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## **Thoughtlessness and the Optics of Moral Argument: Screening the Spectacle of Eichmann**

In her controversial work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt insisted that great evil is not necessarily a reflection of evil motives or an expression of natural depravity. Such evil, she argued, is better understood as the outcome of a certain *thoughtlessness* or inability to think from another's point of view. "[O]ne cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann," Arendt wrote, He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. It was sheer thoughtlessness—by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period....[S]uch thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together... —that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem." Although Arendt sought to distinguish Eichmann's inability to think from another's point of view from conventional understandings of "empathy," much contemporary commentary persists in reading Eichmann's failure as a failure of empathetic identification. Indeed, even accounts that aim to adopt Arendt's reading of Eichmann, it seems, cannot easily escape producing "thoughtlessness" as an absence of empathy or rendering what she argued was a political failure (a question of solidarity) as primarily a moral one (a question of sentiment). In this paper, and following an elaboration of Arendt's claims, I consider Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman's 1999 documentary *The Specialist*—a densely edited visual text that restages the trial through Arendt's argument and attempts to recover one of the missed opportunities Arendt

identified in her trial report to understand a new kind of criminal and crime . Examining, specifically, the logic of a sequence within the film in which we watch Eichmann watching footage shot by American and Russian troops as they moved across Europe liberating concentration camps, I argue that the documentary inadvertently reproduces precisely the problem it seeks to challenge and consider how (and why) the apathetic indifference of Sivan and Braumann's Eichmann, despite the film's best critical efforts, remains primarily a question of pathology rather than politics, the absence of feeling rather than thought.

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*Evil in its total banality*: this is what Hannah Arendt claimed to have seen in the figure of Adolf Eichmann when she observed him in an Israeli court in 1961.<sup>1</sup> Eichmann was considered a core member of the Nazi leadership and would have undoubtedly been tried at Nuremberg in 1946 along side of Göring, Speer, and Hess among others for war crimes had he not fled Europe following the collapse of Germany's Third Reich. He was living in relative obscurity in Argentina when he was captured by the Israeli Secret Service and clandestinely returned to Jerusalem to stand trial for his central role in the genocide of European Jewry.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, at least, Eichmann was one of only a handful of officials in the Nazi SS whose sole job it was to implement or make operational the regime's various political and physical *solutions* for what it identified as its *Jewish problem*. Among other things, this entailed

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<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, (New York, 1977), 287-88.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed discussion of Eichmann's abduction by one of the men that engineered it, see Zvi Aharoni and William Dietl, *Operation Eichmann: The Truth about the Pursuit, Capture and Trial*, (New York: 1996).

organizing the forced emigration and so-called resettlement of Jewish communities throughout (eastern) Europe and later, as the war progressed, overseeing their transport first to the ghettos and then to the camps where, as it is known, large numbers were systematically killed. While Eichmann never denied his role in helping *solve* Germany's Jewish problem—he claimed to have been an “expert” in Jewish affairs, a pro-Zionist no less, and an idealist<sup>3</sup>—he stressed repeatedly that he harbored no ill-will towards the Jews and acted not from base motives but out of a sense of responsibility and duty and with an eye towards personal advancement. In his view, the annihilation of the Jews was “one of the greatest crimes in the history of humanity,” but a crime in which he did not participate directly.<sup>4</sup> He had served the regime only as a mid-level bureaucrat on the margins of power, someone who sat at his desk and did his work, evacuating and deporting rather than killing. And although his account was not entirely accurate, Eichmann's rendering of his Nazi past was, in Arendt's view, nevertheless somewhere in the general vicinity of truth: “Technically and organizationally, Eichmann's position was not very high; his post turned out to be such an important one only because the Jewish question, for purely ideological reasons, acquired a greater importance with every day and week and month of the war, until in the years of defeat—from 1943 on—it had grown to fantastic proportions.”<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, the prosecution in Jerusalem advanced a somewhat different view of

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<sup>3</sup> The question is clearly in what sense a “pro-Zionist”? What little sense this claim makes emerges only if one accepts that the Gestapo and Zionist organizations shared a “negative identity of aims”: on other words, both organizations wanted Jews to leave Germany and other European territories albeit for very different reasons and agendas.

<sup>4</sup>Jochen von Lang with Claus Sibyll, *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Secret Police*, (New York, 1999), ?

<sup>5</sup>Arendt, *Eichmann*, 70-71.

Eichmann's position in the Nazi hierarchy and role in the genocide of European Jewry. Indeed, Gideon Hausner, Israel's Attorney General at the time and lead prosecutor in the case against Eichmann, maintained that it was Eichmann and Eichmann alone whose business had been the destruction of the Jewish people in its entirety. He had been the architect of Nazi terror against the Jews and, in Hausner's words, "the central pillar of the whole wicked system"—personally selecting the sites of the gas chambers, choosing the kind of poisoned gas that was to be used in these chambers, and specifying the number of people to be killed in them daily.<sup>6</sup> And while Eichmann may have performed his "bloody craft" from the security of his desk in Berlin—in this Hausner echoed Arendt's claim that Eichmann represented a new kind of criminal—in the end, the prosecution settled on constructing a somewhat more predictable, conventional, and politically more useful portrait of the former Nazi official. Sitting in a bullet proof glass enclosure—designed to protect the accused from possible attack while in court—Eichmann emerged from mounds of documents and weeks of oral testimony by survivors as a sadistic, demonic figure even while, it should be said, most of those who testified had no direct dealings with the man and were brought to the stand by the prosecution to humanize the larger historical picture of Nazi atrocity.<sup>7</sup> In the view of the prosecution, he was a consummate liar and "savage

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<sup>6</sup>Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 300, 90-97.

<sup>7</sup> As with Nuremberg, the particular challenge that confronted the prosecution was establishing a *direct* link between the defendant's actions and the suffering of those brought to testify. The Eichmann trial was especially fraught in this respect. The point of the trial, as Hausner's conceived it, was to cover the "whole Jewish disaster" rather than to clarify or further establish Eichmann's guilt—which, for all intent and purpose, was a foregone conclusion. Although much of the lengthy survivor testimony rarely mentioned Eichmann in a legally reliable or authoritative way, it nevertheless served the prosecution's "goal of constructing a narrative of heroic memory" leading Presiding Judge Landau to describe the evidentiary value of such testimony as being "next to nothing."

sociopath whose abominations made the crimes of ‘Genghis Khan, Attila, or Ivan the Terrible..., pale in significance.’<sup>8</sup> Where Arendt saw in Eichmann a disturbingly average man of middling intelligence who, while implicated in a crime of gigantic proportions, was in the end “simply” a petty, deferential, careerist bureaucrat—someone who was not incited by ideological convictions, driven by base motives or, based on the evidence presented, psychologically capable of committing the kind of acts of overt violence attributed to him; where Arendt saw, in other words, not Attila the Hun or Ivan the Terrible, but the embodiment of something she described as *evil in its total banality*, the prosecution produced and pursued a diabolically wicked, morally monstrous Nazi official whose hatred of the Jews was relentless in its pursuits, deadly in its expression, riddled with sadistic impulse, and far from banal.

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Considerable outrage greeted Arendt’s report of the trial when it was first published in *The New Yorker* as a series of articles. And in the four decades since, her claims regarding the meaning of the Final Solution, her arguments regarding the nature of individual responsibility, agency, and culpability under conditions of terror, and her scathing review of Israel’s case against the accused continue to incite and confound commentators. For Arendt, the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem presented and squandered a number of opportunities— and most centrally, the opportunity of arriving at a clear or clearer understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz. In her view, the prosecution under the direction of Prime Minister Ben Gurion opted instead to

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Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment*, (New Haven, 2001), pp. 134, 140-149.

<sup>8</sup>Douglas, *Memory of Judgment*, 179.

mythologize the horror rather than master it— and this, in the interest of an emerging Israeli national identity rather than justice.

It is now a matter of public record that Hausner along with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had sought to use the trial to establish “the correct historical perspective” on what would come to be known, after and in large measure because of the trial, as the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup> Their strategy—of fashioning a “canvas soaked in blood and tears...that would reach the hearts of men”—entailed explicitly interweaving two narratives, one having to do with the suffering and destruction of the Jews, not only in the context of the second world war, but across centuries, beginning with the Pharaoh in Egypt and climaxing in an unimaginable martyrdom: “It is not an individual in the dock at this historic trial,” wrote Ben-Gurion, “and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history.”<sup>10</sup> This narrative of persecution was coupled with another detailing the remarkable passivity of the world at large as a tragedy of gigantic proportions unfolded.<sup>11</sup> And then there was, of course, a lesson to be drawn from the story for which this

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<sup>9</sup>Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, (Boston: 1999), 133; Pnina Lahav, *Judgment in Jerusalem: Chief Justice Simon Agranat and the Zionist Century*, (Berkeley: 1997), 147.

<sup>10</sup>David Ben Gurion, *Israel: A Personal History*, (New York: 1971), 599.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 291-2: “I wanted our people at home to know as many of the facts of the great disaster as could be legitimately conveyed through these proceedings. It was imperative for the stability of our youth that they should learn the full truth of what had happened, for only through knowledge could understanding and reconciliation with the past be achieved. Our younger generation, absorbed as it was in the building and guarding of the new state, had far too little insight into events which ought to be a pivotal point in its education. The teenagers of Israel, most of them born into statehood or during the struggle for it, had no real knowledge, and therefore no appreciation of the way in which their own flesh and blood had perished. There was here a breach between generations, a possible source of an abhorrence of the nation’s yesterday. This could be removed only by factual enlightenment.

“Then there was also the world at large, which had so lightly and happily forgotten the horrors that had

“correct historical perspective” was required— in fact, several different lessons for different audiences. As Ben-Gurion envisioned it, the trial was to foster a certain consciousness among Jews about their vulnerabilities in a historically hostile world, dramatically rehearsing what it meant to live among non-Jews and emphasizing the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the incontrovertible fact of such vulnerability, that only a Jewish state could guarantee the survival of the Jewish people. For a non-Jewish world, brought into the courtroom through television<sup>12</sup>, the trial was to underscore the extent of the destruction of the Jewish people and the culpability and, thus, responsibility of Western powers for the slaughter of innocents: the free world not only failed to act in either a swift or decisive fashion as a nation was led to slaughter, but happily forgot about the catastrophe once the war ended.<sup>13</sup> They were to be reminded of their shameful

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occurred before its eyes, to such a degree that it even begrudged it the trail of their perpetrator. It was imperative, for its own good, that the world should be reminded, with as much detail as possible of the gigantic human tragedy, which is an ineradicable part of a century with unlimited possibilities of both good and evil.”

<sup>12</sup>For a compelling discussion of the ways in which telecasts of the trial shaped public response to the case and its depiction of the Holocaust see, Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust*, (New York: 1999) especially Chapter 4, “The Man in the Glass Box.” As Shandler observes (84-5): “Televised presentations of the Eichmann trial....invok[ed] the trope of witnessing as a morally charged act. At the same time, the Eichmann case provided the occasion for the first extended contention over the significance of the Holocaust as a moral paradigm in America, and television figured strategically in the debate. The Israeli government...conceived the Eichmann trial as an occasion for presenting the Holocaust as a distinctly Jewish phenomenon and structured the trial as a public event validating the new Zionist state’s unique historical and political agenda. However, American conceptualizations of the Eichmann case, including those offered n television programs, usually presented the Holocaust as a paradigmatic investigation, having universal significance, of the limits of human morality.”

<sup>13</sup>Novick takes critical aim at the view, now part of accepted lore and institutionalized at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, that the American and British governments failed to pursue an energetic rescue policy during the war to save European Jewry that might have included (1) relaxing immigration quotas (2) negotiating on behalf of Jews in custody and (3) bombing the rail lines that led to Auschwitz. Such a view, he contends, is “a comfortable morality tale that has passed for history.”

inaction and obligations toward the new Jewish state. Finally, for an Israeli audience, the trial was to do a different kind of work, repairing and consolidating an otherwise fractured set of histories through education and “factual enlightenment.” Among other things, this would entail rehabilitating the picture held by many of Diaspora Jews as meek, submissive, and hapless victims who went like sheep to the slaughter.<sup>14</sup> What would emerge, therefore, during the trial through witness testimony and in place of this hapless victim was the survivor: Israel (primarily Israeli youth) and the world at large would encounter a figure who had heroically resisted, thwarted, and ultimately overcome the Nazis’ grand and evil designs and whose survival against all odds symbolized the rebirth of the entire Jewish people. And of the many who perished before liberation? They were now to be seen as having died fighting— “*not* on their bedraggled knees but on their blood soaked feet.”<sup>15</sup> Writing some years after the trial, Hausner described the transformation of individual and collective identity that took place over the course of the proceedings in terms that clearly vindicated the past while also authorizing the nation’s political future:

It came as a discovery to many that we are actually a nation of survivors....The trial...brought home to everyone in Israel the basic facts and lessons of our time. But even more significant was the feeling of self-assurance and confidence that swept the nation. If Hitler, for all his fiendish powers, enormous resources, and unrelenting efforts, did not succeed in wiping out Jewry when he had it at his mercy, then the age old belief in the eternity of Israel was reaffirmed before our

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<sup>14</sup>Douglas, *Memory of Judgment*, 109.

<sup>15</sup>ADL writing on the Eichmann trial, cited in Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, 139.



very eyes. The Jews had survived their mightiest enemy. The prophetic assurance bequeathed by Isaiah to the Jewish people – “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper” – was once again proved true. In comparison with Hitler’s might the present-day anti-Semitism and foes of Jewry and of Israel, formidable as they may be, still look less menacing. There can be no complacency in facing them, but there is a valid and reasonable hope of overcoming them...[T]he great national disaster has..., been a fountain of new strength, and it holds out new hope for a better future.<sup>16</sup>

If one of the missed opportunities for Arendt was arriving at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz, another missed opportunity was the court’s failure to grasp the totality of moral collapse precipitated by the Nazis across Europe. One of the “darkest chapters of the whole dark story,” as she described it, concerned the cooperation of the Jewish leadership in their own destruction – in working out the details of SS directives, implementing the policies of Nazi officials, and shoring up the power of occupying forces. In fact, the cooperation of Jewish authorities constituted a cornerstone of the Nazi’s program and, in Arendt’s view, this cooperation had a great deal to do with its success. As she bluntly charged in what Lawrence Douglas describes as “the most controversial and vilified statement in her book”<sup>17</sup>: “The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between

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<sup>16</sup>Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 453, 454. See also, Haim Gouri, “Facing the Glass Booth,” in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman, (Cambridge, MA: 1994), 153-160.

<sup>17</sup>Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment*, 154.

four and a half and six million people.”<sup>18</sup> If Eichmann bore responsibility for the death of millions—and Arendt was absolutely clear that he did—a significant measure of responsibility for these deaths lay also with the Jewish authorities. What this moral collapse suggested to Arendt was just how feeble were the traditional mores, customs and habits typically considered an indisputable and self-evident infrastructure of civil(ized) life in times of crisis and under conditions of terror. In a well known exchange with Gershom Scholem after the trial, Arendt put it this way: “Although there was no possibility of resistance, there existed the possibility of *doing nothing*. And in order to do nothing, one did not need to be a saint, one needed only to say: *‘I am just a simple Jew, and I have no desire to play any other role.’*”<sup>19</sup>

Finally, and of significant consequence in Arendt’s view for the way in which the world would subsequently understand the conditions that precipitated the emergence of death camps, the trial squandered the opportunity that Eichmann’s capture offered to begin to make judicial sense of what she insisted was “special type of crime”— administrative massacre; and “a special type of criminal”— one who has no intent to do wrong, does not act from base motives, and “who commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.” To regard Eichmann as a perverted sadist or to see in his actions a straightforward display of demonic intelligence was to fail, utterly, to grasp the criminal character of the accused and the nature of his crime. It was also, significantly, to misidentify the larger problem that he represented and that now confronted the world in the aftermath of

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<sup>18</sup>Arendt, *EJ*, 125.

<sup>19</sup>“An Exchange of Letters Between Gershom Sholem and Hannah Arendt” in *The Jew As Pariah*, ed. Ron Feldman, (New York: 1978), 248. Italics in the original.

Auschwitz.

It would have been very comforting indeed” Arendt wrote, “to believe that Eichmann was a monster.” This would certainly let the rest of us off the hook and as journalist Harry Mulisch observed, “*allow us to believe in the Devil even if it was no longer possible to believe in God.*”<sup>20</sup> But, in Arendt’s view, there was no hidden or hideous evil lurking beneath or behind the defendant’s nondescript exterior, no mask to be removed or depths to be unearthed and examined. What “stared one in the face at the trial,” she argued, was not monstrosity— a beast in the jungle (as Hausner suggested)— but “*sheer thoughtlessness,*” an inability to think from another’s point of view.<sup>21</sup> In her words, “

[O]ne cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing.* It was sheer thoughtlessness—by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.....[S]uch thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together... —that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>

Arendt would return repeatedly throughout the rest of her intellectual life to this lesson and what she described as “the problem of our time” in an effort to make sense of and render, more concretely, the relationship between thoughtlessness and the capacity for evil. What she saw clearly from the beginning and refused was the all too convenient tendency to equate great

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<sup>20</sup>Harry Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, (Philadelphia: 2005), 50.

<sup>21</sup>Arendt, *EJ*, 276.

<sup>22</sup>Arendt, *EJ*, 287-288, italics in the original.

evil with a wicked heart. And, this refusal led many of her critics upon the publication of her report to charge that she was, in effect, absolving Eichmann and others in the Nazi leadership of responsibility for their part in building and administering a machinery of death. Her insistence that one of the most remarkable and, for the purpose of comprehending great evil, relevant things about Eichmann and others like him was his— and their — extraordinary shallowness and normality was regarded as an affront to the memory of those murdered.<sup>23</sup> It worked against the pull of suffering graphically portrayed in the liberation footage of the camps—shown in Jerusalem as at Nuremberg but, significantly, as evidence now of the *Holocaust* rather than “simply” war crimes.<sup>24</sup> It worked against the pull of suffering graphically recounted in the testimony of survivors even while Arendt went on to argue that this “normality” was, by implication, infinitely more terrible and “terrifying than all the atrocities put together.”<sup>25</sup>

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What precisely did Arendt mean when she argued that sheer thoughtlessness— the inability to think from the standpoint of somebody else— predisposed Eichmann to become one of the greatest criminals of that period? To answer this, we need to begin briefly by underscoring what she did *not* mean— and this because of the irrepressible impulse to simply shift registers and reformulate the notion of “thinking from the standpoint of somebody else” as a problem of

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<sup>23</sup>Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research*, 38:3 (1971), 417.

<sup>24</sup>Lawrence Douglas makes a similar point and offers a provocative discussion of the dramatically different ways in which the documentary, *Nazi Concentration Camps*, signified when it was screened at Nuremberg in 1946 and 15 years later in Jerusalem. See, *The Memory of Judgment*, chapters 1&2.

<sup>25</sup>Arendt, *EJ*, 276.

empathy or empathetic identification. Such a shift occurs in part because of the ostensibly self-evident, constitutive (though not uncontested) place empathy occupies in conventional accounts of moral development as well as conventional understandings of what anchors moral sensibility: As moral philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen argues, echoing others, empathy constitutes “humanity’s basic emotional faculty.” As such, it is conventionally thought to be and is treated as “indispensable to an unimpaired exercise of moral judgment:” indeed, in Vetlesen’s view, “the call for empathy can be met because we are all human beings, principally sharing the same access to the experience of pain.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus with respect to Eichmann, the argument from empathy would go something like this: Had Eichmann been able to empathize with those he sent en masse to their death, had he been able to see them or feel-with or -for them as individuals, had he dealt with names and faces rather than lists of nationalities then— and here we find ourselves inadvertently entering the fictionalized world of Anne Frank’s good hearted people— he could not have acted as he did; something would have or at least could have been different. In other words, it seems at least intuitively plausible that had Eichmann been in close(r) proximity to those his policies victimized, he would not have been able to engage in or perpetuate atrocity, certainly not with such emotional indifference and Vetlesen suggests why: “Proximity,” he explains, typically “possesses the power to call the bluff of dehumanization.”<sup>27</sup>

However, with Eichmann (and others) clearly, the power of proximity failed: Eichmann

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<sup>26</sup>Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry Into The Preconditions of Moral Performance*, (University Park, PA: 1994), 120/119.

<sup>27</sup>Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing*, (Cambridge: 2005), 101.

met regularly with the leadership of the Jewish Councils and described his encounters with Council members as both “normal and human,” and, at times, even “friendly.”<sup>28</sup> They were not a mere abstraction even while the changing lists and figures that leaders were required to submit to him of people to be transported might have been: and still he persisted, apparently unfazed and disinterested although guided in his work he claimed, as the Court later learned, by what he more or less accurately identified as a version of Kant’s categorical imperative. That he could meet with members of the Jewish Council and enlist its leaders in expanding Nazi terror against those whose trust they bore—without apparent feeling for the suffering he inflicted, many times multiplied—merely underscores, certainly for the court and generations since, the depth of his depravity. Vetlesen elaborates, both in conversation and contention with Arendt’s reading: “The capacity [Eichmann] failed to exercise is emotional rather than intellectual or cognitive; it is the capacity to develop empathy with other human beings, to take an emotional interest in the “human” import of the situation in which the persons affected by his actions found themselves.”<sup>29</sup> Within this frame, the problem of Eichmann is the problem not of politics but of individual pathology.

For Arendt, it was not Eichmann’s lack of emotion—whether we call it a lack of compassion or an impaired capacity for empathy—that struck her during the trial and led her to describe Eichmann as someone unable to “*think from where he was not*.” As she would later describe it, what was in evidence at the trial was Eichmann’s self-abandonment and the abdication of responsibility that she insists inevitably followed from his refusal to call himself to

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<sup>28</sup>Arendt, *EJ*, 101.

<sup>29</sup>Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*, 105.

task, to engage in what she characterized in later writings as a “thinking dialogue.” “*Thinking from where one is not*” is primarily a practice of self-examination and of calling oneself to account. Part of the process of such reflection entails imagining, representing, making present to ourselves what is absent– the views of others as a countervailing set of claims and perspectives: not, primarily, for the purpose of establishing affective ties with them or knowing where they stand or what they might feel, but as a way of determining and evaluating (by contrast) where one stands oneself. This process Arendt describes as “training one’s mind to going visiting.” And, by this she means to underscore a particular kind of encounter of the self with itself, the self engaged in a “thinking dialogue” whose aim, she argues, is not truth– which would altogether retire the need for thinking– but consistency. Such consistency while a condition of living peacefully with myself is also only provisional, an on-going if tenuous achievement given the basic deconstructive character of the thinking dialogue “which relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules,” opinions and beliefs.<sup>30</sup> “The business of thinking,” writes Arendt,

is like Penelope’s web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. For the need to think can never be stilled by allegedly definite insights of “wise men;” it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Responsibility and Judgment*, Jerome Kohn, ed. (New York: 2003), 177.

<sup>31</sup>Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (I), 88. However essential thinking may be in the constitution of a meaningful

There is more to Arendt's account of the activity of thinking, but even with this abbreviated discussion we are somewhat better equipped to (re)consider Eichmann or her reading of him— her claim, on one hand, that it was “*sheer thoughtlessness....that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of the period*” and her insistence, on the other, that in this *thoughtlessness* lay a story about the banality of evil. Arendt traces Eichmann's sheer thoughtlessness to his refusal at any number of significant junctures over the course of his career – and some 18 years afterwards– to both think and thus judge for himself, to say *this is wrong* even as he described for the court any number of instances that threw into painfully sharp relief the broader meaning and unmistakably dreadful consequences of his job as a “transportation” officer. And we see any number of such moments depicted in *The Specialist*. The Wannsee

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life or the development of our distinctive humanity, Arendt, curiously, tells us that “thinking as such” tends to be a politically irrelevant, socially inconsequential activity. Generally speaking, she observes “it does society little good.....It does not create values; it will not find out, once and for all, what ‘the good’ is; it does not conform but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct.” Moreover, thinking can be and frequently is considered dangerous and, by some, even “nihilistic” in effect because it entails a relentless, critical, questioning of received norms, accepted doctrines, conventional practices, and cultural sentiments– “*undo[ing] every morning what it has finished the night before.*” And, although Arendt acknowledges the risks “inherent in the thinking activity itself” she rejects the notion that nihilism is its product. Indeed, as she sees it, times in which thinking comes to be considered especially dangerous or is denounced as nihilistic tend also to be precisely those times when it ceases to be a politically marginal activity– times, in other words, of political emergency when, as she puts it following Yeats, “Things fall apart; [and] the center cannot hold.” At such moments, the purging or deconstructive character of thinking, the practice of critically examining cultural beliefs, claims, opinions, and assumptions and their implications comes right up against and sometimes collides, brutally, with entrenched ideas, national pieties, or moral certainties and the often dogmatic insistence that further thinking is not only unnecessary but crippling, subversive, and even treasonous. “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.” *Life of the Mind* (I), 192.



conference— however we might understand what transpired there— is one such instance.<sup>32</sup> As he tried to explain to the court: “*Who was he to judge? Who was he ‘to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?’*” Another such moment is when he insisted to his interrogators in Jerusalem that he harbored no malice towards Jews and offered as evidence his refusal to watch Jews being asphyxiated in a gas van at Chelmno. As he described his reaction, “*I couldn’t look....my knees were buckling under me....I was badly shaken.*” Reporting back to his immediate superior, Heinrich Müller, about the killing process at Chelmno, Eichmann claims to have expressed alarm, “*This can’t go on, one can’t do this.*”<sup>33</sup> And later, again to Müller, after witnessing a mass shooting at Minsk, Eichmann maintained that he was horrified and experienced, if only momentarily, something akin to doubt:

The solution....was supposed to have been a political one. But now that the Führer has ordered a physical solution, obviously a physical solution it must be. But we cannot go on conducting executions as they were done in Minsk and, I believe, in other places. ..My unconditional, my absolute allegiance underwent a change....when the so-called solution of the Jewish question became more violent.... when the gassing and shooting started....I said to my superior:....This isn’t what I imagined, it probably isn’t what any of us imagined because it’s not a

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<sup>32</sup>The Wannsee Conference was held in January 1942 and is generally held to be the meeting at which Reinhard Heydrich announced that a “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”— which now included some 11 million Jews from across Europe— was imminent. To all present, including Eichmann, the genocidal implications of Heydrich’s directive were unmistakably clear.

<sup>33</sup>Eichmann cited in David Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*, (New York: 2004), 106.

political solution.<sup>34</sup>

The story with Eichmann, therefore, as Arendt tells it, is that he refused to engage in the kind of thinking activity that she insists would have allowed him not only to tolerate the doubt he claimed to have experienced at Chelmno or the ditches in Minsk, but to use this doubt as the disruptive opening it presented for (re)considering the meaning of the trite bureaucratic formulas, rules, codes, and directives that together organized and continued to organize his sense of who he was and what he was doing. That Eichmann's identity was so constituted was clearly evidenced for Arendt in his insistence throughout the trial that "he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been told to do," that is, only if he had broken with the formulas, rules, codes of expression, and directives that had come to comprise his sense of self.<sup>35</sup>

Along these same lines and equally as telling was the fact that some two decades after the regime's collapse, Eichmann still could not give a coherent account of himself – of what he said and did– that was not riddled with clichés or stock-phrases or rendered in terms of the ever-present pile of documents that accompanied him in prison and court as if these papers provided definitive points of reference to some unfamiliar story, except the story if there was one was supposedly his own. Indeed, when considered through the lens that Arendt provides, there was, in the end, no personal story to be told, in part, because there was no thinking subject to tell it.

A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will

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<sup>34</sup> Eichmann cited in Cesarani, *Eichmann*, 106, 107.

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *EJ*, 25.

he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment.<sup>36</sup>

Eichmann held tenaciously to an empty oath and rules of conduct that together worked to insulate him from encountering his own witness, the ever-present, observant other. Indeed, as Arendt puts it, “he and the world he [had] lived in [were] in perfect harmony.” Thus, he could arrange for the displacement, deportation, and eventual death of hundreds of thousands across Europe and still maintain in all sincerity, without duplicity, that he was innocent of the charges brought against him: *“Officially I had nothing to do with [the gassing] and, unofficially, I wasn’t interested....I am responsible for the things my orders obliged me to do....I have no desire to evade that responsibility. But, I refuse to take responsibility for things I had no orders for and which were not in my department.”*

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In the final section of this essay, I want to return to the question of empathy. With respect to Arendt’s claims, empathy shows up in basically two ways. It constitutes a common transliteration of what Arendt described as Eichmann’s lack of imagination and inability to think where he was not; and, it also shows up as part of a critique of what Arendt missed or simply dismissed in marshaling what moral theorist Arne Johan Vetlesen refers to as a “cognitively-based” model to explain the dramatic asymmetry between the ordinary even commonplace character of the defendant and the monstrous deeds for which he was being tried. In either

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<sup>36</sup>Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (1), 190-91.

rendering, the problem is not that Eichmann was thoughtless— and within this frame, thoughtlessness is typically equated with general intelligence or analytic competence, a significant departure from Arendt’s explanation of the notion. The problem, rather, is that Eichmann could not *feel* for those who suffered at his hand or respond to the claim their suffering placed upon him. In this view, then, his was an emotional rather than cognitive failure. Following Vetlesen, he “failed to perceive the Jews as human beings and he did so because he failed to develop empathy toward them, to take an emotional interest in the human import of the situation in which they found themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether and in what sense empathy can be said to be a faculty or (universal) moral property— the point is only that it has long been regarded as instrumental in the constitution of moral sensibility and as an essential constituent of “civilized” coexistence— I want to call attention to the way in which this ostensibly clarifying shift or in Vetlesen’s case, alternative formulation, fundamentally transforms the constitutive terms of the problem that Arendt insisted was Eichmann. For reading Eichmann’s failure as a failure of empathy or empathetic identification restores to him precisely the dark depths that Arendt insisted were absent and whose absence then incited her efforts to articulate an entirely secular, demythologized account of the criminal and his crime. Indeed, restoring these depths works to reproduce precisely the terms of a missed opportunity by reinstalling a more familiar moral and conceptual landscape: it works to recover the well-adjusted, appropriately empathic, compassionate norm even as it casts Eichmann (reassuringly) as a departure from this norm so

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<sup>37</sup>Vetlesen, *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*, 106-107, 119. See additionally, Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust*, (Ithaca: 2004), esp. chapter 1.

that an evil or perverse nature can be said (once again) to ground obviously evil deeds.

Eichmann's exceptionally flat demeanor, his nondescript self-representation, his nervous tics, crooked grimace, or formal and deferential continence when speaking may well reveal a shallow personality, as Arendt maintained; but, within this frame, they are symptoms as well (as the prosecution and spectators at the trial came to regard them) and evidence— the most cunning of ruses. They tell us something about the man who secured rolling stock to transport “human cargo” while being utterly indifferent to the meaning and implications of what he was doing: “*Officially I had nothing to do with [the gassing] and, unofficially, I wasn't interested.*” The scope of atrocity demands that he have an interest or at least some remorse and his lack of empathy begins to explain why he might not experience or express either.

Even accounts that are guided by or aim to adopt Arendt's reading of Eichmann, it seems, can not easily escape producing “thoughtlessness” as an absence of empathy or rendering what she argued was a political failure (a question of solidarity) as primarily a moral one (a question of sentiment). And here finally we turn to consider briefly *The Specialist*, a filmic intervention by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman that seeks not to reconstruct the original narrative structure of the trial according to the temporal or chronological scheme of day-to-day sessions; but seeks rather, through selective editing and image enhancement, to “lay down a grammar” that would allow the drama of Arendt's narrative to emerge along with its main protagonist, Eichmann. As Sivan and Brauman explained in a post-production interview, much of the trial as it unfolded in 1961 had very little to do with Eichmann and yet, he was his own “best accuser.”<sup>38</sup> By bringing

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<sup>38</sup>*The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*, Special Features: Post-production interview (60min), 2002.

Eichmann into focus and allowing him to give an account of himself, one could, in their view, turn his defense against him. The result of their editing and enhancement efforts, then, is both a two-hour compilation of Leo Hurwitz's original video footage and what Sivan and Brauman characterize as a two-hour *composition* that uses Hurwitz's video footage to reflect upon questions of responsibility and obedience.

The particular sequence to which I want to call attention comes some 25 minutes into *The Specialist* when the prosecution elects to show footage from numerous documentaries originally produced by US, British, and Russian troops as they moved across Germany, Austria, and Poland liberating what were primarily at that point in the war labor-death camps. Originally shown at Nuremberg— to bear witness in ways that words and survivor testimony simply could not— they are introduced into the record in Jerusalem for similar reasons. As Hausner explains, survivor testimony about the death camps was threatening to overwhelm the legal proceedings. “[W]ords no longer conveyed their full meanings, and it looked as if in two or three more days of this we might lose control of our nerves and give way to hysteria. Instead of more evidence I showed a film that lasted about an hour...”<sup>39</sup>

The sequence from *The Specialist* that depicts this viewing begins with Hausner introducing the film and noting he will explain for the Court what it is they are seeing— his narration will replace the film's original and otherwise sparse soundtrack. The lights dim, and the camera finds Eichmann earnestly taking notes. He will be visible only intermittently and always in shadow while images from the screen on which the film is being projected reflect off

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<sup>39</sup>Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem*, 347.

the glass booth in which he sits, a ghostly presence. As Hausner describes what have become, for contemporary viewers at least, easily conjured scenes of atrocity— mounds of bodies, shoes, spectacles, and suitcases— we watch Eichmann as he watches the screen, his head nodding to one side and then the other as if he might be falling asleep. The film stops and, in the shadows before the lights are turned on, Eichmann’s mouth subtly twitches. We hear Hausner apologize to the Court for subjecting spectators to such a distressing experience even as he also insists that viewing the film was necessary.<sup>40</sup> The judges look down, in the classical repose of shame, clasping their heads, averting their gaze from the scene of the courtroom. Hausner grasps the armrests of his chair as if to stand; he pauses, looks to the floor at his feet, and then collapses back into himself as if exhausted by the emotions wrought in him by the spectacle. The camera cuts to Eichmann. Sitting looking vacantly out across the courtroom, he performs an utterly banal gesture, one he would hardly perform had he been aware that the camera was trained upon

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<sup>40</sup>Hausner’s claim that it is *necessary* to look at such images seems at first blush, especially to contemporary audiences, entirely self-evident. However, their use in a legal context, however compelling is—rather than necessary— problematic at best: such images are highly prejudicial and do not clearly establish a link between those on trial for such brutality and the actual (or aftermath of) brutality captured on film (Landsman, *Crimes of the Holocaust*, 28). What then are they evidence of? On the other hand, viewing these images has been said to be “morally necessary.” As Novick observes (*The Holocaust in American Life*, 260), “The push behind teaching the Holocaust in the schools is the conviction that an encounter with the Holocaust, particularly an emotional encounter [as is provoked by viewing atrocity imagery], is bound to be productive of lessons. The same conviction was held by those who built the Washington Holocaust Museum.” And it informs, in part, the move by the prosecution in Jerusalem as well. But in what respects does looking at such imagery make sense of atrocity and, more specifically, of what happened over the course of approximately a decade? As Janina Struk puts it, “If acts of atrocity are beyond the comprehension of most of us, then little can be achieved by looking at images of them So why display them? Are the effusive display of photographs really teaching us something?” *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, (New York: 2004), 214.

him at this moment (if indeed we are being shown a shot of the moment following the screening): he absently reaches up to his own face and unceremoniously itches his nose. He blinks and shifts his eyes from right to left, composed and perhaps apprehensive but hardly overcome.

Eichmann's expressions throughout this sequence stand in their ambiguity and in marked contrast to those of the judges and the prosecution whose gestures and countenance leave no doubt as to their state of *feeling*. Eichmann's apparent lack of affect, his ostensibly apathetic demeanor during the viewing of these films in Jerusalem— especially when juxtaposed with the judges' loss of composure— seems to reveal a perverse humanity. He looks at the images but neither sees nor seems to grasp the story otherwise easily, if painfully apprehended by others in the courtroom. And this, in some sense, discloses his guilt *and* a monstrosity his appearance and ordinary demeanor do not otherwise betray, at least for those watching him watch the debased and debasing outcome of orders he denies having given. As a french journalist wrote of the screening of these films at Nuremberg, so too with the Eichmann trial: *It was not a matter of showing the judges a document about which they already had in depth knowledge. It was about bringing the criminals suddenly face to face with their colossal deeds. Thus, as it were, throwing the assassins right into the mass graves organized by these butchers of Europe and observing the reactions that these shocking images would provoke.*<sup>41</sup> That they produce no apparent reaction in Eichmann speaks volumes.

What Sivan and Brauman aim to present is the portrait of a bored, detached administrator,

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<sup>41</sup>Get cite



a transportation specialist, a bureaucrat. And by their own account, they aim to do this, following Arendt, without offering any exploration of Eichmann's inner character or psychological disposition. Yet in the sequence I have just set out, atrocity images are presented to the Court—depictions of apocalyptic horror as they were described by the press—as graphic evidence of the consequences of Eichmann's work. And yet, Eichmann himself remains apparently unmoved and indifferent throughout, indeed, it appears he can barely stay awake. In the words of a reporter for the *New York Times*: “Eichmann sat through eighty minutes of filmed horror today without flinching or batting an eye. A ghostly figure in the dimmed courtroom, the former Gestapo (secret police) officer, on trial for his role in the murder of millions of Jews, looked steadily from his glass cage.... The man who said he could not bear the sight of blood, who said he hated visiting death camps, was the very model of composure....At the end of the films, after the three Israeli judges hurried to the chambers, Eichmann—the man who headed the Gestapo section assigned to the annihilation of Jews—picked up his pile of green folios and walked steadily from his cage.”<sup>42</sup>

Because he does not see or, perhaps more accurately, is not made to perform his “seeing,” (as he might have been through editing) in a manner that is legible—a manner that conveys any discomfort in the company of suffering and the obvious anguish of those in whose presence he watches the film—a question of inner character or moral character necessarily overtakes the scene (particularly since contemporary spectators for whom Sivan and Brauman are restaging this trial do not need to see the images to know what their moral claim is and how to respond;

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<sup>42</sup> Homer Bigart, *The New York Times*, (June 9, 1961: 16).

contemporary viewers have been schooled in the meaning of such images or schooled to see and experience in the spectacle of catastrophe a morally transformative, morally transcendent lesson).

Eichmann's failure to demonstrate feeling or empathy seems to underscore precisely what the filmmakers sought to challenge by reconstructing the visual record some 30 years after the event, that is: Eichmann's inhumanity or Hausner's insistence that while Eichmann may have been "born human," he could no longer be regarded as such.

*The Specialist* attempts to recover one of the missed opportunities Arendt identified in her trial report and offers contemporary viewers a certain critical distance to consider anew the nature of Eichmann's "criminality" or what was otherwise treated during the trial as self-evident and foregone. With this critical distance and the film's refusal to provoke through emotional immersion and trauma, there is then room for the pedantic and at moments seemingly abject administrator that is Eichmann to emerge clearly. In addition, the film refuses to extract for viewers—and works against viewers easily extracting for themselves—the now conventional moral lessons for which Eichmann and the trial have come to stand in as a kind of rhetorical shorthand.

But even with these decidedly striking interventions, the apathetic indifference of Sivan and Brauman's Eichmann—along side and in contrast to Hausner's "flint-hearted plotter"—fails still to capture Arendt's reading of the criminal and his crime. Thoughtlessness is neither indifference nor the absence of (normal human) feeling; more feeling (however demonstrated) is not a substitute for critical thinking (although it may be a constitutive component of it). It will not bridge what Arendt described as "certain abysses of remoteness"; it will not provide a reliable compass from which we might take our bearings in the world; and, finally, it will not

render the evil of which she spoke explicable, even if it does make a figure like Eichmann more legible.