# Dana Spiotta and the Novel after Authenticity

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# Dana Spiotta and the Novel after Authenticity

In "considering the novel in the age of obama," christian Lorentzen proposed "authenticity" as the definitive preoccupation of US fiction circa 2008–2016. Describing an era stewarded by a president "whose political appeal hinged on an aura of authenticity" and had "written a genuine literary self-portrait" himself, Lorentzen argued that it was fitting that much of the US fiction published in the Obama years would disavow the abstract epistemological conundrums and self-interested reflexivity of postmodernism and return to representations of social reality. Lorentzon identified two particular dilemmas for the Obama-era novelist: "*how to be authentic* (or *how to create an authentic character*)," and "*how to achieve 'authenticity effects'* (or *how to make artifice seem as true or truer than the real*)." His theory was not that novelists of the Obama-era merely faced such dilemmas, but rather that they made problematics of authenticity essential to the forms and themes of their works. According to Lorentzen, these recent authenticity-fictions fall into four main categories: the "autofictions" of Sheila Heti, Teju Cole, and Ben Lerner, led by writer-characters; the confrontations with purportedly meritocratic institutions staged by Jonathan Safran Foer, Chad Harbach, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; the retro-fictions of Nathan Hill and Rachel Kushner, nostalgic for moments of historical magnitude; and the epic-length, trauma-driven narratives of Atticus Lish and Hanya Yanagihara.

While persuasive in its taxonomy, Lorentzon's account of authenticity's reemergence amid the 2008 Obama campaign demonstrates a substantial oversight in recent literary and cultural history—and one that subsequently prompts reconsideration of the periodization of late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US fiction. In particular, Lorentzon overlooks the three-decades long exploration of authenticity that has been conducted under the banner of the "New Sincerity,"

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a loosely defined, multi-genre movement that originated in the 1980s Austin punk scene and came to permeate US fiction and film in the following decades.[1] The New Sincerity is commonly understood as fulfilling David Foster Wallace's prophesy in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction" (1993, revised 1997) that the turn-of-the-millennium's literary rebels would be those who rebel against what Wallace deemed the formal gimmickry and apolitical experimentalism of late-postmodern art. These "anti-rebels," wrote Wallace, would attend to "plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in US life with reverence and conviction . . . , willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists" (81). And while Wallace's own career may in fact demonstrate the difficulty of adhering to such a vision—or even his rejection of it in practice—scholars have nonetheless characterized Wallace's work, and its influence on the New Sincerity, in accordance with his early-career ambition of yoking together realist aesthetics and humanistic concerns. As Adam Kelly concludes of Wallace's oeuvre, even if "the fight to preserve personal authenticity had proven impossible, . . . what remains possible, in Wallace's fiction, is the reconstruction of new forms of sincerity, with the artwork as a model of interpersonal connection" ("Dialectic of Sincerity").

While sincerity and authenticity are not synonymous concepts, what New Sincerity fiction has often illustrated is that for a writer to explore one frequently demands that they also explore the other. Sincerity, according to Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), indicates not only "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling," but also an "avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self" that aids in "the correct fulfilment of a public role" (2, 5, 9). It names, then, a harmonization of intention and expression key to a virtuous public character. In contrast, Trilling explains that authenticity "suggests a more strenuous moral experience" that dissolves the very boundaries between inner and outer life, generating an ontological state in which "there is no within and without" (11, 93). This distinction is not, however, a condition of mutual exclusivity. Trilling points out, for example, that the characters typical of canonical nineteenth-century British fiction are those who are "sincere *and* authentic, sincere *because* authentic" (115). Similarly, much of the fiction considered representative of the New Sincerity—including Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2001),

Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am* (2016)—depends on the construction of more and less authentic characters, some of whom cannot help but wear their inner lives on their sleeves, alongside others who struggle or fail to present who they are internally to others. That is, to examine the dilemmas of disclosure and comprehension which New Sincerity authors see as endemic to the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries seems to require the juxtaposition of characters for whom sincerity is functionally automatic—because, as per Trilling's formulation, they are authentic—and characters for whom sincerity could hardly be more difficult to achieve under the conditions of late capitalism.

But if Lorentzen's oversight of the New Sincerity compels reevaluation of the relationship between sincerity, authenticity, and the recent periodization of US fiction, then the novelist most salient for such an exploration is not Wallace—whose prolific output, market success, institutional accolades, and "great-American-novel" *Infinite Jest* underlie his status as a "national spokesman"—but rather Dana Spiotta.[2] A professor of fiction writing at Syracuse University who has been named a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellow, and winner of the Rome Prize for Literature, Spiotta has published in all but one of the four categories of authenticity-fiction proposed by Lorentzen. In keeping with the New Sincerity's propensity for "putting in doubt the very referents of terms like 'self' and 'other,' 'inner' and 'outer'" (Kelly, "DFW and the New Sincerity" 136), the characters of Spiotta's oeuvre continually negotiate whether it is ever possible in late-capitalist culture to be certain that one possesses a rich inner life and to convey that inner life to others.[3] Spiotta's literary project is thus to exhibit the manifold ways in which US consumerism makes the act of "curat[ing] ourselves for other people" (Treisman), as Spiotta puts it, a shared cultural condition. And in such expositions, as Aliki Varvogli suggests, Spiotta aims to "break free from the prisonhouse of postmodernist irony [and] self-referentiality" and "reintroduce some promise of human connectedness, empathy and affect" to a culture whose economic and ideological configuration actively diminishes those prospects (660).

While Spiotta's fiction has been critically underappreciated (a search of the MLA Bibliography for her name returns seven results), it

registers among the longest sustained and most aesthetically consistent inquiries into New Sincerity themes and problematics, perhaps even more so than Wallace's.[4] And it is through Spiotta's unwavering commitment to New Sincerity realism that her provocative intervention into debates about the movement's periodization, as well as US fiction's broader interest in the project of literary history, becomes visible.

In her most recent novel, *Innocents and Others*, Spiotta's characteristic attempts to refashion authenticity into an antidote to postmodern culture seem to return, unexpectedly and recursively, to the same postmodern forms and fixations which the New Sincerity sought to escape. Fittingly published in 2016—the year, according to Lorentzon, that concluded the literary era of authenticity—the novel mutates the authenticity-dilemmas that typify Spiotta's works into a force that threatens the very underpinnings of New Sincerity literature. For as Spiotta transforms the protagonist of *Innocents and Others*—like Spiotta herself, an artmaker deeply concerned with authenticity—into the victim of a postmodern condition, she casts considerable doubt on the continuing viability of New Sincerity fiction as an authentic response to commercial culture.

But in complicating New Sincerity interests through the concepts that distinguish literary-historical periods, Spiotta not only assesses the efficacy of her own sincere fiction (and, implicitly, that of her New Sincerity contemporaries), but also as Emily Hyde and Sarah Wasserman recently predicted of contemporary fiction, intervenes provocatively into debates on the periodization of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature (10–11). That is, in rendering competing perspectives on the periodization of recent US fiction, Spiotta at the same time contests and instrumentalizes current conceptions of periodization, and in doing so stages fiction's own capacity to engage with the concepts that emerge from literary-historical debates.[5] Wresting the discourse on periodization from academic and critical spheres, Spiotta demonstrates how fiction may itself grapple with and rework periodization as literary material.

## SPIOTTA'S MODES OF AUTHENTICITY

In Spiotta's debut novel, *Lightning Field* (2001), and her subsequent works, authenticity is a concept imagined as suppressed by or opposed to the dominant US culture. Three of the Spiotta's four novels take place in Los Angeles, and, following Thomas Pynchon, Bret Easton

Ellis, and Karen Tei Yamashita, Spiotta paints the city in the colors of postmodern simulacrum. The Los Angeles of *Lightning Field* is a monoculture that bleeds hyperreality; it is a "mock paradise" of "movie-fake dusk light that could be thrown by a switch in a soundstage," a city where the "faux moo shu pork" almost tastes "like real food" (208, 9, 69). "It's a real tan," a minor character remarks in a telling Los Angeles cliché, "I mean, I got it at a tanning salon" (101).[6]

Much of *Lightning Field* is organized around the corrosion such an environment—in which "there is no totality left to embody" (Vermeulen 119)—can impinge on the inner lives and expressive capacities of its inhabitants. Echoing the hieroglyphically inclined Oedipa Maas of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) and the experience of "certification" depicted in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), *Lightning Field*'s central character, Mina, suspects that in Los Angeles her identity can only amount to "a collection of references" (73). While Mina throughout the novel laments this condition, Lorene, Mina's closest friend and employer, makes it into a professional opportunity as she consults as a "life-stylist" to wealthy, presumably white men between college and marriage. Identifying a market flush with consumers eager to "pa[y] someone to help you be yourself" (31), Lorene guides her clients in transforming their capital into objects that, when arranged properly, give the impression of interiority. It is not long, however, before Lorene's work brings deleterious effects and, mirroring Mina's semiotically confused subjectivity, Lorene loses her ability to "recal[l] chains of reference" (30). As the narrator describes of Lorene's final days in the profession: "Everything grew quotes around it" (30). But Spiotta's contribution to the New Sincerity is not simply to indict a postmodern, consumerist culture for irony, apathy, or political quietism. Rather, her novels depict such factors as inextricable from a broader condition of epistemological groundlessness. Or they express, as Spiotta herself remarked in a 2008 interview, that in US consumer society, "meaning in general is compromised" (Meyer).

As *Lightning Field* contrasts authenticity with a postmodern, consumerist culture incompatible with communicable self-knowledge, the concept emerges in the novel through a characteristically Romantic fetishization of those distant or excluded from mainstream or upper-echelon sociality: a fetishization, as Trilling posits, in which "authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and

through the power that this is presumed to bring" (171). With authenticity unavailable to those who occupy the universe of advertising, luxury, and simulacra, it is the working class and neurodiverse who evince experiences, inner lives, and concerns that register as semiotically coherent and thus indicative of authenticity. That is to say, Spiotta's representations of consumerist culture depend on the apparent authenticity of convincingly othered characters.

If the confusion of self-identity that Mina and Lorene experience coincides with material wealth, then the first of Spiotta's two foils in *Lightning Field* is Lisa, a housekeeper whose subjective stability is never questioned. Lisa's conflict in the novel is domestic, fiscal, and singular: to scrape together enough money to provide for her children while negotiating her marriage to a husband who wavers between absent and abusive. With Lisa as counterpoint, Spiotta silos challenges of identity to the middle and upper class; when contrasted with Lisa's precarity, the novel's dilemmas of authenticity come into focus as luxury goods. "So what preoccupies you, if not some performance of yourself?" Lorene asks Lisa, summoning concerns of authenticity and self-understanding evocative of Wallace and Egan. "What occupies me?" Lisa replies, "My family. My family, my family and, oh, yeah, my family" (*Lightning Field* 94). Thus, in the melodramatic scenes that follow, Lisa exhibits an identity that is knowable, articulable, and semiotically consistent by virtue of her moral purpose and economic and bodily vulnerability. And in effect, Lisa's compound flatness and authenticity not only demonstrate the devaluing of domestic and reproductive labor in entrepreneurial, "lean-in" models of third-wave feminism—a politics we might ascribe to Lorene—but also how very far from authentic the comparably affluent Mina and Lorene stand.

The novel's second foil is its one explicitly neurodiverse character, Michael, Mina's brother and Lorene's former lover, who demonstrates behaviors consistent with bipolar disorder. Nontypical subjectivities are, of course, part in parcel with representations of the shallowness and incoherence of postmodern culture. As Catherine Prendergast has argued, theorists such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guatarri have found "the schizophrenic" to be uniquely reflective of the inherent instability of the postmodern period or condition (232). Michael is not a schizophrenic—neither in the clinical sense nor as a proper subject of schizoanalysis—but he reads his

condition as a response to postmodern indeterminacy. "I've lost faith in the world as a place I can reliably inhabit," Michael tells Lorene as she visits him in a hospital after he attempts suicide. "It takes so much energy—so many possible interpretations. No way to distinguish one from the other. A paralysis, an ambivalence ensues" (*Lightning Field* 111). His condition thus functions, as Stuart Murray writes on representations of autism, as "a prop, a prosthetic device, for the discussion of a range of issues . . . that ultimately have their meaning in nondisabled contexts" (163).

In this way, Michael's difference confers distance enough from mainstream sociality to facilitate a critical perspective. In a letter to Mina written following his hospital stay, he claims the role of "*truth-saye[r],*" and even in his most paranoid delusions he retains the veracity of a sagacious outsider or mad seer (126). In keeping with an American Romantic tradition that deploys the disabled outsider to evaluate mainstream and upper-class society, Michael describes the reality he inhabits as "*an endless stream of letters and words, periods and commas, dashes and hyphens, streaming through the walls, through outlets, into some mother monitoring computer*" (127–28).[7] If only Mina and Lorene could comprehend the postmodern world in this way, Spiotta implies, then perhaps they too could confront their subjective impediments.

With authenticity figured in *Lightning Field* as a coherent inner life secured by either the purpose-driven mentality of the working class or the special insight of a nontypical cognition, the plotlines of the consumerist, neurotypical characters are defined by their searches for alternate sources of authenticity. It is by amassing traces of the confidential or deep that the latter characters aim to convince themselves they do in fact possess inner lives inaccessible to others. In Spiotta's second novel, *Eat the Document* (2006), the teenage audiophile Jason articulates a relationship between authenticity and veiled interiority: "Authenticity. We like the inside story, the secrets. We constantly feel the best, coolest stuff is being withheld from us" (72). So too does the narrator of *Stone Arabia* (2013) in a gloss on a peripheral character: "Jay was authentic; Jay had depth" (60). Similarly, when the characters of *Lightning Field* awash in postmodern shallows attempt to cultivate inner lives, they do so by engaging in behaviors generative of secrets they might conceal from others, most often through marital infidelity. Lying to Lorene about one of her affairs, Mina is described by the narrator of

*Lightning Field* in terms that join depth and secret-keeping: "She now had secrets within her secrets" (54).[8] The accumulation of secrets thus grants Mina a vision of her own interiority, and the possible interiority of others, that defies the shallowness of her postmodern experience; it is only once Mina has established a "triple life" that she conceives of the potential depths of others, granting that "everyone [is]n't as they see[m]" (161–62).

This is not to suggest that for Spiotta the cultivation of secrets offers an uncomplicated panacea to the postmodern condition. "It's unbearably lonely to have a secret that never gets told," notes the narrator of *Lightning Field*, "It doesn't exhibit its secretness unless it is known. It is made to be violated" (179). The desire for depth is therefore accompanied in the novel by the desire for the exposure, and it is in this regard analog technology and DIY artmaking emerge in Spiotta's fiction as the neurotypical, middle- and upper-class characters' primary means for ascertaining interiority.

Prominent in *Lightning Field*—and likewise *Innocents and Others*—is the confessional disclosure of interiority facilitated by filmmaking. Together with DIY music, live performance, and record curation—the primary technologies of *Eat the Document* and *Stone Arabia*—the camera completes what Pieter Vermeulen terms Spiotta's "*analog* aesthetic: a form that, even if it cannot compose events, connections, and characters into meaningful totalities . . . , still records them and renders their unpredictable interactions legible" (124). *Lightning Field* in particular is a novel populated by characters who seek either to validate the existence of their own interiority or to glimpse the inner lives of others by partaking in voyeuristic or erotic uses of video. Mina's husband David develops an obsession with livestreaming footage gathered by security or traffic cameras. Watching "real life, a stranger's life, in real time" unnoticed allows David entry into "an unlimited space" where even "the most atomic details are available" (*Lightning Field* 76), thus fulfilling what David calls a "voyeur vulnerability thing" (195). Similarly, in Mina's affair with David's closest friend, Max, Max exhibits his own disclosure fetish as he assumes the role of filmmaker: "Tell me about when you first cheated on your husband and wrote a confessional note, which you tore up, swearing to yourself it never really happened," he instructs Mina from behind the lens, "Tell, tell, tell" (37).

While desperate and cloying, Max's demand that Mina "unveil [her] inner heart" synchronizes with Mina's own desire to reveal what

secrets she holds (138)—or, as her refusal to disclose her secrets to Max demonstrates, her longing to inhabit an environment where disclosure is at least possible. While Mina initially feels that "it has to be a sort of petty vanity that got you here in the first place," she later comes to a more astute understanding of her appetite for participation (136). Appearing in Max's films, Mina

> seemed to deeply reveal her inner self, the part of her that felt perpetually animated by the gaze of others. . . . And it wasn't about vanity, damn it, it was about having the feeling that your life was being attended, about having your life signify something, some true thing. (197)

So, in fostering what Maud Casey describes as "need to be watched to feel significant," Mina develops a strategy for attaining the authenticity which *Lightning Field* otherwise assigns only to those on the margins of or excluded from the middle- or upper-class (e.g., the working class and neurodiverse). It is a strategy both psychologically trying (for characters) and representationally problematic (for readers), but for those enmeshed in consumerist postmodernity, the novel envisions no alternative.

### THE ENDS OF AUTHENTICITY IN *INNOCENTS AND OTHERS*

While retaining Spiotta's distinctive illustrations of authenticity and its impediments, *Innocents and Others* also reverts to characteristically postmodern epistemologies and forms, contesting, in effect, the ongoing viability of New Sincerity fiction. The origin of Spiotta's provocation lies in the relationship between Meadow Mori and Carrie Wexler, childhood friends from Los Angeles who mature into directors of highbrow documentaries and middlebrow comedies, respectively. Through Meadow's artistic development, and with Carrie's career as a counterpoint, Spiotta both elaborates on previous interrogations of film's potential for laying bare the inner lives of others and problematizes the capacity of the medium—and, consequently, New Sincerity literature—for manifesting authenticity.

Building on an early realization of film's capacity to convey "secret messages just to you as you sit in the dark," Meadow's career is an extended employment of the camera to coax and disseminate the secrets of others, to test the limitations of film as a catalyst for confession—or, to "fil[m] a person as themselves" and cause her "subject—no

matter how comfortable—to come undone" (*Innocents and Others* 21, 142, 124). After her first film, an eight-hour interview entitled *Portrait of Deke* finds acclaim at independent film festivals—and after pursuing other confession-oriented projects, such as *Kent State: Recovered*, in which Meadow interviews students and National Guardsmen involved in the 1970 Kent State University shootings—Meadow hears rumors of a woman who successfully developed "personal and even erotic" telephone relationships with famous Hollywood men through cold calls alone (179). Intrigued, she begins a film called *Inward Operator*, which explores the experiences of one "Nicole," who is later revealed to be "Jelly," an overweight, nearly blind woman who was once a member of a phone-hacking group led by a blind, Tiresias-like figure named Oz. In terms of analog aesthetics, the telephone—like the camera, an essential component of everyday twentieth-century technology—offers Jelly a means for peering into the inner lives of strangers or encouraging them, as Max does Mina, to divulge their secret desires or histories.[9] Because the phone has "no visual component, no tactile component, no person with hopeful or embarrassed face to read" (47), Jelly speculates, it manifests an expressive framework hyper-conducive to disclosures of interiority. So, as Jelly wields the phone as a "weapon of intimacy" (108), persuading others into admissions of their inner lives, she engenders what Kate Marshall describes as a simultaneous "logic of access" and "logic of separation," a feature of novelistic representations of technology that echoes fiction's own relationship to concepts such as "public and private, or interior and exterior" (7).

*Inward Operator* ends as Meadow introduces Jelly for the first time in person to the subject of her longest sustained phone relationship, Jack Cusano, a celebrated film score composer based on Jack Nitzsche (Treisman). In the film, Jack confirms the ease with which, in conversation with Jelly, he divulged the most sensitive happenings of his life: "She didn't interrupt me. She told me about her life, and I told her about mine" (*Innocents and Others* 195). Before concluding in the face-to-face meeting, *Inward Operator* centers on a moment in the Jack/Jelly relationship when, after Jack buys Jelly a plane ticket to visit him, she finds herself unable to transition from fantasy to reality—in part due to her enjoyment of the fantasy, in part due to her fear of revealing her body—and leaves him waiting at the airport.

With this betrayal set as backstory for a redemptive exchange of inner lives, it comes as a surprise that in the final scene of *Inward*

*Operator* the camera fails to provoke disclosure. Instead, as Jelly meets Jack in a Los Angeles restaurant decades after the conclusion of their relationship, expectations of vulnerability give way to resentment and accusations of interior vapidity. "She lied to me, and she manipulated me. . . . Now I can see it was all a trick. I can't have feelings for her if there is no her. How can I know if any of it—of her—was real?" remarks Jack, unable to understand, in Jelly's words, that she "did it for love" (198). After viewing the film, Jelly phones Meadow and excoriates her for "set[ting] me up to be humiliated." "You knew how it would look," Jelly accuses, "you filmed it" (242). As Jelly questions the purpose of Meadow's project—"Not everything needs to be seen, to be public. What good did it do? What was it for?"—the typically verbose Meadow is left almost wordless, responding only, "I don't know. . . . I don't" (243).

While Meadow affirms, much like *Lightning Field*'s Mina, that "there is a particular joy in telling the darkest truth about what you did. . . . [That we] are all desperate to get it out of us instead of waiting for it to be discovered," her insufficient response to Jelly indicates a more difficult confessional framework, one in which confession not only allows for relief and revelation, but also harm (165). For as damaged as Jelly is by the staging and mass distribution of her encounter with Jack, so too does Meadow underestimate the psychic toll which dark disclosures (or attempts at inciting such disclosures) may proffer on the filmmaker herself. Indeed, the implication of this scene, and a development in Spiotta's fiction unique to *Innocents and Others*, is that film's power to incite the disclosure of secrets or inner lives carries significant psychological risks for both the artmaker's participants and, eventually, the artmaker.

In Meadow's final project, the productive discomfort of bringing evil to light through confession—what she called "the right feeling" in her mid-career interviews of the "cold-blooded murderers and kidnappers" of Argentina's Dirty War (186)—becomes a purely disturbing force. The core of this project is Meadow's interview of a woman named Sarah, who recounts how in an inebriated but lucid state, she abandoned her baby in an apartment fire. As Sarah admits that she "knew that [her baby] would die if I didn't pick her up and take her with me," what Meadow later describes as Sarah's "weird lack of affect" causes Meadow uncharacteristically to cut Sarah's confession short and, not long thereafter, abandon the film entirely (236, 243). The scene is remarkable in that Meadow finds herself "shook . . . completely" by the very disclosure she not only aimed to provoke, but has also staked her career on provoking (236).

Unwilling to confront what she has uncovered, Meadow's response is to regard Sarah's confession as fabricated, dismissing it as the product of "a mentally ill woman making things up" (236). So disturbed by this experience, Meadow's professional filmmaking comes to an abrupt end as she finds herself "tired of confessions" (237).

Crucially, the psychologically deleterious consequences of filmmaking that Meadow experiences are later subordinated under a different concept, narcissism, and specifically Meadow's fear that she suffers from narcissistic personality disorder. After viewing Carrie's *Girl School*, a "raunchy school comedy about women" released not long after Meadow's comparably "serious" film on the Argentine Dirty War, Meadow's nonreaction to *Girl School*, in a foreshadowing of Sarah's "lack of affect," brings her to a moment of significant introspection:

> Meadow couldn't wait until [*Girl School*] was finished and she slipped out before the end. . . . What was wrong with her? Why was she like this, so ungenerous? On a different day—or maybe a different time in her life—she would have laughed and gotten lost in the fun of Carrie's film. . . . What kind of person had she become, and why couldn't she be better? (187)

That kind of person, Meadow concludes, is a narcissist, and one seemingly contaminated by the same semiotic confusion attributed to the fiscally secure, neurotypical characters of *Lightning Field*.

The apex of Meadow's introspection comes after a serious automobile accident, an event she interprets causing as symptomatic of a core selfishness and incredulity toward others. As she recovers, Meadow illustrates and reckons with her narcissism in terms that recall Jack's characterization of Jelly and return the novel to the themes of subjective instability that characterize Spiotta's earlier work. Composing from her hospital unit a document entitled "Notes: My Transgressions," Meadow becomes the subject of her own confessional demands. And yet, even at her personal nadir and most introspective, Meadow's sense of protagonism endures in the sheer volume of first-person statements she writes (e.g., "I flirted, drunkenly and outrageously, with a friend's husband," "I didn't return the letters of my aunt," "I cheated on the three serious boyfriends I have had" [247]).

But Meadow recognizes these complications herself. "Her litany of self-recrimination was absurd," the narrator summarizes of Meadow's

thoughts, "A way of proving that she was a certain kind of person" (248). Thus, in an echoing of *Lightning Field*'s Mina transposed to the realm of creative labor, Meadow suspects, "I am just trying to make myself. Out of looking at other people. I have no real self, I think" (244). And it is in this light that Meadow's self-criticism finds a strange, unexpected, and category-confounding resemblance to the criticisms leveraged against postmodern metafiction by the very New Sincerity writers with which Spiotta is aligned.

Throughout the novel, descriptions of Meadow's singular fixation on filmmaking reverberate with late-twentieth-century analyses of metafiction drawn along lines of narcissism and apoliticality, such as Christopher Lasch's supposition that the writer of metafiction intends "to seduce others into giving him their attention, acclaim, or sympathy" (21) and Wallace's subsequent criticism that the supposedly innovative metafictions of the 1980s represent little more than an assertion of "Hey! Look at me! Have a look at what a good writer I am! *Like* me!" (McCaffery 130).[10] Similarly, as the narrator describes of a teenage Meadow's early experiments filming oncoming trains, "Meadow wanted her inventiveness noticed" (*Innocents and Others* 66). Carrie, although reverent of Meadow's nascent brilliance, concurrently suspects that those same experiments "just poin[t] back to the filmmaker no matter where the camera is turned" (66).

At times, the narrator explicitly characterizes Meadow's explorations of authenticity through the techniques of high-postmodernism, particularly in the terms of John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion," a 1967 essay in which Barth explains how the twentieth-century writer might make metafictional content from "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities" (64). Operating from a comparable vantage—on how one can "confron[t] an intellectual dead end and employ it against itself to accomplish new human work" (69–70)—Meadow incorporates into her films the very dilemmas inherent to filmmaking. On the complicated task of intertwining historical footage, filmed interviews, and audio recordings in *Kent State: Recovered*, the narrator describes Meadow's ruminations:

> A film is an idea about the world. Meadow thought of it like that, but she also knew that people can know something and visual images will override anything they know. Cinema truth is deceptive that way. It can tell you something but show you

> something very different. And you can bet you will walk away believing in what you saw. She thought she should make this problem an explicit part of her film. The way to manage a problem is not to solve it, which is impossible, but make that problem the material of the film. (*Innocents and Others* 172)

And yet, Meadow finds the characteristically postmodern deployment of artistic predicament as content more easily imagined than achieved. For the impasse at the heart of *Innocents and Others* is that Meadow cannot undertake such reflexive efforts without also fostering an incessant self-suspicion of narcissism that undermines her capacity to appreciate others and their works. "There's something sickening in what we all do," a depressive Meadow tells Carrie after viewing *Girl School* (228). "There is so much ego in it, and the rest is a veneer of something beyond self. A flimsy pretense that this isn't just self-aggrandizement. It is really an advertisement of my own intelligence and quality" (228). "All Meadow's life she had prided herself on her rigorous self-interrogations," the narrator continues not long after the episode, "None of this saved her from becoming a destructive person, a person who not only didn't make the world better, but a person who made some lives worse" (247). Thus, in a movement atypical in Spiotta's oeuvre, Meadow's biting self-characterizations imply that an art in search of authenticity may not only be bereft of moral utility, but also morally discolor the auteur by inculcating a narcissism reminiscent of that which New Sincerity criticism attributes to postmodernists. It becomes easy to imagine Meadow, despite her decades-long quest for authenticity, as a target of Wallace's anti-metafictional ire.

After acknowledging the "narcissism that was in evidence in everything I made" (248), Meadow's final act is one of renunciation: she gives up directing, donates her wealth, and retires to teach DIY filmmaking at an unrenowned college. Renunciation is recurrent in Spiotta's work: *Eat the Document* stages the renunciation of identity, and *Stone Arabia* the renunciation of material possessions; however, what distinguishes the theme in *Innocents and Others* is the unsettled question as to whether Meadow's renunciation is necessary, that is, whether she is in fact the narcissist she supposes herself to be. And in its persistence, this ambiguity raises a more difficult and troubling question: whether dedication to authenticity in art necessarily fosters self-destructive narcissism.

But I submit that Meadow is not the narcissist she describes. Although the narrator is quick to corroborate Meadow's admissions of narcissism and sociopathy, it is equally possible to interpret Meadow through her eagerness to self-diagnose. What distinguishes Meadow is not a lack of core personality—someone who is "just trying to make myself. Out of looking at other people . . . [with] no real self" (*Innocents and Others* 244)—but her fixation on such a lack. Meadow does desire her talent noticed in a way that is irksome to others, yet, in an artistic framework represented in the novel by the opposing poles of Meadow and Carrie, Meadow also appears as an emissary of the contradictory self-seriousness that is required of women in high art but for which they are often chastised. Carrie seems to understand Meadow in this very way as she reads a reflective essay on filmmaking written by Meadow:

> Meadow could be so pretentious sometimes. Carrie felt bad as soon as she thought that. And it wasn't even accurate, was it? Meadow was not *pretending*, that wasn't the right word. She was self-conscious and ambitious; she took herself very seriously and sometimes Carrie found it exhausting. Shouldn't the work speak for itself? And yet there were lots of great filmmakers with manifestos. Essays and polemics. Why not Meadow? (190)

At the same time, then, that Spiotta herself labels Meadow an "Art Monster"—citing Jenny Offill's term for a creature whose selfishness, carelessness, and even malevolence is activated or amplified by its participation in artmaking (Kavanagh)—her novel gives reason to doubt the veracity of Meadow's self-description as pathologically narcissistic. For this reason, Meadow's narrative raises the question of what art, if any at all, is possible under such rigorous self-effacement, and whether Meadow's final resolution to "tread lightly, quietly" can be compatible with creative labor (258).

### NARCIPHOBIA, POSTMODERNISM, RECURSIVITY

Given Meadow's extensive treatment of authenticity, the irresolution of her self-diagnosis similarly leaves uncertain the artistic viability of the pursuit of authenticity as the New Sincerity has conceived it—and through such uncertainty, Spiotta intervenes in the critical discourse on the periodization of both New Sincerity works and their

postmodern predecessors. Central to Spiotta's intervention is the dyad of Meadow and Carrie: Meadow as a portrait of intensity, dedication, and ambition, and Carrie of compromise and wellbeing.[11] Had Meadow's self-centeredness been offered as a matter of fact, the novel's aesthetic and critical endpoint would be legibly moralistic: Meadow would demonstrate how serious, extra-corporatist art runs the risk of egotism, while Carrie would show how reasonable market concessions allow for gentler creative experiences. But in concentrating on a figure marked by what Kristen Dombek terms "narciphobia"—an inexhaustible suspicion of the narcissism that may be laden in actions, habits, motivations, and essence—Spiotta's finale redirects instead toward the remaining prospects of New Sincerity fiction.[12] For at the moment Meadow reads her own fixation on authenticity skeptically, Spiotta's most dedicated authenticity-seeker falls into something very much akin to the interminably recursive halls of mirrors emblematic of postmodern literature—that is, the supposedly antithetical predecessor of the New Sincerity.

Consider, for example, Meadow's "My Transgressions" document, which consists of a catalog of confessional "I did" and "I did not" statements and ends abruptly with a paragraph containing the single incomplete sentence: "I made" (*Innocents and Others* 248). Only four sentences after this disjunction, Meadow's "transgressions" fold back on themselves in second-order self-consciousness: "Meadow gave up. . . . Even her guilt and inventory were an exercise in narcissism" (248). Here, Meadow's self-analysis takes shape as a limitlessly refracted series of meta-inquiries and meta-skepticism, a nesting doll of narcissistic suspicions and suspicions of narcissism. In this way, Spiotta transplants a scene of introspection and renunciation familiar to the New Sincerity into the ostensibly incongruous realm of postmodern self-consciousness: a form Brian McHale called the "Chinese-Box worlds" of postmodern fiction. As McHale argued of works such as Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* (1967), and Barth's "Menelaiad" and "Life-Story" (1968), these "Chinese-Box worlds" entail "perform[ing] the same operation over and over again, each time operating on the product of the previous operation" (121). A realist novel consistent with Spiotta's oeuvre, *Innocents and Others* is narratologically distinct from the multi-layered works highlighted by McHale; yet, by the novel's end, Spiotta's protagonist nevertheless finds herself

subject to a similar "ontological discontinuity" (McHale 113). That is, Spiotta transposes a recognizably postmodern narrative framework into the psyche of her novel's central character, thus imbuing her with the very recursivity that a New Sincerity grounded on "single-entendre" principles would consider antithetical to Meadow's artistic ambitions ("E Unibus Pluram" 81).

## TOWARD A PARADOXICAL PERIODIZATION

Because *Innocents and Others* echoes Spiotta's oeuvre so vividly, it suggests an extra-textual level of autobiography, signaling in Meadow's character arc a self-questioning of Spiotta's own career-long effort to critique Western consumerism and delineate the promise of analog alternatives. It is *Innocents and Others*' extension of Spiotta's distinctive inquiries into authenticity and its cultural or ideological impediments—into the intersection of authenticity and the fetishization of disability, the role of technology in DIY artmaking and voyeurism, and renunciations of late-capitalist consumerism—that reveal the novel's complication of the dominants on which literary periodization typically relies. For, when Spiotta mutates Meadow's pursuit of authenticity into narciphobia—a circular, self-referential dynamic resembling what Wallace described as a literature that "called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it" (34)—she effectively postulates that the novel of authenticity, after three decades, may have exhausted itself in a mise en abyme similar to the one it sought to criticize.

But a predicament such as this brings with it a certain paradox: Spiotta's challenge in *Innocents and Others* to New Sincerity fiction is legible only if it remains distinct—and, to a degree, separate—from those of the preceding postmodern period. That is, one cannot articulate how the narciphobic dimensions of *Innocents and Others* return Spiotta's New Sincerity fiction to the aesthetics, forms, and epistemologies belonging to early articulations of postmodernism without the vocabulary construed by the periodization of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century US literature. As the perhaps longest-standing and most recognizable mode of post-postmodernism dissolves into the conceptual repertoire of postmodernism, that dissolution can only be intuited through the supposed incompatibility of the New Sincerity and the postmodernism it meant to challenge. Spiotta's novel draws from both Wallace's rebuke of narratives eager to laud their own

formal ingenuity and McHale's attention to narratives that forefront their carefully layered worlds. It encompasses both Mary K. Holland's account of a post-postmodern fiction that aims "to be about something, to matter, to communicate meaning, to foster the sense that language connects us" (6) and Patricia Waugh's description of a postmodern-era metafiction interested conversely in calling "attention to its status as an artefact" (2). It is a literature that, in absorbing scholarly debates on periodization, renders the continuation of those very debates instrumental to its own operations.

Thus, in the meta-theory of periodization gleaned from *Innocents and Others*, the supersession of periods is best evaluated not by weighing claims of separateness against claims of continuity, but instead by the tension between those claims. At once, Spiotta declines the pervasive logic of conceptual opposition: a rhetoric of "rupture" or "fragmentation," which, as Ted Underwood argues, has long lent literary study institutional prestige and progressive credibility (14). But Spiotta also refuses to smooth over previously distinct periods with assertions of conceptual continuity, as in Robert McLaughlin's identification of a postmodern refusal of reification in the fiction generally categorized "post-postmodern" (294) or Amy Hungerford's suspicion that "postmodernism" and "the contemporary" may have been a "long modernism" all along ("On the Period" 418).[13] Rather, through a protagonist whose legibility depends on competing literary-historical dominants, Spiotta posits that it is the uneven synthesis of claims to separateness and sameness makes literary history neither segmented nor continuous, but instead what Hyde and Wasserman metaphorize as "braided, knotty strands" (11).

However ferocious the debates between literary-historical accounts—and however variable their groundworks may be, whether aesthetic, formal, philosophical, ideological, or economic—the lesson of *Innocents and Others* is that the conceptual equipment developed in those debates has now been integrated into very fictions to which they refer. Thus, by dint of Spiotta's example, the substance of US fiction may well come to depend (if it has not already) on the perpetuation of those debates and the battles for viability between periods, modalities, and subperiods; between a still-ongoing postmodernism and a New Sincerity (and/or "metamodernism," "neosincerity," "neorealism," "postirony," and so on), between a long modernism and a divergent

postmodernism. There can be no contemporary fiction, Spiotta suggests, without wild competition between theories of fantastic coherence and stark temporal incongruity.

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NOTES

1. On the New Sincerity's emergence in the Austin music scene, see Barry Shank.

2. On "national spokesmanship" in US fiction as it relates to gender, see Kasia Boddy.

3. Spiotta often describes her work in relation to the empathetic and anti-solipsistic properties Wallace ascribes to fiction; her comments on art's ability to bring audiences to escape their own subjectivity echo Wallace's oft-cited remarks in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery: "a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves" (127). Spiotta expands on this subject while indexing Wallace in a 2016 interview published in *Tin House*: "On some level, we must as writers believe that all people are bridgeable. That we can find something in our own experiences and observations to enable us to empathize with the characters we write. To inhabit people who are not exactly like us. But of course, we also understand the limits of that, and the deep loneliness that is the human condition. These bridges are impossible in some ways. . . . And when I read good fiction, I feel a bridge to the inner lives of other people, which is consoling. As DFW so often pointed out, we read to feel less alone. I think we write to feel less alone too, which is funny because writing requires so many hours alone" (Scarpa).

4. Spiotta is also an emissary of what Mark McGurl has coined the "Program Era," an ongoing postwar period defined by the proliferation and influence of university-sponsored creative writing. Spiotta attended a workshop instructed by Program-Era authority Gordon Lish, and, like Wallace, she has been described as a "protégé of Don DeLillo" (Miller). See also Megan O'Grady.

5. See Theodore Martin, Ted Underwood, and Eric Hayot.

6. In illustrating postmodernity through sweeping depictions of Los Angeles, Spiotta, like Fredric Jameson, conceptualizes postmodernism as the "cultural dominant" of a Western capitalist culture conceived of in totality, thus participating, as Madhu Dubey has written on the absence of African American fiction in late-twentieth-century accounts of postmodernism, in the omission of the particular communities whose experiences animate and embody characteristically "postmodern" crises. See Madhu Dubey.

7. On disability and the American Romantic tradition, see David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. On postmodernism and disability, see James Berger.

8. In this quotation, Spiotta echoes two of her major literary influences, DeLillo—whose fictionalized Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (1988) thinks, "I am ready to go round and round on this because there are stories inside stories, that the press is unaware" (452)—and Wallace, who writes in the posthumously published *The Pale King* (2011), "There are secrets within secrets, though—always" (101n6).

9. Jelly is modeled from Whitney Walton, alias "Miranda Grosvenor," whose over-the-phone relationships with celebrities including Quincy Jones, Paul Schrader, Buck Henry, and Billy Joel were described in a 1999 *Vanity Fair* feature. See Bryan Burrough.

10. Wallace's dissection of late-postmodern metafiction, centering on Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990), participates in what Dubey identifies as the privileging of works written by white, theoretically minded authors in accounts of literary postmodernism. Dubey points, for instance, to the seldom-recognized prominence of the book-within-a-book trope in twentieth-century African American literature, which, interpreted through Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and John Edgar Wideman's *Rueben* (1987), Dubey describes as a definitively postmodern method for "grappl[ing] with the question of how the literary text can vouchsafe its referential claims" (50). See also Madelyn Jablon.

11. In contrasting Carrie's embrace of commercial accessibility, Meadow's pursuit of formal and conceptual difficulty locates her amid what Amy Hungerford describes as an enduring, modernist account of genius reinforced by academic reverence for features such as "allusive density, formal self-consciousness, . . . individual voice, [and] ambition" and attributed predominately to white, male twentieth-century writers (*Making Literature Now* 157). On this topic, see also Loren Glass.

12. In coining "narciphobia," Dombek describes a second-order fear of narcissism. She theorizes a "pervasive pattern of paranoia (in fantasy or behavior), plotting (organizing people, events, and the world into categories of good and evil, real and fake, deep and superficial, etc.), and catastrophizing, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts" (137). Dombek suggests that to be hyperaware of narcissism constitutes its own mode of self-aggrandizement, one that positions the self as both victim and hero, always "in the center of the world, stuck in time, assessing the moral status of others, until the love is gone" (119).

13. See also, on the reemergence after postmodernism of a categorically modernist faith in grand narratives, Matthew Schultz.

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