

ARENDR IN JERUSALEM: DOCUMENTARY,
THEATRICALITY, AND THE ECHO OF
IRONY \

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That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.

—Hannah Arendt, “Postscript” to
Eichmann in Jerusalem

My initial thoughts about Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy and its relevance to documentary film, particularly liberal documentary, emphasized the trope of publicness in Arendt’s writing, as this concept is defined—especially in *The Human Condition*—in distinction from the liberal philosophical tradition, where publicness is primarily a concern of the individual.¹ The Arendtian conception of publicness, by contrast, appears—and this quasi-phenomenological manifestation is decisive—when and where a social collectivity does work that brings to light intersubjective connections that bind individuals to each other, even just temporarily, through a sensible medium of “public experience.” The term *public experience* appears more than once in my initial explanation.² I observed that it was surprising that the Arendtian concept of publicness had rarely appeared in the theory of documentary to that point, even though the version of it presented in *The Human Condition* seemed almost a direct rebuke of the paradigm of documentary publicity promulgated by such standard and long-lived works of documentary criticism as Richard Dyer MacCann’s *The People’s Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (1973). In MacCann’s research, which was first conducted during the early decades of the Cold War, the freedom of the democratic subject to act is paramount: the citizen addressed by a work of documentary publicity—for instance, government propaganda—might not be convinced of the propriety of a particular, authoritative point of view, which might *fail* to connect with its intended public; and this subject in fact had the right, as MacCann put it, “to pay no attention” at all to the message being sent through a public

channel of communication.³ Arendt essentially reverses this formulation, so that there is no *common world*, and no public, without attention: nothing is public about the members of a public until they recognize a common good, and recognize that they recognize it.

But ten years ago I was not reading Arendt fully enough, and did not see that with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt reverses the idea again. Insofar as the occasion for Arendt's report is the show trial mounted by Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion, the spectacular display of state power, as Arendt argues that the Eichmann trial was, cannot help but preempt the formation of a public sphere, of justice, or of any other governing idea. "A trial resembles a play," Arendt writes, "in that both begin and end with the doer, not with the victim. A show trial," on the other hand, "needs even more urgently than an ordinary trial a limited and well-defined outline of what was done and how it was done. In the center of the trial can only be the one who *did*": the actor, in both of the usual meanings of the word. If anyone in the show trial, an allegorical form of the ordinary juridical process, is to suffer, Arendt argues, it is this true life character, because juridical suffering is intended for those who most deserve it, not those whose acts of witnessing corroborate the decision and the punishment. There is no room in Arendtian justice for the suffering of bystanders and "others."⁴

At the start of her report, Arendt laments the spectacular character of the Eichmann trial, which demanded that it have an audience (in addition to the gallery, the trial was televised) and that it give this audience what it already owned in the way of public goods: the narrative of the Jew—or, rather, of Israel—as victim. "As witness followed witness and horror was piled upon horror," this audience "sat there and listened in public to stories they would hardly have been able to endure in private, when they would have had to face the storyteller."⁵ The amassing of the evidence of eyewitness accounts, stories from the perspective of a private person that could be told to an audience, is, to Arendt, beside the point of justice. What matters is the offense against that which humans in a society share: "for just as a murderer

is prosecuted because he has violated the law of the community, and not because he has deprived the Smith family of its husband, father, and breadwinner, so these modern, state-employed mass murderers must be prosecuted because they violated the order of mankind, and not because they killed millions of people".⁶ Arendt's postscript to her report again comes back to the criticism of who sits in judgment if they were not present. "Although," Arendt wrote, "it seems obvious that if (presence were required for judgment), neither the administration of justice nor the writing of history would ever be possible."⁷ Thus, Arendt rejects the idea that justice has a mimetic structure, along with the New Testament principle that we ought to do to others what they have done to us. Furthermore, she disputes the notion that personal experience is a requirement of critical thought.

This way of thinking about the public of justice is not necessarily inconsistent with Arendt's earlier thinking about publicness. As Jennifer L. Culbert notes, in a commentary on *Eichmann* and its relation to some of Arendt's other writings, Arendt uses the metaphor of theater to challenge a metaphysical ideal of judgment, which, Culbert takes Arendt as saying, needs the world and its "appearances" to exist. "Try as philosophers and scientists might to uncover the higher truth underneath appearances . . . and the superiority of Being over appearing," appearances and surfaces are precisely where we should look to find the causes and meanings of things, the same way that spectators at a play are in a position to judge the actions of actors precisely because these actions are performed for the benefit and in the presence of observers.⁸

Taken to an extreme, however, "no one who wasn't there can judge" would make much of contemporary documentary impossible. Claude Lanzmann, the director of the epic documentary *Shoah* (1985), was one of the most vocal proponents of this principle of first-person presence, excoriating filmmakers whose films contained material not shot with survivors, bystanders, or perpetrators living in the present or perceived by Lanzmann to be in some manner inauthentic and thus tantamount to

works of fiction. The post-*Shoah* concept of documentary, it might be said, relies heavily for both its historical function and its ethical effects on the truth-value of what is sometimes referred to as *embodied* observation.

In historical terms, this kind of *embodiment* is said to occur when camera operators and sound recordists are *freed* (the language often takes an ideological turn at such moments) from a stationary position or attachment to a superhuman mechanical means of movement, and when, in grammatical and psychological terms, the documentary problem of *subjectivity* enters the audio-visual field, in the forms of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema. Around 1960 or 1961—not coincidentally, the moment at which the Eichmann trial is taking place and being observed by Arendt—these forms come to dominate the realm of scholarly and critical thinking about documentary, even if they do not, from this point forward, necessarily become the mainstream of documentary practice. After this point, among documentary critics and producers alike, an ideological distinction establishes itself, between *vérité* and direct forms of documentary and all documentary styles not *liberated* by *embodied* acts of eye- (and ear-) witness. These latter forms seem suddenly in danger of relying too heavily on predetermination and orchestration, and thus into theatrical fiction and reenactment. Such a definition of documentary publicness seemed useful at the time, around ten or fifteen years ago, for challenging one of the commonplaces of contemporary documentary and its immanent theory: the notion that the most complex problems of social documentary were the ones that originate in moral or ethical dilemmas of *embodiment* and its sometime analog, witnessing; an idea of documentary that found its way into many versions of documentary not historically or formally in close contact with filmmaking of the *moment* of 1960.

“No one who wasn’t there can judge” is a formulation central to the films of Claude Lanzmann, which are among the defining works of documentary of the past several decades. One sees the influence of Lanzmann’s work in many places in contemporary documentary. Take, for example, another of the most

widely noticed and discussed films of the past several years, *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (2015), Andrew Jarecki’s arduous attempt to record the eccentric New York billionaire Robert Durst admitting to the murders of at least three people, including that of his first wife, deaths for which there are no witnesses except the dead and their killer. Made in the same speculative juridical tense and mode of Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), another film that gathers evidence of a crime committed by a character who goes through the film uncharged, *The Jinx* devolves entirely onto the last moments of its 270-minute length, where the filmmaker finally seems to extract a confession from its main character, although he does so at the tantalizing fringes of documentary ethics, since Jarecki doesn’t tell Durst he’s being recorded or seen by others when he utters the admission of his guilt. The continued efflorescence of small-screen documentary in the hands of production-distribution entities like HBO and Netflix has only enhanced the sense that one especially poignant application of documentary is less to gauge the depths of a *world* held in common than to measure “our privately owned place in” that world⁹, and *The Jinx* is not the only widely discussed recent film to structure justice like the home version of a game show. Another Netflix program from 2015, *Making a Murderer*, follows the same template of unsolved true crime narrative.

For a sense of the difference between these two documentary models for a public sphere, Arendt’s earlier and later formulations, it’s helpful to compare the Eichmann that the reader encounters in Arendt’s account to the picture of Eichmann one finds in Lanzmann’s documentary cinema, and to compare as well the documentary methods each author uses to produce these studies. In *The Last of the Unjust* (2013), made from material originally intended for the film that became *Shoah* (ten years after Lanzmann recorded the interviews that compose most of the former), Eichmann appears as a spectral but monstrous presence haunting the interviews with Rabbi Benjamin Murmelstein, the head of the *Judenrat*, or Jewish council, of Thereisienstadt, the Nazis’

gruesome charade of a *model* concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Murelstein is a central character in Eichmann's stories about his efforts to *help* Jews *emigrate* from German territory, and in *Kristallnacht*, which he orchestrated and participated in. Murelstein disputes Arendt's description of Eichmann as a *banal*, bumbling bureaucrat. In the interviews with Murelstein, conducted in 1975 (and, according to various sources, among the first interviews Lanzmann recorded for the film that would become *Shoah*), Eichmann is a figure of terror, wearing an SS uniform, performing interrogations, and brandishing a revolver—hardly the pathetic, farcical clown of the show trial mounted by Ben-Gurion. In Arendt's hands, however, Eichmann is laughable.¹⁰ Lanzmann's method of *cinéma vérité* interview places emphasis and value in the indelible impression Eichmann makes on his witness's memory, holding a traumatic power that allows Lanzmann to figure him almost entirely without cinematic image (he appears once, in a briefly-seen photograph at a desk, in his uniform), as an effect of memory and testimony. Arendt, by contrast, creates the mocking image of a character so ineffectual in his memory, conscience, and speech as to almost fail to register in the courtroom.

This failure is also what I take to be the desired effect of Eyal Sivan's film *The Specialist* (1999), a video reconstruction of the Israeli television audience's view of the trial. Made from hundreds of hours of videotape of the trial rediscovered by Sivan and Rony Brauman in a variety of archives, including the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive at Hebrew University, *The Specialist* is, as a documentary, best described by the term invented by Trinh T. Minh-ha for her post-ethnographic filmmaking, a *reassemlage*. (In one interview, Sivan refers to the film as a "restaging."¹¹) Following the same self-imposed strictures that Arendt does, *The Specialist* limits itself to merely *reporting* on the trial by reproducing sections of the videotape recording, in an order and with a sensibility more or less corresponding to Arendt's account. Indeed, for the uninitiated, *The Specialist* would be difficult to follow or make much sense of without a reader's

memory of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to serve as a guide text. In keeping with this asceticism of structure, the low-contrast, low-resolution video gives the impression of having faded with time (even though, of course, videotape doesn't fade)¹², especially since Sivan favors a shot of Eichmann through the glass wall of his booth, in which very faint reflections of the courtroom are visible. And the Eichmann seen in this manner likewise reflects, literally and figuratively, the impression created by Arendt of a man whose professional and ideological commitments so inhibit his ability to feel or to think that he almost entirely fails at being a human person capable of unique self-expression or communication. Arendt quotes Eichmann as saying that "officialese is my only language," to which she responds that "officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché." Thus, Eichmann is, prior even to his "restaging" in Sivan's film, capable only of *reenacting* the role of human being. "The longer one listened to him," Arendt writes, "the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else."¹³

In certain respects, we might say, it is difficult to separate the formal and aesthetic qualities of "Arendt's Eichmann," like the ones we find in Sivan's film, from the very idea of performance. The works emphasize the sense of an event staged by the state according to a formalized script, in a space of more or less literally empty legal rituals designed to be observed by witnesses, and then restaged by artists who stick quite close to the script, just as a play is performed from a preexisting text.

Another aspect of Arendt's documentary method that goes largely unremarked is her concerted, Kafkaesque effort throughout the report to reduce Eichmann, the disgruntled paper pusher, to ridiculous spectacle, a theatrical figure of fun. Arendt constantly undermines Eichmann—and thus, the trial that *stages* his performance—as a historical and juridical subject, with a style and tone that, while adhering to her assertion that she is merely giving an accurate account of events in the Jerusalem

courtroom, is suffused with irony. Arendt's prose is often quite funny, and borders on satire. It frequently emphasizes the theatricality—what Richard Schechner calls the aspect of performance that can be called “restored behavior”¹⁴—of Eichmann's ways of expressing himself, or of the linguistic environment of the Third Reich itself.

Anticipating this ironic iterability in Eichmann's speech and in the historical context of his crimes, the report opens with an image of the three judges and the gravity they bring to the space and the proceedings: “At no time is there anything theatrical in the conduct of the judges. Their walk is unstudied, their sober and intense attention, visibly stiffening under the impact of grief as they listen to the tales of suffering is natural.”¹⁵ The judges' lack of self-consciousness, and the complete absence of their subjectivity from the public sphere of their courtroom, contrasts sharply not only with the Eichmann recounted by Rabbi Murmelstein in *The Last of the Unjust* (a cold-blooded madman with a revolver) but also with the Eichmann observed by Arendt.

The courtroom where the Israeli court assembles to *do justice* to Eichmann-in-his-own-words is a space ringing with the echo that always accompanies irony: speaking for Eichmann in free indirect discourse, Arendt says he “‘personally’ never had anything whatever against Jews” and “on the contrary, had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew hater, even if many of his closest friends were.” This puts Eichmann, Arendt says wryly, in a position opposite that of the old line that Jews imagine coming from the mouths of racists, “some of my best friends are anti-Semites.” In this respect, the courtroom mirrors the space of the Reich as a place of such thoroughgoing duplicity that “the Party program was never taken seriously by Nazi officials,” who “prided themselves on belonging to a movement, as distinguished from a party and . . . could not be bound by a program”¹⁶; where “business” was indistinguishable from “official policy,” in that “it was no longer mere corruption”¹⁷ and Eichmann's men negotiated with Jews hoping to emigrate “*as though* they were corrupt,” and “corruption, first simulated

as a trick soon turned out to be real enough”¹⁸; and where some former Nazis claimed to been in “inward opposition” to Hitler, in a state they referred to as being an “inner emigrant,” such that “the only way possible way to live in the Third Reich and not act as a Nazi was not to appear at all . . . in public life.”¹⁹ A duplicity or doubling of things and statements is, according to Mladen Dolar, a necessary condition for comedy.²⁰ And comedy, observes Arendt, “now and then breaks into the horror itself, and results in stories, presumably true enough, whose macabre humor easily surpasses that of any Surrealist invention.”²¹ “The horrible,” Arendt says, apropos of Eichmann's struggle with Nazi “officialese,” “can be not only ludicrous but outright funny.”²²

Mordant laughter is surprisingly plentiful in Arendt's report and comes in a variety of forms: a joke that doubles as both a Polish *and* a Jewish joke, for example, when Arendt imagines the chairman of the Warsaw *Judenrat* repeating a “rabbinical saying: ‘Let them kill you, but don't cross the line’”²³; the absurd, as when Arendt ends the chapter, “The Final Solution: Killing” by imagining a good German who worries that “all that good, expensive gas has been wasted on the Jews!” when faced with the possibility that the Nazis might have to euthanize her and her countrymen²⁴; sarcasm, like when Arendt describes Himmler as “the member of the Nazi hierarchy most gifted at solving problems of conscience”; and endless examples of irony, registered as bluntly as the insertion of “mere” into the phrase “a mere eight thousand people,” in reference to an episode of mass killing in Serbia.²⁵ One might say that dark joking of this sort—literal gallows humor—was well-suited to the historical moment, a period in which former Nazis could still be found, as Arendt notes, in authoritative positions in the West German bureaucracy and in public office.²⁶

And in this latter respect, the entire account can be read as a satire of bureaucracy as such, and a lacerating parody of bureaucratic reason, embodied by Eichmann, a consummate bureaucrat. In “What is Bureaucracy?,” Claude Lefort observes that the bureaucrat is not defined simply by his penchant for orders and

their execution. The bureaucrat also belongs to a discrete social system, separate from two different realms of social action, the division of labor and civil society, which Lefort calls the "theatre of real activities." The bureaucrat, by contrast, inhabits a realm of "formalism," a world where effort is compensated not only with remuneration, but with rank and reward, where what matters is the "prestige which earns the others' respect," and "where subordination is the other side of issuing commands and opportunities for promotion are available."²⁷ After his entry into the National Socialist Party and the SS in 1932, Eichmann thrived in the military hierarchy, escaping a "humdrum life without significance and consequence."²⁸ In the SS, Eichmann found his place in the military as what the Nazis called a "recipient of orders," with a "burden of responsibility and of importance."²⁹ Indeed, he was moved to consider his career as different from those other functionaries who were like "'an ox being led to a stall,'"' "nothing but office drudges,' for whom everything was decided 'by paragraphs, by orders, who were interested in nothing else,' who were, in short . . . 'small cogs,'"' whereas Eichmann could think of himself as an idealist³⁰ and a Kantian.³¹

Eichmann explained to the Jerusalem court that he thought of himself as an *idealist*, a trait he was happy to share with the Zionists who were the only Jews he came in contact with that he respected. (Arendt indicates that her use of the term *idealist* is largely satirical when, on the next page, she writes: "when he said in the police examination that he would have sent his own father to his death if that had been required, he did not mean to stress merely the extent to which he was under orders, and ready to obey them; he also meant to show what an 'idealist' he had always been."³² And a few pages later she explains why she always frames *idealism* with ironic quotation marks when she writes that the social context for this philosophy was the same "German society of eighty million people" who had been "shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann's mentality."³³)

Eichmann's enthusiasm for this risible self-description led the court, Arendt claims, to see him otherwise than as a *monster*. On the contrary, she says, "it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown," a caricature which did not prevent Arendt from seeing him, within this dialectic of satire, as "the perfect bureaucrat."³⁴ Eichmann thus had no trouble describing his work with an "'objective' attitude," and speaking about concentration camps, according to Arendt, in terms of "'administration' and about extermination camps in terms of 'economy.'"³⁵ In this respect, Arendt has the same bitter sense of humor about bureaucracy that Marx does.

According to Claude Lefort, one of the "empirical characteristics" of bureaucracy is its systematic incompetence. In this he follows Marx, who maintains that in a bureaucratic system, "the highest point entrusts the understanding of details to the lower echelons, whereas these, on the other hand, credit the highest point with an understanding of the universal, and thus they deceive one another." This description of a state of mutually assured deception captures Eichmann's situation perfectly, for even though Eichmann is, according to Arendt, the acknowledged "expert" within the S.S. on "Jewish affairs,"³⁶ the office he runs, ostensibly to facilitate the movement of Jews across and out of the Reich, in fact "functions" by creating difficulties and putting obstacles in the way of the Jews seeking to emigrate, and to negotiate with money and paperwork their passage out, making actual movement impossible: "[T]he chief difficulty lay in the number of papers every immigrant had to assemble before he could leave the country. Each of the papers was valid only for a limited time, so that the validity of the first had usually expired long before the last could be obtained." When Eichmann *improves* this process by streamlining it, he only succeeds in creating a more efficient death machine, a Rube Goldberg process for eliminating bureaucracy's very subjects,

like an automatic factory, like a flour mill connected with some bakery. At one end you put a Jew who still has some property,

a factory, or a shop, or a bank account . . . and he comes out without any rights, without any money, with only a passport on which it says: "You must leave the country within a fortnight. Otherwise you will go to a concentration camp."³⁷

In short, the Nazi bureaucratic apparatus was truly, where its Jewish subjects were concerned, *going through the motions*, and it worked just as well to dehumanize its victims by *not working* as by operating smoothly. The description of the bureaucracy as a domain of reason, especially a *Kantian* one, with *ideals*, is inherently parodic.

I think that Arendt means the concept of *objectivity*—as in the "objective" attitude" she says that Eichmann takes toward the descriptions of his work to the police investigators and to the court—to be read with the same ironic inflection she uses in parodying idealism. I base this reading on the argument she makes in a passage late in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she addresses the *objectivity* of film, calling into question the putative objectivity of a very specific kind of documentary film: actuality footage from the liberation of the concentration camps. Arendt explains that it is difficult to keep descriptions of the camps within the frame of realism when history testifies to the fantasmatic appearance of a world in which the horrors of the camps exist side by side with everyday life of ordinary bourgeois societies. "The difficult thing to understand," Arendt writes,

is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. The result is a place where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors, nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream.

The films which the Allies circulated in Germany and elsewhere after the war showed clearly that this atmosphere of insanity and unreality is not dispelled by pure reportage. To the unprejudiced observer these pictures are just about as convincing as snapshots of mysterious substances taken at spiritualist seances.³⁸

And in a footnote to this passage, Arendt adds: "it is of some importance to realize that all pictures of concentration camps"—by which Arendt means photographic or cinematographic images—"are misleading insofar as they show the camps in their last stages, at the moment the Allied troops marched in . . . what gives the films their special horror—namely the sight of the human skeleton—was not at all typical for the German concentration camps; extermination was handled systematically by gas, not by starvation."³⁹ The exception to this rule of belated realism, where the camps and their survivors were concerned, was, of course, the Theresienstadt *model* camp, where a fake documentary film was also produced, to show outsiders how good life was for the Jews imprisoned in the ghetto.

Arendt's mention of *films* was likely a reference to the films made from footage of the camps shot during their liberation, and shown to the defendants and the courtroom during the Nuremberg trials, and to German audiences made up of prisoners of war and citizens in the recently reopened German theaters by order of the Allied Occupation authorities. These included *Nazi Concentration Camps* (1945), directed by George Stevens, the Billy Wilder-directed *Death Mills* (1946), a special edition of the Allied newsreel *Welt in Film* (1945) devoted to concentration camp footage, and a compilation film made with atrocity footage, *KZ* (1945), a title taken from the German for concentration camp. As a "propaganda of truth," these images were likely to produce only a "skeptical shrug."⁴⁰ Their representation of the "insanity and unreality" of the camps is ineffectual precisely because they are representations, and, as such, have the status of always already meaningful signs. "The conviction that

everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead," she writes in the preface, "to interpreting history by commonplaces . . . deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities [so] that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt."⁴¹ And toward the end of the book she writes, "[t]here is a great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalizations. In each one of us, there lurks such a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense."⁴² For the documentary scenes to provoke radical distress, they would have to show the camps in their bureaucratic and pedagogical banality, operating as workaday training grounds for making ordinary men capable of mass murder.⁴³ Arendt's approach is, as we have seen, to refute the possibility of an objective picture of Eichmann or his work with irony and joking. Rather, despite frequent avowals that her job is only to present a *report* on the trial, the image of Eichmann that she crafts is flagrantly non-indifferent.

Like the audience at a play, the responsibility of those who sit in judgment is to take sides. "Like theater," Jennifer L. Culbert argues, "justice for Arendt is properly concerned with action. Thus, at the center of a trial is, and can only be, the one who acts." Apropos of Arendt's repeated comparison of the Jerusalem courtroom with a theater, "what the actor does is a matter for the spectators of the play, not the actor, to decide," as Culbert puts it. "From a vantage point away from the action, spectators can critically evaluate what they see," a point which can be taken a number of ways. What the spectators evaluate is both the performance of the actor and the actions of the character within the script; and it is not up to the actors to decide what to make of the characters' actions, only to carry them out, a point that is particularly true of a "show trial," where the meanings of the action are predetermined, or "stage managed."⁴⁴ Despite the fact that she begins the report with some of the only praise she dispenses in the book—here, for the "three obviously good and honest men" who will sit in judgment of Eichmann and

who refuse to "playact" in the self-aggrandizing ways that the major players in the "show trial" do—her position on theatricality and the function of judgment is somewhat different by the time she comes to write the book's epilogue and postscript, its final twenty pages.⁴⁵ The faculty of judgment is necessary, she writes in the postscript, precisely because it requires one to leave behind the pretense of objectivity.⁴⁶ A willingness to be judgmental is necessary if one is to recognize the originality of an action, and thus the possibility that history can be made, against the backdrop of the times in which one acts.⁴⁷ Translated into the terms of documentary thought, it is not objectivity that Arendt champions in the writing of judgment and of history, but *subjectivity*. Both the observer—the documentarian—and the viewer are implicated.

The difference between the time before Arendt's report and the kind of documentary thought that followed is summed up in the phrase used for the title of filmmaker James Blue's 1965 interview with direct cinema pioneer Richard Leacock, "One Man's Truth."⁴⁸ In their interview, Blue and Leacock evince the typical confusion of filmmakers of the period between *objectivity* and *subjectivity* in documentary, exacerbated by the analogy of the filmmaker as an observer of scientific phenomena. "You say that you object to being *told something* as an audience, but are you not telling us what you want by selecting what you want us to see?" Blue asks. Leacock responds: "It's no less objective to be selective," and that a physicist "describes those aspects that he *judges* to be significant and interesting. He is objective in the sense that he did not cook it up. He found something out. He didn't create it."⁴⁹ Although they could easily co-exist for Arendt, for Leacock—the cinematographer behind the camera for a number of the best-known works of direct cinema in the 1960s, including *Primary* (1960), *Happy Mother's Day* (1963), and *Monterey Pop* (1966)—the ability of the filmmaker to select and judge, the scientific attitude, was inimical to the idea of the subject as performer. The hidden camera was the *ne plus ultra* of so-called observational cinematography, since it

would allow subjects to *be themselves* without any self-conscious playing to an audience or *cooked-up* behavior before the camera. (The ideal hidden camera subjects were, of course, Nazis and other “irresponsible people . . . a Dr. Goebbels or an incipient Hitler or a drug peddler.”)⁵⁰ In the moment just before this sea-change thought, and the onset of a rampant confusion over what counts as performance, or theatricality, in documentary, documentary looks much more like Franju’s pigeon.

In Georges Franju’s 1957 short architectural study, *Notre-Dame, Cathédrale de Paris*, a formal, austere-narrated film, made for the same producers (Anatole Dauman for Argos Films) as, and within a year of, *Night and Fog*, the director briefly turns his attention away from the spectacular arches and towers of the great cathedral to observe the plight of a pigeon, lying wounded on a roof. The narrator explains that the pigeons that roost on the cathedral occasionally collide with the building, stunning and injuring themselves, so that they either die from starvation or from the cold. What is this rather pointless interlude doing in the middle of a study of the soaring aesthetic achievement like Notre-Dame?

Unlike the violence of the scenes of killing and dismemberment in *Blood of the Beasts*, this scene seems to have no logical, documentary purpose, since it does nothing to advance our knowledge or enjoyment of religious architecture—a point emphasized by the matter-of-fact and yet excessive quality of the narration, which underscores what we can already plainly observe in the image of the sad little bird struggling to remain alive. Like *Night and Fog*, although with considerably less complexity, the scene reminds the viewer of the cruelty of the act of looking, tests the viewer’s humanity, and challenges them to come up with a reason – and one can find none—the scene exists at all.

It could be observed that with this use of documentary narration to make a spurious, cruel point, Franju’s film functions at this moment not as a documentary but as a *parody* of the kind of *intelligence work* that characterized the documentary mode in many of its

instantiations, prior to this time. The exercises of intelligence and reason that had justified much of the public use of documentary was now, after a period in which an entire society could be “shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had” gained such a purchase on the thought of idiots (in the properly etymological sense) like Eichmann, caught up in the appeal of what we might call the *bureaucratic reason* of the Third Reich that is the subject of Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt frequently raises the question of whether Eichmann was an “average person,” or a grotesquely cruel and unfeeling exception to be measured and tested against the average person.⁵¹ These are questions—what is an ordinary person?; what kind of society is populated with ordinary people?—that will come to dominate documentary practice in the *vérité* and direct styles that signify innovation in precisely the years in which Arendt is writing her report, the initial years of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, the beginnings of contemporary documentary’s preoccupation with the question of *character*.

And the question of character, as Henri Bergson observed, is the question of the comic. “In one sense it might be said that all *character* is comic, provided we mean by character the *ready-made element* in our personality, that mechanical element that resembles a piece of clockwork,” Bergson writes in *Laughter: On the Meaning of the Comic*. It is, he continues, “that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which causes others to imitate us.”⁵² Although we might like to think of so-called observational documentary, in its *directness*, as the place to find individuals acting in their singularity, the premise of most works of direct or *vérité* documentary from the 1960s and after is the question of whether what social documentary documents is individuals or types, and whether, by that reasoning, documentary subjects perform spontaneously, without any theatricality. Franju’s pigeon is not a *character* because it can’t act; its injury, pain, and death before the camera are singular. “Comedy,”

remarks Dolar, “thrives on the generic, on types, on stereotypes and clichés, on replication, on repetition, on doubling.” So do bureaucracy and fascism.

And documentary reenactment. I have been puzzling over the topic of reenactment for the last decade without quite noticing its relation to the comic. Reading Arendt’s writing on Eichmann through the lenses of comedy—closely connected, as Dolar points out in his splendid treatise, to the mimetic and the theatrical—underscores this relation. It explains as well some of the great appeal, over that period and longer, of reenactment as a documentary method, one that was once quite common, but fell out of favor with the coming of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema in the 1960s. Examples of screen reenactments that connect the art of doing-over to the history of violent action—striking, military conflict, traumatic injury—through irony and restatement are plentiful, but for now, the work of Polish video artist Artur Zmijewski will suffice. Much of Zmijewski’s work in the vein of video and performance reenactment demonstrates how *Arendt’s Eichmann* can be the point of departure for these various thematic routes—bureaucracy, theatricality, comedy, violence—through a variant of the reenacted documentary that I have been calling the *documentary procedural*.

Of all the grammars of irony that test anyone who must work in an office or institution, the irony of procedure is among the most vexing and familiar. The language of procedure is less an occupational hazard of bureaucratic work than its medium. Procedure regulates the behavior of institutional subjects by its oblique reference to the past, which is always both out of our hands—those who preceded us established this procedure—and, through this oblique citation, the means of our control of the present and future. The dictionary tells us that procedure combines the Latin words for *go* and *forward*; but buried in the historical definition is a confusing alternative: not to *go forward to*, but to “Go or come *from* or *out of*,” to “arise, originate, result” or “be derived (from).”

We encounter this powerful ambiguity about the tense and telos of procedure in our

everyday uses of the concept. The ordinary authority of procedure as a grammar is captured in the injunction *that’s (not) the way we do things here*, where *do things* means, all at once, *do (not do) things*, *will (not) do things*, and, perhaps most importantly, *have (not) previously done things*. These are not exactly temporizing choices between equivalent options about which the speaker speaking of procedure—how things *shall* (not) be done here—maintains ambivalence or neutrality. As is suggested by the dictionary, the current or future (not) doing is excused or legitimized by the prior example or the precedent: procedure often devolves to the notion that we do or don’t do things this way *because* they have or haven’t been done that way before. And by the same illogic, procedure is often the reason to *not* do something, while leaving open the possibility that it *might have been done*. Procedure stages the confrontation of history and discourse: one might feel that procedure is cited precisely to prevent one from doing something that was, nevertheless, quite possible had circumstances been a little different.

Many recent examples of what we might want to call ironic or experimental documentary work develop a sort of euphemism for documentary through the analogy of procedures of the psychological testing and behavioral experimentation that characterize earlier phases of social-scientific documentary. To take just two examples from the past several years, consider Zoe Beloff’s arch citations of psychoanalysis and home movies, in her imagined Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society, and of Taylorism and instructional film in *The Infernal Dream* (2011), a project with strong echoes of George Landow’s recycling of educational media in *What’s Wrong With This Picture? 1* (1972), *Institutional Quality* (1969), and other films, or Rebecca Baron and Doug Goodwin’s film *Detour De Force* (2014), about the pseudoscience of telekinetic photography. Of course, the procedural analogy runs throughout the work of Harun Farocki, most of whose films, from *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) through the *Serious Games* series (2009-10), could be considered reflections of and on institutional and

scientific testing procedure.

It is difficult to know where on this spectrum to place the work of Artur Zmijewski, one of the best contemporary examples of procedural irony in the field of recorded performance. Born, educated, and based in Warsaw, Zmijewski has been assembling a body of performances on video whose rudeness beggars description. These include an oratorio performed by deaf singers in a church; a fractious workshop on political expression pitting Polish civic and affinity groups against each other with paint and scissors; a reenactment of the Stanford Prison Experiment with unemployed Poles;; and a game of naked tag in the ruin of a gas chamber. These intensely physical works frequently involve the staging and restaging of acts of physical extremity or transformation, sometimes in a context of cultural or political ritual, sometimes under the pseudo-scientific conditions of psychological or sociological experiments, testing political concepts like agency, propriety, democracy, and tolerance. Just how much of Zmijewski's work is meant to be a kind of post-socialist Polish joke is an open question.

To capture and represent in *vérité* fashion the transactions governed by procedure that comprise the quotidian operations, the unwritten rules, of institutions—as Frederick Wiseman has been doing for decades—risks overlooking and leaving unanalyzed the structural historicity of those operations, as reflections of an engrained historical understanding of the way things “have always been done here,” and *why*. But to apply a mode of documentary better equipped for historical explanation risks translating a paradoxical and illogical phenomenon into something comprehensible, risks replacing the obfuscatory logic of procedure with the documentary logic of intelligibility and mass communication. Zmijewski's rather pointless film *Repetition*, a full-scale restaging of the Stanford prison experiment shot with unemployed non-actors, effectively evokes this historical false consciousness of procedure since it comes, as the title suggests, to no better an understanding of the causes of totalitarian violence than the original—and does so, moreover,

in contemporary Poland, a state that, during the period in which Zmijewski was making *Repetition*, served as one of the *black site* hosts of the CIA torture program.

At about the same time that he was making *Repetition*, Zmijewski contracted with an Auschwitz survivor to have the tattoo of his prisoner number, which serves as the work's title, 80064, re-inked on his forearm over the fading original. The resulting ten-minute video, which begins with Zmijewski and his ninety-two year-old subject Jozef Tarnawa in a tattoo parlor, revisiting their agreement and arguing over its validity and its meaning, is a series of casually shot short scenes in which Tarnawa is reluctantly convinced to honor his agreement and go through the “renovation” of his tattoo, after which he is visited at home by Zmijewski, who wants to see how the renovation has worked out, and how Tarnawa likes it. Like a number of Zmijewski's undertakings, 80064 is literally and figuratively a work of re-writing, and from the skin of the film on down, both the theme and the technique of recovering memories are inscribed in bold in the work. In its citation of the documentary scenario of tattooing, 80064 nods to historically important scenes in films that are themselves subject to intense historical memories, revered as they are in the documentary tradition: Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) and Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). And beyond the superficiality of its ostensible (and somewhat repulsive) topic, the violent permanent marking of live flesh that these scenes share, Zmijewski's video gestures in the direction of the banal and generic process-film that Flaherty helped popularize with *Moana*, and to the equally ordinary social-scientific interrogations of ordinary people that *Chronicle* alternately parodies and embraces, commanding them, with the aid of an invasive recording apparatus, to consider whether they are truly happy in their own skin. At the other end of the spectrum of reality-based reference material, Zmijewski draws on the long documentary tradition of the stunt-prank joke, raising the same kind of questions as Allen Funt or Johnny Knoxville: what kind of person *wants* to get his concentration camp

number *renewed*? Moreover, what kind of person films it? And what kind of idiots stand around and watch? If *80064* is, as a lot of Zmijewski's work appears, a kind of documentary intelligence test, it's unclear whether the right thing for the viewer to do is to pass or to fail.

At first glance, nothing about the film, as a work of documentary, seems important, novel, or necessary, besides the sheerly audacious demand that an old man, an Auschwitz survivor, undergo a pointless procedure for the sake of viewers who could not be present to observe this indignity in person. That the Nazis imprisoned innocents in death camps is not news; neither is their treatment as a mere agglomeration of objects before disposal, nor the indelible effects of this horror, etched as traumatic memories, on those who survived to testify to the experience. Indeed, the dialogue in which artist and subject engage during the film concerning Auschwitz and its legacies, while Zmijewski works to convince Tarnawa to respect the agreement they made, is sadly familiar, and the haphazard character of the filmmaking further banalizes the scene and the resulting document, as if no one involved could summon the energy to make one more of these films, or to make this one seem singular. And in fact, the truly idiotic part of the conversation is where Tarnawa and Zmijewski behave like art historians or dealers, debating the aesthetics of the *original* tattoo and the value of its reproduction. This passage places in relief the idiolectic quality of the survivor's testimony, which is valued for its singularity: eyewitness testimony is priceless, because no one else could have formulated it in quite the same way, an axiom all the more true when it concerns mass killing and genocide. But this bit of dialogue sits uncomfortably next to the discussion of the *tattoo's* singularity: Tarnawa *likes* his faded number, and has a proud, if not fond, relation to his memory of the tactical process by which he acquired it, getting "a friend" to stencil it before the camp tattooist drove it into his skin. Stripped of almost all of the conventional explanatory, narrative, and affective scaffolding of *real* documentary about survivors and the concentration camps,

conventions referenced in the video only by their conspicuous absence, *80064* cannot help but reduce to a set of semiotic exercises: the viewer is invited, if s/he can stand to watch the entire ten minutes, to consider what the art of tattooing has in common with the process of memory and, more specifically, what a figure inked in living flesh has to do with the identity of the person who inhabits that skin.

Equally significant are the questions that this moving image provokes about what's beyond those frames, questions having to do with what's *not* visible in it. These necessitate a shift in critical emphasis from object to apparatus, making the apparatus sensible even though it remains just outside the frame. These are questions about the procedural aspect of *80064*. Where is the "agreement" that Zmijewski and Tarnawa refer to, and what's in it? *Can* you write a contract for the right to own, purchase, or reproduce history and experience? And, overlaying all such moral and legalistic questions is the implicit and reflexive question: what's achieved by filming this? Zmijewski's work tests the unconscious and determining force of such unuttered questions and the institutions of knowledge to which they silently refer, premises that have for decades sustained what Brian Winston once called the "tradition of the victim" in social documentary. But traditions don't maintain themselves: someone has to operate the rites, rituals, or procedures in which they must be continually re-installed. In the documentary work of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the commitment to merely *record* crossed with the withering irony the author directs toward its "wheedling liberal" subject,⁵³ Arendt moves us beyond intelligence work and towards what she called in the "Postscript" to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* the "lesson" of the savage ironies she had observed, recorded, and reported. If this "lesson" struck Arendt as "'banal' and even funny,"⁵⁴ this is an attitude we might start to adopt as our own for documentary thought in the age of Trump, a period of "peculiar unreality and lack of credibility"⁵⁵ in which concentration camps have come back into fashion.

ENDNOTES

1—See Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

2—Ibid., 18-20.

3—Ibid.

4—Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 9. Emphasis added.

5—Ibid., 8.

6—Ibid., 272.

7—Ibid., 295-296.

8—Jennifer L. Culbert, "Judging the Events of Our Time," in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 146-47.

9—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), quoted in Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, 20.

10—See Richard Brody's review of *The Last of the Unjust*, *The New Yorker*, September 27, 2013, and Emmanuel Burdeau, "The Last of the Unjust: Faces of Claude Lanzmann, in *4 Films After Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, DVD supplement.

11—Eyal Sivan and Gary Crowdus, "Historical Memory and Political Violence: An Interview with Eyal Sivan," *Cineaste* 37, no.4 (Fall 2012): 22-31.

12—Although the original quad (2") Ampex tapes—some of which were re-used by the courtroom camera operators who would have been concerned about its then-tremendous expense and scarcity—and the magnetic particles coating them may have been subject to various kinds of disintegration or change in state from the process of being played or stored, causing the recorded image dropouts and other kinds of distortion and effacing, it is, according to the archivist who originally

received Sivan's copy of the tapes in the archive at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, only in a metaphorical sense that the images could have faded, though the softness of the focus would have been an effect of the relatively primitive cameras then in use. Email from Regina Longo, August 12, 2019.

13—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 48, 49.

14—Richard Schechner, "Excerpt from 'Restoration of Behavior,'" in *The Performance Studies Reader*, Third ed., ed. Henry Bial and Sara Brady (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 69.

15—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 4.

16—Ibid., 43.

17—Ibid., 144.

18—Ibid., 196, 197, emphasis added.

19—Ibid., 127.

20—Mladen Dolar, "The Comic Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), 570-589.

21—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 50.

22—Ibid., 48.

23—Ibid., 119.

24—Ibid., 111.

25—Ibid., 23.

26—Ibid., 17-18.

27—Claude Lefort, "What is Bureaucracy?," in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 92, 107.

28—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 33.

29—Ibid., 27.

30—Ibid., 57.

31—Ibid., 136-137.

32—Ibid., 42.

33—Ibid., 52.

- 34—Ibid., 54.
- 35—Ibid., 69.
- 36—Ibid., 40.
- 37—Ibid., 45-46.
- 38—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 445-446.
- 39—Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 446 n138.
- 40—Ibid., 446.
- 41—Ibid., viii.
- 42—Ibid., 439-440.
- 43—Arendt writes that when the SS took over administration of the camps, they ceased to be “amusement parks for beasts in human form, that is, for men who really belonged in mental institutions and prisons.” Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 454.
- 44—Culbert, “Judging,” 146.
- 45—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 4.
- 46—Ibid., 277-279; 295-296. See Culbert, “Judging,” 146-148.
- 47—Culbert, “Judging,” 147.
- 48—James Blue and Richard Leacock, “One Man’s Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock,” *Film Comment* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 15-22.
- 49—Ibid., 16.
- 50—Ibid.,: 18.
- 51—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 93.
- 52—Quoted in Dolar, “The Comic Mimesis,” 585.
- 53—Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 440.
- 54—Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.
- 55—Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

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