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No Man Is an Island: Fiction, Trauma, War

Jonathan Blitzer

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Jonathan Blitzer | January 8, 2013

It was like two bald men fighting over a comb, Borges famously declared. In 1982, for seventy-four days, England and Argentina fought over an inhospitable, craggy archipelago in the South Atlantic. The islands were known in England as the Falklands, in Argentina as the Malvinas, and the bloody skirmish between the two nations capped centuries of discord over the territory.

Neither country ever formally declared war. Instead, repeated provocations made for lurching brinkmanship. This was how it had been since Argentina first agitated for independence from Spain in 1811 and began demanding its postcolonial inheritance. At that point, the British had presided over the islands in a deal struck with the Spanish crown; the Spanish claimed sovereignty, while the English stayed on to save face decades after a British naval captain had planted a Union Jack there. But that was as far as the deal-making ever went: Argentine independence scrambled the precarious arrangement.

At first, a ragtag band of armed gauchos pitted themselves against the British, who refused to budge. Before long, the warring gave way to a century of saber rattling and even the occasional high jinks. Fervent Argentines staged symbolic airlifts and landings on the British-held islands throughout the twentieth century. General Juan Perón, a self-styled anti-imperialist crusader and opportunist, along with a contingent of pro-*patria* stalwarts in government, had egged on these activist-stuntmen. The Malvinas were 300 kilometers off their coast, so why should they belong to a faraway empire? Remarkably, the acrimony did nothing to halt the buying and selling of arms between the two countries. Over the course of the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, Britain became Argentina’s fourth-largest arms supplier. Diplomatic relations between the two nations continued, haltingly, all the while, until nationalist fervor met political exigency in both countries.

The Argentine junta invaded the islands on April 2. Caught by surprise and promptly sobered, the British launched a counterattack in May; they routed the Argentine forces after some unexpected setbacks, then pushed them out by June. Ultimately, the English traveled 8,000 miles south to defend land most English schoolboys had never heard of, as one journalist quipped. The Argentines, with notably less sea and ground to cover, "retook" an archipelago whose inhabitants spoke broken Spanish with English accents. By the fighting's end, Margaret Thatcher had a cause célèbre to distract the country from the bitter medicine she'd been dispensing at home. Argentina's military dictatorship, which had attempted to stave off its own collapse by invading the islands in the first place, limped away disgraced as the public reeled. Two bald men indeed.

The death toll was just shy of a thousand, the overwhelming majority Argentines. This very nearly equaled the population of the islands themselves, which hovered around 1,200 residents. All told, more people were harmed than redeemed. In the three decades since the war, suicides by Argentine veterans have surpassed the number of battlefield deaths. For a war so localized and relatively short-lived, so apparently minor against the backdrop of a century's colossal carnage, the trauma is outsized.

What the Argentines officially called "war," the British government dubbed a "conflict"; the Argentines conscripted an "army," while the Brits organized a "task force." Whatever the appellation, this was a skirmish without a clear winner. Sovereignty over the islands remains unresolved to this day; if anything, the battle has deepened rather than quelled the controversy. Thatcher eventually intensified her commitment to the islands in the late 1980s, encouraged by the military romp. Her avowedly Churchillian turn-around followed years of cool indifference to the drab and costly islands. Meanwhile, a line of Argentine politicians, with only minor exceptions, have continued speaking of them in soaring, nationalistic tones.

In the end, the British victory was Pyrrhic at best. The islands became, as Borges wrote in a poem, "far too famous." The angsty teenage protagonist of David Mitchell's novel *Black Swan Green* extrapolates the concept of a stalemate from the conflict's gory inconclusiveness: "war's an auction where whoever can pay most in damage and still be standing wins." His words are a fitting epitaph to that bizarre, moldering cause. But now, thirty years after the violent hostilities have ended, what of the war's legacy in Argentina? How obstinate were its death throes?

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The Argentine novelist Carlos Gamerro has written one of the most ambitious novels about the war. First published in Spanish in 1998, *The Islands* has been

translated into English by Ian Barnett in collaboration with the bilingual author. The novel's protagonist, Félix, a Malvinas veteran and drug-addled computer hacker, is embroiled in a murder mystery. The crime, though, pales beside the colorful and often hilariously overwrought machinations of a variegated cast of misfits, pontificating businessmen, maniacal bigwigs, coked-up thugs and oversexed hangers-on. In short, it is Buenos Aires in the 1990s, the years of President Carlos Menem; this was an age of runaway corruption, giddy privatization and wholesale impunity.

The Islands, like the era, could have used more regulation at points. It is swollen with speechmaking and ranting. Translator Ian Barnett acquits himself well under the circumstances. Gamerro, evidently aware that many of his characters spew cascading, self-justifying gibberish, nonetheless seems loath to interrupt them. Feeding the bombast is a quintessentially*porteño* feat, and at its center is a figure at once clownish and megalomaniacal. An extraordinarily wealthy land developer named Tamerlán, incorrigibly bullish and saddled with a sordid past, is trying to round up the names of witnesses to a crime his troubled son has committed in plain sight. He offers Félix a hefty check to bring his smarts and technological know-how to bear on the case.

The Malvinas, still smoldering after more than a decade, are enmeshed in the murder's intricate particulars. Félix, for one, carries around wreckage from the war: he suffers debilitating migraines, the cause being a shrapnel injury that has left a piece of a helmet lodged in his head, forever setting off metal detectors. It is a case of chronic synecdoche: "a foreign body in [his] head…. A soldier's helmet. A memory." In conversation, he lamely brings up the war and is generally ignored or else mocked. Urbane Argentines are eager to establish lives of capitalistic normalcy. The war is something of a national blight in their eyes, a memento to *fracaso*, or failure. "I haven't got time for cheap soaps," Tamerlán thunders at Félix; "that wasn't a war. In a real war fortunes are won and lost."

Félix takes the belittlement in stride, but drifts away from the civilian world. Being essentially a loner through it all, he sometimes keeps company with a mangy crew of maladapted veterans. All are in various stages of denial that the war has been lost, and all are forever foundering. One of them boasts about hiring "five boats in Palermo Park" and invading "the island in the middle of the lake…where couples go to neck." Another barricades himself behind an aisle of non-perishables at a local grocery store and barks out orders for a counterattack when he sees the face of a Korean woman. Her visage has apparently triggered a warped recollection of the Gurkhas, who formed part of the British ground forces in 1982.

An obsession with "alternative history," however, might be the most persistent affliction, and the most consequential in the world of the novel. Of

one friend's unstinting work on a book called *A Thousand Different Outcomes to the Malvinas War*, Félix remarks:

I'd never come across anything like that in the English bibliography on the Malvinas War… The winners, it seems, reach their destination believing they've walked a straight line to victory; it's us losers who are always left to fret over the multiple possibilities of history.

Félix's observation also has another meaning: the failed war effort may have fractured that coveted "straight line" toward victory into a multitude of diverging counterfactuals. What could have been never was. But all those accumulated lines scrambled by defeat still lead ineluctably, years later, back to a single fixed point. The characters, Félix included, are restaging and, in their way, memorializing the Malvinas; the sight lines all point in a single direction. It is a psychological Maginot Line.

For much of the first half of *The Islands*, visitation, through repetition and re-creation, is a recurring theme. Malvinas veterans are forever remaking the war in their own image. This is literally true of one person so obsessed by the scale model of the island towns he's made, in the isolation of his basement, that the "real" town he aimed to revive "ceased to matter." Félix, ever the ironist and resident wit, embarks on his own version of eternal return, although his is virtual. In order to hack into the state intelligence agency's computers to round up files for Tamerlán, he rekindles his relationship with his former superior officer, Colonel Verraco, and ensnares him with a promise to design a video game so that Verraco can refight all the battles he's lost. It's an irresistible proposition. In an amusing chapter called "The Malvinas Strike Back," Félix creates the game, using templates from other wars (among them Desert Storm) to fashion a motley amalgam. It's all meant to culminate in a victory parade for Verraco, complete with the pope congratulating the victors. (The pope at the time of the Falklands War, John Paul II, was circumspect about the Argentine cause and decried violence on both sides.) "Verraco had better not look too closely because, finding no Popes on the [design] menu, I'd had to make do with an Ayatollah," Félix says.

Gamerro's mischief here does not entirely hold up, as the author himself acknowledges in a 2012 postscript. Much of the novelty of the book's carnival of virtuality has worn off, and some of the theoretical asides voiced by Félix feel slightly dated. But the idea of a virtual war is nevertheless a brilliant gambit. Had Gamerro chosen to be more cinematic about rehashing the battle scenes, as other novelists have done, the fighting might have taken on an air of surreality. Tristán Bauer's film, *Iluminados por el fuego* (2005), is a case in point. Wrenching scenes of an Argentine retreat—with bullets whizzing past, ubiquitous explosions, spurting blood and enveloping shouts—are shot with a tremulous camera that compounds the sense of chaos and purposelessness.

When the flashbacks and recollections subside, though, the fine-grained horror suddenly disappears, locked away in the past like a bad dream. The ensuing scenes, set in the film's present-time register, feel wan and forced by comparison. A compensatory voice-over laments the tragedy, but pays lip service to the Malvinas cause.

Gamerro's virtual treatment is decidedly farther from the action. It rewrites the battle experience, falsifying it outright, an approach that sharpens one of the novel's central ideas about the contrivances of memory. One of the only other scenes in the book that return, concertedly, to the ground in the Malvinas is a cab ride that Félix grudgingly takes with another war veteran at the wheel. The voluble cabbie has gotten lost in the streets of Buenos Aires soon after picking up his fare, and he talks all the while about how the fog on the islands used to leave him and his fellow soldiers disoriented and perpetually wandering. The more he drives, the more he talks; the more he talks, the more aimlessly he drives, until the present moment seems to fall away entirely. Memories are overlaid onto the action until they finally usurp and reroute it. The haze of the Malvinas is so vivid as to spill fog onto the streets of Buenos Aires a decade later, and we, along with Félix, are adrift.

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Spread over the last three decades, Argentine literature about the war seems to conspire in a trick of perspective, even an act of collective foreshortening: the further away in time a novel stands to the war, the more graphic the fighting appears to be on the page. *The Islands* is nearly two decades removed from the war and restages its combat through a diaphanous scrim of memory and virtuality. But Patricio Pron's as yet untranslated *Una puta mierda* (2007), written nearly three decades after the fighting ceased, is set on the battlefield and never really strays far from it. The scenes are a loose agglomeration of tragicomic set pieces. It sometimes feels like Pron has mapped *Catch-22* onto the open set of the Lars von Trier film *Dogville*, with its schematic, even gestural, sense of space. Through it all, we gaze into a war whose Argentine protagonists are young, mostly provincial conscripts. They are perplexed by the cause, unable to distinguish friend from foe, and seem perfectly ridiculous aping Hollywood gestures of manly bellicosity. As the narrator remarks early on:

We didn't know what to think because the war was something entirely new to us, and we weren't clear on whether it was normal for a bomb to hang from the sky without ever falling, or if it was a characteristic particular to that war, although this was obviously an exaggeration since the war had started about ten days before and it couldn't be said that something was characteristic of it.

The irreverence in the novel stems from this tone of pathetic ingenuity. Pron wryly refurbishes the action, and to do so he returns to the outset of the war, when things seemed at once absurd and freshly perilous. (The British arrived on the islands nearly a month after Argentina had occupied them, but once they did, the carnage was instantaneous.)

In 1982, the Argentine novelist, sociologist and sometimes publicist Rodolfo Fogwill published a trim and exquisite novella called *Los pichiciegos*, eventually translated into English as *Malvinas Requiem* (2007). Fogwill wrote it while the war was still being fought. And though the tale is almost too good not to be apocryphal, it's rumored that he produced the novel about the seventy-four-day skirmish in almost as many hours (seventy-two, as it happens), over the course of a cocaine-fueled marathon. *Malvinas Requiem* triumphs by way of a negative (or inverted) conceit: it essentially imagines the war's end, following a group of Argentine soldiers who, upon landing on the islands, promptly become deserters and hide in an underground bunker for the duration of the conflict. Chronologically, this novel was written in the thick of the war's action, yet Fogwill opts to portray its denouement. It's a daring move, politically and aesthetically; Fogwill denies the war's enthusiasts their longed-for triumphalism. And he does so not with a fiery, essayistic riposte, but with a measured subversion from within the very ranks of the dwindling cause.

The war comes to be defined by all that it is not. The chapters tend to open with negations ("This couldn't be it," one soldier thinks on arriving); fittingly, darkness is their characteristic shade. In the early scenes, disembodied voices carry on a conversation in a deep hole known as "the Warren," a hiding place and makeshift HQ where the sporadic "glow" of a lighted cigarette momentarily illuminates a mud-streaked face. These soldiers are known by the slang term *dillos*, as in "armadillos," with their subterranean predilections.

The war has driven them underground, but to quote one character, "a dillo goes for it—burrows, suffers and survives." In this, they are foils to the thousands of Argentines tortured and killed by the military dictatorship during the country's Dirty War, which began in 1976. A common form of death among those *desaparecidos* was being drugged after a torture session and dumped into the Rio de la Plata from an airplane. "If you hit the water from twelve thousand meters," one dillo says as the group discusses the horrors of the dictatorship from inside the Warren, "you turn into thick mush that won't float and gets pulled down beneath the surface by the current." If the dillos are aspiring underground "survivors," the victims of state terror are simply "pulled down beneath the surface," never to return.

The perpetrators of these atrocities were largely the same authorities in charge of prosecuting the Malvinas escapade. In their desultory, casual way, the

dillos grapple with the implications of this horrible irony, perhaps the crux of the war on the Argentine side. “They say there’s ten thousand of us” on the islands, one remarks. To which another responds, “They say Videla”—Jorge Rafael Videla, the former Argentine president and general—“killed fifteen thousand.” There is that tragic mismatch: “ten thousand” Argentines sent to defend a country whose government has just killed “fifteen thousand” of its own. It all has the makings of a massive, bloody setup—the military dressing civilians up as soldiers, inducting them into its ranks and forcing them into the service of a dying cause.

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In 1976, General Videla and his military cohort had come to power with a plan called the Process of National Reorganization. It was nothing less than a savage and systematic assault on Argentine society, cloaked in messianic terms as a defense of Christian values. The crackdown on subversives—a limitless pretext—was pre-emptive and unremitting, the atrocities unfathomably gruesome. Descriptions of that hellish time are a portrait in collective psychosis, as the public shuffled, almost somnambulant, through the trauma of the Dirty War. As V.S. Naipaul wrote in May 1977:

Buenos Aires is full of shocked and damaged people who can think now only of flight, who find it no longer possible to take sides, who can see no cause in Argentina and can acknowledge at last the barbarism by which they have for long been surrounded.

By 1982, tens of thousands had been “disappeared” and the underground torture sites were still in use. Videla had given way as Argentina’s president to Roberto Eduardo Viola, who had given way to Leopoldo Galtieri. The ethos was unchanged; circumstances, though, were shifting. Infighting among the generals and mismanagement of the economy had weakened the dictatorship’s armor of invincibility. It was economic crisis, finally, that threatened to topple the regime once and for all. Three days before the invasion of the Malvinas, thousands of Argentines staged the first concerted demonstration against the military government since it ascended to power in 1976.

Then the war came—and, as planned, it froze dissent in place. The anti-dictatorship left, for the most part, doubled over in uncertainty. The Malvinas had long been an unimpeachable, anti-colonialist cause; the public was fiercely supportive. As Jimmy Burns writes in *The Land That Lost Its Heroes*, “trade unionists, political leaders, Bishops, the Communist party and the Peronist guerrilla organization all supported the military occupation of the islands.” The writer Ernesto Sábato, who would go on to catalog the dictatorship’s horrors, wept openly on Spanish radio, saying, “It is not a

dictatorship that is fighting for the 'Malvinas'; it is the whole Nation." The dictatorship had appropriated a deeply ingrained popular cause. Troubled observers likened the outpouring of support to the patriotic displays from the 1978 World Cup, when the ravages of life under the dictatorship were blithely set aside as the country rallied behind a goal-scoring Maradona. Indeed, an old popular slogan from that year—"Whoever doesn't jump is a Dutchman," the rallying cry from the finals in which Argentina faced the Netherlands—was adapted to a new cause: "Whoever doesn't jump is an Englishman."

The dictatorship's embrace of the Malvinas cause was, in a way, the apotheosis of state terror. The young soldiers—the so-called classes of '62 and '63, known in Argentina simply as*los chicos* and around 20 years old—were cannon fodder, both for the British and, as it turned out, the ranking Argentine leadership. There was also the generalized abuse of ill preparation and abandonment, and then there were the more acute torments. As one veteran told Argentine journalist Daniel Kon, in his indispensable oral history *Los Chicos de la Guerra*:

What hurts me most is that [friends] died in a war for which they weren't trained. We were just targets for [British] artillery…I felt like a duck on a lake…terribly helpless…we didn't feel like soldiers…so we felt like prisoners, condemned to forced labour…. I felt I was on the island of Alcatraz.

Soldiers were short of gear, training, food and potable water. It was winter on the islands, and they had to endure the cold unprotected and routinely suffered frostbite.

Mistreatment of the Argentine soldiers by their superior officers was another grisly reality. When the starving soldiers set out to find food, often killing local sheep for meat, their own officers tortured them, sometimes to death. This was, after all, a military with little to no experience in conflict with foreign nations, but a wealth of knowledge about how to torture (thanks in no small part to training from the United States). The standard torment for a soldier caught stealing food, or otherwise guilty of insubordination, was tying the man to stakes in the ground, leaving him "spread eagled" with his "feet and hands exposed" to the elements, often overnight and in the rain and cold, as one soldier described it. This was one of many sadistic punishments, leaving soldiers dead by morning or fatally ill and eternally scarred.
In *Iluminados por el fuego*, torture is the tipping point that sends one character physically and emotionally over the edge; he never recovers, and his suicide years after the war opens the film. Remembering this sort of trauma, and having been impotent to stop it, is at the heart of Gamerro's novel.

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Military authority is mostly absent from *Malvinas Requiem*, and Pron upends it as farce in *Una puta mierda*. In *The Islands*, by contrast, the military officers are at their most menacing. Partly this is because Gamerro's is a memory novel; characters live in a dual register, and imposing past selves co-exist with future iterations. In the present, Félix's former superior officer Verraco is a risible crank, as is the mysterious, storied Major X, a junta torturer–cum–Malvinas liberator whose fanaticism for the cause is undiminished a decade later. Yet the past is not even past, as it has never been fully resolved.

Félix has repressed one traumatic memory from the war: Verraco has viciously tortured and killed a fellow soldier while Félix stood by in silent horror. The passage replaying this episode stands in decided contrast to the virtually reconfigured video game grandiosity of the war maneuvers. Every detail—the electric shocks, the pliers applied to fingernails and teeth, the scorched flesh—is rendered with excruciating vividness. The victim, tied at each limb and pulled taut along four stakes in the ground, is wired to a "heavy machine" and subjected to electric shocks until "he writhed and contracted like a worm pierced by the tip of a hook." The dumb, brutish laughter of the latter-day Verraco dissolves into the sinister smirk of a cold-blooded murderer whose face Félix recalls smiling "smugly at the touch of originality he'd added to [the] most traditional of Argentinian tortures."

Félix drifts into this recollection much like his cabbie was carried off by his own memories earlier in the book. He is at a birthday party for a paraplegic veteran. The group's chumminess and fraternal hectoring, peppered with chants from the war, summon a memory to the surface: "My reactions came in layers, like one birthday present wrapping another and another." It is no coincidence that these visions appear at a birthday party. The war represents a peculiar rite of passage, but with a stunting effect, a developmental hitch. One soldier in Daniel Kon's book recalls a common joke made among the veterans: "If you wanted to tell someone they lacked experience of life, you said: 'What you need is more Malvinas.'" Yet the veterans are frozen in a childlike state, with their superior officers as eternal parental authorities. "What Hugo celebrated" each year, Félix says of the party's honoree, was "the day when, landing on the wrong beach, his dinghy brushed against one of our own mines and the bow blew into the air along with both his legs."

Past selves are blown apart in the war, only to be replaced by the budding equivalency of person and state. Tormentor becomes protector and redeemer, defender of the popular will. Alas, this was a war in which personal and patriotic conviction converged, in spite of the dictatorship's former (and current) atrocities. Conscription took place in more ways than one. Just as soldiers could joke about not having "Malvinas," they could say, critically, in the same breath: "I hope this war also makes the army…grow up."

At the core of Gamerro's novel is a series of reflections and mirror images that approximate this perverse convergence. They begin in the novel's opening pages, when Félix contemplates for the first time the enormous twin towers in Buenos Aires, "less unreal in memory than face to face," where Tamerlán keeps his office.

They were so perfectly alike it was easy to imagine they were a single building leaning against a gigantic mirror: a golden mirror in which the silver tower was reflected gold, a silver mirror making the golden tower's silvered sister.

This is exactly the language one veteran uses to describe the Malvinas themselves. "The Isla Gran Malvina looks like the other one reflected in a mirror…. If [only] we'd invaded it instead of Isla Soledad…. We were pursuing a mirage…. We mistook the reflection for its object." The resonance is only natural: Tamerlán's building houses towering ambitions for a massive new society that he plans to build on the Malvinas. He dubs the project, with a Peronist flourish, "the Third Foundation of Buenos Aires" and "the city of the Third Millennium." And like the Malvinas veteran with his meticulous scale model of the island towns, Tamerlán has his own model prominently displayed in his glassy office. The connections to the war and its antecedent years are, as it were, transparent.

The building could have been designed by an admirer of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. The thirty-floor tower is completely transparent, with a series of one-way mirrors from top to bottom. Tamerlán can watch his subordinates watch their subordinates, and onward (or downward) to the bottom floor. But from the bottom up all one sees is one's own reflection. "A [surveillance] camera can generate discomfort, fear perhaps; but not terror," Tamerlán says. "Mirrors can, and do. The more so when you know there's always someone behind them…. The master looking at us through our own eyes." It's a jarring reminder of what it meant for the murderous dictatorship, so feared and reviled, to cloak itself in a popular cause. And worse: to force its citizens to don patriotic garb while the public was still in the grip of state terror. They internalize, finally, the hierarchy itself, the whole ontology of submission and submissiveness.

Félix's love interest, who helps catalyze the confrontation with his own past, is one such victim. Brutally raped and tortured in confinement during the dictatorship, Gloria goes on to fall in love with her former torturer. She is powerless to push him away and even bears his children, two "Mongoloid" twins who are a sort of Argentine version of midnight's children: "They were slightly premature. It was the night of 2nd April 1982"—the day of the invasion of the islands.

What brings Félix and Gloria together is an archipelago of memories in the most literal sense. First, they share childhood memories of a small lagoon town in Argentina, a fictional locale that Gamerro explores further in a companion novel called *An Open Secret* (2011). In *The Islands*, Félix's memory of that town, Malihuel, is keen and vivid. There was a small island in the lagoon that served as a resting spot for masses of flamingos, making it a vibrant "patch of pink" in the distance. When the birds flew away, "the entire island would lift into the air and open like a hundred orchids flowering at once." There is something pristine, even quaint, in the image. And yet it gets refracted through the darkening screen of the ensuing years of dictatorship and war, for the two lovers have something else in common: a connection to Major X, who, it turns out, is the father of Gloria's two children. Gloria's suffering during the dictatorship echoes and rebounds in Félix's hurt from the war; her anguished relation with Major X is mirrored in Félix's halting regard for Verraco.

In Malihuel, an island seems to become a dense throng of flamingos spilling skyward, transforming it from a water-bound clump of earth to an airborne flower, but somehow the image holds together long enough to forge an abiding, coherent memory. In Buenos Aires, after the war, all echoes are cacophonous, and every likeness becomes some other, disparate image. At one point, the witnesses to Tamerlán's son's crime are temporarily reflected in the window glass of the towers, which Félix glimpses in a recorded video. But Tamerlán's son has thrown his victim through the glass, and the reflection breaks into a thousand pieces. Félix can only make out the faces breaking into a fragmentary blur.

As Wallace Stevens once said: "identity is the vanishing-point of resemblance." Through the looking glass of the war, a country sees its own true face. It is a visage withered by psychosis and prolonged torment. It looks angular and haggard in some cynical resemblance to what the "master," on the other side, has wrought. There is that bewildered stare into a mirror that casts back an unfamiliar aspect. It is no mere likeness; the onlooker actually sees himself, as though for the first time. And with that, the image breaks apart.

In "Unreal Images [1]" (June 6 2011), Jonathan Blitzer reviewed Javier Cercas's The Anatomy of a Moment: Thirty-five Minutes in History and Imagination*, a nonfiction account of a failed coup that takes on the confounding history of Spain's transition to democracy.*

Este texto se publicó originalmente en el semanario estadounidense The Nation