
Satisfying ambiguity

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Swigart retells the story of "The Wizard of Oz" in such a way that the reader is both protagonist and audience, and by doing so examines the nature of ambiguity. Dorothy's trip to Oz might be an apt metaphor for political action in the light of the events of Sep 11.

Full Text (3187 words)

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The unfolding story of 'satisfying ambiguity' is somewhat postmodern. Though it has a beginning and a middle, its ending is indeterminate. Furthermore, we already know this story about a future grounded in the present, in the same way that the audience for Homer already knew the story he would tell them. Ours is a version of The Wizard of Oz in which we are protagonist and audience. There is tension, and suspense, and a hope for resolution, but understanding the nature of this drama is vital to our survival lest we turn unwillingly into the antagonist. We must also become the authors of this story.

The film of The Wizard of Oz oscillates between two modes: black-and-white reality and technicolor imagination. Ambiguity expresses such dual modes, and is similar to the nature of light, both wave and particle at the same time, depending on point of view. Dorothy's trip to Oz happens in the imagination (while she is knocked unconscious), and so occurs at the same time as her Kansas reality. Oz and Kansas are concurrent, not sequential.

Dorothy is a naive and innocent heroine from a sturdy farm in Kansas, the heart of the myth of America. Her little dog Toto digs in Miss Gulch's garden, and that cranky neighbor brings down the full weight of her rage, hatred, and envy. Dorothy and Toto are only saved by a whirlwind flight when the tornado carries them to the land of the Emerald City ("Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore"). From then on, she seeks only to return to her black and white reality. After all, "There's no place like home."

Like us, she wants answers and certainty, and like us she gets ambiguous answers and uncertainty. Yet, in a curious way, the ambiguity is satisfying because it is an integral part of the story.

We ask, how can ambiguity satisfy? Or, how can we satisfy its insatiable demand for contradiction, for appeasement, for burnt offerings? Both meanings dwell in this phrase, 'satisfying ambiguity,' itself ambiguous and suggestive.

Our version of The Wizard might begin on a sun-drenched day in May in Greece, which we have called the cradle of our civilization. At the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, a long line of suppliants climbs a steep road toward the temple, circles around the impressive treasure house of the Athenians to the sacred precinct in front of the Oracle's home. The first suppliant submits the burning question of the day: "The Persians are coming, what should we do?" The priest takes the question into the gloom of the temple and offers it to the Pythia—a mantic (perhaps mythic)

priestess crouching in a hole in the earth, a hole which may or may not have even existed. She may (or may not) have inhaled, or smoked, or drunk some kind of drug for inspiration, but she speaks in tongues, and the priest returns with her answer, correctly, if mysteriously, interpreted in perfect hexameters. The suppliants leave, satisfied, or, if after some consideration they should remain unsatisfied, they can come back for a second opinion.

In the brightly-colored land of Oz, Dorothy makes her way to the Wizard. She, and the companions she collects along the way, seek a heart, a brain, some courage, and a way back to the reality of Depression-era Kansas. They approach the Oracle, an impressive, even frightening, projection in the central room of the central city. They timidly offer their requests.

The Wizard doesn't really have answers, of course. He's just a man, a humbug, kindly but ineffective, hiding behind the curtain, manipulating the symbols, and hoping for the best. All he can do is delay, confound, propose. He can create new ambiguities, ones that, in the end, must satisfy. He can stall for time by sending them on a quest: "Bring me the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West."

Delphi was located in neutral territory, an unimportant region along the north coast of the Gulf of Corinth, far from Athens, from Sparta, from the real centers of political power. As a result of its inoffensive location, it offered, or appeared to offer, unbiased answers to its broad clientele. Today, we would call what the Oracle did intelligence, information analyzed and packaged for policy-making customers.

Like the Emerald City, Delphi (and the plain below) was filled with support infrastructure. There were gatekeepers, barber shops, campgrounds, hotels, and restaurants, and in Delphi, the sellers of local sacrificial product, mostly cattle. Mingling among the suppliants were undoubtedly agents of the Oracle bureaucracy, picking up information about the geopolitical situation in the greater Greek world about the suppliant's personal life and economic situation. As with psychics or psychotherapists, they were trained to extract information from subtle clues like clothing and accent. The Oracle had agents in foreign lands as well, at the courts of foreign leaders, keeping their eye on the local situation.

At Delphi, the man behind the curtain was, in effect, an intelligence analyst, supported by an infrastructure of spies and informants, sometimes with policy goals of his own. He didn't have conclusive answers, so he offered carefully crafted ambiguities.

The story of Delphi is a spy story. Today, the Oracle might be an intelligence agency or a business consultancy (it's no surprise the leading database software comes from a company called Oracle). Where else do we go for answers, especially about the future? And the answers must be ambiguous because, after all, the future isn't here yet. In fact, it never really arrives.

But the present, where our story starts, is here. Recent events have brought this story into the foreground. The attack on the World Trade Center was the climax of a long drama for some, the beginning of a different drama for the rest of us.

Both the audience and the perpetrators are communities, and communities work on two levels, the level of ideology and belief, and the level of action. Ideologically, some communities at some times think of themselves as positive, as part of a coherent whole (We're Christians, we believe in peace and turning the other cheek, we seek to bring others into our group). Such communities might be called centrifugal. Their energy flows outward. Others, at other times, think of themselves in opposition to something (we hate America, we are against America, our hatred of the evil is what binds us together in communal purpose, we must keep our group pure.) These might be called centripetal communities, with the energy of their values and ideas pouring in

toward their center.

The problem with these categories is that they are ambiguous. Is light a wave or a particle? It is both. Is the terrorist network positive or negative, centrifugal or centripetal? It is both, depending on where the audience sits.

We all want answers now, but to find them, we must understand the nature of the contest. We must follow the plot of the story, and we must be prepared for a satisfying ambiguity.

Herodotus tells us that Croesus, king of Lydia, saw that Persia was becoming a power in the world, one that would ultimately threaten him. To counter the great power, he considered a pre-emptive strike. But as a good citizen of his world and a strong contributor to the Oracle at Delphi, which had such a good reputation for giving sound advice, he sent his envoys there to ask the question. Should he make war on the Persians? The answer, as we all know, was that if he made war on the Persians he would destroy a great empire.

Croesus thought he understood the answer. He was too quickly satisfied with the ambiguity, and never considered that the great empire might be his own. Others, with hindsight, saw the ambiguity of the answer and were also satisfied. The Oracle did not lie.

Later, the Athenians asked what to do about the Persian invasion. The Oracle said, essentially, run like hell. The envoys didn't feel comfortable going back to town with this answer, not with Themistocles there making so much trouble. So later, perhaps the next day after spending the night at the hotel bar talking it over, they asked again. This time the answer was, "Trust in the wooden walls."

What were these wooden walls? To the conservatives, they represented the palisade that surrounded the Acropolis (wrong answer). To Themistocles, the wooden walls represented the Athenian naval fleet (bingo!) The answer was ambiguous, and satisfied in the end. Reputation intact, the Oracle continued well into the Christian era.

There is another important element to this story, one not related to facts or technologies, but to belief. That is the element of spectacle. I am Oz, the great and terrible!" Smoke and mirrors, drums and thunder. "My name is Ozymandius, King of Kings/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

The World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the White House, all are pure and necessary symbols, the makings of theater in a global theater state.

Theater states emerge in jungles. Jungles are fragile and diverse ecosystems. Humans who settle there must fill a number of small ecological niches, must seek sustenance in a number of ways. Such locations rarely develop a centralized state where the central authority controls economic life, as in Egypt or other so-called hydraulic cultures, where massive and coordinated flood-control and irrigation projects typify the activities of the ruling elite.

The Wizard of Oz knew about the importance of theater, just as the priestly class at the Oracle did. And the perpetrators of the attack understand the significance of their targets and the effect of their actions on the world stage.

Today's global economic ecology is as fragile and diverse as any rain forest, and theater is an important element in the structure and coherence of the world, perhaps the most important element. No national government controls the world's economic life. The world system is simply too complex and variable with NGOs nations international cartels multinational corporations

and special interest groups all competing for control. We have seen protests at the WTO meetings, and we have seen terrorism on a new scale. This the story of the world is going through a new plot twist.

Religion has been the ideology of many successful states, and the religions with a book have been the most successful. The Bible and the Koran are the texts that people can quote to justify their actions.

What happens to religion in a secular state, though? Despite the talk of God after the tragedy at the World Trade Center, America, and indeed most of the world, does not believe God is behind most things (if any). Without the supernatural, where do the symbols go? What is the stage for theater? Where, indeed, is the satisfying ambiguity?

Some time ago, a casual glance at The Wizard of Oz suggested it might be an apt metaphor for national political action. After all, Vice President Dick Cheney has heart problems. Because he comes from the energy business, and often repeats the word "Oil," he does seem to resemble the Tin Woodman, who wants a heart. So the Scarecrow (a president not noted for a robust intellectual life) wants a brain, and the Cowardly Lion would like to come out of the State Department and roar.

But if we as citizens of the developed world identify with the protagonist, Dorothy, then these three would be the companions we have picked up along the way. We are on a quest, and though each companion is flawed in some way, we must prevail together with pluck and will. In a secular state, we fall back on our mythologies. Drama repeats itself.

We saw the events of September 11 over and over from every possible angle. There was no ambiguity about the actions, though the ideology may have been obscure.

The World Trade Center was a symbol. Note that it was not the New York Trade Center, or the American Trade Center. Scores of nations lost citizens in its destruction. These buildings were symbols of globalization. The object of their destruction was not loss of life (though from the point of view of the planners that would be a nice additional benefit), but the loss of the symbol. Striking those two buildings and the Pentagon (and of course they wanted the White House as well) was stunning global theater. No Hollywood producer could have dreamed of such an audience. An enormous number of the world's eyeballs have watched. The ratings must have been truly impressive.

A corollary to such global presence is the almost instantaneous branding that came with it. For some days it was "Attack on America." Then it became "America's New War." The phrases took over the public imagination within hours and stuck with it. All the channels picked it up.

These images have bound us together, united a fragile polity in a diverse economic ecology. This drama has created myriad back stories of candlelight vigils and prayer meetings, of political posturing, declarations of solidarity, of grieving families, and courage. For the first time in many years, these stories felt real.

A global culture was under construction before the attacks; its book is based on spectacle, on the parade of celebrity-- celebrity interviews, celebrity scandals, celebrity talk. As an example, two major networks scheduled for this fall series based on psychics interviewing dead celebrities. There will be no need for this now. The adversary has taken the center of the stage, and in so doing bound up his own community. He has become sacralized. The comparison with The Wizard of Oz is not trivial. This is the mythic struggle.

We have given the adversary a face because drama is about people, but this, too, is an ambiguity. It is not the name or the face that is important, it is the ideology that unites the community. The face, the one we see on television, is a symbol also, representing something far deeper in the world's collective psyche. There is a reason she is called The Wicked Witch of the West, and not Miss Gulch. There were warning signs; in narrative, this is called foreshadowing. Just as Dorothy and the others are about to approach the Wizard, the Witch writes in the sky over the Emerald City the words: Surrender Dorothy. The phrase is ambiguous. Is she addressing a command to Dorothy herself (in which case there should have been a comma), or was she addressing the citizens of the city? Ambiguity: it is both.

We do know that we have had warnings, prior terrorist attacks, threats, intelligence. Terrorism is on every list of 21st century risks. The adversary has always been with us.

And we must ask ourselves the important question, can we prevail?

The Wicked Witch, hiding out in her dark mountain fortress, closely watches in her crystal ball as Dorothy and the others make their way through the dark wood. When she decides the time is right, she sends her flying monkeys to attack and capture Dorothy and her friends, crying, "Fly! Fly! Fly!"

In the story; Dorothy and the others do prevail. Her little dog Toto-pulls aside the curtain while the Great Oz thunders, and the Wizard, through his media proxy, says, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

After all the trial, the search, the attacks, and retaliations, we may yet melt the witch With a simple bucket of water and all return home to black and white Kansas. But, as with Dorothy, it will take luck. She was putting out the fire of the Witch's weapon, her broom, with which she threatened the Scarecrow. How could she know the Witch was susceptible to water?

So, it probably isn't so simple. That was a movie, a myth, and this is reality, this war of symbols.

In a theater state, the leader is the mediator between the physical and the supernatural world. As long as he can keep the attention of his followers, can offer a satisfying show, he maintains the center of the polity's cohesion. An attack on the symbols of power, the physical towers, the pentagonal building, created such a show, and the leader holds his broadly dispersed community together because of it.

The problem, of course, is point of view. If we look through the adversary's eyes, the event was a successful assault, plucky David bringing down slow-witted and slow-moving Goliath. If we look through our own eyes, the eyes of the developed world, we have seen the work of the Wicked Witch of the West, who wants the ruby slippers and the power they represent (oil, perhaps). The terrorist, sacralized by this theatrical gesture, becomes celebrity. He's been on television. He's been interviewed. He plays with the world's technological and media infrastructure. He informs his community. He sends forth his minions, crying, "Fly! Fly!"

But communities endlessly iterate. They define themselves; we notice them, see them from the outside, define them, and then they redefine themselves. Audience becomes actor becomes author. It is a fitness landscape of endless adaptation, completely interactive and always evolving.

The world is a fragile, complex ecology with many niches for us to fill. Complexity has many advantages, but as Stephen Jay Gould points out, it comes at a price. Complexity means sacrificing flexibility. The landscape always changes, sometimes in very dramatic ways, and then

complexity is a disadvantage.

So we try to simplify, at least in our minds. The Wizard offers us a contemporary mythic pattern, a 'book' that is a film. We are all Dorothy in a colorful and dangerous land of the imagination. We, like our leaders, are looking for heart, brains, courage, and a way home. We may, in fact we must, survive the mythic quest, melt the witch. "We did what you asked," Dorothy says. "We melted her." "You liquidated her," the wizard says in surprise.

If we do not survive, do not rewrite the script, understand the nature of the drama in which we are both actor and audience, we may pass from the scene, fall into chaos or Armageddon. Or, worse, we will become the antagonist of our own drama, the Wicked Witch of the West.

A quick stop at the Wizard's palace is not enough. Picking up a diploma, a medal, a testimonial is not enough; after all, these are things we already have. Collecting intelligence, reading reports, making policies are not enough. In the end we must find out who the man behind the curtain really is. The Oracle can only give us answers that reflect what we know, answers that are ambiguous, oscillating between two poles of meaning.

We may find that the man behind the curtain is us. Collectively we create the world, the real and the imaginal, the stuff and the symbol. We are all collaborators, working together despite our differences. The world-- Wizard and Witch, Kansas and Oz - is our collective creation.

Whatever question we ask, the answer will remain ambiguous. If we attack, we will destroy a great empire.

Is this an ambiguity that satisfies?

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