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Architects, Exiles, and Megalomaniacs: Lawrence Weschler and the Post- Totalitarian Turn

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Abstract

In recent decades, the American journalist Lawrence Weschler—a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and *McSweeney's*—established himself as one of the most prolific and imaginative writers on the “post-totalitarian” turn: that is, on the startling revival or persistence of both totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This essay explores his engagement with the rise and fall of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, whose rule Weschler filtered through successive treatments of two exile architects—Kanan Makiya, one of the most prominent and controversial critics of Hussein’s regime, and his father, Mohamed Makiya, who returned to Iraq to work for the dictator. Weschler’s collaborative portraits of this father and son—which helped him construct a cultural, transnational account of their journeys from Baghdad to London and to the US—became fundamental to the increasingly experimental ways Weschler began to track the global resurgence of totalitarianism and authoritarian politics, including back to the American scene.

In his collection *Everything that Rises: A Book of Convergences* (2006), the American longform journalist Lawrence Weschler reprinted an oblique meditation that had engaged him back in the 1990s. While at The Hague covering the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Weschler had taken a break from the proceedings, deciding instead to leaf through a history of human habitation in the Netherlands. The book he opened was about that country’s reclamation of otherwise catastrophic flood plains, beginning with clusters of “piled mounds known as terps” and then, over the generations, stitching those areas together with land bridges,

connecting paths, and dykes. Weschler then pivots back, applying this history to the tribunal's attempt to construct a new body of international law piece by piece, trial by trial, testimony by testimony:

[This expansion of the law is an] effort by no means guaranteed to succeed. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of [the tribunals'] labors was the way that in plunging their foundations into the swampy borderland, they kept coming upon planks and girders left over from earlier efforts ... and earlier masters (Augustine, Aquinas, Montesquieu, Grotius), structures that had once contained the floodtide for a time and then themselves collapsed before the onslaught of further depredations. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of all was the way that the current workers would come upon these earlier ruined efforts and dust them off, tighten them up, sand them down, and then reinsert them right back into the rapidly expanding structure.¹

As fanciful as this conceit might seem, we might also use it to explore the imagination of Weschler himself, one of the most prolific, versatile, and yet elusive US practitioners of literary nonfiction in our day: the author of profiles, essays, and conversations on art, film, international politics, and many other subjects. After all, Weschler is usually classified as, well, unclassifiable: as a “whimsical and uncanny” author of “deliberately variegated multiplicity” who nevertheless has been invested in “dark” subjects and “big questions.”² As one reviewer has put it, Weschler is a writer whose oeuvre can read “like the contents of a puréed card catalogue.”³

There are several reasons, however, why Weschler's writings have often fallen outside sustained critical analysis. First, whereas critics and reviewers habitually focus on single texts, Weschler often sees his individual projects as part of a continuous process. As his Hague musing suggests, he is interested in “building” an “overarching structure” from one treatment to another.⁴ Weschler revisits his topics; early works are revised, broken up, or made to reappear in new formats. Second, though Weschler has declared his exclusive devotion to journalistic facticity, his work has not always confined itself to the sober, empiricist, and realist norms that still govern the practice of nonfiction.⁵ Rather, he is resolutely experimental and interdisciplinary, repeatedly ranging outwards to influential artists and theorists—such as David Hockney, John Berger, and Robert Irwin—who challenge realist illusions of a singular “window” into experience.⁶ Weschler borrows from these figures' techniques to create what he calls a world of “convergences”: a place “already filled to bursting with interconnections, interrelationships, consequences, and consequences of consequences.... That's what my reporting becomes about ... following the mesh through into the wider, outlying mesh.”⁷ And in many cases, the reporting that results is not so whimsical at all. On the contrary: As with the case of Slobodan Milošević, the primary defendant of that tribunal at The Hague, Weschler has repeatedly returned to the subjects of human

rights and authoritarian rule in an inter- and transnational frame. Usually, he does so by recounting cases of those who resist such rule, attempt to escape it, and yet still live on in its aftermath. In other words, his lens is often the experience of dissenters, émigrés, and exiles.⁸

My aims in this essay are to explore one of Weschler's projects of this kind from what some have called the "post-totalitarian" turn: a pivotal period of global history in the 1990s and early 2000s when, in Weschler's own words, "dictatorships" that had once "seemed to be melting away" had suddenly risen up again.⁹ Specifically, I will focus primarily on his treatments of the reign of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, a nexus of US foreign policy at the time—and, in turn, a regime to which the label *totalitarian* was so controversially reapplied.¹⁰ But in broaching that vexed term, my analysis will not follow the more familiar path taken by those historians or political scientists who, by focusing on ideology or philosophical consistency, attempt to differentiate "types" or stages of authoritarian and/or totalitarian regimes. By and large, these critics have largely seen the revival of the *totalitarian* label as simply a resuscitation of Cold War hysteria, a theoretical anachronism, or the result of a blame game played by post-*perestroika* Russian intellectuals.¹¹ Instead, Weschler's treatments are more akin to those of a number of narrative journalists—Suki Kim, Barbara Demick, M. Gessen, and Emma Larkin, among others—who have suggested that "post-totalitarianism" has taken many forms.¹² Moreover, this group of journalists has examined this diverse, post-totalitarian revival through matters that are *cultural* in the sense of artistic expression or love, coming of age and despair about the future, family loyalty and generational difference.¹³ And in addition, Weschler has applied this cultural lens across borders, using experimental forms to create uncanny resonances between ostensibly dissimilar venues, political formations, and time periods. Indeed, as I will say in closing, Weschler's cultural approach—in the manner of Poland's Ryszard Kapuściński, one of his favorite writers—can be read as a malleable, even reversible critique designed both to capture the transformations of authoritarian and post-totalitarian nations and track them back into the US.¹⁴

In the case I examine here, Weschler's prismatic lens refracted Saddam Hussein's rise and fall through the life of the former Iraqi architect Kanan Makiya—who had authored several prominent exposés on Hussein—and of Kanan's father, Mohamed Makiya, also an architect but who had worked for the dictator while his son wrote those exposés. I will focus on the three occasions when Weschler turned to the Makiyas' experiences: in a 1992 *New Yorker* profile entitled "Architects Amid the Ruins"; in "Oedipus in Samarra," the first installment in Weschler's *Calamities of Exile: Three Nonfiction Novellas* (1998); and in a short piece from 2004 called "Thumb in Eye" that would be reprinted in *Everything that Rises*.¹⁵ Weschler's first essay followed closely on the heels of the first Gulf War, and looked back at Hussein's rise to regional power; the second, a revised version of the first, reframed that story in the context of global struggles over the apparent resurgence of totalitarianism. The third piece

appeared six months after the second Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq, which had of course led to Hussein's toppling.

In my first section, I will offer an initial summary of Kanan Makiya's best-known writings on totalitarianism; in my second, I will take up Weschler's *New Yorker* profile, suggesting why, on a first reading, it might seem to lay the groundwork for the manifestly Manichean framing of *Calamities of Exile*. Then, however, I will cut back against that reading, and—by rethinking *Calamities* and turning to “Thumb in Eye”—suggest a countervailing set of forces at work in Weschler's imagination. Weschler was neither, as we shall see, directly interested in matters of policy, nor terribly precise about political labels or possible solutions; nor did he focus much on routes or vehicles of cultural transmission. Rather, his work created a mobile, often quite speculative set of interpretations of power and dissent that, often dancing on the edge of fear and irony, pulled together extravagant collages of sculpture, photography, family history, and even myth to create disturbing and unexpected meanings. Thus in any number of ways—adopting a word we might also lift from his reading of the Netherlands—the passing of Saddam Hussein came to register new “floodtides” of political power, grievance, and violence across the globe. And just as importantly, in Weschler's view, those floodtides could be seen running through channels closer to home.

Saddam Hussein's Republic of Fear

Among the various profiles Weschler crafted in the mid-1990s, potentially the most controversial was that of the Iraqi dissenter and exile Kanan Makiya.¹⁶ A second-generation émigré born in Baghdad, schooled by American Jesuits, and later extending his education at MIT and the London School of Economics, K. Makiya became best known for two of his books about Saddam Hussein, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (1988) and *The Monument: Art, Vulgarly and Responsibility in Modern Iraq* (1991).¹⁷ Although he wrote pseudonymously at first, he would soon be widely known for casting Hussein's state as totalitarian, and eventually for supporting US military intervention after the invasion of Kuwait (AR 62). In subsequent years, clinging to the slim hope that a democracy might emerge in Iraq, K. Makiya would also be seen, especially on the left, as having been coopted by neoconservatives in the White House. In one of the most detailed accounts of the US debacle in Iraq, George Packer's *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* (2005), K. Makiya initially appears as a guide and inspiration even for (as Packer calls himself) “ambivalently prowar liberals” in the US.¹⁸ But as George W. Bush's duplicitous campaign descended into futility, K. Makiya was increasingly vilified on the left as a bookish tool of American geopolitical ambitions. For Packer's book, however, he remains a quixotic, if tragic, figure.¹⁹

Both of K. Makiya's books had drawn on orthodox Western strains of anti-totalitarian critique. Indebted to thinkers as different as Plato, Thomas Hobbes, and Hannah Arendt for his critique of centralized authority, K. Makiya lambasted Hussein's cult of personality; the Iraqi state's reliance on centralized surveillance and ideological

control; and Hussein's mobilization of an official (a)historical mythology of a monolithic *turath* or heritage. In *Republic of Fear*, Hussein's regime was Plato's ideal city horrifically realized, a fully mobilized bureaucratic police state with spies everywhere (16), invented enemies within and without (20), and citizens arbitrarily kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured. Seizing on what historian Abbott Gleason has called the persistent "core of meaning" in the totalitarian concept, *Republic* argued that Hussein's state was especially designed to reach into the private sphere of family life.²⁰ The book in fact said that goal "summed up" Hussein's "view of politics" (36), an outlook expressed in one of the dictator's speeches to his so-called Ministry of Education:

"You must surround adults ... through their sons, in addition to other means. Teach the student to object to his parents if he hears them discussing state secrets ... You must place in every corner a son of the revolution, with a trustworthy eye and a firm mind ... Also teach the child at this stage to beware of the foreigner, for the latter is a pair of eyes for his country and some of them are saboteurs of the revolution. ... The child in his relationship to the teacher is like a piece of raw marble in the hands of a sculptor who has the power to impart aesthetic form, or discard the piece to the ravages of time and the vagaries of nature."²¹

In addition, K. Makiya argued that Hussein's culture of control was driven by a claim, as Arendt had written of ideologies generally, to know the "secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present," and "the uncertainties of the future."²² And in an emphasis more recently revived by thinkers such as Judith Shklar—with whom, as "Architects" had it, K. Makiya had studied while visiting Harvard (AR 55)—Makiya's book argued that fear was Hussein's signature tool of oppression.

K. Makiya's books also singled out the particular effects that Hussein's ideological and bureaucratic power had on Iraqi citizens. Both books focused on the regime's assault on the cognitive processes of everyday citizens: on Iraqis' sense of themselves, their "common sense," even their everyday storytelling and communal gossip. Rather than lifting up citizens, *Republic of Fear* argued, Hussein's putative rationalism actually required such gullibility that it produced cynicism and self-doubt (45, 113). Accordingly, Saddam putatively "reigned" over his people but did not "rule" (*Republic* 43), a distinction that suggested that genuine consent was actually beyond the leader's grasp. Meanwhile, K. Makiya also argued that Hussein's full control was constrained by the arbitrariness of his thinking. Taking up a line of argument reminiscent of the "memory holes" in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949),²³ *Republic* argued that one day a "truth" was declared and, on the next, it would be denounced as a lie. As a result, Iraqis were endlessly trying to become someone other than themselves (*Republic* 68). Everyone had been told to embrace a mythos that they knew was absurd and backward even as they brought "up their [own] children to

applaud it” (73). Repeating force-fed claims of the state’s success that they knew to be false, they subjected themselves to a fugue of fragility (193; see also 114).

K. Makiya’s focus on popular consciousness also derived from his special interest in the Iraqi state’s cultural productions, particularly its architecture, urban planning, and public art. He was alternately enraptured and horrified by the way Hussein “had become habituated to making his own reality virtually from scratch” and to expressing his personal “taste for ideologizing the world” (*Monument* 17) through a massive redesign of Baghdad’s public spaces. *The Monument*, especially, devoted crucial pages to the waves of international modernism that had swept over Baghdad during the 1960s and 1970s, transforming the old city of backstreets and alleys into a landscape of shopping malls and high-rises. As this book had it, the scale of this crusade reached its “apogee” (31) in Hussein’s obsession with shrines and public art. *The Monument* argued that Baghdad’s brief status as a showcase of Western architectural styles had, ironically, served merely as an “exercise in alienation” (caption, 25) that had produced a break with the best of Iraq’s own artistic traditions.²⁴ Under Hussein’s new campaigns, Iraqi public space had then been given over to a world of endlessly self-reproducing “kitsch” where “everything [would be] subservient to the sweet lie” of the dictator’s supremacy (*Monument* 72). The culmination of K. Makiya’s case was Hussein’s grotesque, personally designed “Victory Arch” (Fig. 1) to commemorate the Iran–Iraq War. Erected in a public square in 1989, this monument featured two pair of scimitars held by gargantuan arms modelled precisely on the dictator’s own limbs. Once completed, this Arch loomed over the scattered debris of the war, including thousands of battlefield helmets of fallen soldiers strewn at its base. But *The Monument* saw a different effect than mere memorialization. Synthesizing ideas from Walter Benjamin, Andy Warhol, and Quentin Bell, the book argued that the Arch assaulted the senses with a crude, blunt “aura” of Hussein’s own power (8). Indeed—while pointing to the Arch’s errors of scale, proportionality, and imagery that no Hussein subordinate had dared to question (*Monument* 50–55)—K. Makiya said that the monument was politically potent paradoxically *because* it was so monstrously grotesque. That is, it became “capable of haunting [both] Iraqi memories and scratching at the psyche of *all* human beings” (*Monument* 29, emphasis added). So bad, one gathers, that it couldn’t easily be forgotten.

Father and Son: Weschler’s *New Yorker* Profiles

As Packer and others would show, Kanan Makiya’s thinking had a measurable impact on American policy debates. However, when Weschler turned to profiling the Iraqi exile in the *New Yorker*, his main goal was not to dramatize the arguments above in detail. Instead—though that profile would offer background material on British colonial rule (AR 42), internal Ba’athist politics, Saddam Hussein’s rise to power, and the dictator’s rivalry with Iran (AR 58)—Weschler’s tone is largely dispassionate. Hussein’s dictatorial presence is more “understood”—in fact, the word

“totalitarianism” actually appears only once in “Architects Amid the Ruins” (55). Instead, in the traditional *New Yorker* sense of the term “profile,” Weschler carefully sifts his lead characters’ private lives out from the most fractious political disputations swirling around them. As scholars and insiders have often told us, in profiles the *New Yorker*’s readers are presumed to *already* recognize the heat of the moment; the writer usually serves to cool it out, displace it by substituting a back story that aims to make the outer conflict look either short-sighted, off the mark, or too “uncomplicated.”²⁵ Rather than addressing its subject head on, Ben Yagoda has written, the *New Yorker* profile “circles” recursively around it.²⁶ Weschler’s emphasis, for instance, fell on the security of civil society during M. Makiya’s early career and his son’s boyhood (AR 45), or quoting the former’s belief that his Shia faith was more a matter of connections to the past than formal religiosity (AR 41). Details are provided about education, home life, family disputes; Weschler’s goal is to reveal the “mesh” of experience and filial loyalty behind K. Makiya’s eventual rebellion.

In creating this mesh, Weschler also revises the customary *New Yorker* header (or “rubric”) of the “Profile” into the plural “Profiles” (AR 40), signaling that he will tell two stories at once. The personal tension between Makiya father and son, and the cultural divide it represents, provide the main narrative scaffolding of the story. As M. Makiya rises to become one of the most prominent architects in the Middle East—sought out by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and Buckminster Fuller (AR 13)—his son is sent abroad to continue his education, and marries in the US. Then, while K. Makiya and his new bride gravitate to left-wing causes, his father increasingly returns to his Shia faith and yet remains largely oblivious to politics (AR 46). Father and son tensions flare up, however, over the running of their shared London office, and then M. Makiya decides to honor a summons from Hussein to return to Iraq for another monumental state-sponsored project. Right before leaving, the father stumbles across his son’s drafts for *Republic of Fear*. Their break is ugly and seemingly final (AR 55–58).

Described in this way, Weschler’s narrative might seem to be enacting a classical pattern of tension leading to a crisis. Really, however, the writer was presaging the arrival of what Weschler prefers to call his signature “trapdoor” moment: not just when a climax arrives, but when protagonists have their world turned upside down.²⁷ To lay the groundwork for this effect, the profile has shuttled transnationally between father and son, across divergences of age, marriages, the father’s Shia religion and the son’s atheism, and so on. In a way, however, Weschler’s “mesh” also positions some cultural beliefs in counterpoint to these divergences—suggesting, for instance, that the émigré son and state-bound Iraqi father are both alike one another and not. For instance, the profile emphasizes M. Makiya’s earlier London training in the arts of Christopher Wren and Inigo Jones (AR 46), both champions of neoclassical recuperation, symmetry, and structural precision. But further along in the profile, Weschler describes K. Makiya in New York, working on *Republic of Fear*, in very similar terms:

[Kanan Makiya's] approach was, in effect one of excavation; indeed, true to his own vocational origins, he seemed to cast an architect's eye over the history of Iraq, examining its deep foundations, highlighting its far-flung symmetries, finding and testing its key stress points. He was, in sum, pursuing a conceptual deconstruction of the regime for which his father was simultaneously busy elaborating visionary constructs. (AR 56)

This passage, so evocative of Weschler's Netherlands meditation, underscores how a structure of balance and equipoise can also be expanded, revised, and even disassembled.²⁸ As such it is a deeply self-reflexive passage for Weschler as a writer. Weschler's apparent intimacy with both parties—through private conversations, asides, random confessions, or admissions—is used to install implied counterweights against each generation's ideological position.

Such narrative intimacy and counterbalancing also prelude the resolution of the conflict Weschler has reconstructed, in which the civil-discourse liberalism used to view the Makiyas now exerts its own center of gravity *within* them. K. Makiya soon becomes disillusioned with progressive politics, turning instead to a more classically liberal commitment to “the fight for individual rights, the claims of the part as against those of the whole” (AR 56). It also turns out that writing *The Monument* has led Kanan to rediscover his father's architectural genius. Reciprocally, having gone back to Iraq, M. Makiya comes face to face with his own contradiction: that building structures honoring Iraq's traditions played right into Hussein's political ends (AR 52). The architect father comes to feel that his original dismissal of his son's *Republic of Fear* was wrongheaded and now calls it the most important thing his family ever did for Iraq (AR 65). That realization is the last line of the profile, and it has been previewed by a standard denouement. Working together, father and son have crafted a charter for the future of Iraq that Weschler calls “impressive” and “humane.” But Weschler says it also “runs the risk of seeming otherworldly” (AR 64). Weschler's profile thus closely adheres to the *New Yorker's* trademark matching of form to meanings cultural and political. With Hussein's maniacal rise as its backdrop, the plot shows us how each Makiya, instead chastened by facts and History, moves towards a hypothetical liberal “center,” holding onto a democratic, pluralistic, “internationalist” vision.²⁹

Calamities of Exile: Weschler's Novella Revision

However, as I have said, a revised and expanded vision of the Makiyas profile appeared in Weschler's *Calamities of Exile* just six years later. Now titled “Oedipus in Samarra,” and labelled a “novella” by Weschler's preface, it was put in the lead position of a volume that included revised versions of two other *New Yorker* profiles: of Czechoslovakian dissident Jan Kavan, accused of collaboration with his country's secret police in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, and that of Breyten Breytenbach, the South African poet and painter once celebrated by his home country

and yet imprisoned by its apartheid regime. Were we to approach this reframing with hindsight, it might simply seem that Weschler had been planning the convergence of these three profiles all along. In his preface, Weschler would declare that each of the three men the book portrayed was a “basically decent” expatriate who “tries to do the right thing with regard to the totalitarian regime holding sway over his homeland” (*Calamities* ix). Were that not enough, Weschler dedicates the collection to own grandparents, Viennese Jews who had been “forced into complicated exile” at about the same age he was when writing this book (*Calamities* iv). Unsurprisingly, then, references to twentieth-century fascism and World War II appear repeatedly in *Calamities*’s pages, giving Weschler’s framing more urgency (e.g., *Calamities* 28, 147).³⁰

Clearly, then, collecting these profiles together was more than a reprinting. For example, totalitarianism—formerly recessed within *The New Yorker* profile of the Makiyas—now rose to be front and center of *Calamities*. Indeed, some might feel that Weschler’s explicit reframing was all too compatible with the neoconservative agenda at the heart of George W. Bush’s foreign policy. The book’s longer format, for one thing, allowed Weschler to go back and integrate frightening materials that he had either minimized or not included in the *New Yorker* installment about the Makiyas. Specifically, he now quoted (OS 26–27) extensively a long section from K. Makiya’s *Republic* (3–4) that detailed the story of an unnamed friend of the family named “Salim” who had been detained by the Iraqi secret police. The man had been swept up, told to vacate his home and remove everything in it—and then, without explanation, allowed to return there. Moreover, this tale was accompanied by the new revelation that M. Makiya had been stopped by the police on the very day he had left Iraq (OS 27). The implication was clear: As Weschler’s allusion to the legend of Samarra suggests, the exiled son may have been in denial about his own father’s “appointment” with a fate not unlike “Salim’s”—or death itself. History, as in Sophocles’s *Oedipus*, was ready to repeat itself.

What these allusions suggest is that Weschler’s collection of novellas was actually designed to generate new interpretive effects. Weschler was experimenting with forms of convergence that destabilized the ideological reading his preface otherwise seemed to be inviting. For example, consider his conceit about the structure of each novella:

[T]hese narratives afford a sort of double cat scan into the natures both of totalitarianism and of exile. Or maybe, to shift the metaphor slightly, the decent impulses animating each of these tales can be likened to individual atoms projected into a cloud chamber, their uncanny vapor trails helping to elucidate the character both of themselves and of the supersaturated medium across which they travel. (*Calamities*, ix)

This passage helps us understand the subtle byplay Weschler creates by the implicit cross-references in his collection. He is no longer evoking a dispassionate emulation of architectural order and balance. Rather, Weschler's new analogies about totalitarianism contain echoes of Newtonian relationality. They convey the idea that a gravitational field shapes the trajectory of objects moving across it and is itself altered by their movement. If being subjected to totalitarian rule is akin to moving through a "supersaturated" medium, the nature of that "totality" has changed, too: Now it is liquid, bursting with excess energy, capable of turning solid lives into vapor trails. It creates both uncanny historical transformations and personal strife. Totalitarianism is "manifestly evil," Weschler now says, but he adds a caveat: It has strangely "turned out to be evil in a confoundingly complicated way ... contaminat[ing] everything it touched—not least, all opposition to it" (*Calamities*, xi).

For these reasons, the book therefore invites less predictable parallels between its collected stories, as the famously "in-between" form of the novella itself often will. To begin with, as the metaphor of a "Cold War" had, *Calamities*'s triptych lumped together nation-states usually considered to represent very different political systems or regimes. But as literary scholars have said, a collection of novellas is often designed to do just that—to interlink its seeming different stories together. Or, some have argued, to invite a reader to understand all of a volume's stories together, in light of a commonly shared event or calamity (say, a flood) that may be offstage. *Calamity* itself is an unusual word, the *OED* tells us, in which a disaster is said to *contain* its emotional impact.³¹ In this rendering, the calamitous, worldwide return to authoritarian or totalitarian rule thus summons more subliminal cross-references among Weschler's three tales: Jan Kavan's "lustration" in Czechoslovakia invites comparisons, say, with Kanan Makiya's public pillorying, or with the interrogation scenes reimaged in Breytenbach's prison poetry ("with his eyes he held mine/the better for to stab me in the back" [*Calamities* 169]), and so on. South Africa's racial apartheid could be cross-referenced with Hussein's pan-Arabic (and yet also anti-Semitic) nationalism. And there are other, stranger crosshatches. Each of the three dissidents, for example, is a maverick in their larger resistance group; each adopts a false identity at some point; each protagonist feels that, uncannily, they have foreseen their fate before it happened.

These parallels also serve to put some of the seemingly incidental revisions in "Oedipus in Samarra" in a different light. While the original floorplan of "Architects" remains intact, Weschler now introduces new material about other creative individuals caught up in political reprisals or debates. For instance, Weschler now draws out Edward Said's harsh dismissal of *Republic of Fear* more fully, as well as K. Makiya's response (OS 53). "Oedipus in Samarra" also reintroduces the controversies surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). These small changes and others reframe K. Makiya's plight. In the original *New Yorker* version, the idea that architects could even be "megalomaniacs" themselves was attributed to K. Makiya himself (AR 52); in

Calamities (OS 27), we hear that he actually borrowed it from Ayn Rand's hymn to individualism, *The Fountainhead*.³²

Other revisions accentuate K. Makiya's inner turmoil rather than providing a neat ideological pattern. Attaching the book's seemingly Manichean framework to what some scholars have called "exilic mourning" created complications in *Calamities*'s psychological and historical revisioning.³³ In the upside-down world of Hussein, Weschler writes, even torture is seen as "a form of therapy in which the lapsed [individual self] is vouchsafed an opportunity to be reclaimed ... hence the Baath's astonishing name for their torture division: 'The Instrument of Yearning'" (OS 37–38). Totalitarianism is now rooted in an unsettling paradox: "both the atomization and the homogenization of the subjugated population" (*Calamities*, ix). That is, regimes want their subjects to "experience themselves, *qua* individuals, as utterly alone, cut off, both endlessly suspect and unendingly suspicious of everyone else" (*Calamities*, x).³⁴ The allegory becomes reversible and transnational: Citizens of totalitarian states come to "experience themselves" as banished even though they never left (*Calamities*, x, emphasis added). Conversely, the vapor trail of exiles is a trace of the mindset of those whose bodies are still inside Iraq.

One consequence of this double-sidedness, meanwhile, is that Weschler now blurs the boundary between "totalitarian" and "post-totalitarian." For example, he refers to "the manifestly growing crisis of post-totalitarian rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" (OS 46). Much as M. Gessen has, Weschler emphasizes not a clear break from the old order but rather totalitarianism's uncanny resilience, its haunting of the present. Citizens are caught in a "post" state like "post-traumatic," as the state descends into a pattern of recrimination belying its commitment to a new future.³⁵ Paradoxically, harassing exiles becomes central to the state's absurd involution, just as torture becomes a "cure" for dissent. Not surprisingly, then, Weschler implicitly draws parallels from his story of the eerily named Jan "K" to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925). As I have suggested, Weschler's allusions to *Oedipus* and the legend of Samarra also pointed to patterns of denial and unconscious reversal. Both Sophocles's trilogy and the famous Mesopotamian fable feature protagonists who, by trying to avoid a prophecy, ironically cause it to take place. In both, the time and place of their appointment is also not of their choosing; protagonists often arrive at their appointment by the very act of trying to avoid it. As for Iraq itself, this pattern becomes an allegory about a nation that can never seem to escape its totalitarian past.

Consequently, in Weschler's new rendering, K. Makiya has come to represent an Iraqi self in a personal torture chamber, trying to differentiate his own fate from that of his father and yet often reproducing it. Indeed, some on the American left claimed that the son had, like his father, become an unwitting servant of power. On the other hand, Weschler also sees that, in another cruel irony, both generations actually come to feel politically helpless all over again. In fact, if one goes back to *Republic of Fear*, one finds moments where its author seemed to imply that the condition of "statelessness" he experienced as an exile was merely "the outer limit"

of what was happening inside Iraq itself (*Republic* 137). There are even a few startling moments when the book had acknowledged the futility of verifying what was “behind” Hussein’s essentially factless mind (*Republic* 136–37, 271–72). K. Makiya has clearly fallen through Weschler’s ultimate trapdoor: In exile, his psyche is still subject to Hussein’s reach.

This mood of self-doubt ultimately suffuses the final pages of “Oedipus in Samarra” as well. As I have said, the version in *Calamities* ends as the *New Yorker* profile had: with generational reconciliation. But now, it seems as if son and father Makiya are forced to live not with their charter’s vision of the future but with what Iraq had actually become. And to live with the disunion within their own identities. What K. Makiya had called, in *Republic of Fear*, the “Sisyphus-like world of exile politics” (*Republic* 99)—thus citing another famous myth of torturous recapitulation—now resurfaces in *Calamities*. In a moment that had not been recounted in Weschler’s *New Yorker* profile, a group of exiles who admire K. Makiya’s work tell him stories about the wretchedness of living under Saddam Hussein. As one exile puts it:

“I myself lived at least five lives, each securely walled off from all the others. There was the me-at-work”—he began counting them out on his fingers—“the me-with-my-friends, the me-with-my-children, the me-with-my wife, and then,” he tapped his closed fist against his sternum, “there was *me*.” (OS 56; italics in original)

Again, this perpetual state of this self-division corresponds to K. Makiya’s own feeling of fragmentation—indeed, his sense of having become “the mirror-obverse” of Hussein’s mad self-confidence. “Oh, that blighted country,” Weschler now writes, so mournfully, “Kanan, with his tormenting self-doubts and wide-open vulnerabilities, seemed to come from a different universe” (OS 55). A universe where, as covertly expressed by Hussein’s monstrous monument, the state had offered not to embrace its citizens but to strangle them.

“Thumb in Eye”: Visual Convergences

And yet, even as Weschler bemoaned the Makiyas’ fate, he was also keeping some elements of their conversations ready for reuse in his overall casting of post-totalitarianism. Blending his Iraq tales with insights that he had also gleaned in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Weschler’s conception of post-totalitarianism sounded much like K. Makiya’s. Compared to its mid-century antecedents, that is, Weschler’s version of totalitarianism’s resurgence could feel both terrifyingly real and ersatz, maniacal and middlebrow—capable of provoking terror and cultish allegiance but also mass disbelief and personal despair. Hussein’s Victory Arch was, as K. Makiya had sensed, all too befitting of this moment: Seen through K. Makiya’s and Weschler’s cultural lenses, Hussein’s regime epitomized a kitschy political fantasy that had degraded public space, the visual landscape, and personal life (see Fig. 1).³⁶ But it was



Fig. 1

US tanks under Victory Arch during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Credit: Technical Sergeant John L. Houghton, Jr., United States Air Force, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

no less brutal. After all, by literally “embodying” Hussein’s own physique, the Arch celebrated the invitation to “march” together under the banner of a mythic, pan-Arabic past. A cause that had only bred war, violent sacrifice, and a legacy of perpetual self-doubt. And if Hussein saw himself (as K. Makiya claimed) as an architect or sculptor of his people, he was also—again, as his education speech quoted in *Republic* betrayed—a leader who felt nothing about “discard[ing]” material he could not use (qtd. in *Republic* 36).

In addition, Weschler’s interests in visual mediums also converged with that of the Makiyas. For instance, it is intriguing how he describes their London office as being “a sort of image bank, its myriad etchings and plans a trove of detail waiting for reclamation and transmutation” (AR 41). As I’ve suggested, Weschler himself had already begun to build such a trove of images for the visual idioms of his essays in *Everything that Rises*. Moreover, Weschler seems to have found a kindred spirit in the carnival spirit of K. Makiya’s visual juxtapositions and captioning. *The Monument* had tossed satiric jibes at the “ridiculous” and “paper-thin flatness” (53) of Hussein’s propaganda, comparing it to Andy Warhol’s soup cans (43) or Los Angeles’s hot-dog stands (56). Weschler was also clearly intrigued by K. Makiya’s suggestion that there was a secret complicity, at the level of creation, between political power and artistic ambition: Architects, just like megalomaniacal dictators, simply wanted the citizens to see themselves through a singular vision. Even if, as Suki Kim has suggested in her account of North Korea, such citizens would thus grow to feel incomplete without their (ironically, ever-absent) leader.³⁷

The Monument’s example therefore proved important when Weschler offered up his third iteration, the convergence meditation “Thumb in Eye,” in 2004. Covering merely eight pages in a horizontal, portfolio format, the piece was organized in three parts. A photo of Saddam Hussein’s monstrous Arch, accompanied by Weschler’s updates on the dictator and K. Makiya himself, is set between two other short ruminations, also featuring photographs. The image leading the array is of French sculptor César Baldaccini’s *Le Grand Pouce* (1968), which Weschler describes as a “massive, exuberantly erect, meticulously realized” (TE 189) rendering of a huge thumb, glazed in gold paint, in all about six feet tall and singularly phallic. The third

meditation concerns a Reuters photo of another sculptural installation: a government-sponsored site in Weihai, China, in which two immense hands hold up a thirty- by sixty-foot frame that takes in a view of the harbor behind it (TE 192).³⁸ As if we are looking at a collage, these seemingly incongruous materials are juxtaposed to conjure up unexpected convergences and collisions in meaning. Or, as the collection's title suggests, meanings are allowed to "rise," come together, and generate new comparisons.³⁹

Juxtaposition of this kind thus allows less for equipoise or distance and more for speculation. Weschler's adjacent ruminations are free-associational, wide-ranging, openly opinionated. His tone is informal but also impatient, even bitter. In the opening lines next to the photo of Baldaccini's sculpture, for example, Weschler addresses a reader *hypothetically* in motion ("You can be coming round the corner there at the world's loveliest and most beloved museum ..." [TE 189]); turning to tell us about K. Makiya's current location, he writes: "[H]ere's a piece of post-Iraq War trivia for you" (TE 193), as if he is leafing through a shoebox, or holding a fact out to us by hand. Using an effect that David Hockney and John Berger have both explored, "Thumb in Eye" aims to bring the viewer into its narrative frame, thus incorporating the "addressing" implicitly at work in Baldaccini's statue and the Chinese government's Weihai structure. Now—unlike in earlier iterations like the profile or the novella—viewers are not allowed Archimedean invisibility or distance; they are called to be physically in front of the "thumb" statue, facing it head-on (it is in their eye). Facing the monumental scimitars of the Arch's madness, the point of view is low to the ground; in front of the gigantic Chinese frame, our viewpoint is very slightly off-center, seeing that the frame offers a "view" but not fully "taken in" by it.⁴⁰

We are also obviously a good distance from "Oedipus in Samarra"—or perhaps traveling in its wake. For example, though Hussein's Victory Arch is again scrutinized, the black-and-white photo Weschler reprints can seem gray and dusted up, as if the Arch is an artifact of the distant past, perhaps abandoned or out of use. Formerly key players can seem, likewise, as if they have dropped out of Weschler's own frame. We are told that K. Makiya has returned to Iraq following Hussein's defeat, and has appointed himself the curator of the now-dismantled Arch, preserving its remains "as testament to the Dictator's entire terrible tenure" (TE 193). Weschler grimly opines that invading US and Allied forces had "made a point of" steering around the Arch during combat despite the obsessive disposition of the two Bush presidents (TE 193)—another father-son pairing. But we might also notice that Mohamed Makiya is not mentioned at all. Instead, we hear that his son—"almost as obsessed, in his way, with the monument as was its patron" (TE 192)—is fundraising for his museum (TE 193) with or without his father's blessing. The aura now lent to K. Makiya is less heroic or calamitous, more that of a postscript. The huge thumb by Baldaccini also suggests K. Makiya's disempowerment: Weschler tells us that anyone standing in front of it can see themselves in the reflective surface of the statue's thumbnail, reduced and scaled

down. (A thumb in the eye, of course, is an insult. It may remind us of Oedipus's self-blinding as well).

And finally, "Thumb in Eye" also includes information about the Arch mentioned neither by K. Makiya nor by Weschler's earlier efforts: that the metalwork of its gargantuan arms had originally been provided by a British foundry (TE 192). In an update bordering on the macabre, however, we learn that the foundry has reversed its prior complicity with Hussein and has offered, now, to provide Allied forces the forensic data of the dictator's thumbprints—still available, it seems, on the Plasticine molds the firm retains (TE 191). Offstage entirely now, Hussein has toppled from tyrannical power to a "collateral object" (TE 193) in the post-9/11 "fixations" of American presidents (194), the dictator reduced to a swab of saliva (TE 194) that will make the foundry's new offer irrelevant. The exile and the totalitarian ruler seem to have uncannily switched places: The exile, still clinging to his antagonist, comes home to become the protector of the Arch; the ruler is the artist who has been vaporized.

And yet, again some of K. Makiya's influence may still be present here. We discover that the Thumb is a huge enlargement of the sculptor's own, much as the Arch's arms were of Hussein's. But along with its baldly erotic shape, the thumb also invokes the classic perspectival trick of the artist taking the measure of what he portrays—and thus perhaps is implicitly connected to a tyrannical (and masculine) artistic drive. I say that because that drive, we gather, is inherent in the Weihai frame as well (TE 192). In Weschler's nod to a rising Asian superpower, a new form of post-totalitarianism lusts after the power of kitschy art, hoping to control its citizens' "point of view."

Conclusions and Crosscurrents

For all their imaginative range and insight, Weschler's meditations on the Makiyas, on Iraq, and on totalitarianism have their limitations. For instance, in Weschler's emphasis on M. Makiya's British and neoclassical training, one might easily forget that this "traditional" Iraqi was also a lifelong patron of modernist experimentation in the arts.⁴¹ Nor is Weschler much interested in precisely distinguishing totalitarian rule from other regime-forms—from military rule, "soft" dictatorships, police states, mafia states, mixed-authoritarian democracies, and so on.⁴² Meanwhile, in regard to Iraq at least, practical matters of how faith, regional autonomy, or human rights might be reconciled post-Hussein tend to be left out of Weschler's iterations. Indeed, Weschler merely summarizes the contents of the Makiyas' political platform. Had he gone deeper, he might have seen why intellectuals such as Said were hardly alone in opposing it.⁴³ Such limits also reveal the challenges in conveying the meaning of totalitarian or post-totalitarian rule through the narrower lens of individual exile, much less through the experience of artists and intellectual mavericks.⁴⁴ For example, perhaps because K. Makiya had always wanted to emphasize Iraqis' own responsibilities and failures, Weschler often seems to leave the geopolitical role of the

US and its military on the outer edges—that is, until “Thumb in Eye.”⁴⁵ Although not nostalgic about British colonialism, Weschler does tend to plant his internationalist flag in the civil societies, in London and Baghdad, that had nurtured Makiyas of both generations.

That being said, we should not overlook that both Kanan Makiya and Weschler himself saw that authoritarian rule, in its many variations, had not simply melted away; on the contrary, Iraq had underscored its terrifying resilience, as it lingered on, so confoundingly, like a bad copy of its mid-twentieth century versions. In whatever regionally and politically distinct “post-” incarnations—in North Korea, or Myanmar, or across South America—new leaders were able to resurrect “planks” of old systems and jury-rig new forms of domination over their citizens’ democratic aspirations and cultural differences. Even the inspiring democratic activists in Eastern Europe could therefore experience what was, to Weschler, much like what Oliver Sacks had described when examining comatose patients going through a miraculous but only temporary “awakening”: feeling alternately exhilarated and fearful, haunted by a “chasm” in their inner beings they could not fully redress.⁴⁶ Even though Weschler’s Netherlands musings had put their hopes in international law, in the history traced by his Iraq iterations, it is more that we have gone from ruins to ruins.

Indeed, fragments of a more fatalistic strain in Weschler’s work had also begun to make their way back into his understanding of the US. Several of the image-bank meditations in *Everything that Rises*, written during the same period he had tracked the fate of Iraq, turn out to resonate with his international musings and domestic US crosscurrents. For example, he found himself writing about how Americans seemed desensitized to the violence inflicted by US foreign policy: blinded, say, to the historical irony of an Iraq war movie that used Richard Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* as its score,⁴⁷ or entranced by the technological marvel of an AWACS keyboard as it sent out actual bombing runs, or a Congress lost in the maze of Orwellian political discourse masking the human costs of aid to the Contras in Nicaragua (*Everything that Rises* 139, 128). Breytenbach, too, reemerges in a short reflection on how jail cells try to contain, and yet cannot, the cries that prisoners make—not just in South Africa, but in Manhattan as well (*Everything that Rises* 30). That cross-reference to the ever-resilient “war on crime” might remind us that Weschler’s decision to include South Africa in his tryptic of *Calamities* implicitly offered a riposte to those, especially on the American right, who—as Thomas Frank has shown—had simultaneously constructed their international “axis of evil” while cozying up to the apartheid regime.⁴⁸

Indeed, perhaps the most provocative contribution to *Everything that Rises* in this regard is Weschler’s “Pillsbury Doughboy Messiahs,” which begins by juxtaposing *Time* and *Newsweek* covers of, respectively, Newt Gingrich and Slobodan Milošević. Starting with these two men’s startling physical resemblance—especially the nearly “identical out-thrust, righteously aggrieved little button of a chin” (*Everything that Rises* 161)—Weschler turns to a meditation on the authoritarian drives behind each figure’s politics of grievance and victimhood. Weschler’s main target here is Gingrich’s

“Contract with America,” which he describes as having taken on “the trappings of a crusade” (*Everything that Rises* 162). Opportunism had become fused with revenge, ostensibly for having been treated as an outsider by liberal Democrats. The Republican movement had turned that core of “True Beliefs” into a proudly heretical cause that was “fundamentalist, preemptory, and intolerant. It lays waste and it glories in laying waste” (*Everything that Rises* 166).⁴⁹

Of course, Weschler makes clear that he does not mean to suggest that American politicians of this stripe harbor a penchant for genocidal violence. But make what you will, post-January 6, of the way that he describes Gingrich’s government shutdown in the late fall of 1995:

In any case, this glorious band of outsiders, once again with the initial collusion if not under the direct instigation of their own Maximum Leader, likewise hit upon the tactic of laying (albeit symbolic) siege to the capital whose liberal, profligate ways symbolized everything about the country’s prior governance which they so vocally and expansively despised. (*Everything that Rises* 163)

Not all of Weschler’s musings on the US’s current plight are so enticingly prophetic, of course, and not all of these crosscurrents derive exclusively from his explorations of Iraq.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, it is interesting that in a conversation with Weschler in 2016, K. Makiya would echo what Weschler commonly said about the former Yugoslavia: how, that is, the US failure in Iraq and the demise of Hussein’s rule had only made it possible for long-standing, suppressed grievances to rise up and divide his country.⁵¹ Or, that in the section of *Everything that Rises* called “Political Occasions” in which so many of Weschler’s recent thoughts on transnational resonances of post-totalitarianism appear, a meditation on Poland’s Solidarity movement appears in the lead position, and “Thumb in Eye” happens to close it. But in Weschler’s hands, any such case is very rarely closed: Usually, its fragments of hope and failure simply await further reclamation.

Notes

The author would like to thank the editors and anonymous readers of *JTAS*.

¹ Lawrence Weschler, *Everything that Rises: A Book of Convergences* (McSweeney’s Books, 2006), 179.

² Daniel Asa Rose, “In Conversation with Lawrence Weschler: Daniel Asa Rose Interviews an Acute Observer of the Convergences Between Art and Politics,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2006; Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, “Art, Look Around, See the Pattern,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2006,

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-mar-05-ca-weschler5-story.html>; and Matthew Price, “A Writer Drawn to the Offbeat and the Dark Side,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 1, 2004.

- ³ Matt Frassica, “Weschler Profile by Matt Frassica,” Matt Frassica’s blog, <https://www.lawrenceweschler.com/about/weschler-profile-by-matt-frassica>
- ⁴ Lawrence Weschler, interview with Robert S. Boynton in *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (Vintage, 2005), 408.
- ⁵ I have discussed these norms concerning nonfiction in “Explaining Michael Lewis: Literary Form and Behavioral Economics in Michael Lewis’s *The Undoing Project* (2017),” *Cadernos De Literatura Comparada* 44 (2021): 73–90, <https://ilc-cadernos.com/index.php/cadernos/article/view/753/775>
- ⁶ Lawrence Weschler, *True to Life: Twenty-Five Years of Conversations with David Hockney* (University of California Press, 2008), esp. 33–37, 41, 48–50; and Lawrence Weschler, “Embeddedness: Robert Irwin in his Seventies,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 84, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 188–217, esp. 193, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26445886>
- ⁷ Lawrence Weschler, “Why I Can’t Write Fiction,” in *The Princeton Anthology of Writing*, ed. John McPhee and Carol Rigolot (Princeton University Press, 2001), 143.
- ⁸ On how exile often shaped anti-totalitarian critique, see Jeremy Adelman, “Precarious Cosmopolitans: Arendt and Hirschman as Refugee Intellectuals,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2017): 1051–1076 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26550376>; and Richard J. Bernstein, “Hannah Arendt on the Stateless,” *Parallax* 11, no. 1 (2005): 46–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464052000321092>
- ⁹ Lawrence Weschler, *Calamities of Exile: Three Nonfiction Novellas* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi.
- ¹⁰ The resurgence of antitotalitarian discourse in US politics is described in Richard Shorten, “The Failure of Political Argument: The Languages of Anti-Fascism and Anti-Totalitarianism in Post–September 11th Discourse,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11, no. 3 (2009): 479–503, esp. 486, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2009.00369.x>; and Joseph Stieb, “The Iraq War and the Idea of Totalitarianism,” *Process: A Blog for American History*, July 18, 2023, <https://www.processhistory.org/stieb-iraq-war-and-the-idea-of-totalitarianism/>
- ¹¹ For debates of that kind, see Stieb, “The Iraq War”; Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Jeffrey Brooks, “Totalitarianism Revisited,” *The Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006): 318–328, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670506000088>; and Aviezer Tucker, *The Legacies of*

Totalitarianism: A Theoretical Framework (Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. 204–234.

- ¹² Suki Kim, *Without You, There is No Us* (Crown Publishers, 2014); Barbara Demick, *No One to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (Spiegel and Grau, 2010); M. Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (Riverhead Books, 2017); and Emma Larkin, *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (Penguin Press, 2015).
- ¹³ Although the term “post-totalitarian” may seem simply a temporal marker, my use is not meant to signal a break from the past. Rather, I draw upon those who use the term to register a precarious moment of reordering and recuperation of a variety of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes. M. Gessen’s analysis of this “reproduction” of the past is especially germane here; on their thinking, see my “‘They are Us’: Refugees and Terrorists in Masha Gessen’s *The Brothers* (2015),” *American Studies* 63, no. 1 (2024): 81–108, <https://journals.ku.edu/amsj/article/view/19254>. As such, the term *post-totalitarian* can be used to describe nation-states more customarily slotted into distinct or putatively narrower categories, including those who have, for instance, thrown off Soviet rule only to revive its worst features. As I will show here, Weschler himself blurs differences between what some would call “totalitarian” states and others “authoritarian.” On such debates about Iraq under Saddam Hussein, see Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (Polity Press, 2016), 93–113. On the European context of the term *post-totalitarian*, see Deborah M. Brissman and Jacques Rupnik, “The Post-Totalitarian Blues,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 2, (1995): 61–73, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0036>
- ¹⁴ For instance, in “Allegories of Eastern Europe” (*Everything that Rises* 140–54), Weschler draws upon the famous template of Kapuściński’s *The Emperor* (Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand [1978; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989]). Though ostensibly an account of Ethiopia’s Haile Selassie in the last days of his regime, Kapuściński’s book was interpreted by his fellow Polish readers as a covert allegory about their own homeland.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence Weschler, “Architects Amid the Ruins,” *New Yorker*, January 6, 1992, 40–65, hereafter “AR”; Lawrence Weschler, “Oedipus at Samarra,” hereafter “OS,” in *Calamities*, 1–61; and the version of “Thumb in Eye” (hereafter “TE”) in *Everything that Rises*, 188–195.
- ¹⁶ Weschler cultivates both informality and intimacy by using his informants’ given names. However—following the standard scholarly convention—here I will frequently use “K. Makiya” to refer to Kanan Makiya, and “M. Makiya” to refer to his father, Mohamed Makiya.
- ¹⁷ All citations in text from Kanan Makiya [Samir al-Khalil, *pseud.*], *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (University of California Press, 1989); and Kanan Makiya

[Samir al-Khalil, pseud.], *The Monument: Art, Vulgarly and Responsibility in Modern Iraq* (University of California Press, 1991).

- ¹⁸ Packer's self-description (George Packer, *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq* [Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2005], 87).
- ¹⁹ Shorten also positions Kanan Makiya as the figure to whom liberals looked (Shorten, "The Failure of Political Argument," 488).
- ²⁰ Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 10. For another view on the central elements of this concept, see Brooks, "Totalitarianism Revisited" (esp. 328).
- ²¹ Hussein as qtd. in *Republic* 78.
- ²² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, Brace Jovanoich, 1973), 469.
- ²³ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Signet Classics, 1950), 37.
- ²⁴ At one point, K. Makiya harshly describes Robert Venturi as having celebrated tyranny in the guise of equality (*Monument* 58, 64). For this context, see Magnus T. Bernardsson, "Visions of Iraq: Modernizing the Past in 1950s Baghdad," in *Modernism in the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (University of Washington Press, 2008), 81–96.
- ²⁵ Trysh Travis, "What We Talk about When We Talk about 'The New Yorker,'" *Book History* 3, no. 1 (2000): 253–285, esp. 258–260, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/bh.2000.0014>
- ²⁶ Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (Scribner, 2000), 133. As Andrew Morantz has written, the *New Yorker* style also avoids provoking an immediate or "activating" emotional response; some pieces "lodge quietly in your brain and unfurl there ... [some] inspire more questions than answers ... some make you feel indignant and impotent and ambivalent all at once" (Andrew Morantz, *Anti-Social: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation* [Viking, 2019], 109).
- ²⁷ Weschler discusses this "trapdoor" effect with Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, 413.
- ²⁸ Oliver Craner also sees Kanan Makiya principally as an archivist. See Oliver Craner, "Archives of Pain: Kanan Makiya and the Politics of Iraq," blog, <https://olivercraner.com/2022/08/24/kanan-makiya-and-the-death-of-pluralism/>
- ²⁹ For an account of that *New Yorker* tradition, see Samuel Zipp, "Raising *The Wild Flag*: E. B. White, World Government, and Local Cosmopolitanism in the Postwar Moment," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/84h9n66t>

- ³⁰ Weschler discusses his grandparents with Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, 410. Of course, reviewers focused mainly on the agonies of contemporary exile *Calamities* detailed. John Martin, "Lives in Exile," *Washington Monthly* 30, no. 7/8 (July/August 1998): 51–52; and Ana Marie Cox, "Calamities of Exile," *Mother Jones* 23, Issue 5 (September/October 1998): 82.
- ³¹ Florian Fuchs, "Novella," *New Literary History* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 399–403. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "calamity (n.), sense 1," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1477534357>
- ³² Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1943, Penguin Books, 1993), vol. 1, 52.
- ³³ Vardan Azatyan, "Ernst Gombrich's Politics of Art History: Exile, Cold War and The Story of Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2010): 127–141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40856511>
- ³⁴ Compare Arendt, *Origins*, 429.
- ³⁵ This politics of recrimination is also discussed, albeit with a different lens—one drawing more on transformations in the post-Brexit and post-Communist intellectual and political classes in Europe—in Anne Applebaum's *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (Vintage, 2020), e.g., 32–37.
- ³⁶ Applebaum, Arendt, and Gessen each offer a somewhat different slant on this ersatz "reproduction" of past totalitarian systems. But on the whole, they explain the erosion of competence by pointing to anti-meritocratic and anti-intellectual traditions—especially in the regimes of Lenin and Stalin—that had put a premium, instead, on unthinking loyalty (see Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 23–25; and Wilson, "'They are Us.'")
- ³⁷ Suki Kim demonstrates this phenomenon in regard to North Korea; see my "The Anti-Atlantis: Suki Kim, North Korea, and Immersion Narrative," *MELUS* 44, no. 2 (2019): 93–114, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlz017>
- ³⁸ Weschler includes this Reuters image under the caption "Scenery Framed, Weihai, China, 2008" in Weschler, *Everything that Rises*, 192.
- ³⁹ Compare Weschler's discussion of collage in Irwin's work in "When Fountainheads Collide," *New Yorker*, December 8, 1997, 60–70, esp. 65, 70. A photograph of Baldaccini's sculpture can be seen at <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/125392>
- ⁴⁰ On Hockney and framing, see Weschler, *True to Life*, 33–34. The discussion of framing appears throughout John Berger, et. al. *Ways of Seeing* (British Broadcasting System and Penguin Books, 1972).
- ⁴¹ Testimonials to M. Makiya's leading role are legion in Ahmed Naji, *Under the Palm Trees: Modern Iraqi Art with Mohamed Makiya and Jewad Selim* (Rizzoli, 2019).

- ⁴² For such distinctions, see Tucker, *The Legacies of Totalitarianism*, esp. 5–10.
- ⁴³ Packer offers a succinct summary of the so-called Future of Iraq Project’s Democratic Principles Working Group. Among the more controversial planks, as Packer lists them, was “an end to ethnic identity as a basis for the state In Kanan Makiya’s blueprint, Iraq would officially cease to be an Arab country” (George Packer, “Dreaming of Democracy,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2003; and Edward Said, “Misinformation about Iraq,” *Counterpunch*, December 3, 2002, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2002/12/03/misinformation-about-iraq/>).
- ⁴⁴ Compare Craner, “Archives of Pain: Kanan Makiya and the Politics of Iraq.”
- ⁴⁵ Lawrence Weschler, “We Didn’t Have Politicians up to the Task: A Conversation with Kanan Makiya,” *Public Books*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/we-didnt-have-politicians-up-to-the-task-a-conversation-with-kanan-makiya/>. Needless to say, US interventions often served to destabilize Iraq, often causing more internal repression and terror. For one harrowing account, see Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun* (City Lights, 2008), esp. 94–96, 106–110.
- ⁴⁶ Weschler’s “Allegories of Eastern Europe,” reprinted in *Everything that Rises*, 147–153.
- ⁴⁷ Lawrence Weschler, “Valkyries over Iraq: The Trouble with War Movies,” *Harpers*, November 2005, 65–77.
- ⁴⁸ Thomas Frank, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule* (Metropolitan Books, 2008), 230–234.
- ⁴⁹ Lawrence Weschler, “Pillsbury Doughboy Messiahs,” from *McSweeney’s* (1999), reprinted in *Everything that Rises*, 160–166.
- ⁵⁰ For another use of “Maximum Leader” in that context, see Weschler’s “Aristotle in Belgrade,” in Lawrence Weschler, *Vermeer in Bosnia* (Pantheon Books, 2004), 46–47.
- ⁵¹ In this 2016 interview, K. Makiya had said a posture of “victimhood”—a theme he had begun with *Republic of Fear*—was now reinforcing a plague of reprisals. Weschler weighed in, in fact, by sharing patterns he felt had characterized the former Yugoslavia, especially Slobodan Milošević (Kanan Makiya, “We Didn’t Have Politicians up to the Task: A Conversation with Kanan Makiya,” interview by Lawrence Weschler, *Public Books*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/we-didnt-have-politicians-up-to-the-task-a-conversation-with-kanan-makiya/>).

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