is wrong,” he said. “That’s simply not the truth!”

I wanted to understand how a movement of a few radicals could come to swallow an entire city. “You are not interviewing me,” he said. “You are making arguments with me.”

On it went. He insisted that he was interested only in facts and data while I seemed intent on pushing my prejudices. I was surprised to find myself in an argument about the protests, given that I’d begun with questions about their economic context. Still, I’d met few Hong Kongers who were on the fence. People espoused their views wholeheartedly and tended to regard the existence of an alternative opinion with baffled exasperation. In a way, I felt that the financier was less outraged by the issues than by the fact that we were arguing at all. To him, I was insolent. Just to ask about the protests was to challenge the established order, much like the protests themselves—another sign that everything was coming apart.

As I headed to the elevator, the receptionist averted her eyes. On the ground floor, I was surprised to see the financier again, at the elevator bank. “You are not permitted to use anything from our conversation just now,” he said. I objected. “I told you, you cannot use it!” he said, raising his voice. He stared at the phone on which I’d recorded our discussion. “You are being disrespectful,” he said, in a low voice. “Very disrespectful.”

I left Hong Kong briefly in late September, and returned just before the October 1st protests. Now the city felt as if it were pulled taut. Blockades prevented my taxi from getting all the way to my hotel, and, walking the remainder of the route, I found that the sidewalk had been freshly dug up. The wide road, normally bustling with traffic and pedestrians, was deathly quiet except for the footsteps of the riot police.

On the mainland, the seventieth-anniversary celebrations proceeded with an almost religious sense of national purpose. But in Hong Kong damage control was the priority; the annual National Day fireworks had been cancelled, and a flag-raising ceremony had been moved indoors because of security concerns. Speculation was rife that, if things got bad enough, Beijing would send in troops.

A little past noon, I walked to a soccer field where protesters had gathered, wielding black flags and chanting. “October 1st is not an occasion of national celebration but one of national injury,” someone had scrawled on the sidewalk. National mourning was the declared theme of the day. People threw fake paper money around, something that is traditionally done to commemorate the dead. I saw protesters clamber up the scaffolding of a building to tear
down a long red banner extolling the day, and set it on fire. A man in a Guy Fawkes mask was putting up a large portrait of Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, with an “X” drawn over his face. Passersby pelted it with eggs.

Once the confrontational phase of the rally got under way, the police sprayed tear gas at the protesters. Seeking shelter under the eaves of a mall, I watched as a police officer, on the steps of a footbridge, fired round after round of rubber bullets. At nightfall, behind an apartment building, I came upon a garden strewn with gas masks, clothes, umbrellas, kneepads, and helmets, most likely abandoned during an escape from the police. By then, fifty-one people had been hospitalized, and two were in critical condition. One had been shot—the first time that live rounds had been used against protesters.

Crossing an alleyway where police were pinning demonstrators to the ground and cuffing them, I saw a young first-aid worker whose helmet bore handwritten instructions: “Do not resuscitate if seriously injured or unresponsive. Handwritten will in pocket.” Bonfires, shattered glass, and improvised barricades were everywhere. Streets and shop fronts were scarred with posters—“Chinazi”; “Never China”—and uprooted street signs crisscrossed the sidewalks.

It was strange, in this charred landscape, to receive messages on my phone from relatives on the mainland, extolling the motherland and urging me to watch video clips they sent of the military parade. “Happy birthday to our great nation,” my aunt wrote. “Today is a remarkable day!” I didn’t doubt her sincerity, just as I didn’t doubt the commitment of the young man I passed who was spray-painting the pavement with the slogan “Hong Kong is not China: not yet!”

I hadn’t heard from No Name all day, and I’d been worried, but around midnight he got in touch and gave me an address in Kowloon, where he said he and his comrades were holed up. When I arrived, a little after one, I found him with a bespectacled, middle-aged man. “We shouldn’t talk here,” No Name said, and the man nodded and led us to his apartment.

The man was what’s known as a “parent,” one of a loose coalition of older professionals who help ferry protesters around the city and provide supplies and other assistance. He was an academic, and his apartment was filled with gentile clutter—calligraphy scrolls on the wall, rosewood furniture, a grand piano, and sheet music covering every surface. He spoke very softly, as if he were sighing. When I asked where he was from, he embarked on a long answer about his family’s origins on the mainland and his studies in the United States. In its complex indeterminacy, it seemed a very Hong Kong response.

The professor hadn’t met No Name before now, but all summer he’d been giving people shelter, meals, and a place to store equipment. Earlier in the evening, a former student had brought some members of his group to the professor’s home. One of them had an injured arm, and the professor called up a physician friend of his to come and tend to the wound. No one dares go to the E.R., the professor said. The protesters don’t know the allegiances of the hospital staff, and worry about informers. “I feel so helpless, so this is all I can do,” he said.

No Name told me why he hadn’t been in touch. While getting teargassed in Central, he’d lost track of some friends. Before he could look for them, police officers appeared, aiming to block off the street. He tried to hide behind a concrete block, but an officer yelled “Freeze!” and charged at him with a baton. He could hear a helicopter whirring above him. He spotted a fence and ran for it. As he hoisted himself up, the baton smashed down on him. Still, he managed to clamber over. A protester behind him wasn’t so lucky. When No Name looked back, he saw the young man being pinned down by a few policemen. Aching from the baton blow, No Name limped off to a nearby church, one of the few spaces in the city that gave shelter to protesters and was by convention off limits to officers without warrants.

It was almost two in the morning. The professor offered to drive No Name home. As we got into the car, No Name told me that, lately, he’d been thinking more about his father. “He had no education, but he spent his life trying to feed us,” he said. “The difference between us is that, while I can imagine my way into his mind, or at least try to, I’m totally incomprehensible to him.”

“I have lived through four eras,” the journalist Lee Yee told me, at his apartment, in an upscale retirement community in North Point. “Colonialism, republican China, Japanese
occupation, and the Communist Party. And the Communist Party is by far the worst.” Lee, now in his early eighties, began his career more than sixty years ago, and for almost three decades he was the editor of an influential news monthly, which he founded, and which is sharply critical of Beijing. “I am very ashamed,” he said. “I think if we’d had the courage of young people now back in the eighties, Hong Kong might not have its current problems.”

He told me that, during the handover negotiations between Britain and China, there had been a complacent assumption that China’s economic liberalization would somehow cushion the worst of its hard-line politics. The optimism, he felt, as naive as it’s turned out to be, was bound up with the fact that his generation had always been able to express its political views freely; it was only natural that a generation deprived of such liberties would opt for protest.

Still, when I’d last talked with pro-democracy leaders in Hong Kong, in 2018, nothing like what has occurred since then was imaginable. Many of them were tied up in seemingly inextricable legal battles relating to their roles in the 2014 protests. Their focus was on finding ways to achieve incremental progress by working within the existing political system, and even these modest ambitions seemed likely to be thwarted. But no one I was meeting with now in Hong Kong claimed to have seen the events of 2019 coming.

The fact that the authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing were caught off guard is no secret. Bruce Lui, who for years covered the opaque world of Communist Party politics for Hong Kong Cable TV, described the sheer level of unpreparedness. There’s a saying in Chinese politics—Fengjiu biluan (“Encounter nine: turmoil for sure”)—reflecting a belief that the country often experiences its worst turbulence in years that end in 9. (Since the fall of the Nationalists, in 1949, years ending in 9 have brought, successively, the Great Famine, an armed conflict with the Soviet Union, another with Vietnam, the Tiananmen Square protests, and the Falun Gong crisis.)

At the start of 2019, Xi Jinping called on cadres and provincial leaders to focus on “preventing and resolving major risks.” Yet, of all the potential headaches that were considered—from unrest in Xinjiang to a trade war with America—Hong Kong was nowhere on the list. The Party anticipated a year in which, having successfully contained the pro-democracy movement, it would see its favored candidates sweep November’s District Council elections, setting up pro-Beijing parties for an overwhelming victory in the 2020 Legislative Council elections. In fact, the result was a landslide win for opponents of Beijing, in which pro-democracy candidates won more than eighty per cent of seats, up from around thirty per cent. As the year’s unrest spiralled out of control, the four characters spelling Fengjiu biluan were used in sardonic hashtags on social media, usually featuring Xi’s name or face.

No one can resist trying to predict the future, both short term and long. Forebodings about a Tiananmen-style crackdown have eased. Although Beijing has moved troops into neighboring Shenzhen, it seems more like a case of braking for the worst than like a signal of intent. Meanwhile, attendance at demonstrations has dropped since October 1st, leaving crowds that are increasingly composed of disparate groups voicing their factional differences.

Benny Tai, an Umbrella Movement leader who served a prison term earlier this year for his activities in 2014, noted the recent appearance at protests of the flag of Catalonia, which has long agitated for independence from Spain. He also thinks that people who might have been amazed at a concession on universal suffrage a few months ago would not be content with anything less than independence.

This sense of mission creep is strikingly similar to what happened earlier in the year: when demonstrations against the extradition bill went unheeded, the other demands appeared, and the feel-
ings they aroused were so fervent that the ultimate withdrawal of the bill could not stem the tide. “You do see people talk about the demands,” Kevin Yam, a former head of Hong Kong’s Progressive Lawyers Group, said. “But, ultimately, the thing that motivates people more than anything else is police brutality.” In other words, the current protests may now, at the most basic level, be driven by what the act of protesting has revealed about the authorities.

Kitty Hung, a writer who was arrested in 2010 for her activism, talked to me about her worries regarding the protests. Their decentralized structure had been good for eluding the authorities, but it didn’t empower anyone to negotiate productively on the protesters’ behalf. Hung worried about the front-liners in particular; many she’d talked to came from deprived backgrounds, with very modest educations that would leave them vulnerable in a highly competitive society. “What made me sad is that, even if Hong Kong were independent, their lives wouldn’t change,” she said. “I can’t see their future even if their political demands are met.”

For now, Hung went on, the mainland served as a common enemy to rally against, but she believed that this animus forestalled a reckoning with collective issues, especially inequalities in income and education. No one was thinking about how to turn a political revolution into a badly needed social one.

Concerning the questions of identity that so many young demonstrators were raising, Yam pointed out that the Hong Kong identity was a product of a particular historical moment: “Since its founding, Hong Kong’s population has always been transient,” he said. This was something that had started to change only when the place became an international financial center. Yam continued, “People in their teens, twenties, and early thirties are probably the first few real generations of Hong Kongers whose lives haven’t been punctuated by waves of migration.” Now that migration is increasingly a two-way exchange with the mainland, rather than with the rest of the world, it may be that homogenization with mainland culture is inevitable. If so, the current flowering of Hong Kong identity could one day look like a brief historical anomaly.

The “2047” actor who was later arrested had mentioned that there was another play that I should see, “Luting: Goodbye History, Hello Future.” According to regional legend, Luting—half man, half fish—were the original inhabitants of Hong Kong. An earlier tetralogy of Luting plays were, according to their author, Wong Kwok Kiu, an attempt to grapple with Hong Kong’s past not as faithful textbook history but as a meditation on the meaning of metamorphosis. This one, more playful than polemical, elliptically considered the question of the territory’s future. It was in eleven acts, which, apart from the first and the last, could be performed in any order: “No story is ever a straight story,” the director, Chan Chu Hei, told me. “Reality is scrambled.”

The venue was a cluster of squat, tiled buildings arranged around a courtyard—a former slaughterhouse that had been converted into an arts village. When I got there, audience members were milling around, in the syrupy night air, waiting for the show to start. Seemingly out of nowhere, an unshaven man with a ponytail darted through the crowd and onto a platform, crying, “Give me liberty or give me death!” This wasn’t Patrick Henry, exactly. It was the progenitor of the Luting clan, a mythic rebel general named Lu Xun, who swam to Hong Kong Island from the mainland. “I would rather be drowned at sea than ensnared by tyranny!” he declared.

In the next act, “Awakening,” an actor led the audience down a cobblestoned footpath and into a dark, dilapidated building. Gradually, we could make out the figure of a Luting, with a manatee–like head lolling above a fragile, human body. Roused reluctantly from a long sleep, he asked, “What era is it now?” As we watched, he grew aware of the noxious smell of the seawater, of himself as an entity capable of asking questions about his state of transition from sea creature to land creature. “To be human is too painful!” he cried, protesting his fate even as he unwillingly sprouted human limbs.

The play veered between the dreamlike and the satirical. In one episode, a Luting runs for office on a platform of economic and social reforms deemed naïve by his political opponents. In another, a Luting reservation is established, but public interest in Luting heritage quickly turns the site into a tourist trap. When a Luting accuses the tourists of defiling sacred ancestral ground, they sneer that the Lutings should be grateful for the economic development. At one point, the audience was split into two groups, separated by a curtain, and shown two separate performances, one titled “Dictatorship” and the other “Democracy.” As Chan remarked, “No one gets to choose what kind of society they have to live in.”

Was the Lutings’ liminal state, neither human nor fish, a symbol for Hong Kong—caught between East and West, in China but not of it? Chan didn’t want to be pinned down, but he admitted that the protests had stirred him to think about the nature of Hong Kong’s existence. “Hong Kong came into being through the dreams of greater powers in the East and the West,” he said. “But, if our existence is created out of someone else’s dream, what does that mean for us, the hapless creatures birthed in that dream, to wake up?”

The final act looped back to the beginning: another awakening. A Luting was racked by existential crises. It was up to him to help bring the next generation of Lutings into being, but he wasn’t sure if doing so was morally responsible. “Can they survive this world?” he asked himself. “We can’t ask the next generation if they want to be born or not, just as my parents have never asked me if I want to be born.”

At the end of the play, the audience was ushered up onstage, and the Lutings threaded between us, chanting over and over, like a prayer, the final lines of the play: “What decision should I make? Can you tell me what to do?” Their voices, at first a chorus, rose and fell, until they became a single barely audible whisper: “You humans are smart, you must have a good answer for me. Tell me. Tell me.”
suppose you’ve been asked to write a science-fiction story. You might start by contemplating the future. You could research anticipated developments in science, technology, and society and ask how they will play out. Telepresence, mind-uploading, an aging population: an elderly couple live far from their daughter and grandchildren; one day, the pair knock on her door as robots. They’ve uploaded their minds to a cloud-based data bank and can now visit telepresently, forever. A philosophical question arises: What is a family when it never ends? A story flowers where prospective trends meet.

This method is quite common in science fiction. It’s not the one employed by William Gibson, the writer who, for four decades, has imagined the near future more convincingly than anyone else. Gibson doesn’t have a name for his method; he knows only that it isn’t about prediction. It proceeds, instead, from a deep engagement with the present. When Gibson was starting to write, in the late nineteen-seventies, he watched kids playing games in video arcades and noticed how they ducked and twisted, as though they were on the other side of the screen. The Sony Walkman had just been introduced, so he bought one; he lived in Vancouver, and when he explored the city at night, listening to Joy Division, he felt as though the music was being transmitted directly into his brain, where it could merge with his perceptions of skyscrapers and slums. His wife, Deborrah, was a graduate student in linguistics who taught E.S.L. He listened to her young Japanese students talk about Vancouver as though it were a backwater; Tokyo must really be something, he thought. He remembered a weeping ambulance driver in a bar, saying, “She flattened.” On a legal pad, Gibson tried inventing words to describe the space behind the screen; he crossed out “info-space” and “dataspace” before coming up with “cyberspace.” He didn’t know what it might be, but it sounded cool, like something a person might explore even though it was dangerous.

Gibson first used the word “cyberspace” in 1981, in a short story called “Burning Chrome.” He worked out the idea more fully in his first novel, “Neuromancer,” published in 1984, when he was thirty-six. Set in the mid-twentieth-first century, “Neuromancer” follows a heist that unfolds partly in physical space and partly in “the matrix”—an online realm. “The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games,” the novel explains, “in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks.” By “jacking in” to the matrix, a “console cowboy” can use his “deck” to enter a new world:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation. . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.

Gibson was far from the first sci-fi writer to explore computers and their consequences; a movement, soon to be known as cyberpunk, was already under way. But “Neuromancer” changed science fiction by imagining a computer-saturated world that felt materially and aesthetically real. Gibson’s hardboiled prose was fanatically attentive to design and texture. A hacker’s loft contains a Braun coffeemaker, an Ono–Sendai cyberspace deck, and “the abstract white forms of the foam packing units, with crumpled plastic film and hundreds of tiny foam beads.” A spaceship is “walled in imitation ebony veneer and floored with gray tiles”—a Mercedes crossed with a “rich man’s private spa.” Gibson’s future seemed already to have aged: the counterfeit young are “marked by a certain telltale corrogation at the knuckles, something the surgeons were unable to erase.” The science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany marveled at the novel’s “wonderful, almost hypnotic, surface hardness.” Describing a hacker about to deploy a virus, Gibson invented his own language, toughened with use: “He slotted some ice, connected the construct, and jacked in.”

Most science fiction takes place in a world in which “the future” has definitively arrived; the locomotive filmed by the Lumière brothers has finally burst through the screen. But in “Neuromancer” there was only a continuous arrival—an ongoing, alarming present. “Things aren’t different. Things are things,” an A.I. reports, after achieving a new level of consciousness. “You can’t let the little pricks generation-gap you,” one protagonist tells another, after an unnerving encounter with a teen-ager. In its uncertain sense of temporality—are we living in the future, or not?—“Neuromancer” was science fiction for the modern age. The novel’s influence has increased with time, establishing Gibson as an authority on the world to come.

The ten novels that Gibson has written since have slid steadily closer to the present. In the nineties, he wrote a trilogy set in the two-thousands. The novels he published in 2003, 2007, and 2010 were set in the year before their publication. (Only the inevitable delays of the publishing process prevented them from taking place in the years when they were written.) Many works of literary fiction claim to be set in the present day. In fact, they take place in the recent past, conjuring a world that feels real because it’s familiar, and therefore out of date. Gibson’s strategy of extreme presentness reflects his belief that the current moment is itself science-fictional. “The future is already here,” he has said. “It’s just not very evenly distributed.”

The further Gibson developed his present-tense sci-fi, the more mysterious
Instead of fantasizing about future worlds, Gibson sets his novels in the ongoing, alarming realm of the present.
and resonant his novels became. They seemed to reveal a world within the world: the real present. The approach was risky; it put him at the mercy of events. In 2001, Gibson rushed to incorporate the September 11th attacks into his half-completed eighth novel, “Pattern Recognition,” a story about globalization, filmmaking, Internet forums, brand strategy, and informational deluge. Terrorism turned out to fit neatly within this framework; “Pattern Recognition” is often described as the first post-9/11 novel. The risks could pay off.

Two years ago, in December of 2017, I e-mailed Gibson to ask if he’d consent to being profiled, since his new novel was to be published that spring. He replied, explaining that the election of Donald Trump had forced him to delay the book.

“I’ve had to get an extension,” he wrote. Extrapolating from current events, he had already written into his novel “a nuclear crisis involving Syria, Russia, NATO, and Turkey”:

But then Trump started fucking with N Korea, here, so how scary can my scenario be? He keeps topping me, but I think I can handle it in rewrite. And if there’s a nuclear war, at least I won’t have to turn in the manuscript! . . .

Crazy times,

Bill

In March, 2018, I e-mailed Gibson again, but he had delayed the book a second time. “Cambridge Analytica now requires a huge rethink, major revisions,” he wrote. “This is very comical in a way, but still a huge problem.”

Earlier this year, we finally met, in Vancouver, to talk about the novel, “Agency,” which comes out next month. Gibson is now seventy-one. Bald and skinny, six feet five but for a slight stoop, he dresses almost exclusively in a mixture of futuristic techwear and mid-twentieth-century American clothing painstakingly reproduced by companies in Japan. It was late on a gray afternoon; we sat at the bar of a cozy bistro—warm wood, zinc bar, brass fixtures—while Gibson, in his slow, quiet, wowed-out, distantly Southern drawl, described the work of keeping up with the present.

“With each set of three books, I’ve commenced with a sort of deep reading of the fuckedness quotient of the day,” he explained. “I then have to admit just my fiction in relation to how fucked and how far out the present actually is.” He squinted through his glasses at the ceiling. “It isn’t an intellectual process, and it’s not prescient—it’s about what I can bring myself to believe.”

“Agency” is a sequel to Gibson’s previous novel, “The Peripheral,” from 2014, which is currently being adapted into a television show for Amazon, executive-produced by the creators of “Westworld.” In writing “The Peripheral,” he’d been able to bring himself to believe in the reality of an ongoing slow-motion apocalypse called “the jackpot.” A character describes the jackpot as “multi-causal”—“more a climate than an event.” The world eases into it gradually, as all the bad things we worry about—rising oceans, crop failures, drug-resistant diseases, resource wars, and so on—happen, here and there, to varying degrees, over the better part of the twenty-first century, adding up to “androgenic, systemic, multiplex, seriously bad shit” that eventually kills eighty per cent of the human race. It’s a Gibsonian apocalypse: the end of the world is already here; it’s just not very evenly distributed. One character reacts to the jackpot equivocally: “Either depressing and scared the fuck out of me or sort of of how I’d always figured things are?”

“I had real trouble coming to that,” Gibson said. “I couldn’t really think about it. I just had to get to the point where I could write it really quickly. Afterward, I looked at it and was just . . . It was the first time I’d admitted it to myself.”

After “The Peripheral,” he wasn’t expecting to have to revise the world’s F.Q. “Then I saw Trump coming down that escalator to announce his candidacy,” he said. “All of my scenario modules went ‘beep—beep—beep—super-fucked, super-fucked,’ like that. I told myself, Nah, it can’t happen. But then, when Britain voted yes on the Brexit referendum, I thought, Holy shit—if that could happen in the U.K., the U.S. could elect Trump. Then it happened, and I was basically paralyzed in the composition of the book. I wouldn’t call it writer’s block—that’s, like, a naturally occurring thing. This was something else.”

Gibson has a bemused, gentle, curious vibe. He is not a dystopian writer; he aims to see change in a flat, even light. “Every so often—and I bet a lot of people do this but don’t mention it—I have an experience unique in my life, of going. ‘This is so bad—could this possibly be real?’” he said, laughing. “Because it really looks very dire. If we were merely looking at the possible collapse of democracy in the United States of America—that’s pretty fucked. But if we’re looking at the collapse of democracy in the United States of America within the context of our failure to do anything that means shit about global warming over the next decade . . . I don’t know.” Perched, eagle-like, on his barstool, he swept his hand across the bar. “I’m, like, off the edge of the table.”

Photographs of Gibson have tended to find him in dark rooms, surrounded by wires and gizmos—a seer in his cyber cave. In fact, he has spent his writing life in a series of increasingly pretty houses on the arboreal streets of suburban Vancouver. The rambling, sunlit home where he and Deborah live now, in the city’s Shaughnessy neighborhood, dates from the early twentieth century; its many windows open onto radiant greenery. His quarter million Twitter followers are accustomed to photographs of Biggles, the couple’s extraordinarily large cat, lounging in the library, where Gibson does most of his writing. A photograph on the living-room mantelpiece shows the Gibsons’ son, Graeme, in aviators and a military jacket; nearby, a drawing of their daughter, Claire, hangs on the wall. Wandering around the first floor, I could find only one futuristic object: a small glass-and-aluminum cylinder, lit from within by warm L.E.D.s. This abstract oil lamp turned out to be a wireless speaker, given to Gibson by Jun Rekimoto, Sony’s version of Jony Ive.

Gibson had a distinctly American upbringing. Born in 1948, he told me that his earliest memories are of a farmhouse in Tennessee. The family lived there while his construction-manager father, William Ford Gibson, Jr.—Gibson is William Ford Gibson III—helped to oversee the building of workers’ housing at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Later, they occupied the red-brick
model house of a Levittown-style suburban development in North Carolina. “And then we moved to a place near Virginia Beach, and while we lived there my father died,” Gibson said. “On a business trip, from a choking incident, pre-Heimlich maneuver. Like, if someone had known to squeeze him the right way, he might have survived.” He paused. “I think I was seven.”

Gibson and his mother, Otey, retreated to Wytheville, Virginia, the small Appalachian town where his parents had grown up, settling in a house that had been in his mother’s family for generations. “Before, I was watching TV in a suburb,” Gibson said. “I could see out the window that it was the modern world. And then I went to this place which, from many angles, looked like the early nineteen-hundreds. In Wytheville, people reminisced about the days before recorded music; men plowed fields with mules. The mid-twentieth century leaked in, like light through the blinds. ‘I’m convinced that it was this experience of feeling abruptly exiled, to what seemed like the past, that began my relationship with science fiction,’ Gibson has written.

Fatherless and quiet, Gibson was often alone. One day, he crawled through the window of an abandoned house and found a calendar from the Second World War. Each month had a picture of a different fighter plane—a sleek machine, yellowed by time. Meanwhile, from the wire rack at the Greyhound bus station, he bought science-fiction novels by H. G. Wells, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and others. He noticed that their stories also supposed the existence of histories—real ones that were being reconsidered (the myths of empire and the American West), or prospective ones that seemed unlikely to come true (world government, the brotherhood of man). In Wytheville, people owned books like “The Lost Cause,” an encyclopedic account of the Civil War, published in 1866, which depicted slavery as benign. “I became someone who disassembles the past in which I find myself, in order to orient myself, or perhaps in order to relieve anxiety,” Gibson told me.

His mother was literary and progressive; she helped establish a library in Wytheville. But she grew worried as Gibson developed what he’s called a “Lovecraftian persona”—“introverted, hyper-bookish.” With his consent, she enrolled him in an all-boys boarding school in Arizona. Gibson, “extracted grub-like and blinking” from his bedroom, arrived when he was fifteen, got a girlfriend, and read the Beats. In the fall of his sophomore year, when he was seventeen, his mother died.

“Probably a stroke,” he said. “I’m not sure. She fell down dead walking somewhere—in those days, if an older person died, no one did an autopsy.” On the flight home, Gibson struggled to think about what had happened. As a child, after his father’s death, he had feared—irrationally, he thought—that his mother might die, too. Now she had. Years later, he would come to see himself as “dubiously traumatized.” In the moment, he took refuge in an odd thought: at least she’d be spared the discomfort of watching him try to become an artist.

His mother’s estate provided him with a vanishingly small stipend. Instead of finishing high school, he took a bus to Toronto; he slept outdoors for a night and then found a job at a head shop, where he could sleep on the floor. Gibson is reluctant to talk much about those years—“I wasn’t a tightly wrapped package at that time,” he has said—but a 1967 CBC documentary features him, introduced as “Bill, a real hippie,” strolling through the city’s version of Haight-Ashbury. (He was paid five hundred dollars to serve as a quasi-ethnological tour guide: “The hippie society centers largely around this curious word ‘love,’” he explains in the program.) In his early twenties, in Washington, D.C., he earned his high-school diploma. He kept the Vietnam draft board apprised of his whereabouts but was never called up. Instead, he perused the ruins of the sixties, reading Pynchon and Borges, going to punk shows. Back in Toronto, he enrolled in art school and met Deborah, a former fashion model; they moved to Vancouver, her home town. For a while, he made ends meet as a vintage picker, buying undervalued objects—antique toys, Art Deco lamps, chrome ashtrays—from thrift shops and reselling them to dealers. Writing of the future in his third novel, “Mona Lisa Overdrive” (1988), he might have been describing this period: “The world hadn’t ever had so many moving parts or so few labels.”

Some speculative writers are architects: they build orderly worlds. But
“Sometimes all you want is a mediocre place to eat something you could have made better yourself if you weren’t so lazy.”

Gibson has a collagist’s mind. He has depicted himself as “burrowing from surface to previously unconnected surface.” His language connects contemporary jargon, with its tactical-technological inflections, to modern states of anxiety and desire. (His chapter titles include “Death Cookie,” “Ordinary Sad-Ass Humanness,” “Tango Hotel Soldier Shit.”) The novels register the virtual world’s micro-expressions—the way, when we’re still half asleep, the first Web site of the day opens as “familiar as a friend’s living room”—and attend to the built environments we take for granted, made from Styrofoam, cardboard, glass, silicon, wood, paper, leather, stone, rubber, and plastic, each subtype of material possessing its own distinctive look, feel, smell, weight, and history. In “Pattern Recognition,” an American marvels at the collage that is England:

Mirror-world. The plugs on appliances are huge, triple-pronged, for a species of current that only powers electric chairs, in America. Cars are reversed, left to right, inside; telephone handsets have a different weight, a different balance.

The difference, she thinks, has to do with Britain’s past as an industrial nation: “They made all their own stuff. . . . All their bits and pieces were different.” Only an outsider would notice the meaning in the bits.

In his late twenties, Gibson earned an English degree at the University of British Columbia. He took a class taught by the feminist sci-fi pioneer Susan Wood; she suggested that, instead of writing an analytical paper, he might turn in a story of his own. (At her urging, he sold the story, “Fragments of a Hologram Rose,” to a small magazine.) He began writing science fiction in earnest only when Graeme was on the way, and it seemed to him that his career had to start, or else. Deborah was in grad school, so he took care of the baby, writing “Neuromancer” while Graeme napped. He learned to work iteratively. He still rereads his manuscripts from the beginning each day—an increasing burden, as each book goes on—stripping away what’s superfluous and sifting new ideas into the gaps. (Having shown a technology used properly in one scene, he might show someone misusing it in another.) His plots are Tetris-like, their components snapping together at the last possible moment until the space of the novel is filled.

Often, at the center of the story, there’s a Gibson-like figure—an orphaned collagist of actual or digital bits. In “Count Zero,” the sequel to “Neuromancer,” an out-of-work curator is hired to track down an anonymous artist who is creating a series of boxes in the style of Joseph Cornell. She discovers that the artist is an artificially intelligent computer built by an unimaginably rich family. The family’s multinational mega-corporation has collapsed, and its space-based villa has fallen into disrepair. The A.I. has chopped the house into parts, and constructs the boxes by pulling fragments—a “yellowing kid glove”; “rectangular segments of perf board”; “an ornate silver spoon, sawn precisely in half, from end to end”—out of the floating cloud that the family’s life has become.

The romance of the abandoned child, of the orphan on the edge of everything, can give Gibson’s novels a sad sweetness. But his collages contain ugly materials, too. In his library, Gibson unfolded himself from his chair, retrieving a copy of “The Lost Cause,” which he had salvaged from Wytheville.

“In our house, there were these objects that no one ever said anything to me about,” he said. “I just found them myself, and reverse-engineered what they meant. These were being sold from the very beginning of Reconstruction, and within them—actually, there’s another one . . .” He bent low, and picked up a smaller volume, blowing dust from its binding.

“This is the most evil object in the house,” he said. “It’s just, like, unspeakable!” He handed it to me. The book was “The Old Plantation: How We Lived in Great House and Cabin Before the War,” by James Battle Avrett.

“Check out the inscription,” he said. It was dedicated to “the old planter and his wife—the only real slaves on the old plantation.”

Gibson settled on a hard-backed chair, adjusting the cuffs of his perfectly reproduced mid-century chambray workshirt. “It’s just the foulest revisionist text,” he said. “It was given to my grandmother when, I think, she was sixteen years old, signed by the author. She took me aside, on one or two ritual occasions, to try to indoctrinate me into the crucial, central significance of the ‘War of the North—
ern Invasion.’” He grimaced. “This is why the South is still so fuck up—because this stuff never quit. It never quit! It’s the formation . . .” He trailed off.

“Of our past?” I asked.

“Of our present,” he corrected me.

Gibson was in the process of sorting through his basement archive, which he planned to donate to U.B.C. Biggles accompanied us down the stairs; beneath a set of head-height windows, an old desk and table were covered with neatly piled manuscripts, some typewritten, others dot-matrix. Gibson wanted to show me the manual typewriter on which he’d composed “Neuromancer”: a 1927 Hermes 2000 that had belonged to Deborah’s step-grandfather. While he rummaged, I inspected the screenplay for “Alien 3,” which he had written in the late eighties, during a contract-screenwriting phase. (In the end, an entirely different story was used.) A paperweight on top of it turned out to be a claw—a memento from the film. Biggles meowed, twining around my legs.

“Can’t find it!” Gibson said from behind a pinball machine based on the 1995 film “Johnny Mnemonic,” starring Keanu Reeves. (The movie had been adapted from his 1981 short story of the same name, about a courier who carries stolen corporate data on a chip in his head.) “I’ll have to text Claire.”

Near a rack of compact disks—Drive-By Truckers; Lucinda Williams; Dock Boggs; multiple bootlegs of live performances by the goth band Sisters of Mercy—a legal pad was covered in interlinked bubbles charting the plot of Gibson’s 1996 novel, “Idoru.” (A song called “Idoru” is featured on the forthcoming album by the future-pop musician Grimes.) One bubble read, “McGuffin in bag.” An orange notebook, filled with intricate time lines for “The Peripheral,” was decorated with a sticker bearing the logo of the niche techwear brand Outlier—a black swan.

“Ah,” Gibson said tenderly. He leaned over to open a green wooden cabinet, containing dozens of mementos: a marmoset skull, a smooth rock, a teacup from Japan. Gingerly, from behind the skull, he removed a small metal ray gun.

“This gun,” he said. “I had one of these—the Hubley Atomic Disintegrator—as a kid. It’s a cap gun absolutely redolent of sci-fi romanticism!” He’d lost his own, and, in middle age, obtained this one on eBay.

“And these guys were very common,” he went on, taking down a small plastic spaceman: red, wearing an elaborately earmuffed helmet with an antenna on top. “These spacemen were dime-store toys at a time—which I can actually remember!—when cheap plastics were still weirdly novel. Like Gore-Tex or something. You’d ask, ‘What is it made of?’” He looked wistful, then thoughtful. “I’ve decided that one of the most significant things I ever saw in my life was the arrival of completely ubiquitous injection-molded plastics. I was certainly aware of them as the onset of something new. They cost practically nothing. But no one had any idea what a disaster we were all witnessing. Now the oceans are full of it.” He handed the spaceman to me. I hefted it, weightless, in my palm—an antique bit of misread future.

Gibson finished “Count Zero” and “Mona Lisa Overdrive,” the sequels to “Neuromancer,” in the late eighties. In the nineties, he achieved maximum fame for a sci-fi writer. It was a time when virtual reality promised to make cyberspace, as he’d described it in “Neuromancer,” real, and he and Deborah were invited to lavish V.R. conferences around the world. He collaborated with sculptors, dance troupes, and performance artists, and co-wrote, with Bruce Sterling, “The Difference Engine,” a novel that popularized the “steam-punk” aesthetic. Movies borrowed liberally from his fiction. In 1999, four years after “Johnny Mnemonic,” “The Matrix,” also starring Reeves, remixed “Neuromancer” to superior effect.

Droll, chilled out, and scarcely articulate, Gibson talked about the future on television. (“It doesn’t matter how fast your modem is if you’re being shelled by ethnic separatists,” he told the BBC.) He appeared on the cover of Wired, did some corporate consulting, and met David Bowie and Debbie Harry. For a time, U2, which had based its album “Zooropa” in part on Gibson’s work, planned to scroll the entirety of “Neuromancer” on a screen above the stage during its Zoo TV tour. The plan never came to fruition, but Gibson got to know the band; the Edge showed him how to telnet. During this period, Gibson was often credited with having “predicted” the Internet. He pointed out that his noir vision of online life had little in common with the early Web. Still, he had captured a feeling—a sense of post-everything-information-driven transformation—that, by the nineties, seemed to be everywhere.

As the Internet became more accessible, Gibson discovered that he wasn’t terribly interested in spending time online himself. He was fascinated, though, by the people who did. They seemed to grow hungrier for the Web the more of it they consumed. It wasn’t just the Internet: his friends seemed to be paying more attention to media in general. When new television shows premiered, they actually cared. One of them showed him an episode of “Cops,” the pioneering reality series in which camera crews sprinted alongside police officers as they apprehended suspects. Policing, as performance, could be monetized. He could feel the world’s F.Q. drifting upward.

Instead of fantasizing about virtual worlds, Gibson inspected the real one. Storefronts in some Vancouver neighborhoods were strangely empty—the drawback before the tsunami of global capital, as though the city itself anticipated the future. “Have you been to Vancouver’s downtown east side?” he asked me. “It’s one of the poorest per-capita postal codes in the entire country, and it is absolutely brutal—well, brutal, Canadian style. Addiction, prostitution, street crime . . .” There were, he thought, more “intersitial spaces”—places that had fallen through widening civic and economic cracks. In Los Angeles, a friend drove him down a desolate street to an abandoned-looking building—Dennis Hopper’s house, she said, with art worth millions hidden behind its walls. Gibson thought he detected an uptick in the number of private security guards. He registered the increased presence of bike messengers—a new punk-athlete precariat—and began reading their zines.

If Gibson’s eighties novels imagined a fluid, hallucinatory datasphere, his nineties novels—“Virtual Light,” “Idoru,” and “All Tomorrow’s Parties”—take place in a world that is itself fluid and hallucinatory. They are set in California and Tokyo
Chevette reads old issues of *National Geographic* and marvels at the size of the old countries, long since broken up.

When Gibson published his first short story in *Omni*, in 1981, the writer Robert Shuckley took him to lunch and gave him two pieces of advice: never sign a multi-book contract and don’t buy an old house. Gibson ignored the latter suggestion; on his second morning in Vancouver, a rainstorm descended, and he texted to say that he needed to check his attic for leaks, inviting my assistance. (“I have a fear of doing it alone,” he texted, lest “the ladder fall over.”)

“It’s coming down hard,” Gibson said, when I arrived. “Luckily, I’ve got the perfect jacket for you.” In writing “Virtual Light” and its sequels, he’d learned to harness his obsessions, among them garments and their semiotic histories.

In the hall, he relieved me of my misjudged chore coat, and handed me a recent reproduction of Eddie Bauer’s 1936 Skyliner down jacket: a forerunner of the down-filled B-9 flight suit, worn by aviators during the Second World War. Boxy and beige, its diamond-quilted nylon was rigid enough to stand up on its own. When I put it on, it made me about four inches wider. Gibson shrugged into a darkly futuristic technininja shell by Acronym, the Berlin–based atelier, constructed from some liquidly matte material.

“You have to dress for the job,” he said.

We ventured into the verdant back yard, retrieving an eight-foot ladder from the garage. Carefully, we carried the ladder through the house and up a winding, skylit central staircase. Gibson’s height allowed him to casually open the attic door. I watched his rose-colored Chucks disappear into the hole. When I ascended, I found him lit by a small window, balancing gracefully on the joists, carrying a bucket heavy with water.

“Thank you very much,” he said, handing it to me.

As it happened, a closet in a room off the hallway contained Gibson’s Acronym collection. (He is friends with the co-founder and designer of Acronym, Errolson Hugh, and was briefly involved, as a consultant, in the creation of Arc’teryx Veilance, a futuristic, or perhaps merely presentist, outerwear line that Hugh helped design.) As a longtime Acronym lurker—I don’t own any, but would like to—I was curious to see the jackets, which enable excessive, even fantastic levels of functionality. “This is something Errolson calls the ‘escape zip,’” Gibson said, indicating an unusual zipper along the jacket’s shoulder, and demonstrating how it could be used to enact an instantaneous, overhanded dejacketing. Another coat, long and indefensibly gray-green, was seductively sinister—the most cyberpunk object I’d seen in Gibson’s home.

“This is this weird membrane that Gore-Tex makes,” he said, rubbing the fabric—leather-like on one side, synthetic on the other—between his fingers. “Errolson gave it to me when they hadn’t named it yet. I was trying to come up with a name…”

“This is what I imagine the scary hit man wearing, in ‘All Tomorrow’s Parties,’” I said.

“Oh, the scary hit man, yeah!” Gibson said. “I’m delighted to have this jacket, but it’s hard to wear it. It’s almost too effective. It absorbs too much light.” He enjoys wearing the future, but fears full cosplay.

Satisfied, Gibson returned the jacket to the closet. Biggles watched from the landing as we carried the ladder and the bucket down the stairs. Techno-fabric and a leaky roof: the real future.

Was Gibson afraid of what the future held? Like anyone, he lived in the present, awaiting tomorrow. By the end of the nineties, he’d taken up Pilates and given up smoking. Claire lived nearby; so did Graeme, who has autism, and a savant-like ability to play hundreds of musical instruments. Gibson and Deborah had helped him build a secure life. (Gibson drops by every day, and often shares Graeme’s birding photographs on Twitter.)

He had reason to be concerned about a rising F.Q. But he managed to keep that concern contained within his writing life. “Bill’s always been able to shut the door in his head,” Jack Womack, one of Gibson’s oldest friends, said. Womack is also a Southerner—he’s from Lexington, Kentucky—and a science-fiction writer. For decades, Gibson has sent his drafts to Womack, who’s based in New York, every few days—at first by fax, and in later years by e-mail. “I’ve
always perceived him as someone who takes everything in before making a decision,” Womack continued. “Not paranoid, not suspicious. Just a good poker player.” Writing near-future science fiction, Womack said, requires “detachment.” It’s like living during the Cold War with knowledge of the bomb.

And yet Gibson seemed, at the turn of the century, to be growing dissatisfied with being detached. When “All Tomorrow’s Parties” was finished, “I felt a little let down,” he said. “Not with how the book had turned out, but there was something about the experience…. It was beginning to seem as though I was doing something that belonged to a previous era.” He wondered if science fiction, as a genre, might be yellowing with age. He was certainly aging: at fifty, he’d begun cognitive-behavioral therapy, hoping to process the unconfonnted experiences of his childhood. Meanwhile, he said, “things were different. The world outside the window was beginning to look considerably stranger to me than the ones I was imagining for my fictional futures.”

Unsure how to proceed, Gibson bided his time. He flew back and forth to London, working on a screenplay for “Newromancer,” which had been optioned for a film. He spent time on eBay—the first Web site that felt to him like a real place, perhaps because it was full of other people and their junk. Through eBay, he discovered an online watch forum, and, through the forum, he developed some expertise in military watches. He learned of a warehouse in Egypt from which it was possible to procure extinct Omega components; he sourced, for the forum membership, a particular kind of watch strap, the G10, which had originally been manufactured in the nineteen-seventies and had since become obscure. (A version of it, known as the NATO strap, is now wildly popular in menswear circles.) Gibson noticed that people with access to unlimited information could develop illusions of omniscience. He got into a few political debates on the forum. He felt the F.Q., creeping upward.

The advent of the online world, he thought, was changing the physical one. In the past, going online had felt like visiting somewhere else. Now being online was the default: it was our Here, while those awkward “no service” zones of disconnectivity had become our There. Checking his Vancouver bank balance from an A.T.M. in Los Angeles struck him suddenly as spooky. It didn’t matter where you were in the landscape; you were in the same place in the datascape. It was as though cyberspace were turning inside out, or “everting”—consuming the world that had once surrounded it.

In Japan, he had learned the word otaku, used to describe people with obsessive, laserlike interests. The Web, he saw, allowed everyone everywhere to develop the same otaku obsessions—with television, coffee, sneakers, guns. The mere possibility of such knowledge lay like a scrim over the world. A physical object was also a search term: an espresso wasn’t just an espresso; it was also Web pages about crema, fair trade, roasting techniques, varieties of beans.

Things were texts; reality had been augmented. Brand strategists revised the knowledge around objects to make them more desirable, and companies, places, Presidents, wars, and people could be advantageously rebranded, as though the world itself could be reprogrammed. It seemed to Gibson that this constant reprogramming, which had become a major driver of economic life, was imbuing the present with a feeling—something like fatigue, or jet lag, or loss.

The suddenness with which the world’s code could be rewritten astonished him. “I was down in my basement office, on a watch site that I spent a lot of time on,” Gibson recalled. “Someone on the East Coast posted, ‘Plane hit World Trade Center.’ I Googled it—there was nothing. I went to get some coffee. And when I came back there was a second post under the first: ‘Second
plane hit. It wasn't an accident." The attack rewrote our expectations. It made life instantly scarier. It also seemed to adjust the temporality of the world. From then on, events would move faster. There would be no screen—only a locomotive.

“Pattern Recognition” and its sequels, “Spook Country” (2007) and “Zero History” (2010), are “set in a world that meets virtually every criteria of being science fiction, and that happens to be our world,” Gibson has said. “We have no future,” one character concludes. “Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did.” Such “fully imagined cultural futures” were possible only when “how was of some greater duration”.

For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents’ have insufficient “now” to stand on. We have no futures because our present is too volatile. . . . We have only risk management. The spinning of the given moment’s scenarios. Pattern recognition.

In a hyperconnected world, patterns can repeat in different idioms. The same ripples flow across Asia and Europe, art and technology, war and television. Even terror-hunting and cool-hunting are related. In “Zero History,” fashion strategists tracking a reclusive designer of otaku denim stumble into a parallel world of clandestine arms deals. Secrets are “the very root of cool,” one character explains, and so today’s coolness flows from our modern secrets: rendition, black ops, Gitmo, Prism. There’s a reason musicians dress like soldiers. Art has become tactical. Culture and counterterror are mirror worlds.

“Bill worried about ‘Pattern Recognition,’” Womack told me. Gibson didn’t know how people would react to his sci-fi of the present. The novel’s protagonist, Cayce Pollard, isn’t a hacker but a brand strategist who’s been hired by a viral-marketing think tank for a commercial research project. She doesn’t zoom through glowing datascapes; instead, having suffered from “too much exposure to the reactor cores of fashion,” she practices a kind of semiotic hygiene, dressing only in “CPUs,” or “Cayce Pollard Units”—clothes, “either black, white, or gray,” that “could have been worn, to a general lack of com-

ment, during any year between 1945 and 2000.” She treasures in particular a black MA-1 bomber jacket made by Buzz Rickson’s, a Japanese company that meticulously reproduces American military clothing of the mid-twentieth century. (All other bomber jackets—they are ubiquitous on city streets around the world—are remixes of the original.) The MA-1 is to “Pattern Recognition” what the cyberspace deck is to “Neuromancer”: it helps Cayce tunnel through the world, remaining a “design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti whose very austerity periodically threatens to spawn its own cult.” Precisely because it’s a near-historical artifact—“fucking real, not fashion”—the jacket’s code can’t be rewritten. It’s the source code.

Gibson needn’t have worried about the novel; it spawned its own cult. Buzz Rickson’s is a real company, based in Tokyo. (It takes its name from a character played by Steve McQueen, who, in Japan, is a men’s fashion icon of special stature.) The company’s policy of military-historical accuracy prohibits it from making inauthentic garments; actual MA-1 flight jackets, produced for about twenty years, starting in the late nineteen-fifties, were sage green. And yet, after “Pattern Recognition” was published, customers began e-mailing Rickson’s in the hope of buying a black version. Making an exception, the company collaborated with Gibson on a black MA-1 that became, in some circles, instantly iconic. Made of a carefully re-created mid-century nylon, it is simultaneously antique and futuristic. There is now a range of “Buzz Rickson’s x William Gibson” military outerwear. Meanwhile, a decade after “Pattern Recognition,” K-HOLE, a marketing think tank modeled on the one in the novel, popularized Cayce’s fashion philosophy in the form of “normcore,” a trend—forecasted, then real—based on the idea of secretive, informed, intentional blankness. Normcore influenced design more broadly, shaping the aesthetics of companies like Everlane and Uniqlo. The boundary between fiction and reality turned out to be even blurrier than Gibson had thought. He had rewritten the code himself.

In earlier decades, Gibson had been lauded for imagining futuristic developments that seemed strangely plausible: a “fractal knife” with more edge than meets the eye; a “micro-bachelor” apartment built into a retrofitted parking garage in Santa Monica. Now the polarity has reversed itself. Today, on Twitter, Gibson’s followers share bits of the present that seem plausibly science-fictional. Protesters in Chile use laser pointers to bring down police drones. A stalker tracks a Japanese pop star to her apartment by extracting its reflected image from a photograph of her pupil. (Everyday life can be Gibsonian, too: a woman entering the subway in a tweed blazer and camo parachute kids; kids learning dances from Fortnite.) In “Agency,” a customer in an otaku coffee shop watches the silent news on someone else’s laptop. “If it wasn’t the hurricane hitting Houston,” she thinks, “the earthquake in Mexico, the other hurricane wrecking Puerto Rico, or the worst wildfires in California history, it was Qamishi.” The novel has yet to be published, but readers with advance copies have pointed out that the fighting in Qamishi, a city on the border between Turkey and Syria, is now real.

Inspired by Cayce Pollard, Emily Segal, one of the founders of K-HOLE, runs her own “alternative” branding and trend-forecasting consultancy, Nemesi, in Berlin. It’s easy, she said, to fall into the trap of thinking that novel things must be entirely new. Gibson, by contrast, is often “looking for something else—for things that aren’t especially new, but suddenly stand out as special.” A changing world might reveal itself not in the never-before-seen, but in the re-seen. “Once you get put in a position where people and corporations think you can predict the future, you see how much of a bullshit enterprise that is,” she went on. “But intuition is real, and texts and art works take on lives of their own, and sometimes it feels like technology does, too. It can seem like you’re seeing the future. Really, you’re just participating in history.”

In Vancouver, I met a friend for dinner. We found each other in Gastown, the city’s stylish old quarter, and walked east, in search of a restaurant she wanted to try. The walk seemed to go on and on. I scrutinized the street numbers and consulted my phone, where my blue dot
drifted through the grid. I'd forgotten what Gibson had said about brutality, Canadian style, until someone pushed a shopping cart past me. We were there: across from the restaurant, a tent city huddled in the dusk.

Not long afterward, Gibson came to New York. We had coffee at a counter in Chelsea Market, near the logoed elevators leading to YouTube's offices. Then we entered Artehouse, a high-tech exhibition space, to check out “Machine Hallucination,” a video installation by Refik Anadol, a Turkish artist. The installation was designed to conjure a sleek, data-saturated metropolis: computer-generated images pulsed and swam over the walls and floor of a large subterranean room, as though every surface were a screen. Instead of talking—it was impossible to converse over the synthesized soundtrack—people posted videos from their phones. In a sage-green MA-1 with black sleeves—an ahistorical, experimental make—and a wool baseball cap, Gibson leaned against a pillar, illuminated by vivid, geometric images evocative of the decades-old cyberspace of “Neuromancer.” Eventually, the images shifted: colorful layers of hand-size pixels suggested a Pointillist cyberspace for the neural-network age. Gibson smiled sympathetically: it was hard to invent visual metaphors for the digital world.

Leaving “Machine Hallucination” meant crossing a floor of radiant C.G.I. We shuffled vertiginously to one door, then another, then another, before finding the real exit and escaping to a lobby.

“Jesus Christ,” Gibson said, blinking. “Those cyberspace cowboys, they deal with that shit every day!”

Chelsea Market's retro brands surrounded us—a cheesemonger, a hot-sauce emporium—each with its own distinctive design language. Neon, chrome, veneer; historical typography, the New York of the past. It was as if, having emerged from one William Gibson novel, we had entered another.

“Which way do we go?” Gibson asked.

“I think this way,” I said, indicating a purveyor of Australian meat pies.

“Make a wrong turn down here and you'll be in the headquarters of YouTube,” Gibson mused. “You'll never get out. Never! You think Facebook is bad?

Those YouTube motherfuckers—they will really fuck you up.”

We took a cab to dinner at Lucky Strike, a French bistro in SoHo that Gibson enjoys. In the back seat, sitting next to him, I thought of the surprising tenderness in his recent novels: in “Agency,” a man works from home while taking care of his baby, as Gibson once did. (Unlike Gibson, he uses a telepresence headset.) It used to be, Gibson had told me, that a defensive membrane divided his life from his work. He could consider the future as a professional, without picturing his own life, his kid’s lives. “I never wanted to be the guy thinking about ‘Mad Max’ world,” he said. “I had some sort of defense in place... It’s denial, some kind of denial. But denial can be a lifesaving thing, in certain lives, in certain times. How on earth did you get through that? Some reliable part of you just says, It’s not happening.” The membrane, he went on, “which I very, very much miss, actually held until the morning after Trump's election. And I woke up and it was gone, whatever it was. It was just gone, and it's never coming back.”

At dinner, Jack Womack joined us. The restaurant was loud and dimly lit, its tables and chairs artfully cheap, the specials written on mirrors in white pen. Attractive drinkers, dressed in black, raised coupe glasses. At our corner table, conversation turned to the jackpot.

“What I find most unsettling,” Gibson said, “is that the few times that I've tried to imagine what the mood is going to be, I can't. Even if we have total, magical good luck, and Brexit and Trump and the rest turn out as well as they possibly can, the climate will still be happening. And as its intensity and steadiness are demonstrated, and further demonstrated—I try to imagine the mood, and my mind freezes up. It's a really grim feeling.” He paused. “I've been trying to come to terms with it, personally. And I've started to think that maybe I won't be able to.”

Womack nodded. “My daughter’s sixteen and a half,” he said. “Sixty years from now, she’ll be in her mid-seventies. I have absolutely no idea what the physical world will be like then. What the changes will be.”

“It's totally new,” Gibson said. “A genuinely new thing.” He looked away from us, into the room. Another song came on the sound system. Incandescent light gilded the mirrors. A young woman in round glasses leaned back in her chair. I felt, suddenly, that we were all living in the past.
SEVASTOPOL

Emilio Fraia
A t the end of August, I received a postcard. It was a picture of the city of Sevastopol, a soulless port framed by gray buildings, a generic scene, the kind with no story to tell. The card came with a message: “Onward, champion!”

Of course, Klaus had never been to Sevastopol. He’d bought the postcard online, from some site like eastern-europeanjunk.com. He knew I’d appreciate the gesture. He closed by declaring that we still had a lot of work ahead of us! That was how he wrote, with exclamation marks.

He called me and spent forever mulling over whether we needed to repaint the backstage of the place he’d found. We’d have to do something about the wiring, for sure.

He’d worked out a deal to rent the space for a month, at half price. It was small, on the ground floor of a squat in downtown São Paulo. Poetry readings and musical performances were held there. The other good news was that we’d get to keep all the box-office proceeds, and there was a chance for us to renew the arrangement if our run went well.

Before he hung up, he said that he could come by later and we could grab a drink at the bar below the overpass, if I wanted. To celebrate. I said yes. I love the beers there.

At the end of the night, Klaus likes to drink what he calls “a nice glass of wine” and eat a milanesa, preferably in some musty trattoria in Bixiga. About our work, he says, “I’ve got to be practical. Simple things lead to simple solutions, complicated things lead to madness.” When Klaus was my age—a lifetime ago, in other words—he was a German teacher. He must be in his sixties, though he looks older. His hair is dyed brown, and he sports a showy, camp mustache. His teeth are small and jagged, and he’s rather thin, especially his face, which is masked in a sickly yellow, his cheeks covered in poxmarks. He always keeps a pen in his shirt pocket. We met at the museum where I work. He used to lead a drama workshop there on Fridays. Staff can take classes for free, and I thought his sounded interesting.

Klaus had just directed a play called “Good Morning, Barabbas,” which ran for a while at a little theatre down on Rego Freitas. I didn’t see it, but an actress friend of mine told me that it was awful. Theatre people will flatter you to your face and stick a knife in your back, that’s a fact. I got a good vibe from Klaus. In class, I could tell that he knew what he was doing. One day I showed him something I’d written. A story about a mysterious relationship between a man and a woman, set in Moscow, in the eighties. The female character had my name: Nadia. The story began with Nadia in the single, lighted window on the top floor of a low-rise building, waving at the man, who was waiting in the courtyard. I liked the idea of a story that started with a wave. And I liked Nadia being up high, as if she were just out of reach. The man was older than her, and his name was Sasha. It was late afternoon. Snow was falling. Nadia came downstairs, carrying a letter. She handed it to Sasha and gave him what appeared to be instructions. He listened intently, holding the envelope in his left hand. He had no right arm. The sleeve of his overcoat hung empty. Before going back inside, Nadia glared at him. Sasha kept his head down. I wanted to explore that woman’s feeling of hatred for that man. I told Klaus that the reader would never find out the reason for Nadia’s anger. But it would be clear that Sasha had a debt to settle with her, and that was why he was there. The contents of the letter would remain a mystery until the very end, a secret that would spell doom for them both. I asked Klaus whether he thought it might work onstage. He said that it was a lousy story and clearly nothing about it worked.

I think Klaus took a shine to me. A few weeks after the course ended, he sent me an e-mail. He said that he was going to put on a new play and that he’d noticed my interest in Russia, which wasn’t entirely accurate. I didn’t know the first thing about Russia, and my story, to be perfectly honest, could have taken place anywhere in the world—but I didn’t tell him that.

We agreed to meet the next day at a café in Santa Cecília. Klaus arrived on time. He was wearing a tattered coat and a faded black shirt, which gave him a penurious appearance. He ordered a coffee. I ordered a mint tea.

He said something about the museum, how poorly the instructors were paid, and that it was unlikely he would continue teaching there. They’re a horrible bunch of people, I said. I worked for the museum’s educational program, leading guided tours for school groups and young people. Other than the girl with the shaved head who worked the cash register at the gift shop, there was nobody there I really liked. “My boss spends all day posting pictures of art work on Instagram, you know? One of the guys who works with me is involved in cultural production—grant-writing, setting up projects—and he’s an artist himself. His work combines photography and installation, and seeks to discuss inequalities in the art establishment, to draw attention to historically overlooked groups. It’s a collection of photos of concrete barriers, and none of the things he says his work is about are actually in the work, which really pisses me off. Anyway, I guess I’m kind of pissed off about everything—my dad told me that, actually—so maybe I’m being unfair.”

Klaus grinned. Coughing, he put a handkerchief to his mouth. Then he opened a small, crumpled pouch of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette. He got straight to the point: he was looking for someone to help him out. He wouldn’t be able to do all the research for the play he was starting to write, and research was the most important part. I disagreed. “Research matters as much as, I don’t know, a cherry,” I said. “A cherry in a cocktail. A cherry in a cocktail after two in the morning. Anybody who’s not a complete idiot knows that there should be only one cherry per drink and that the cherry’s only there so that it can be removed.” I was being serious, I meant it, but Klaus was amused by what I’d said. I told him that what I was interested in was writing, but I might be able to give him a hand with his research.

He looked at me, sat quietly for a moment, and then assured me that I’d get to write as well. Depending on how things worked out, I might even get a credit as his co-writer.

I didn’t believe him for a second, but, on the other hand, it didn’t seem so far-fetched. I realized then that Klaus was a lonely person. He had no money
and no friends, and couldn’t count on
many people.

He had done political theatre in the
seventies, which was when he’d made
a name for himself, or, rather, a name
among theatre buffs and writer friends,
which, fair enough, is still something.
My dad always says I shouldn’t be so
critical. But since then Klaus had kept
to himself. “I got old,” he said. “The
world changed. I’ve never been part of
the in-crowd, and now I’m paying the
price.” Klaus had spent the past few
decades putting on shows for virtually no
one in grungy theatres
downtown. But he was
happy that way. All you
can do is be happy that
way. He took another sip
of coffee, and then he
rested his hands on the table and began
to tell me about the play he was writing.

“It’s a historical play,” he said. “It
takes place in 1855, in Russia, during
the Siege of Sevastopol.” I pretended
to know what he was talking about.

“It’s about the life of a painter, Bog-
dan Trunov, a man who reached his
heyday during the war years and then
died young. He left behind many paint-
ings, which have only fairly recently
been discovered. What’s most fas-
inating,” Klaus said, “is the way Trunov
was always breathing the leaden air
of war—he was up to his neck in it—but
war, the war itself, never appeared in
his paintings.”

I quit my job at the museum and went
to work for Klaus. He didn’t take it
very well when he found out I’d quit. I
told him that I would have done it any-
way, that it wasn’t because of him. I just
didn’t want to be stuck in that place
anymore. “I’m not paying you a penny
more,” he said. Klaus paid me peanuts,
no question, but I had some savings and
I could get by. Anyway, it really wasn’t
because of him or our play that I’d quit
my job, I repeated. That was how I put
it: our play. And Klaus laughed.

He could laugh, I have to say that.
It was something I noticed right away.
He laughed with his whole face, and
with his shoulders and his arms. I was
thinking later about the complex
motions involved in laughter. It’s all so
weird. Opening your mouth, showing
your teeth, producing sounds, rocking
your body. No matter how fucked up
humans may be, they still want to laugh.
You can’t show sadness by simply pre-
senting a man who’s been trampled on
and screwed over. Deep inside the eyes
of a sad character—someone who’s re-
ally been tested by life—we must also
see hope. Klaus said things like this,
and I wrote it all down, absolutely all
of it, in my notebook.

A t night, Klaus would take me
to the bars on Vieira de Carvalho. Drunk,
we’d roam the streets of Repú-
lica, along Avenida São Luís, past the
gray boulevards, the tangled nests of
wires on telephone poles, the guys giv-
ing blow jobs in dark alleys, the statue
of an Indian whose shadow bore down
on the transvestites who gathered at
Largo do Arouche to smoke joints.
Sometimes we stopped and smoked
with them.

Then we’d head to Nove de Julho,
where Klaus’s apartment was, on the
fourth floor of a building with dark
hallways and a doorman who resem-
bled a zombie, sitting behind a little
wooden desk on the ground floor. The
apartment was stuffy and looked like
a room in Count Dracula’s castle. A green
light blinked in the street below the
only window. There was a steady, elec-
tric hum that made the couch, the
stained carpet, the smell of cigarettes
and of old food in the fridge seem all
the more gloomy.

I think it was because I’d just been
dumped by my boyfriend and I didn’t
have anywhere else to go that I spent
so much time with Klaus. My dad said
I needed to get a real job, but that’s
what parents always say. Some nights I
slept at Klaus’s place, on a foam mat-
tress in the living room. Before I fell
asleep, he’d tell me about the guys he’d
seen while cruising the streets, or at
bars. When he liked a guy, he would
remap his routes, hang out at the places
where the guy liked to hang out, often
sending himself on a kind of wild-goose
chase, which he would recount to me
in detail.

He described the clothes these men
wore, their hands (Klaus liked hands),
their gestures, the bulge of their dicks
in their pants, told me if they were tall
or had a beard. The flavor of the month
was a little blond actor, who, he said,
was just what we’d imagined for the
hero of our play. A gorgeous queen. He
said that he wanted to introduce me.
To see what I thought of him, because
we had similar tastes, he said. He could
not have been more mistaken.

In the morning, Klaus and I would
wake up and have breakfast together at
a little dive on Martins Fontes. I’d order
orange juice and buttered toast. Klaus
would have a glass of cold milk. Then
I’d spend the rest of the day organizing
research files and reading about
nineteenth-century Russia. When the
clock struck five, I’d start writing my
own stories and draft scenes for the
play, and every once in a while I’d jot
down what I remembered from my
dreams the night before. When night
rolled around again, we’d go out for a
drink or take a hit of the acid that Klaus
kept in a plastic sleeve with his driver’s
license, and then we’d sit, paralyzed, on
the couch in front of the window, look-
ing out at the city. Once the acid eased
off a little, Klaus would rave wildly for
hours. He’d rant about the play and ev-
everything he imagined for it, and brain-
storm solutions to production problems,
motivations for the characters.

Whenever he talked about the blond
guy, the one he thought would be per-
flect for the role of Trunov, he said that
he was sure I’d like him. “I saw him in
a play a while back,” he said. “He’s got
talent, not just a pretty face, no—he’s
really good, believe me. Yesterday,” he
went on, “I took the bus with him. I
rode all the way to the last stop, in San-
tana, can you believe it? I had no rea-
son to go all that way, of course, but I
pretended I was going to visit an aunt
and sat down next to him and we got
talking. I couldn’t stop looking at his
hands—they were firm but soft, with
pink, rounded nails. I looked at the hair
on his arms. We didn’t talk about sex,
of course, but I can tell he loves it. I can
pick up on that sort of thing. Now,
whether he’s a good lay or not, I wouldn’t
know. The problem sometimes is that
even people who love sex are scared to
death of sexual fantasy. A lot of folks,
if they could, would put an end to sex-
ual fantasy, because that’s what carries
us through life.” Then Klaus repeated
for the thousandth time that the guy
was perfect for the role, that he’d give
Trunov that strange and distant qual-
ity we’d imagined—of being and not being at the same time.

An eccentric quality, for sure. Unlike his fellow wartime painters, Trunov had no interest in the battlefield. Or, rather, he had an interest—those were the times he lived in, after all, and it would have been impossible not to express that in some way—but it wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted in his paintings. The ranks of soldiers in the field, the cavalry with flags raised. He didn’t capture the upheaval, the triumphant generals, the human suffering. Instead, he focussed on the soldiers’ everyday lives, when they weren’t at the front: the little breaks, the downtime when nothing was happening, soldiers with grubby faces waiting to hear the whereabouts of their artillery batteries or playing cards at a staging post.

Something else I learned was that Trunov—born in 1818 in the city of Odessa, died in 1860, at the age of forty-two, a man Klaus described as full of energy and self-respect—had very particular methods when it came to paint. He didn’t do full-scale studies for his paintings, for example. He did almost no studies. He had the habit of starting his sketches with no plan in mind. He used to paint figures and set them aside, then arrange them against backgrounds he’d prepared separately. So, even when the figures interacted with one another, the connection between them seemed unnatural. Their eyes, Klaus told me, almost never seemed to meet, which gave the paintings an unusual psychological dimension and a dreamlike ambiguity. In one of Trunov’s most famous paintings, some soldiers play chess with pieces made from scraps of bread. In another, a lieutenant dozes atop a white horse, looking like he’s about to fall off. In another, soldiers talk, or seem to be talking, while a plump woman holds a colorful feather duster.

From 1854 to 1855, when Sevastopol fell, Trunov lived in neighboring Simferopol. In 1855, while the Russians were losing up to three thousand men a day, Trunov spent about four months shadowing a regiment. He nearly died more than once. He did this on his own, spending his inheritance, because joining the war voluntarily cost money. It was a very prolific period for him. One of his first paintings from that time shows two soldiers, surrounded by smoke, sitting on the stones of a collapsed wall, eating watermelon. One of them is slicing the whitish melon with a pocketknife. They appear to be talking, but most likely, Klaus says, they were painted separately and then mounted against the background of the canvas.

One morning, while we were eating breakfast, I told Klaus that I didn’t quite understand why he was writing a play about Trunov. “You like the guy’s paintings,” I said. “There’s something about them that moves you, fine, but it’s just a weird story where nothing happens.”

Cars streamed past in the street outside. Klaus wiped milk from his mustache with a napkin and said that all stories, at heart, were weird stories where nothing happened. “We are the past,” he said. I said, “No, we’re the future.” He laughed at that. I asked him to explain what was funny. He said no, he wasn’t going to explain anything to me. And, besides, it wasn’t true that nothing happened in the story. He was just now working on a very rousing scene.

“A very rousing scene,” I repeated.

“Yes,” he said, “a very rousing scene. A very rousing scene in the life of Bogdan Trunov.”

Klaus and I had got drunk the night before and were trying not to die. My head was about to explode. It was a cold, sleepy morning. We were sitting in a sheltered part of the café, away from the draft. He wore a scarf with a brown moose on it that matched the color of his mustache. I ate my toast, looked at Klaus, and thought that, if anything was weird, it was my life.

My parents lived in the countryside, and whenever they called I’d say that things were going well—my job, school. I’d tell them about mundane stuff, like when the microwave broke and I had to get it fixed. I made up a story about meeting a new guy, who was very smart and had a job. To be honest, I wanted to be able to tell my parents that I’d gone through a terrible breakup, that I’d dropped everything and was working with a famous director on a play—I mean, they wouldn’t have had a clue who he was, of course, but I’d explain that Klaus was a famous director, a visionary genius. I was just waiting for the right moment to say it. I came close several times. But the months passed and I said nothing. When it was all over, when the play debuted, I’d have my revenge, I thought. They’d tell me that I was right and forgive me for everything. I ordered a mint tea. My head felt detached from my body.

Klaus went on to tell me about this rousing scene, which, of course, was far

“You boys might as well dig in—this could smolder for days.”
from rousing, because what Klaus liked was anything but action. He liked what he called “the lingering moments”: the rain, dunking cookies in milk—that mustache dripping with milk was disgusting. And, of course, he liked lunatics and lost people.

One day, Klaus told me how, in horror stories, mysterious characters suddenly appear, wearing clothing from centuries past, as though they’d been asleep for years—or for eternity, which is one and the same—and then suddenly awoke and knocked at the door, hungry for blood.

That was exactly what would happen in our story, according to Klaus. One morning, a man would knock on Trunov’s door. Not at night but around midday—which, ultimately, I thought was a good idea, not at all clichéd, it all happening at the brightest hour of the day.

The man stands waiting in the doorway. He is a soldier. His face is grubby, and he doesn’t look more than thirty. “What’s remarkable about him,” Klaus said, as though he weren’t making the whole thing up then and there, “is his white hair, a contrast with his youthful features, his thin, ruddy face. A handkerchief is tied around his left wrist, and he wears a dark uniform, patched at the knees. His tattered old coat, adorned with an insignia, looks to be the finest garment he owns. He might even be handsome,” he said, “if it weren’t for his over—all look of exhaustion, the crisscrossing expression lines hardening his features.”

“Are you Mr. Trunov, the painter?” he asks.

Standing halfway between the door and the kettle on the fire, Trunov looks at the soldier, who waits behind a curtain of dust, backlit by the pale sunlight. He invites him in. “I have a request,” the soldier says. “I want you to put me in one of your paintings.” Trunov takes a few steps back toward the fire and stays there for a while, looking at the flames, looking at the man. He warms his hands. He takes a sip of water from a shiny cup. He wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his dark sackcloth coat (this was a detail I’d researched and which Klaus was now using and, you’ve got to admit, it’s what gives the scene its charm). The soldier’s gaze hovers over the silver candlestick on the table, the clock on the wall with the picture of Peter the Great (me, again), and the stack of firewood, before landing once again on Trunov, whose answer takes a little too long to come. (We’d have to fix that later.)

Trunov thanks the man for his visit and his interest. He says that he can certainly paint him, but this is something new, it’s unusual for his subjects to come to him. He usually goes out in search of people willing to pose.

After a brief silence, and realizing that the soldier isn’t going to say anything more, Trunov asks him how he would like to be depicted.

Here Klaus said he’d imagined an elaborate and perfectly steady play of light. He wanted the moment of hesitation between Trunov’s question and the soldier’s reply to stand out, as if it were something solid and heavy, something we could feel. The soldier would stand there in silence, stare at Trunov, then say, “In the midst of battle. Among my fellow-officers. I’d like to be in a trench or on horseback carrying a flag. With the enemy fleet in the distance, the white batteries on the shore, the aqueducts, clouds of smoke, the wind in our faces. On the horizon, enemy fire.”

“This consciousness of solitude in danger,” Klaus said. “That’s the feeling we’ve got to strive for. Are you writing this down?”

He stuck a piece of bread in his mouth and took a sip of milk.

I asked whether Trunov would agree to do the painting in the end.

“Yes, of course,” Klaus answered. “That’s the event that will propel our story forward.” He lowered his head with a sad look on his face. “But Trunov will not accompany the soldier to the battlefield. He will do it differently. He’ll set the scene in the courtyard of a workshop. Civilians and soldiers will be summoned, with guns, in their best clothes.
Move past me on every side, the hours
Settling like a tomb through nothing
Of the infinite spirit of his
Half-broken heart, half-spoken
Voice rising like the drawing of water.
He kisses raindrops on the grass. Kisses
For the city he was born in.
Drops for the echo of a future
He enters, as if entering
A house to die in. He can’t make
Up his mind. —As if from a promise
From that house of madness,
I’m required to say,
Cold, beauty, pain will be done in ten
Thousand days from now, and all
That will be left will be the first taste
Of time, first forgotten day of the week,
Whatever city he’s left us in, added
Or subtracted from a bright field running
To blue in the horse-light of spring.
—My brothers counts his own hours now,
And I’m thinking of all the lightning-
Fractures of sky I had to go
Under with nowhere to go, nothing to
Do but climb the cloud of long ago,
Feeling again the cold of his hand
The last time, until pleas of
A grunting voice have nothing to say.

—David Biespiel

They’ll line up horses. At that moment,
onstage, let’s have the soldier in a different
kind of light. Soft and clean. This
is important, Nadia, let’s do it like that,
just like that.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall,
and it was past 11 A.M. The sidewalk at
that hour was teeming with old folks.
I had no idea where all those people
came from. They arrived gradually, bun-
dled up in thick coats, and soon there
was a whole crowd. They were milling
around, drinking coffee, wandering up
and down the street. They seemed to
have nowhere to go, so they stayed right
there, like cats in the winter sun. I told
Klaus that I had to go home. I hadn’t
been to my apartment for three days,
and I needed to get some rest.

The bus came quickly. On the way
home, I thought about the motivations of
the Russian soldier who wanted to
be depicted in a war scene. Maybe he’d
lost everything. Maybe he wanted to
tell the story his way. I thought about


er coast of Brazil, a town with gusty
mornings and white skies, with shops
selling beachwear, floaties, Styrofoam
boogie boards. Nadia, from the single
lighted window, waves at Sasha. She’s
in one of those squat, low-rise build-

ings slowly eroded by the salt air. Sasha,
who is waiting in the courtyard, sees the
apartment light go out. Then a door
slams, and he hears footsteps on the
stairs, at first distant, formless, with lulls
between floors. The clutter of keys, the
gate, and then Nadia approaching. She
has a letter. She gives Sasha instructions.
Propped against the little gate, he looks
at Nadia. It is always possible to go crazy
when you’re alone at night. In the cour-
yard, Nadia feels like she’s being watched,
and she could swear there’s a device in
her chest, some sort of mechanism, going
tick-tick-tick. She points to her chest.
You know the story of the crocodile that
swallowed the alarm clock? A leaden
air descends on them—silence. Nadia
glares at Sasha. He bows his head. She
hands him the letter and turns around.
Sasha hears the gate slam. He stands
there for a moment, thinking about the
debt, because Nadia, what little she said,
insisted on this—a debt that Sasha will
have to pay back sooner or later.

Nadia’s orders were for him to make
his way to the pier in front of the Ita-
lan Club, drop the letter on the curb,
and leave. And never look back. Like
in a detective movie. The sea is smooth
and glassy like a dish of milk, and at
that hour no one else is by the water.
Hulls bob up and down in the dark.
The club’s neon sign blinks on and off,
on, off. Sasha wipes the sweat from his
brow and sits on the curb. He
fixes his gaze on the water. The
next day he will have to obey
Nadia again. And again, and
again. Because he’s settling his
debt, which he can’t understand.

“One day you’ll remember, yes”: when
Nadia said that, her lip trembled.

I think deep down I wanted to be-
lieve that Sasha and Nadia could be
friends, could stroll through a strange
city together. But I couldn’t write it that
way. This filled me with irreparable sad-
ness. I glanced at the pathetic book-
shelf in my living room, at the wooden
bowl filled with pencils, paper clips,
Post-its, a sushi-shaped eraser, a little
plush monkey that had been a gift from
my mom. I looked at the only picture hanging in my apartment, a tiny student apartment. It was a pitiful little landscape, with a big white mountain.

The next week, I went back to my meetings with Klaus. When I got to his apartment, the door was ajar. A song wafted from inside, some tune from the seventies that I couldn’t identify. Klaus was waiting for me, smoking, a map open on the kitchen table. He looked even thinner than usual and as if he hadn’t slept in days. He showed me on the map where Sevastopol was. I told him that I knew where Sevastopol was. He ignored me and kept pointing at the map. “Sevastopol is a port,” he said. “It’s a funny name. This is the Black Sea. Minerals make the water dark. It’s what they call an inland sea, because it’s surrounded by the mainland. It’s connected to the Atlantic by various stretches of water, but, if you look at the map this way, the sea looks like a big hole. Or, rather, a drain, in the middle of the map, where the whole world will get flushed away.”

Klaus ran his hands over the map, unrolling it across the table. “And this is the world,” he said, and laughed.

I heard the click of the turntable in the living room; the record had ended. Klaus sat down. He said he had something to tell me. I expected the worst. He was silent. Then, as if he’d suddenly swerved around a bump in the road, he started talking about the blond guy. He said he’d run into him a few days ago, at a friend’s birthday party, in a night club downtown. When the booze had all been drunk, the party had migrated to a bar. Then another. Klaus had followed him all night. When he got the chance, he talked about the play. “We were very drunk. I ruined everything,” he said, laughing in a way I’ll never forget. “He’s no longer on the project. We’ll have to find another actor.” Klaus laughed again. He laughed and seemed to be crying, too.

Suddenly I realized that Klaus had aged since we first began meeting. The wrinkles, the white roots in his thinning hair. He looked fragile, weak, his eyes hazy, coated in a goozy yellow film. He’d been drinking too much. He always drank. But it had got worse. There was something inscrutable about him, that was my feeling—a tumultuous heart, in which nothing was clear-cut.

To break the silence, I asked about Trunov, whether Klaus had worked on the play in the past few days. “ Barely,” he replied. “To tell you the truth, Trunov has taken a lot out of me.” He shook his head as he said this, and winked at me, a sad, almost involuntary wink, as though he were seeking some kind of accomplice in his sadness.

To try to cheer him up, I told him that I’d managed to get someone to look into the theatre’s wiring. “He’ll take care of everything. He’ll paint the stage, too. The lighting will be perfect. It’s gonna work out. I don’t think the stage is small. It’s the ideal size.”

I opened my backpack and pulled out a stack of printed paper held together by a rubber band, with notes in the margins. “These are suggestions,” I said. “I’d like you to read it. I thought a lot about Trunov, our story. It’s going to be a great play.” I pushed the pages toward Klaus. He held them limply, then set them down on top of the map, just above that city with the funny name.

What I had in mind was that Trunov wouldn’t be able to paint the picture.

He’d assemble the fake battle scene. But he wouldn’t be able to do it. He’d throw out several attempts. And, instead of the battle scene, he’d paint another scene, something quiet, a simple portrait of the soldier in his tattered uniform, the one he wore the day he appeared on Trunov’s doorstep asking to be painted. The soldier would be standing in front of a staging post, his face unexpectedly lit up by a crooked smile.

Trunov takes his time with this painting. He wants everything to be perfect. The days go by. But, before he can finish the painting, he is surprised by news of the soldier’s death. A bomb in the trenches. It happened quickly, the way death often does.

Trunov mourns the young man’s death and sets the painting aside, unfinished. The frosts come and time passes and everything ends and begins again. Summer arrives and, with it, the end of the war. The soldier’s portrait will be lost for decades, until the mid-nineteen-sixties, when it’s discovered accidentally by a collector, in an antique shop in Siracusa, Italy. A series of investigations confirm that it is indeed a work by the Russian painter Bogdan Trunov. And only at the end of our play do we find out that this collector, a lonely man with gray eyes, is the narrator.

We debuted two months later. The play was a flop. Everything sounded fake. The script didn’t work. Nothing worked.

The actor Klaus picked, another strapping, angel-faced young man fresh out of some crummy drama school, was dumb as a post. He couldn’t understand a word he was saying. The actor who played the soldier was a little better, but he wasn’t convincing, either. The lighting was great until halfway through the show, when everything went haywire. My parents made the trip into the city, and at the end of the performance I think they just felt sorry for me, because my dad took out his wallet and handed me two hundred reals. “Don’t forget to eat right, dear.”

During the month the play ran, the audiences who used to come to the squat to see gigs and poetry slams—poems with positive messages that spoke of love and trauma, loss and abuse, strength and overcoming—simply evaporated. We weren’t able to renew the contract with the folks who ran the cultural program there, and we buried the story of our play.

On the last night, after the performance, I went with Klaus to a trattoria in Bixiga. I was devastated. He was tired but seemed happy. He ordered a glass of wine and a milanesa. I ordered the gnocchi. We barely said a word about the play. Klaus got drunk fast and started talking as if he’d never stop. At one point, he began to tell a story about Giacometti, the sculptor, a story I found eerie and sad. “In 1914,” he said, “when Giacometti was just thirteen, he sculpted a head, the first head he ever did from observation. His brother was the model. It all turned out fine. But, fifty years later, he spent nearly a month in his studio trying to re-create the head from back then, same head, same size. But he couldn’t do it. It never came out the way it had the first time. Suddenly, everything was a mess. If he looked at the head from far away, he saw a sphere. If he looked at it up close,
it was something much more complex. If he looked straight on, he forgot the profile. If he looked at the profile, he forgot the face. Too many levels. What I think is that, besides the lighting and the research, nothing's more important than time. Nothing.”

As Klaus spoke, I listened to a man who was singing and playing a Casio keyboard. One of the songs was about an emergenza d’amore. “And I will carry you/In my pockets wherever I go/Like a coin, an amulet/That I will cradle in my hands.” I sat there listening, my eyes red from the wine. The room seemed to ripple, with its twinkly lights and photos of actors and actresses (Marcello Mastroianni, Sophia Loren) and colorful ribbons dangling from the ceiling. When the song ended and lifeless applause sprang sporadically from around the room, Klaus said that he was leaving. That was how he said it: “I’m leaving.” I didn’t understand what he meant. Leaving to go where? He was drunk. He apologized to me. He tried to look me in the eye. “Will you forgive me, Nadia? I can’t stay. I hope you understand. I can’t stay any longer.”

Even today I can’t explain it. Goodbyes are like that, quick, and we never know when they’ll actually happen.

That night I left the restaurant and walked to the Brigadeiro metro stop. It was cold, and the city looked like a giant space station, a forgotten corner in the vastness of the heavens.

I remember, when I got to the station, taking a while to find my metro card in my bag. Then I put my headphones on. I went down the escalator. It was late; there was hardly anybody on the platform. Sitting on a bench was a dirty homeless man. He moaned; the corners of his mouth stretched to show his teeth. The man was hunched over, trying to keep himself warm. He looked at the ground and rocked gently back and forth. I opened my backpack and pulled out an old sweatshirt. I placed it on his lap, feeling a little ridiculous.

Soon my train arrived. That night, I stayed up writing almost until morning. Once again, the story began with Nadia waving from the single lighted window, at the top of a low-rise building. But I changed just about everything else. Instead of Moscow or a sea-side town, the story was now set in the city of São Paulo, in a sufficiently distant future. There were no more secret letters. Nadia and Sasha were older, too.

Sasha stood waiting in the building’s courtyard. He was just dropping by to visit Nadia. They were friends who hadn’t seen each other for a long time, or maybe they had once been a couple. She said that she liked living on the top floor, in the highest apartment. The building used to be taller, she said. Many years ago, during the siege, a bomb took off the top. A Chinese tailor lived on the ground floor and took refuge there—he couldn’t leave. Today, the tailor’s family owned the building and rented out the apartments; the price was low and the street secluded.

Sasha and Nadia walked down the block to a sort of bar with a big window, on the top floor of another building. At first it appeared to be a residential building; there was no sign, and no noise could be heard from the street. In the dark, they climbed the stairs, turned in to a corridor. A door opened. They entered a smoky room with a bar and people drinking and talking so quietly that you couldn’t tell whether they were real people or just projected images. The window looked out on an overpass and a compact cluster of buildings and lights. There was a red ball in the sky. Nadia told Sasha about a trip she’d taken many years ago, when she was still a child, to the house of some friends of her parents. It was the first time she’d ever left the walled side of the city. Everything was new. When she arrived, she was given gifts: a doll, a seashell, a music box. She’d never seen anything like it.

Later, she would tell Sasha the same story again. I don’t think she realized that she was telling the same story. People always tell the same stories, even when they try to tell new stories. Stories are laid out in front of us, like objects, and over time we realize that they’re all made of the same material, a solid mass of stone and metal.

Nadia told the same story at dawn, as she and Sasha tried to cross a wide avenue. For a moment, she seemed to catch a glimpse of herself from the outside, like an image beside Sasha. They continued down the avenue, which grew wider and wider and impossible to cross.

(Translated, from the Portuguese, by Zoé Perry.)

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Emilio Fraia on stories within stories.
THE CRITICS

POPP MUSIC

SONGS OF THE STREET

How Moondog captured New York.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Anyone who lives in New York for a while will eventually begin to mourn, in some vague way, the idea of an Old New York. The feeling is less one of nostalgia than of having just missed something remarkable. For some people, Old New York is subway tokens and street crime; for others, it’s merely Greenwich Village without a salad franchise on every corner. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, the musician and composer Moondog stood on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street, wearing an elaborate Viking costume, selling his political broadsides and musical compositions, eating chocolate bars, and chugging grapefruit juice out of a jug fashioned from an animal horn. Moondog is a potent symbol of Old New York, both as a collective fantasy and as a real and absent place. He translated the clamor of street life into song. This month, “Moondog: On the Streets of New York,” a compilation of his early music, including several previously unavailable pieces, will be co-released by Mississippi Records and Lucia Records. When Moondog died, in 1999, an obituary in the Times suggested that he was “as taciturn and unchanging a landmark of the midtown Manhattan streetscape as the George M. Cohan statue in Duffy Square.” Most New Yorkers who passed him on Sixth Avenue—by nearly all accounts, he stood there regardless of the weather—were unaware that his musical scores, usually for wind or percussion, were celebrated in Europe and admired by composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

Moondog was born Louis T. Hardin, Jr., in Marysville, Kansas, in 1916. He released more than a dozen albums in his lifetime, some on major labels, and often designed his own instruments, such as the trimba, an assemblage of triangular drums and a cymbal, and the Oo, a small harplike device made with piano string. His work was informed by the classical canon, various eras of American jazz, and the Native American music he heard as a child. Moondog’s best pieces are minimalist and percussive, and incite a kind of woozy, placating trance. In 1967, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Janis Joplin’s band, put out a cover of “All Is Loneliness,” a dazed but imploring hymn. (“All is loneliness before me,” Moondog repeats on his version, his voice sweet and layered, like a children’s chorus.) In 2002, a sample of “Lament 1 (Bird’s Lament)—which he released in 1969, fourteen years after the death of Charlie Parker—was featured in a commercial for the Lincoln Navigator.

In 1932, when Moondog was sixteen, he lost his eyesight in an accident involving a dynamite cap. His family eventually relocated to Batesville, Arkansas, where his father was the rector of an Episcopal church. He studied composition at a school for the blind, and learned how to read music in Braille. In 1943, he took a bus to New York. For five dollars a week he rented a room with a skylight on West Fifty-sixth Street, where he kept a sleeping bag, a portable organ, and a small electric stove. He worked as a model for figure-drawing classes, befriended the conductor Artur Rodzinski (Moondog would stand outside the stage door at Carnegie Hall, waiting for the musicians to arrive), and began attending rehearsals of the New York Philharmonic. In 1947, he took the name Moondog, in homage to a three-legged farm dog back home that howled reluctantly at the moon. By 1949, he was playing homemade drums on Sixth Avenue and busking for change.

In 1949 and 1950, Moondog released a series of 78-r.p.m. records on S.M.C. Pro Arte, the record label of the Spanish Music Center, a studio on Sixth Avenue run by Gabriel and Inez Oller. The Ollers let Moondog stay in their basement and use their studio at night. Moondog was mostly left alone by the New York Police Department, though he was charged once, in 1950, for “being disorderly while soliciting alms.” There were stretches when he was homeless, but he usually found a safe place to sleep. (For a while, he rented a broken-down panel truck parked near the Polo Grounds.) Once, when Philip Glass read in the Village Voice that Moondog was looking for a place to stay, he offered his own home, on Ninth Avenue and Twenty-third Street. Moondog spent a year living with Glass and his wife. He was not a particularly courteous roommate, and Glass recalled having to retrieve empty doughnut boxes and chicken bones from his room with some regularity. In the preface to “Moondog: The Viking of 6th Avenue,” a biography by Robert Scotto, Glass writes about Moondog’s racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism—he seemed disappointed that most of his own friends were black or Jewish, Glass notes, and he believed that his blindness might protect him
A serious musician and a familiar figure, Moondog stood on a street corner selling political broadsides and compositions.
from any sexual-assault prosecution. Glass describes him as “a difficult guy,” though it is clear that he loved him. He and his cohort often turned to Moondog for inspiration. “We took his work very seriously and understood and appreciated it much more than what we were exposed to at Juilliard,” he writes.

In the early fifties, Moondog met Tony Schwartz, an archivist and a sound designer who had a radio program, titled “Adventures in Sound,” on WNYC. Schwartz made amateur field recordings of street life around Hell’s Kitchen—he was agoraphobic, and preferred not to wander very far from his apartment—using a lightweight custom tape recorder and microphone. Like the photographers Bruce Gilden, Diane Arbus, and Weegee, Schwartz was eager to document the spiritual and cultural magnitude of New York, and to preserve some small measure of its wildness.

Between 1953 and 1962, Schwartz made dozens of recordings of Moondog, who was usually stationed just a few blocks away. Shortly before Schwartz died, in 2008, his archives were acquired by the Library of Congress. (Schwartz, who was hired by Johnson & Johnson to create ads for baby powder, also made political spots. He was part of the team behind “Daisy,” a commercial for Lyndon Johnson that invoked the prospect of nuclear war and included a grave caution from the candidate: “We must either love each other, or we must die.”)

The curator and writer Jeremy Rosser, who runs Lucia Records, believes that Schwartz was driven by an “excitement and enthusiasm for vernacular expressions of folk culture, the sounds and stories that are rooted in the traditions of different ethnic groups, be it Puerto Rican, Jewish, Italian. He wanted the everyday-life things.” Rosser told me, “He hated sound recordings made in a studio, because he thought that robbed the material of any life.”

Rosen transcribed three unpublished interviews Schwartz did with Moondog, from 1953, for the liner notes to “Moondog: On the Streets of New York.” In them, Moondog expresses a deep love of the city. “I object to the noise and hustle and all that, but when I go away, I miss it terribly and I have to come back,” he says. “There is no city in the world like it.” He also tells Schwartz that he’s comfortable being thought of as a beggar. The radio broadcaster Walter Winchell “calls me a mendicant, but that’s a euphonious way of putting it,” Moondog says. “I don’t feel self-conscious or apologetic about begging for a living. I’m blind and I do my composing and writing while I’m standing here.” He often had a Braille slate and a stylus tucked under his robes, so that he could make a notation at any moment.

New York is a place that respects mavericks and romanticizes hardship, and Moondog was never a particularly obscure figure; in fact, he was covered seriously by the Times as early as 1953, when a reporter called his work “unique, individualistic music, neither primitive nor extremely sophisticated, yet a little of both.” Though Moondog could write an elegant melody, I tend to prefer his more esoteric material. The new collection features an unreleased version of “Why Spend the Dark Night with You?” and the first full recording of his “Nocturne Suite,” performed with members of London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. It also includes “On the Streets of New York,” from a seven-inch EP that Moondog released in 1953, on Mars Records, and a series of song sketches and experiments, with titles such as “Untitled Percussion Solo in Traffic #2.”

Those snippets—which were recorded on the street by Schwartz, and are generally around a minute long—sound like stolen transmissions, secret missives from another era. There’s something urgent, almost holy, about hearing Moondog perform in his preferred context, synchronizing his work to the sound of traffic, footsteps, the door of the Warwick Deli clattering shut. In my richest fantasies of Old New York, I often imagine Schwartz and Moondog huddled together on the corner, Schwartz with his bespoke reel-to-reel machine, Moondog holding his Oo. Each uses the sound of the city to orient and steady himself, finding peace in its tumult.
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How happy we’ll be together,” Robert Lowell wrote to Elizabeth Hardwick in July, 1949, weeks before their marriage. Thirty-two years old and divorced from the writer Jean Stafford, Lowell was finishing a stay at Baldpate Hospital, in Massachusetts, after his first serious mental breakdown. But he hopefully prophesied that he and Hardwick, whose romance had begun at Yaddo, the artists’ colony, would soon be “together writing the world’s masterpieces, swimming and washing dishes.”

Lowell’s bouts of mania periodically interrupted the literary and domestic success that the two of them managed to create during the next two decades.

Lowell mined years of epistolary drama with his wife for “The Dolphin.”

The cozily titled poem “Man and Wife,” in his landmark confessional volume “Life Studies” (1959), describes the times that Hardwick faced the kingdom of the mad—its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—and dragged me home alive.

In the spring of 1970, not long after their twentieth anniversary, the Lowells vacationed in Italy with their only child, Harriet, then thirteen. After his wife and daughter returned home to New York, Lowell went by himself to Oxford, in order to take up a fellowship at All Souls College. He also took up, almost immediately, with Lady Car-oline Blackwood, who soon enough became the third writer he married.

Lowell’s desertion of Hardwick was for a while masked by his deceptions, and by the simple bewilderment engendered, in those days, by transatlantic letters crossing in the mail. Early in May, Hardwick writes, “Darling, I’m so happy you’re having such a nice time,” and apologizes for the quotidian dullness back home: “all these book-keeping and housekeeping and child-raisin’ details” that she includes, as she continues to get “the taxes, insurances, houses, studies, papers, schools organized, mail answered.” Within weeks, however, she has become exasperated with the infrequency of Lowell’s communications (“I guess we’ll never hear from you”), telling him it “would be decent” if he at least kept in touch with his daughter. But, even before Lowell counter-claims about “such boiling messages, all as public as possible on cables and uninclosed postcards,” Hardwick retreats toward contrition: “Darling I didn’t know you were in London working on the galleys of your wonderful book…Sorry I complained about your not writing.”

What she still doesn’t know is that he has been working on those proofs with Blackwood, a thirty-eight-year-old heir to the Guinness brewing fortune and a writer of social criticism for English magazines. When Lowell cables that unspecified “personal difficulties” will keep him from making a promised visit, late in June, to New York, Hardwick responds, “I must say I feel rather like a widow.” To a reader, she appears more like a secretary or a literary agent:

I sit here answering your mail, saying “my husband is away and will be so indefinitely. I do not think he would like to write on his concept of style, since this isn’t exactly what he likes to do, but I will send along your kind letter.” And so it goes. Anthologies pile up, telephones ring.

She wonders about next year—“if you are leaving us or if I am leaving you”—and sends off a letter, on June 23rd, “with my love if you want it.” During the next couple of days, while Lowell’s publisher tries to track him down, Hardwick’s pleading breaks through attempts to remain calm: “Don’t forget us! There was a life here and there still is.”

On June 25th, Hardwick learns the
propriety of his wife’s words.” Bether Bishop, who, with blunt eloquence, tried to dissuade him from the appropriation of his wife’s words. “Art just isn’t worth that much,” Bishop wrote, in uncharacteristic italics, after reading drafts of the poems.

But “The Dolphin Letters, 1970-1979” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), edited by Saskia Hamilton and published this month, will be the essential volume for any understanding of what actually went on. A sort of casebook, it assembles material from all the participants in the turmoil, including Elizabeth Hardwick, whose letters from this period appear in full for the first time. With “Lizzie” as its principal author, “The Dolphin Letters” turns out to be a better and a more important book than “The Dolphin.”

The assembled correspondence takes readers through the birth of Lowell and Blackwood’s son, Sheridan; Lowell and Hardwick’s divorce, in October, 1972; his immediate remarriage; Hardwick’s continuing claims of his inattentiveness toward Harriet; and the crisis brought on by the publication of “The Dolphin.” Hardwick’s alternations of mood, between forbearance and anger, are not the manic kind that Lowell suffered. They reflect a fluctuating, improvised rebuilding, more suited to prose than to self-mythologizing poetry. She conveys to Lowell her “contempt for your present situation” as well as “love for you.” When she signs off as “Your loving wife,” the envoy is simultaneously sarcastic and true.

There are times when she appears overly grateful for crumbs of recognition—“your kind note to me meant a lot, more than a lot”—and needlessly (if cuttingly) generous toward Blackwood, whom she writes directly with regard to Harriet. Her daughter, she explains, “does not imagine very much of Cal but I feel that I must make definite arrangements for at least a few days with him each year and I hope you won’t mind these brief and rare occasions.” In the first months after the marriage’s collapse, Hardwick muses, tentatively, to Mary McCarthy, upon “that strange thing that happens to you when you know you don’t want it any longer.” But her emotional liberation is fragile and intermittent. More than a year after writing this to McCarthy, she tells Lowell, “I miss you terribly and always will until I die,” and well after that she is still seeing to his literary business and issuing commands that hover tenderly between the wifely and the maternal: “Keep your pills straight and all will be well.” A pledge she makes early in their estrangement remains in force throughout: “If you need me I’ll always be there, and if you don’t need me I’ll always not be there.”

Lowell acknowledges her “old undeviating loyalty” and heroism, and it is Hardwick’s own awareness of those qualities that launches and validates her anger, forcing into the letters the sort of speech Lowell paid tribute to in “Man and Wife” (“the shrill verve of your invective. . . . your old-fashioned tirade—/loving, rapid, merciless”). Hardwick tells him, during their first summer of separation, that “the choice you have made is ludicrous and destructive and unreal,” and she stingingly contrasts the existence he’ll have with Blackwood to the one he could have with her:

What are your values? Do they include loyalty, responsibility to those you love, since you have love for me. Sickness & shame will overcome you as your whole life sinks into that created by someone else, ruled by a new country & the English aristocracy & its helpless ways, by surrender of something beautifully old-fashioned & New England & pure in you.

However earned and rational, Hardwick’s eruptions of wrath are quickly spent and regretted. She could never bring herself to like Lowell’s former student Sylvia Plath (“What an awful girl! What rage and hatred”), and usually appears relieved when affectionate recollection diminishes her own ferocity. During a summer alone in Maine, she pierces Lowell with a dart of parallel phrasing—“no child you can produce can be more splendid than the one you abandoned”—ten days before sending “fond memories” of his “old grey head going down Water Street! The swallows miss you.”

Lowell’s conduct in every part of the story, not just his eventual abuse of Hardwick’s letters, seems worse in this “Rashomon”-like volume than it has in previous tellings. His guilt comes up in sodden flashes (“Two additional lives would be too little to cleanse my character, to go the rounds of amend[s]”), but more often a clueless, offhand cruelty prevails. He wonders, to his friend Blair Clark, if it isn’t “meaningless scrupulous” to fret over bringing Blackwood to New York while Hardwick is there, and to Hardwick herself he exhibits a thinking-out-loud callousness. “I don’t think I can go back to you,” he writes on October 18, 1970. Three weeks later, he asks, “Dearest Lizzie: I wonder if we couldn’t make it up?”

In a letter of her own to Clark, Hardwick recognizes Lowell’s narcissism: “In all the months he has been gone I’ve heard from him a lot and he has
never answered one question that I have put to him, or discussed really anything, me or Harriet or practical things or Caroline—except himself.” Lowell manages, amid all the upheaval, to produce a great deal of poetry, and at one point he suggests that Hardwick write and publish something about him, since that is “one of the things you do best.” A reader has to wonder if he isn’t subconsciously urging Hardwick toward a preëmptive strike against her own appearances in “The Dolphin.” More exasperating than his self-preoccupation is the childish malingering over the many tasks of breaking up—the taxes to be disentangled, the property to be settled. “I’ve spent the forepart of this afternoon looking for the divorce agreement,” he tells Hardwick, “and fail to find it though once there seemed to be three or four, various versions, in drawers.” When he asks his daughter to “give all my love to mother and to your self,” he includes a caveat: “Alas, we can never give all. I try.”

Hardwick declares to him that Harriet is now the source of what “real love” her life contains. Inevitably, the child becomes a bone of contention, and the attention to logistics—how the “youth fares” of the era will take Harriet, a sort of human parcel, back and forth across the Atlantic—consume the most wearying stretches of the letters. Between surges of befuddled warmth, Lowell treats his daughter, according to Hardwick, “like a cottage that once was near but has been lost to memory when a new building went up.” He complains to Elizabeth Bishop that “Harriet has been stolen from me” in the divorce settlement, as if his own initial desertion didn’t enter into things.

“We are broke,” Hardwick informs Lowell early on. Having planned to join him in England later in 1970, she had given up her teaching job at Barnard for the coming academic year. Now she can’t get it back: “Crummy, cruel thing for you two selfish little people there to do.” What she cannot know is that financial pressures will begin driving her toward a greater, more focussed fulfillment of her talents. “I have been doing all this writing day and night to make a living,” she reports in March, 1971, having already confessed to Lowell that she is hoping “for a little prestige at least.”

As the decade goes on, the exigencies of earning will help to produce a collection of essays of feminist literary criticism, “Seduction and Betrayal” (1974), as well as her best-known novel, “Sleepless Nights” (1979), a book she tells Lowell, that “will save my life.” Among the essays is a study of Jane Welsh’s marriage to Thomas Carlyle, which founded upon the historian’s fascination with a wealthy aristocrat: Welsh “had sacrificed something—it was not altogether clear—in vain for Carlyle, and that discovery, if such it was, accounted for her exaggerated frenzy over Lady Ashburton.” It’s hard to imagine that Hardwick wasn’t writing, in part, about her own predicament.

She and Lowell had issues over personal letters even before “The Dolphin.” In April of 1970, just prior to their parting, Hardwick urged the sale of his papers to a university as a way for them to get out from under financial burdens. She joked about how to increase the letters’ value (“I have to write some good ones for the ‘files!’”) and subsequently took pride in her negotiations with Harvard, which acquired them. Lowell had been queasy about such an archive (“I hate the idea of people pawing through it”), and their estrangement complicated the sale. Hardwick now wanted to be paid separately for the part of the collection she had generated. Lowell, who feared the loss of her letters (“Please don’t wish to erase our long dear years from the blackboard”), found the condition reasonable, and agreed to it.

What became the “Dolphin” scandal involved not the physical or even the intellectual property of the Hardwick letters that Lowell incorporated into his poems. It centered on the more fraught matter of what might be called emotional property—Hardwick’s rights to her own privacy and pain, claims to be adjudicated not by a court but by friends, critics, and posterity. In November, 1970, Lowell writes to Blair Clark of the “delicate misery” in Hardwick’s letters, which “veer from frantic affection to frantic abuse.” Their potential as literary material seems already to compel him. But his use of them in “The Dolphin” fails not just morally but aesthetically as well. A letter Hardwick wrote to Blackwood about arrangements for Harriet, on March 12, 1971, contains this sentence: “She knows that she will have very little of him from now on and that he belongs to you and all of your children, since his physical presence there and absence here is the

“Sure, he’s ascended to a godlike state. But, from what I hear, he’s still on his family’s cell-phone plan.”
most real thing.” In Lowell’s “Green Sore,” we get instead:

She knows she will seldom see him;
the physical presence or absence is the thing.

He has deleted any explanation of whom he belongs to, and made the mere fact of his existence (“presence” or “absence”), not his location (“there” or “here”), all that seems to matter. It is no longer “the most real thing”—one concern among many—but simply “the thing,” ineffable and all-consuming. These changes alchemize a small piece of gold into a small piece of lead. Lowell slackens Hardwick’s prose into poetry, robs it of precision and pith. Shortly after the book’s publication, Hardwick manages to use her formidable powers of critical detachment in assessing, to Bishop, the poems’ literary flaws: “It seemed so sad that the work was, certainly in that part that relies upon me and Harriet, so inane, empty, unnecessary. I cannot understand how three years of work could have left so many fatuities, indiscretions, bad lines still there on the page.”

In March, 1972, Lowell himself had written to Bishop that “The Dolphin” would be best read alongside two other books: “History,” a revised version of a collection called “Notebook,” and a slim volume of poems, “For Lizzie and Harriet.” All three were published together in 1973. “The three books are one heap, one binding, so to speak, though not one book,” Lowell told Bishop. More crucial than this recommendation of a contextual reading is the way the sonnets of “The Dolphin” have always required, for any meaningful clarity, some knowledge of what was going on in the actual lives of Lowell and Hardwick and Blackwood. The book still needs what Harriet, as a child, called “footmarks”—not to present incidentally interesting facts but, rather, to provide a basic intelligibility. The letters and bits of conversation in the poems seem to come out of nowhere, not so much rich with discoverable meaning as simply confusing. Lowell may well have had in mind George Meredith’s “Modern Love” (1862), another verse narrative of marital catastrophe, whose sixteen-line sonnets have the poet speaking as both cuckold and adulterer, with anger and self-laceration and bitter amusement. But the male voice in “Modern Love”

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Cheffe, by Marie NDiaye, translated from the French by Jordan Stump (Knopf). At the heart of this novel is a character study of a brilliant chef, filtered through the perception of her most obsessive disciple, a much younger man to whom she is fairy godmother, mother, and beloved. His attraction propels a spiralling family psychodrama, whose richness and suspense are surpassed by those of scenes depicting the chef’s exquisite inventions, from a signature “green-robed leg of lamb” to sweet crabmeat poached in absinthe. NDiaye creates an arresting portrait of a self-effacing genius, as the chef yearns “to leave only a vague, marveling recollection in the eaters’ minds . . . only a dish, or just its name, or its scent, or three bold, forthright colors on a milky white plate.”

Mary Toft; or, The Rabbit Queen, by Dexter Palmer (Pantheon). In a small English village at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, a woman named Mary Toft gives birth to a dismembered rabbit every few days. Whether her plight is a medical miracle, an elaborate hoax, or a “shared moment of collective delusion” is the conundrum of this frolicsome period comedy. The young surgeon who cares for Toft becomes renowned as an “expert in human–leporine midwifing,” and, when word of Toft reaches King George’s court, she is summoned with the surgeon and his apprentice to London, where they become entwined in the bizarre and barbarous world of the upper class—a visit that exposes the chasm between provincial innocence and metropolitan cunning.

Parisian Lives, by Deirdre Bair (Nan A. Talese). The author of this sparkling memoir achieved two of the greatest coups in literary biography: writing a semi-authorized life of Samuel Beckett, which the gnomic Irishman promised to “neither help nor hinder,” and a life of Simone de Beauvoir, which was based on interviews conducted immediately before the philosopher’s death. Bair spent seven years on Beckett and ten on Beauvoir, and her dedication to her subjects is apparent. Into her accounts of working with these eminent, often exasperating writers she weaves recollections of malfunctioning tape recorders, grandstanding sources, and her travails as a professional and a mother commuting across the Atlantic, working in a field dominated by men.

Medieval Bodies, by Jack Hartnell (Norton). Elegantly combining strands from the histories of medicine, art, and religion, this study explores how the medieval world understood and treated the human body. In the late Middle Ages, medicine sought natural as well as mystical causes for all manner of afflictions, making diagnosis a complex affair (stringy hair, for instance, might indicate an unscrupulous character, while baldness resulted from an excess of heat). Focussing on Byzantium, the Islamic world, and the patchwork of kingdoms constituting western and central Europe, Hartnell deftly shows how these societies’ visual cultures were, like their medical theories, profoundly influenced by a symbolic understanding of humanity’s relationship to realms seen and unseen.
is forceful and direct, less like Lowell's than like Hardwick's.

As in the letters, Lowell's guilt makes fitful appearances in his poems:

I waste hours writing in and writing out a line,
as if listening to conscience were telling the truth.

Yet a kind of self-aggrandizement just as often rules the page. The testimony to his own desirability comes via Hardwick's versified letters or telephone talk:

. . . I was playing records on Sunday, arranging all my records, and I came on some of your voice, and started to suggest that Harriet listen: then immediately we both shook our heads. It was like hearing the voice of the beloved who had died.

In “Christmas,” the poet extolls, and attempts to repel, his ex-wife's words:

All too often now your voice is too bright;
I always hear you . . . common sense, though verbal . . .

waking me to myself: truth, the truth . . .

Hardwick's clarity, even doctored, carries more energy than the elliptical maulerings of the sonnets from which she is largely or entirely absent. In “On the End of the Phone,” the poet seems to concede as much, contrasting her “rapier voice . . . hundred words a minute, piercing and thrilling” with his own “sidestepping and obliquities.”

Lowell knows that what he's doing with the letters is wrong. “Lizzie is the heroine,” he writes to Stanley Kunitz of his work in progress, on April 25, 1971, “but she will feel bruised by the intimacy.” To Hardwick herself, prior to publication, he offers false assurances: “You won't feel betrayed or exploited.” When she at last reads the book, and its reviews, she even has to fear the instrument she uses to transmit her fury:

I feel that our marriage has been a complete mistake from the beginning. We have now gone down in history as a horribly angry and hateful couple. A review is coming out in which Harriet is called “the fictional Terrible Child.” . . . She knows nothing of all this. I am near breakdown and also paranoid and frightened about what you may next have in store, such as madly using this letter.

After dedicating “The Dolphin” to Blackwood, Lowell insists, to Hardwick, “I swear I never in all this business have wanted to hurt you.” Three years later, when his “Selected Poems” is issued, he tells her, “I regret the Letters in Dolphin.” But, he explains, “the only way to make a narrative was to leave a few.”

Lowell had always been something of a magpie, an allusive poet keen on incorporating the voices of literary predecessors and contemporaries as well as the utterances of family and friends. Writing, in 1949, to T. S. Eliot, then an editor at Faber, about a British edition of his early work, he explains, “When I use the word after below the title of a poem, what follows is not a translation but an imitation.” In 1970, in “Notebook,” he quoted conversations he'd had with Eliot and William Carlos Williams, along with newly metered versions of letters from Bishop and Allen Tate.

The appropriations in “The Dolphin” are, however, breathtakingly more intimate. When Hardwick saw the book, she wrote in protest to its publisher, Robert Giroux, “I know of no other instance in literature where a person is exploited in a supposedly creative act, under his own name, in his own lifetime.” One would not, of course, have four centuries' worth of novels without the forced deflection of real people—their physical appearance, actions, and speech—into “characters.” Composites are rarer than straight knockoffs, and creations ex nihilo are rarer still. (For an amusing catalogue of fiction's human resources, see William Amos’s “The Originals: Who’s Really Who in Fiction.”) And yet, even in the most treacherous romans à clef, actual models are usually accorded the fig-leaf dignity of invented names, and the writer's annexations don't generally extend to a real person's written words.

But standards, amid great contention, seem to be changing. Sheila Heti's novel “How Should a Person Be?” (2012) annoyed some readers by crossing the farthest boundaries of autofiction, using e-mails and transcribed conversations with friends, who went into the book without pseudonyms. The Swedish author Linda Boström Knausgård, whose novel “Welcome to America” was recently translated into English, has up to now been best known to readers as the wife whose actual life and mental breakdown are unsparring portrayed in “My Struggle,” her ex-husband's nanoscale chronicle novel. Elsewhere in Scandinavia, dispute continues over whether the Norwegian writer Vigdis Hjorth used family members' correspondence, without their permission, in her novel “Will and Testament.”

In “Seduction and Betrayal,” Hardwick takes up the case of William Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy, whose journals were “created in a collaborating mood” for her brother's poetic use. Hardwick is wary of overestimating Dorothy's contribution—the correspondences noted by scholars are not very striking—but does concede it a place “alongside,” if not fully entwined with, William's poems. Phyllis Rose, the literary critic and biographer, suggests a similarly cautious appraisal of the photographs that Alfred Stieglitz took of Georgia O’Keeffe: “It is modish now to say that O’Keeffe 'collaborated in the portraits and to present them as a joint work. As years went by and O’Keeffe took charge of her own image, this became true to some extent. But in the early images, from 1918 to 1920, the collaboration amounted to little more than her willingness to be a model.”

“Willingness”—eagerly imparted by Dorothy Wordsworth, absent from Elizabeth Hardwick in “The Dolphin”—is the ethical crux of any double-helix creation. A decades-long joint enterprise of James Merrill and his lover David Jackson, their hands sliding over the same Ouija board, resulted in three volumes of poetry, eventually collected as “The Changing Light at Sandover” (1982). In “Familiar Spirits” (2001), the novelist Alison Lurie, a friend of both men, amplified Jackson's occasional ambivalence toward the project into outright censure of Merrill, and of the work's enthusiasts:

It is no wonder that David felt both exhaustion and regret. For over twenty years he had provided at least half of the material for Jimmy’s epic poem. With the skill of a novelist he had helped to create dozens of original characters, an elaborate plot, and a fantastic history and cosmology.

Merrill, during an interview in 1981, considered whether “the trilogy shouldn't
have been signed with both our names—or simply ‘by DJ, as told to JM.’” And yet, Lurie notes disappointing, “when Sandover appeared the following year, the only name on the title page was [Merrill’s] own.”

The question of appropriation is the editorial mainspring of “The Dolphin Letters.” Saskia Hamilton, who teaches at Barnard and helped assemble the two previous volumes of Lowell letters, approaches the particulars here with deep knowledge and occasionally overexcited exegesis. When Lowell complains to Hardwick about taxation (“The government scoops us like a steamshovel”), Hamilton pounces with a footnote reminding us that “yellow dinosaur steamshovels” make an appearance in “For the Union Dead.” When Hardwick laments that Lowell will “never, never, never” be home again, we are directed to her 1964 review of Peter Brook’s production of “King Lear,” in which she writes, “All the existential ‘nothings’ and ‘nevers’ of the play take on a special meaning.”

In 1976, Lowell tells Hardwick she is “welcome to anything about me” that she might like to use in her novel in progress. “Sleepless Nights” ends up containing very little of Lowell, just a glance or two at “the Mister,” less vivid and full than the portrait of the cleaning lady who calls him that. Once, he is referred to as “him who has left,” his absence becoming a kind of presence, but also, in this part-epistolary novel, a sort of revenge. By 1975, Lowell was sometimes addressing his letters to “Elizabeth Hardwick” instead of “Elizabeth Lowell.” (“I go back and forth as a commuter,” Hardwick writes.) The two seemed to have less and less to say to each other—“I’d write more but nothing churns up,” Hardwick tells him—and yet their exhausting estrangement was approaching an unexpected coda.

Lowell’s marriage to Blackwood was falling apart under the weight of her alcoholism, and her inability to help or even be near him during his spells of madness. In “Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire” (2017), Kay Redfield Jamison quotes the poet Frank Bidart, who said that Blackwood “was always a very vivid talker, but she got to be much more flamboyant, and there was a kind of vehemence, an apocalyptic, destructive coloration” to her words—not the “piercing and thrilling” and ultimately therapeutic speech Lowell had timaely heard from Hardwick. He moved back to America in 1977 and spent portions of the last year of his life with Hardwick in New York and Maine. (The poet Philip Booth greeted him as “Odysseus” when he turned up at his old haunts.) Jamison sets out believable evidence of a “growing tenderness” in Lowell toward the end. Hardwick assured McCarthy that their reunification was “no great renewed romance, but a kind of friendship” and quiet caregiving: “We are trying to work out a sort of survival for both of us.”

After a trip to see Blackwood and his son, Sheridan, in Ireland, Lowell died of a heart attack, on September 12, 1977, in a taxi cab taking him from J.F.K. to Hardwick’s apartment, on West Sixty-seventh Street—a poignant twist for the biographers Hardwick had been dreading for years. She believed that their effortful “documentation,” as she scornfully called it, would further distort her history with Lowell, even more than the usurpation of her letters by his poetry already had.

In his last book, “Day by Day,” published just weeks before his death, Lowell asked, in a poem called “Epilogue,” “Why not say what happened?”—the question Hardwick had posed to him, encouragingly, some twenty years before, as he sought to expand the possibilities of confessional poetry. It is often quoted as an apologia for that mode, but in “Epilogue” the question is one rhetorical piece of the poem’s attempt to weigh the merits of actuality against those of art. Longing to create “something imagined, not recalled,” the poet finds himself “paralyzed by fact,” before accepting, or at least contemplating, that we are but “poor passing facts”—and praying “for the grace of accuracy.” Are facts dishonored when art distorts them? Do they point to any larger truth when biography collects and presents them as is? If Lowell ever had the answer, it may have come, improbably enough, in “The Dolphin,” when he wrote, with a moment’s fleeting certainty, “Everything is real until it’s published.”

“*We’re so not getting our security deposit back.*“
Let me attest, at the outset, to the hauntingly powerful—and, now, almost twenty-five years on, probably unreplicable—cultural permutation that the songs on Alanis Morissette’s third album, “Jagged Little Pill,” achieved after its release, in 1995. When its popularity began to crest, I was in sixth grade, at a largely black all-boys school, where hip-hop had a monopolistic hold on our pop-artistic attention and almost nobody admitted to watching the rockers and teenyboppers on MTV. Still, I can remember a friend of mine—Asata, named for the Black Liberation Army activist now in permanent exile, in Cuba; that’s how black and unlikely to be playing Alanis at home he was—sticking a finger in my face and shouting, “You! You! You!,” gearing up for but never arriving at Morissette’s famous “oughta know!” Our cred depended on not knowing this song, but none of us could help knowing.

The album’s power rested in its total, terrifying specificity. It read less as a thematically linked cycle of songs than as an opera with a cast of one: Morissette, as a new kind of Gen X diva soprano, her hair everywhere and murder in her eye.

It’s strange, then, to see songs like “You Oughta Know” and “Ironic” spread out and depersonalized, turned into situational anthems instead of markers of deep emotional truth, as they are in the new musical “Jagged Little Pill” (at the Broadhurst), directed by Diane Paulus, with a book by Diablo Cody (the writer of films such as “Juno” and “Jennifer’s Body”) and choreography by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoou. Rather than putting the album’s mix of anger and love, forbearance and recrimination into one woman’s mind and threading those contradictions together in the telling of her life—in other words, rather than doing what each listener of “Jagged Little Pill” does by an instinctive act of imagination—Cody distributes them awkwardly among the members of a strained family, painting a tableau of white suburban anomie that feints at depth but, throughout the show’s two and a half hours, is always threatening to dissolve.

Mary Jane Healy (Elizabeth Stanley) is a wife and mother whose lifetime of anxiety, perfectionism, and self-avoidance has brought her to a crux. She’s suffered an injury in a car crash and is having trouble—more than anyone knows—kicking her painkillers. (That this plotline might have some punning relationship to the name of the show makes my ears ring.) Her husband, Steve (Sean Allan Krill), is distant and addicted to porn. (She surveils his Internet searches.) Their sex life is as dry as a riverbed in a drought. Their daughter, Frankie (a charismatic Celia Rose Gooding), who is black and was adopted, is a highly principled social-justice advocate at school but suffers daily indignities—we see somebody stroke her hair, that micro-aggressive cliché—and seems, increasingly, to hate her mom. Frankie’s brother, Nick (Derek Klena), is an overachieving swimmer headed to Harvard, who seems to be crumbling under his parents’ expectant pride. When faced with an ethical quandary concerning two of his classmates, his response shows that the moral part of his education has lagged far behind his grades and popularity.

The show checks off “issues” like boxes on an interminable medical form: transracial adoption and rape culture, opioids and bad marriages, catty neighbors and the perils of meritocracy, bisexuality, and, fleetingly, prayer. The suburbs of Connecticut are a middle-class surface under which all kinds of funky bacteria are thriving. There’s a sprinkle of Cheever and a dash of “Real Housewives,” all tightly Spanxed into the form of an after-school special. Adding to this topical muddle is the clutter onstage: the
ensemble, dressed like a vaguely radical street gang—Doc Martens, sheer shirts, pointless vests—dances around the main characters at odd moments, adding welcome movement at the expense of cohesion. A series of panels meant to suggest the siding of a suburban house, but a bit too reminiscent of an aisle in Home Depot, glides around the stage, framing scene after scene.

To the extent that one theme predominates, it is a worthy one: the inner lives and imperilled freedom of women. This rhymes, in a way, with Morissette’s work. But the show’s insistence on making its story ever bigger, broader, and more inclusive—perhaps an effect of anxiety about the size of the Broadway stage—leaves each of its women underdescribed and essentially unknown.

The most powerful moment of the show comes when the focus is whittled down to one: Frankie’s best friend and occasional make-out partner, Jo (Lauren Patten), who finds out that Frankie has fallen in love with a new boy at school, Phoenix (Antonio Cipriano), and gives a galvanizing rendition of “You Oughta Know.” When I saw the show, Patten—a great singer—brought the house down. It was possible to imagine, for a moment, an entire story told through Jo’s eyes, and what a howl such a show might make.

Now try this for a portrait. A woman with a short bob, wearing well-tailored trousers and a fitted vest, picks up a rifle, aims it out the window at her lawn, stretches to her full, formidable height, and takes her best shot. Her name is FeFu (Amelia Workman), and the gun is pointed at her husband, who never shows up onstage. This is a game they play: before FeFu fires, her husband fills the gun’s chamber, never telling FeFu whether any of the bullets isn’t a blank. So goes the perilous game of chaining and dependency in marriage; and such, in its violence and whimsy, is the experience of watching “FeFu and Her Friends,” by the late Maria Irene Fornés, directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, at Theatre for a New Audience’s Polonsky Shakespeare Center, in the play’s first Off-Broadway revival since its premiere, in 1977.

FeFu, so real and electrically idiosyncratic that she might at any moment up and leave the theatre, stroll down Fulton Street, and start apartment hunting in Fort Greene, has invited a group of women to her house so that they can run through the program of an upcoming educational fund-raiser. FeFu’s restlessness and loose tongue—she claims not to like other women—scandalize the mousy Christina (Juliana Canfield) and amuse Cindy (Jennifer Lim), a cooler customer who’s used to FeFu’s shtick. More friends file in, and soon the drawing room looks fit to burst with their hopes and secrets, hanging before us like the armada of art on FeFu’s bright-green wall.

The second act is a marvel. The audience is split into four groups, each making its way through four parts of FeFu’s house: the drawing room, a whimsical kitchen, a lawn bedecked for a game of croquet, and—thanks to a glass floor—a dismal basement where Julia (a brilliant, unnerving Brittany Bradford), who’s been physically incapacitated for reasons that are unclear to her friends, carries on a conversation with someone unseen. Something’s wrong down there, and the trouble might be FeFu’s before long. The set piece rips away the artifice that so often congenially pillows our notions of theatre. As we walked around Adam Rigg’s intricate doll house of a set, ropes and pulleys and bits of black tape flopped into view, and some of the people in my group started talking about holiday plans.

You could call this a distraction. I wished that the wristbands that designated our groups didn’t also denote which of us could sit and which should stand. This pageant of movement insists on a flattening equality among the different perspectives, and I didn’t like to be reminded of hierarchy, which already poisons too many of the theatre’s trappings. Still, I felt pleasantly plucked out of place. “Life is theatre,” one of the women says. And theatre, in turn, is a feverishly wall-papered fun-house version of life, whose totality none of us can tell. Here we were, walking the line between the two.

The otherworldly effect was this: on the lawn (the last stop for my group), when FeFu’s hands grazed those of her friend Emma (Helen Cespedes)—this play is, among other things, a map of little erotic touches—I felt my hand grazed, too. I left the theatre and kept looking around corners for new sets to discover.
THE CURRENT CINEMA

COMPLEX PERSECUTION

“Seberg” and “In Fabric.”

BY ANTHONY LANE

A remarkable scene at a ritzy club, in Otto Preminger’s “Bonjour Tristesse” (1958), shows a young woman dancing first with a spruce admirer and then with her doting father. She has short blond hair and a halter-neck dress; the men are in tuxedos. As they take her in their arms on the dance floor, she looks over their shoulders and holds us in her unnerving gaze—not so much smashing the fourth wall as gently tapping it and staring at us through the crack. She talks to us, too, in voice-over, confessing how little the perks of privilege mean to her. “I can’t feel anything he might be interested in,” she says of the younger man. Despite this candor, we sense that she is keeping something back. So, what is she: a spoiled brat, a sad case, or a cornered spirit, angling for a chance to cut and run?

The woman’s name is Cécile, and she is played by Jean Seberg. Two years after Preminger’s film, Seberg strolled into Godard’s “Breathless” as Patricia, the all-American in Paris, crying “New York Herald Tribune!” up and down the Champs-Élysées. She was now wearing a T-shirt and flats, but the restlessness, and the blond crop, as neat as a choirboy’s, remained. And, lo, here they are again, in Benedict Andrews’s “Seberg,” in which the title role is taken by Kristen Stewart.

Stewart’s voice is lower than Seberg’s, her smile more hesitant, her chin more determined, and the gleam in her eyes a touch more dulled with knowingness, as if the innocence to which Seberg somehow clung were no longer available; Stewart, though, is not in the business of impersonation. Her task, which she fulfills with terrific intent, is to chart the downfall of a resolute but precocious soul who was ill-suited to take the plunge. The movie’s larger mission is to prove that not an inch of that descent was of Seberg’s making. She was pushed.

Seberg was born in Marshalltown, Iowa, in 1938 and died in Paris in 1979. Her decomposing body was found in a car, along with a note to her teen-age son, Diego, and a bottle of pills: a terrible conclusion to an errant life. It’s a blessing, I suppose, that the writers of “Seberg,” Anna Waterhouse and Joe Shrapnel, resist the temptation to cram that life into a bio-pic. Rather than range far and wide, they focus on one especially murky patch, beginning in 1968. We find Seberg preparing to fly from Paris, where she lives with her husband, Romain Gary (Yvan Attal), to her native land. On the plane, she meets Hakim Jamal (Anthony Mackie), an activist of charismatic renown, and, upon landing in Los Angeles, joins him in giving the Black Power salute. The assembled press is watching. So is the F.B.I.

Seberg’s political sympathies are common knowledge, but now she goes further. She sleeps with Jamal, and harkens to his earnest decrees. “If you can change one mind, you can change the world,” he tells her. (The line is repeated later, in case we didn’t catch it.) Mackie—one of the few actors, surely, who can exude menace while sporting a tiger-striped shirt top and matching shorts—lends the soft-spoken Jamal a seductive edge, and, before long, Seberg is writing checks for his educational project. Her contribution, however, is not popular, either with Jamal’s tough-minded wife, Dorothy (Zazie Beetz), who calls the actress “a tourist,” or at the Bureau, where, under the benevolent aegis of J. Edgar Hoover, the decision has been made to persecute Seberg. She is to be photographed, bugged, and shamed. The Puritan appetite needs regular satiating; every generation, you could say, must have its Hester Prynne.

The maltreatment of Seberg is a matter of record. It is true that, when she became pregnant, the F.B.I. triggered a rumor, quite without foundation, that one of the Black Panthers was the father; according to an internal memo, from 1970, “It is felt that the possible publication of Seberg’s plight could cause her embarrassment and serve to cheapen her image with the general public.” It’s also true that the baby survived for only a few days and that the casket was opened, at Seberg’s request, so that mourners could see that her child was white—a display that the film, mercifully, does not seek to re-create. The iniquity of what was done to Seberg, harrying her into a breakdown, is beyond dispute; but there’s a problem with Andrews’s movie. Where is the center of gravity in this sorry tale?

Much of the narrative is occupied by an F.B.I. greenhorn, Jack Solomon (Jack
O’Connell), his wife, Linette (Margaret Qualley), and his partner, Carl Kowalski (Vince Vaughn). There’s also a substantial role for Jack’s conscience. His job is to spy on Seberg, and he comes to loathe himself for doing so. Eventually, he even sneaks into his boss’s office, purloins the relevant file, and offers it to Seberg at a hotel bar. All of which makes the movie more balanced, undoubtedly, but also more boring than it has any right to be; time spent away from its heroine seems like a wasted opportunity. Watching the authorities dick around with long lenses and concealed miles is hardly an unprecedented treat, whereas the sight of a film star rolling up to the residence of a known radical, after dark, in a convertible Jaguar E-Type, is new.

The look of the film, like that of its subject, is not of minor concern; what gets trapped inside that look is anything but superficial. The cinematographer is Rachel Morrison, who shot “Black Panther” (2018), and “Seberg” is her finest hour to date; the precision with which she gauges the crystalline light of California surpasses even Robert Richardson’s lucid work on “Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood,” earlier this year. To observe Seberg, framed by the wide windows of her West Coast home, is to see someone caged by her own visibility, whether or not the law is on her tail. Likewise, the outfits she wears, from the natty to the sumptuous, are designed to draw attention. The point at which she appears in a strapless, rose-pink gown, with a looping collar resting like a jewelled yoke on her shoulders, to the soft lament of Scott Walker’s “It’s Raining Today,” was my signal to fall sideways out of my seat. It’s as if her whole existence had become one long catwalk. Is it any wonder that the curiosity of others killed the cat?

Seberg was that most benighted of creatures, the paraanoiac who is dead right, and her fears are enshrined in Stewart’s performance, at once twitchy and refined; notice how she touches her hairline, as if to check the lid of her head. What a mournful irony it would be, though, if viewers were left with the belief that Seberg was no more than the sum of her nervous wreckage. It’s hard, of course, not to regard her movies except through the prism of her private strife, the clearest example being Robert Rossen’s “Lilith” (1964), in which she plays a patient at an asylum. And yet what is so moving about the film, and what allows Seberg to hold her own against a youthful Warren Beatty, is the care and the control with which she measures out her character’s collapse. If the story of Jean Seberg is one of the more wretched footnotes in the chronicle of fame, that’s all the more reason to treasure those occasions, onscreen, when she was not a victim—when she bore herself, and whatever pains she harbored, with mastery and grace.

Hounded though Jean Seberg was, at least she wasn’t attacked by her own clothes. Such, however, is the strangely textured fate that befalls Sheila (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), the shy bank teller at the heart of Peter Strickland’s “In Fabric.” Being in her early fifties, and not long separated from her husband, Sheila embarks, with some wariness, upon the dating game. At a local department store, she buys a new dress. In the catalogue, it is described as having a “dagger neckline.” And the color? “Artery red.”

Strickland is the British-born director of “The Duke of Burgundy” (2014) and other oddities, and, if you haven’t encountered his work before, brace yourself. Snorts of derision are a perfectly standard response, as are guilty snickers; you may also feel mesmerized, baffled, and disgusted, all in the space of a single scene. What, for instance, are we to make of the store, where Sheila is served by Miss Luckmoore (Fatma Mohamed), a magnificent saleswoman in funereal crinoline, whose scarf nails match her lips? “I have reached the dimension of remorse,” she says, meaning “I’m sorry,” when Sheila, besieged and inflamed by the dress, tries to return it. Has Dracula’s sister really gone into retail?

To judge by the fashions, “In Fabric” is set in the nineteen–seventies. And, to judge by its visual and aural manners, it might as well have been made then, so reverent is Strickland’s thirst for the period, with its soft-core-porno tropes and its throbbing horror flicks. If anything, this antiquated air makes the film a little too arch and over–concocted for its own good, and I’d love to see the director unleash his talents on the mercurial fetishism—“a transaction of ecstasy,” as Miss Luckmoore’s boss would say—of our own age. How about an Apple watch that slits the wearer’s wrist, or earbuds that drill into the brain? Or a haunted Alexa that listens in on every word and slowly takes possession of our lives? Oh, hang on. Too late.

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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"I was stationed at CVS during the war on drugs."
Charlie Wollborg, Detroit, Mich.

"It's the price of freedom."
Fred Lief, New York City

"I got tired of explaining each one."
Paul Crystal, Arlington, Va.

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