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A Comfortable Atrocity: Bearing Witness Beyond the Courtroom

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ABSTRACT

Holocaust testimony is a gesture that points to the limits of language and representation. A mode of remembrance and partial understanding, it bridges the gap between law and art, fact and emotion, past and present. Drawing on the works of Shoshana Felman, Claude Lanzmann, Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Yossi Bloch, Daniel Sivan, Jonathan Glazer, and others, we can explore the paradoxes and complexities of human nature, the fragility of memory, and the incompleteness of testimony. Perpetrators portray themselves as victims, developing a narrative of self-justification. The courtroom, the judge, the jury, the prosecutor, and the defense regulate honesty. And the banality of evil manifests itself in the everyday language and behavior of both those who witnessed and those who carried out the genocide. Museums, films, and sites of memory share the courtrooms' demand for resolution, routing visitors and viewers from atrocity toward meaning along a predictable and comfortable path. But they cannot do what the most powerful testimony does: linger on the unresolved and resist the clarity that institutions demand. Perhaps every framework built to remember the Holocaust has, in its own way, flattened what it claimed to preserve.

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To my parents, for supporting me through it all, words aren't enough. Love you.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Beige, green, gray. Bleached, muted, drab. Haunting sound design, a grim homestead, and an emphasis on things heard, not seen, set Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* apart from the rest. Banality lingers in every corner of the Höss family's two-story home. It oozes through the back garden, across the neatly laid patio, over the gray concrete wall, and into the concentration camp next door. Holocaust films are a cornerstone of modern media: spectacles that serve as moral lessons while capturing our attention. More often than not, they fetishize survival, suffering, and victimhood. Doing so, they ignore what Holocaust survivor and writer Primo Levi calls "The Gray Zone," a clear-cut categorization of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, resistance and collaboration. The Nazi system created a complex and multilayered microcosm inside the camps, where different groups of prisoners had different roles, responsibilities, privileges, and pressures. And many films, by assigning moral responsibility, discount the possibility that moral judgment is a consequence of the gray zone. That there may not be such a thing as the unforgivable, that "evil" is far more ordinary than we would like to imagine, and that we have, in error, flattened an infinitely complex series of events: "We [...] tend to simplify history; but the pattern within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single unequivocal fashion, and it may therefore happen that different historians understand and construe history in ways that are incompatible with one another" (Levi 22).

As a film, *Zone of Interest* does more than most. We meet Rudolf and Hedwig Höss by a small stream, sitting on a picnic blanket under a tree. The camera pans through the bushes,

prying into an intimate moment as the family prepares lunch. And for a time, all is quiet. For Giles Harvey of the New York Times, and many others, *Zone of Interest* terrifies precisely because it “invites us to regard its central couple [Rudolf and Hedwig Höss] not as calculating monsters, the way we’re used to seeing Nazis depicted onscreen, but as ordinary people acting on recognizable motives” (Harvey). Perhaps the most striking aspect of Glazer’s interpretation is that, at times, the family, Rudolf in particular, is also trapped in this dollhouse. Drowning in formality and denial, he paces his office, lies in bed, and smokes a cigar, the camera framing him quite literally behind bars (Glazer 22:40). Levi believes “we are compelled to reduce the knowledge to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are specifically the property of the human species – language and conceptual thought” (Levi 22). The Nazi’s in this film have depth. All of the characters in this film have depth. Depth that can’t be easily reduced.

It’s difficult to make an intricate film about the Holocaust. Glazer spent years on *Zone of Interest* to offer us a glimpse into the enormity of the Holocaust. The law asks for more, for something even film cannot manage: the whole truth, delivered in minutes, under oath.

Chapter 2

The Courtroom

The contemporary courtroom is a place of confinement, bound by rigid parameters and assurance of outcome. A judge presides over this microcosm. Jurors enter in single file, witnesses wait, lawyers pray for a swift victory. Sometimes, cameras tucked away in cruxes and corners transmit the proceedings to the public so that we may observe, from a distance, the judicial petri dish. At other times, the process remains a tightly guarded secret, endemic to the chamber. The court aims to reveal a semblance of truth, governed by and within the boundaries of law and the rules of evidence. Witnesses must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with one caveat: it must be relevant and easily verified. Lawyers advocate for their clients under the constraint of professional ethics and legal procedure. Judges are impartial and fair only within the framework of applicable statutes and precedents, and jurors must be objective and rational, only within the scope of their instructions.

Trials are, in their simplest form, a contest between two opposing parties: the prosecution and the defense. In Manichaean fashion, each tries to prove the other wrong beyond a reasonable doubt. As Primo Levi stresses in *The Drowned and the Saved*, “Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they, Athenians and Spartans, Romans and Carthaginians” (Levi 26). Rarely is this more prevalent than in the courtroom, where lawyers try to win over the jury by appealing to preconceived notions of good and bad, right and wrong. Quickly, trials shift from dialogues to confrontations between adversaries. Everyone has something to lose. The accused stands alone, fighting for freedom and the sanctity of being, their future in the hands of a jury randomly

chosen. The victim, in this black-and-white system, may sacrifice justice, dignity, and compensation. Likewise, witnesses, judges, and jurors may risk their safety and integrity, and the lawyers, who carry the heaviest burden, must strive not only for truth and justice but also to maintain their credibility and reputation. Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor of the Eichmann trial, addressed the Israeli court on behalf of six million prosecutors: “When I stand before you, judges of Israel, in this court, to accuse Adolf Eichmann, I do not stand alone. Here with me at this moment stand six million accusers...” (Leavy 1). To lose after such a proclamation would be unforgivable.

Our understanding of the juridical system is, at its simplest, a fraction of a much larger mechanism and at its most complex, a paradox balancing the critical role of objectivity with the undeniable role of subjective experience. Juridical testimony aims to conclude: Evidence presents itself clearly and concisely, lawyers duke it out, jurors deliberate, and the judge presides. But, literary critic Shoshana Felman asks, “If the essence of the testimony is impersonal (to enable a decision by a judge or jury—metaphorical or literal—about the true nature of the facts of an occurrence; to enable an objective reconstruction of what history was like, irrespective of the witness), why is it that the witness's speech is so uniquely, literally irreplaceable?” (Felman 204-205). That is, if juridical testimony is the end-all, why is there, despite this, a lingering and undefinable aspect still to be explored? Legally speaking, the case is closed. But many leave longing for more authentic testimony, not bound by the limitations of legal etiquette.

Non-juridical testimony, or bearing witness to events that are not widely recognized or validated by the legal system or the general public, challenges conventional notions of justice, seeking instead to communicate the harder-to-represent aspects of experience. Such testimony is

often more poignant than any delivered in court, offering a more nuanced account of an event and its aftermath. Professors Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer suggest that for Felman, this form of “Witness testimony locates the possibility of grasping the Holocaust in ‘the slippage between law and art’ – between the closure brought by legal judgment and the open-ended immediacy and presence preserved in a work of art” (Hirsch and Spitzer 152). From this perspective, the art itself, and by extension, the authenticity of non-judicial testimony, lies not in the convictions it brings about but in its preservation of history. Such testimony often has the force to provide a narrative not from the Manichaean perspective of victims and perpetrators but from the lens of experience, one which preserves the past, a past that, in the judicial system, concludes at the end of a trial, and one that Felman, Levi, and Claude Lanzmann wish to dispel, focusing instead on the enormity and eternity of the Holocaust.

Felman references Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, drawing on a visceral level his presentation of the scramble of prisoners toward the light in gas asphyxiation vans. A fixation that underscores something far more powerful and authentic than can be explored via traditional testimony, irrelevant to a court case but integral to our understanding of the human condition:

As soon as darkness sets in, the other half-dead and half-living bodies in the gas vans rush to the doors—rush to the outside light—in a desperate attempt at once to avoid death and to avoid the very fact of dying in the dark, to avoid, that is, not seeing, and not knowing their own death. The asphyxiated bodies are attempting not just to prevent their death, but to prevent their death, precisely, from *escaping them*, from taking place without their knowledge or awareness. Pushing toward the light, the gas vans’ captives strive for some sort of *intelligence* of their own death, or at least for some sort of physical intelligibility. (Felman 240)

This testimony, rendered through art, adds another, more profound element. It presents the gray area beyond guilt and innocence, black and white, right and wrong. From a judicial standpoint, the importance of dignity, shame, and the conditions of one's death cannot be factored into a legal outcome, because no charge reflects the crime. But this dash toward light, inconsequential as it may be in a courtroom, exposes the condition of survivors, who are both subjects and objects, human and inhuman, living and dead, and the shame they feel for having survived, for having been reduced to bare life, for having borne witness to the atrocities committed.

Non-judicial testimony also captures that which is no longer able to be expressed by the living, a form of expression that is inadmissible in court but crucial to our understanding. Judicial testimony implies closure, non-judicial testimony does not, instead seeking to preserve history, an act which, in its very doing, challenges the Nazi ideology that sought to blot the record of genocide. In this way, "Even the corpses of the now dead witnesses or the Figures are still material evidence by which the Nazis might, ironically, be figured out" (Felman 226).

Contributing to the authentic, beyond that which is admissible in court, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* suspends judgment, unlike moralizing documentaries that clearly distinguish between good and evil. The film, apart from most, is about the present, capturing individuals who, in bearing witness to the past, bear witness to the present. Lanzmann confronts his subjects with difficult questions, hidden cameras, or unexpected encounters and sometimes deceives, provokes, or even bribes them to elicit their responses without pretending neutrality or objectivity and acknowledging his role and responsibility as a filmmaker and witness. Most strikingly, however, is how he structures his questions. They are not broad, sterilized by the legal or ethical process, or intended to elicit a desired response. Instead, they often encompass

descriptions of the concrete and minute details that, in traditional testimony, would be easily disregarded, extending beyond the purview of a trial. Felman adds, “It is not the big generalizations but the concrete particulars which translate into a vision and thus help both to dispel the blinding impact of the event and to transgress the silence to which the splitting of eyewitness reduced the witness. It is only through the trivia, by small steps, and not by huge strides or big leaps, that the barrier of silence can be in effect displaced, and somewhat lifted” (Felman 219). To understand precisely what this means, it is helpful to examine some of Lanzmann's most striking interviews.

Abraham Bomba

The first and most well-known is the testimony and deafening silence of former Sonderkommando Abraham Bomba. Lanzmann conducted his interview with Bomba in a barbershop. The old man, whose job it once was to cut the hair of those selected for the gas chambers, tightly grips his scissors, cutting a customer's hair. Lanzmann asks about the distance between barracks, room sizes, sitting areas, and working conditions, and over time, his gentle coaxing elicits testimony in a wholly different manner than that produced in a courtroom. From this, a single memory emerges, one deeper, more authentic, and more disturbing than any revealed in a courtroom:

At the gas chamber, when I was chosen to work there as a barber, some of the women that came in on a transport from my town of Czestochowa, I knew a lot of them. I knew them; I lived with them in my town. I lived with them in my street,

and some of them were my close friends. And when they saw me, they started asking me, Abe this and Abe that—“What’s going to happen to us?” What could you tell them? What could you tell? A friend of mine worked as a barber—he was a good barber in my hometown—when his wife and sister came into the gas chamber... (Lanzmann 1985)

Silence. His testimony stops, he steps away, and tears fill his eyes. Lanzmann does not interject. Instead, he films the silence and focuses on Bomba’s facial expressions as he paces about. Silence, in this case, is a form of testimony. One that, in a court of law, would be quickly dispelled by an interjection, but here, is allowed to linger. “When, in a recent seminar at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Claude Lanzmann ventured that ‘the tears of Bomba are worth gold,’ he clarified the values on which his project is based. The ultimate truth, he implies, the ultimate act of witness, comes from inside the gas chamber and from the mute testimony of memory emerging from the body” (Hirsch 158).

Aestheticization

A distinction Lanzmann makes, and one of utmost importance, is that non-judicial testimony, as shown in *Shoah*, should not be aestheticized. This also remains true of the works of Primo Levi and Shoshana Felman. We can appreciate their techniques and unique perspectives, but should remain aware of the context and purpose of the work and the moral implications of our response. On the first page of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi clarified that what haunted him and other survivors, more than the lack of retribution or justice, was the ever-present thought

that no one would believe them. He quotes Simon Wiesenthal's account of an SS Militiaman's words, "There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say they are exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the Lagers" (Levi 1). To that end, authentic testimony often outweighs the legal constructs applied in court to press charges or carry out sentences. It preserves the past, a testament to the endless enormity of the Holocaust.

Chapter 3

The Devil Next Door

What do we mean when we speak of the truth? Alberto, a friend of Primo Levi's, vanished during the evacuation of Auschwitz in January 1945. The pair lived, suffered, and nearly died together. Upon his repatriation, Levi decided to visit Alberto's hometown and bear the news of his death. His family refused the truth. Alberto had "been able to slip away from the column without being shot," he "was safe in Russian hands," he was "in a Soviet clinic, he was fine, but he had lost his memory" (Levi 20). Haunted by reality and its inability to be settled, Levi questions his credibility. He is cautious, admitting his victimhood, but never claiming the epistemological privilege or the moral judgment typically afforded. Truth is a function of unity, being able to tell the entire story. Levi rejects this notion, save for the empirical truth. In his eyes, nobody has the perspective of truth, including the victim, who, while speaking truthfully, may not understand the full scope. *The Devil Next Door* presents this uncertainty, reexamining the case of John Demjanjuk, a Cleveland autoworker accused of being Ivan the Terrible, a notorious Nazi guard at Treblinka.

Ivan the Terrible

John Demjanjuk, husband, father, grandfather, aging, unremarkable Ohio autoworker. And, following an investigation by the United States Office of Special Investigations, Ivan the Terrible of Treblinka. "He had children. He was a family man. He fixed the kids' bikes. He worked at the Ford plant. He was a normal Cleveland guy" (*The Devil Lives in Cleveland* 5:39).

But in 1981, Demjanjuk was stripped of his US citizenship, and after years of legal proceedings, was extradited to Israel in 1986. The courtroom in Jerusalem was prepared for a monster. A creature who crushed men's faces, stabbed pregnant women, gouged eyes, burned children, and hurled corpses with brutal efficiency. They found a burly, aging American, front and center in what would become an international spectacle.

By the time the trial began in 1987, it had exceeded the boundaries of a criminal proceeding. "This is so much more than a trial of one man's guilt. This is a hearing of history" (The Devil Lives in Cleveland 19:15). This is precisely what made it so unstable, so dangerous. A trial is contained, governed by procedure, bound by rules and regulations, focused on a conclusion. The Demjanjuk trial was something else entirely. It was a vessel for collective grief, a place for healing, and for revenge. This was more than a determination of guilt or innocence. The documentary makes a series of striking narrative choices that align it with films like *Zone of Interest* and *Shoah*. Glazer explores the everyday life of the Höss family, Lanzmann takes note of the little details, people's reactions, the things left unsaid, and Daniel Sivan and Yossi Bloch (directors of *Devil Next Door*) do much the same. Episode one, "The Devil Lives in Cleveland," establishes Demjanjuk as an ordinary man. An autoworker, immigrant, patriot, and crucially, a pillar of the community: "I think a lot of people in Cleveland saw themselves in John Demjanjuk. Someone who came to this country and got married and worked hard" (The Devil Lives in Cleveland 35:49).

Then, it thrusts us into a whirlwind as we watch the man we have just met, hurled into the spotlight. The cameras are on, the lights fire up, and the trial starts. Sivan and Bloch have flipped the narrative. It's rare for the audience to see anything other than the monomaniacal Nazi leader, much less a family man living a quiet life in Ohio. John Demjanjuk is transformed into a person,

and that's frightening because we want good and evil to be clearly distinguished, and "good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted" (Levi 23).

The Witness Stand

Episode two, "Nightmares of Treblinka," further complicates the purpose of testimony, asking what it means to reveal the truth and the purpose behind that truth. Witnesses crowd the box, and survivors pack the stands. The cameras roll, and the show trial begins. Gustav Borax, a barber at Treblinka, takes the stand. Donning a tan suit and trembling as his memories come alive, Borax describes Ivan the Terrible's brutality and cries throughout. Opposing counsel, Yoram Sheftel, steps in: "If the prosecution wants to create a clear picture for the court, they need to only submit the testimonies [...] But if they insist on bringing these witnesses, we [defense counsel] say the purpose is not to bring it to you, honors, but to the 16 cameras up there" (Nightmares of Treblinka 9:40-9:50). Borax's is silenced by formality; the experience he seeks to reveal is quelled. Called forward, planted before a microphone, and systematically dismantled, he represents the contradiction of juridical testimony. The courtroom summons a witness and then binds them, demanding the truth from someone the legal process has already begun to discredit. Sheftel is correct; this is a show trial. Its purpose is not merely to convict, it is to vindicate. In the camps, certain roles involved cooperation with the Nazis either unwillingly or willingly. Primo Levi mentions the Kapos, who were inmates who served as the heads of work squads and who had the power to punish or reward other inmates, the Sonderkommandos, who were forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria, and the Muselmänner, who were

prisoners who had lost all hope and will to live. All were united by guilt. A seeping, oozing guilt that nothing could stop. And trials like this are another, often unsuccessful, attempt to relieve this guilt.

Borax's testimony raises doubts about his mental soundness. Mark O'Connor, Demjanjuku's defense attorney, coaxes the elderly man through a "very gentle examination" (Devil Next Door 18:37), seeking to undermine his credibility. Mentioning a prior case, O'Connor asks Borax: "How did you get from Israel to Florida" (Nightmares of Treblinka 18:52). Hesitates, "Yes, we went by train" (Nightmares of Treblinka 18:57). The defense prods the man, hinting at his senility, wholly disregarding his testimony, and going so far as to shift blame to the prosecution, as Sheftel boldly claims that "only a vicious, merciless prosecutor would bring such a witness to the witness stand" (Nightmares of Treblinka 20:00). Certain truths are revealed, and others are hidden away. Eliahu Rosenberg's visceral reaction to John Demjanjuk at once reveals the guard's identity and, paradoxically, damns the prosecution. Rosenberg is poised, assertive, and aggressively sure of himself. The defense, noting this and carefully assessing his weaknesses, provokes: "Was it ever in your heart [...] to try to do something to help those men that were running outside naked?" (Nightmares of Treblinka 30:19). They poke and prod and doubt until Rosenberg is defenseless. Then they fight his testimony. As his time on the stand comes to an end, Rosenberg is asked to approach Demjanjuk to verify his identity. The courtroom grows silent as camera operators shift their lenses on the gray-haired man walking across the stage, approaching his tormentor. The walk itself is a kind of testimony, one that the spectacle demands. Sixteen cameras track his every step. The world watches a survivor cross a room to confirm, for the record, the face of the man who had haunted him for decades. Demjanjuk extends his hand. Rosenberg erupts in rage, returns to the stand,

assured that the man across from him is Ivan the Terrible. The cameras capture something beyond evidence, something rawer and less easily contained, a man's entire history compressed into a single walk across the floor. Sheftel, with unusual clarity, notes the impossibility of this situation: "In a normal court [...] maybe he [Rosenberg] will admit the truth. But in the attitude of the court, in the atmosphere of the court, with the cameras on [...] Never!" (Nightmares of Treblinka 36:30). To testify to the court and the media with utter certainty only to realize that the defendant is not Ivan the Terrible would be to disgrace all those watching, the survivors, their families, their memory. The trial obscures the truth. And the event, the spectacle, is sensationalized. The trial is as much a showcase of Demjanjuk and his distraught family as it is an examination of war crimes. But Sheftel only criticizes the trial when its faults no longer benefit him. After all, he aims to win, not deliver justice. "Some of the witnesses were liars. Some of the witnesses were seniles, and some of the witnesses were seniles *and* liars" (Nightmares of Treblinka 23:39).

There is no closure. That is the only truth this trial reveals. Liberation is not the end of suffering or the restoration of dignity for those who were saved from the death camps. It merely exposes the paradoxical condition of the survivors, who are both subjects and objects, human and inhuman, living and dead. It underscores the shame that the survivors feel for having survived, for having been reduced to bare life, and for having witnessed the atrocities committed by their fellow human beings, and nothing more. Testimony is not the property of the survivors, but of those who did not survive, and who entrusted their unspeakable experience to the living. Testimony is thus a transmission of an impossibility, a gesture that points to the limit of language and representation. For thinkers like Levi, liberation does not mean freedom or happiness, and this trial and its verdict cannot serve as a remedy.

An Ordinary Guard

The Nazi system was designed to make individual culpability impossible to isolate. Until now, the trial has promoted a binary. John Demjanjuk is either Ivan the Terrible, a Nazi death camp guard, or a refugee from Ukraine who moved to America, built a life, and a family. The final three episodes of *Devil Next Door*, and the discovery of a document, the Trawniki card, that identified Demjanjuk as a camp guard, introduce a gray area, a third possibility: What if John Demjanjuk was a Nazi, but not Ivan the Terrible? Are his crimes equal to Ivan's because both wore the same garb? The Trawniki card could not definitively prove Demjanjuk's identity. But it did place his name on a list, one of thousands of Ukrainian men trained at what prosecutors call "a school for mass murder," men who "took part in every phase of the operation of the death camps" (The Conspiracy 15:17). The card posted Demjanjuk to Sobibor, not Treblinka. The name was wrong, the camp was wrong, but the function was identical. The trial had spent years constructing a monster, a monomaniacal Nazi, but the card was one of many.

The search for Ivan the Terrible was, in a sense, a search for the wrong thing. Not that Demjanjuk was innocent, but that the demand for a singular, identifiable perpetrator obscured the more troubling reality that the camps were run by ordinary men. Israeli State Prosecutor Michael Shaked notes that the Trawniki card moved Demjanjuk from a case of mistaken identity "into collaboration with the Nazis" (The Conspiracy 21:47). The verdict the spectacle demanded, Ivan the Terrible or innocent man, was the wrong question entirely. Demjanjuk's defense understood this. Faced with a card bearing his name, his photograph, his physical details, and his posting to an extermination camp, their only escape was to argue forgery, to insist the Soviet Union had fabricated the document, to drive a wedge between Ukrainian and Jewish communities in

America. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps not. Demjanjuk was convicted, sentenced to death, and then acquitted. There was no resolution, only a question the proceedings could never grapple with: not whether this particular man operated this particular gas chamber, but what it means that thousands of men like him did, and that most of them disappeared back into ordinary life without ever standing trial at all.

Chapter 4

Sistine Madonna and the Eichmann Trial

In the Book of Job, a mysterious figure appears as God gathers the angels for a discussion. The Accuser stands apart from the counsel, having observed the Earth and its delicate balance, untouched and up close. This figure, an amalgamation of doubt, cynicism, and curiosity, is the remarkably complex foundation upon which modern-day interpretations of evil are built. For most of history, this has been the consensus surrounding evil, the precedent for Alighieri's three-headed Satan, encased in a frozen lake, consuming history's greatest traitors, Brutus and Cassius, and Milton's depiction of the fallen angel with unprecedented depth, where one element remains constant: the individual, shrouded in mystery, who bears a certain indefinable allure. Evil is, at its most fundamental, the perversion of good; a fearsome extreme, widely considered to be a dark and sublime force that transcends the ordinary human condition, a source of aesthetic and emotional experience, eliciting paradoxical feelings of sympathy, awe, wonder, and terror.

Adolf Eichmann's first appearance in the Jerusalem District Court, eleven months after his capture in Argentina, was likewise unremarkable. Peering into the glass tank where he sat, Hannah Arendt saw a slight man, made notable only by an ill-fitting suit, two guards to his left and right, and an occasional nervous tic at the mouth. A surprise, if not a shock, to judges, onlookers, and camera operators who waited with anticipation, half expecting the man to lunge at the walls of his enclosure, he did nothing of the sort. Confined, he was no longer the architect who had orchestrated the capture, transport, and execution of millions with deadly efficiency; he was precisely the opposite, or so he appeared. A walking cliché, strung along by the kind of thoughtlessness that manifests in empty and repetitive phrases. As Hannah Arendt notes in

Eichmann in Jerusalem, “Officiales became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché” (Arendt 1963, 48).

Affected mannerisms and stale, run-of-the-mill expressions had, over time, served as a camouflage and catalyst for Eichmann’s rapid upward trajectory in the Schutzstaffel. Joining in the early thirties as an *SS-Anwärter*, he was quickly appointed to *SS-Mann* and pushed further up the ranks as the years passed. To compensate for his lack of charisma, slight appearance, and suspected Jewish heritage, all for which, according to former Nazi officer Wilhelm Hoettl “he was teased by his colleagues, which always made him angry” (Hoettl 1961, 2), Eichmann adopted banal mannerisms and affected speech, pandering to the Nazi bureaucracy. Often, clichés are put into practice within a bureaucratic state to impose a sense of solidarity within a larger group. To Arendt, this is the normality of the bureaucratic mass, a prescription that undermines our capacity for independent thought and forces us instead toward a herd mentality. The cliché was more than a way to advance in the social hierarchy or to achieve a sense of solidarity. It was also standard practice in the defense of Nazi officers, foot soldiers, and commanders, shifting blame from the accused onto the institution. Eichmann, not surprisingly, attempted the same to support his not-guilty plea. A witness, Otto Winkelmann, former General of the Waffen-SS, addressed the court on behalf of the defense, comparing the charge to a subaltern “who uses his authority unreservedly, without evolving moral or mental restraints upon the exercise of his power,” lacking “scruples about exceeding his authority, if he believes he is acting in the spirit of the person giving him his orders” (Winkelmann 1961, 3). No doubt an attempt at exonerating himself of any wrongdoing, the well-rehearsed speech echoes Eichmann’s disingenuous manner of speech, a manifestation of thoughtlessness.

Striking is Eichmann's apparent inability to accept responsibility for his actions, failing to appreciate human agency and assuming instead his minor position in an overpowering organization. He claims to act not out of hatred or ideology but out of blind obedience to authority and a desire to advance his career, refusing to question the morality of his actions and following orders without regard for the consequences. Nowhere is this more striking than in his defense, where he attempts to absolve himself of any wrongdoing or sin: "My life's principle, which I was taught very early on, was to desire and to strive to achieve ethical values. From a particular moment on, however, I was prevented by the State from living according to this principle" (Eichmann 1961, 1). His passive, almost casual tone shirks responsibility, placing it instead on the state, and not on the thoughtless actor who carried out its deeds. As Jean Amery's torturers were servants of torture, Eichmann was, in Arendt's eyes, a thoughtless agent of the Nazi regime.

We assume evil will reveal itself in the face of an individual, the purveyor of evil, the mastermind. Be it the stereotypical, sadistic Nazi officer, equipped with a black leather jacket and a dangling cigarette, or the grotesque monster spread out on a pile of bones, evil makes itself known. What, then, is to be made of someone who claims, "I am not the monster that I am made out to be. I am the victim of an error of judgment" (1961, 1)? So far as Arendt is concerned, there is a distinction between thoughtlessness and stupidity. Stupidity, she argues, is a lack of intelligence or knowledge, a deficiency remedied by education or experience. Thoughtlessness is a lack of reflection or judgment, a failure to engage with the reality and meaning of one's actions. It is not simply ignorance or error of judgment but a deliberate avoidance of thinking, a refusal to confront the moral and political implications of one's deeds. Thoughtlessness, in its extreme, allows evil to flourish without resistance. It is often the state of a functionary, a cog in a

machine, a disciple of orders, and a perpetrator of atrocities. It is the outcome of being human without being humane.

To better understand what this means, it is helpful to examine some of the controversial experiments that sought to prove Arendt's thesis. The first and most well-known is the Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Philip Zimbardo. Here, twenty-four male college students were randomly assigned to play the roles of either prisoners or guards in a mock prison set up in the basement of a campus building. The experiment, intended to last for two weeks, was terminated after only six days due to the escalating abuse and violence inflicted by the guards on the prisoners, revealing how ordinary people can quickly adopt the behaviors and attitudes of their assigned roles, regardless of their personal characteristics or moral values. The guards became cruel and authoritarian, while the prisoners became passive and submissive. Zimbardo, who acted as the prison superintendent, also became immersed in his role and overlooked the suffering of the participants. Situational factors, like social pressure, group identity, and dehumanization, influenced people's actions as they accepted an oppressive system without questioning its morality or legitimacy.

Through this lens, evil is the contamination of humanity, akin to a fungus that spreads across the world without rhyme or reason, with no root structure or discernible source. Thoughtless and indiscriminate, it appears at random and takes control without resistance. Is it possible that good also manifests itself in the extreme of thoughtlessness? In Australia, a species of seagrass called *Posidonia australis* also spreads like a fungus, acting as one organism. Unlike the fungus, which saps life from the forest floor, the seagrass provides for its environment and brings forth flowers in the ocean depths. Perhaps, as Emmanuel Levinas argues, goodness prevails in small acts of kindness that often reveal a kind of goodness that goes far beyond

established ethics. These are the acts of kindness that elevate us, not to the triumph of God's goodness, but to the triumph of human virtue.

Vasily Grossman sees this in the eyes of the mother and child in Raphael's painting *The Sistine Madonna*. He asks, "Why is there no fear on the mother's face? Why have her fingers not fastened around her son's body so tightly that even death cannot untwine them? Why does she not wish to keep her son from his fate? Rather than hiding her child, she holds him forward to meet his fate" (Grossman 1987, 167). Depictions of adoring mothers and their children are timeless, and their representation in art is not uncommon. Why, then, do we feel such an inherent attachment to this image as a portrayal of triumph over evil? The Sistine Madonna may represent a cliché, "But we, we people, we recognized her, and we recognized her son too. She is us; their fate is our fate; mother and son are what is human in man" (1987, 172). If humanity represents the will to meet and accept our fate, then Eichmann, buried in cliché and dubious defense, is the antithesis. Where Madonna accepts her fate with poise and composure, Eichmann begs and pleads.

The Sistine Madonna, for Grossman, represents the countless women killed in the Holocaust and their selfless, often unconscious acts of kindness, comforting their children in their final moments, underscoring something far more powerful and authentic than a simple cliché, something integral to our understanding of the human condition:

It was she, treading lightly on her little bare feet, who had walked over the swaying earth of Treblinka; it was she who had walked from the "station," from where the transports were unloaded, to the gas chambers. I knew by the expression on her face, by the look in her eyes. I saw her son and recognized him by the strange, unchildlike look on his own face. This was how mothers and

children looked, this was how they were in their souls when they saw, against the dark green of the pine trees, the white walls of the Treblinka gas chambers. (1987, 169).

Goodness is not always overt or extraordinary but manifests in seemingly unremarkable and unconscious acts. It breaks the boundaries of cliché while adhering to its structure. The Madonna's child, held dearly in her arms, may at first appear to be little more than an artistic cliché, but a closer look reveals the emotion, the power, and the passion that go far beyond the portrait itself. In a single frame, conventional as it may be, it becomes clear that "The power of life, the power of what is human in man is very great, and even the mightiest and most perfect violence cannot enslave this power; it can only kill it. This is why the faces of the mother and child are so calm: they are invincible. Life's destruction, even in our iron age, is not its defeat" (1987, 172).

Such is the power of the cliché and its puzzling capacity to represent the masses, conveying a message that somehow reaches into our hearts, minds, and souls. An unchanging painting in the Pushkin Museum, seen by thousands, generation after generation, affects each viewer differently. Gazing upon it, Vasily Grossman was whisked away to the battlefield, to villages, and the train stations where he saw thousands of Madonnas from different worlds, all like the mother of the boy on canvas:

We met his mother more than once in 1937. There she was—holding her son in her arms for the last time, saying goodbye to him, gazing into his face and then going down the deserted staircase of a mute, many-storied building. A black car was waiting for her below; a wax seal had already been affixed to the door of her

room. How mute the tall buildings, how strange and watchful the silence of the ash-gray dawn... And out of the half-light before dawn emerges her new life: a transport train, a transit prison, sentries looking down from wooden watchtowers, barbed wire, night shifts in the workshops, boiled water in place of tea, and bed boards, bed boards, bed boards... (1987, 171).

There is no triumph over evil, but there are acts of kindness in “evil” situations, seldom noticed but never absent. Solidarity of spirit is often pursued by evil but rarely destroyed. And the cliché, as we have seen, is not simply repetition. It is an expression of a profound and universal truth, one that resonates with the human condition. This is the kindness of everyday acts, the kindness of a soldier who allows another to drink from his canteen, or the compassion of a stranger who offers a helping hand to a victim of violence. They may not erase or diminish evil, but they affirm value and dignity. They are the light that shines in the dark, the hope that keeps us going, and the dream that good may prevail. Because “soon we will leave life; our hair is already white. But she, a young mother carrying her son in her arms, will go forward to meet her fate. Along with a new generation of people, she will see in the sky a blinding, powerful light: the first explosion of a thermonuclear bomb, a superpowerful bomb heralding the start of a new global war” (1987, 173).

Chapter 5

A Comfortable Atrocity

A flat-faced house, brown and barren, five stories high. The Van Pels family and Fritz Pfeffer, tucked away in the annex, were free to move about only after the sun had set and the day's bustle mercifully subsided. The Anne Frank house was saved from demolition in 1957 and has since become integral to Holocaust teachings. Perhaps that is because the home is palatable in a way that Treblinka is not. Within, the indescribable enormity of the Holocaust is simplified. The museum renders complete testimony impossible. Gustav Borax, Eliahu Rosenberg, Abraham Bomba, and even Anne Frank's testimony (Agamben adds that testimony is not the property of the survivors, but of those who did not survive, and who entrusted their unspeakable experience to the living. Testimony is thus a transmission of an impossibility, a gesture that points to the limit of language and representation) are incompatible with the modern museum because they reduce the Holocaust into something navigable. The entrance, the steps, the annex, and the gift shop on the way out flow predictably. The museum, like the courtroom, demands resolution.

Resolution is precisely what the Holocaust resists. Agamben's argument against the word holocaust itself is critical here. To name the event, to build institutions around it, is to imply that it can be contained within a framework, that it has edges, that walking through it leads somewhere. The Muselmann, caught between life and death, cannot be housed in an exhibit. The Sonderkommando cannot be labeled. And the contamination Levi notes, the seeping guilt that touched everyone inside the camps, cannot be outlined. The museum offers a rough outline of the event, stripped of its true nature, arranged into rooms. Alan Mintz traces this flattening

through American popular culture, where the Holocaust arrived not through the testimony of survivors but through its dramatization. Regarding Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg*, he notes that the film forces the audience to confront evil, but "once he [Kramer] has accomplished this goal, he does everything possible to lead us away from our revulsion and the troubling questions it raises, and instead he points us in the direction of the grander and more universalist themes of collective and individual responsibility for the evil that humans visit on other human beings" (Mintz 86). The gray zone is raised and then smothered. The audience is made uncomfortable and quickly relieved. What Levi refused to do, what Lanzmann refused to do, what Felman called the irreplaceable and open-ended quality of non-judicial testimony, popular culture undoes in hours.

The Anne Frank House follows suit. The preserved rooms, the staircase, and the open bookcase are not testimony. Otto Frank chose to leave the annex empty after the war, a gesture of grief that many recreations have since reversed. The emptiness Frank intended, the barren state that so wonderfully captures the enormity of the Holocaust, is gone. In its place are "documents, photographs, memoirs, memorials, museums, films, movies [...] so numerous and so intense and so chaotically all-encompassing as to leave little room for the intentionality and self-awareness of memorialization" (Mintz 160). The Anne Frank House is a node in that accumulation, one of thousands of sites where the Holocaust has been made clear. Agamben again identifies this paradox in his argument against the word holocaust, noting that to aestheticize and fetishize the event is to render it perversely fascinating. The museum does not mystify in the way a film production does, but it sacralizes in its own way, through preservation, through the weight of the pilgrimage, and the implication that to walk these rooms is to arrive at some greater understanding. Borax understood something. Bomba's silence in the barbershop

meant something. Rosenberg's encounter with Demjanjuk was powerful. More powerful than a refurbished space can approximate.

The Zone of Interest ends with a cut to the present day. The corridors of Auschwitz are cleaned and lit, and passed through by visitors. Glazer holds the shot with the same attention he paid to the Höss family's garden, to the children playing, and the smoke drifting over the wall. The camp is now a site of remembrance, a place where atrocity becomes navigable. The gray concrete wall remains, but the other side has been refurbished. What Glazer refuses, and what the Anne Frank House cannot refuse, is the camera's indifference. The Höss family's garden was ordinary. The gas chamber was ordinary. Glazer holds all three with the same stillness and, by doing so, suggests that the horror of the Holocaust and the horror of its institutionalization are not always opposites.

Levi's insistence on the gray zone challenges each institution that profits from clarity. The Sonderkommando cannot be judged because the Nazi system was constructed to make it impossible and to contaminate everyone it touched so thoroughly that the question of innocence would never be answerable. Contamination is the real crime that museums and films are incapable of conveying, and courtrooms are unable to try. What remains is the question of what testimony is actually for. Not the juridical kind, which aims at conclusion, but the kind Lanzmann spent nine and a half hours pursuing, the kind Bomba approached and could not finish, the kind Rosenberg carried across a courtroom floor before opening his mouth to speak. Felman calls it a transmission of impossibility, a gesture toward the limit of language. The testimony that matters refuses to resolve, insisting on remaining open, denying the viewer or the reader or the juror the comfortable sense that they now understand. Levi feared that nobody would believe the survivors. Perhaps more frightening is the fact that they were believed, and

that belief was flattened. The gray zone seeped into every framework built to contain the Holocaust, where it lingers today, in the gap between what the testimony strives toward and what the institution can hold.

The courtroom and the museum share a demand for resolution and a demand for the Manichaeian clarity that Levi, Felman, and Lanzmann refuse. The museum routes the visitor from atrocity to survival to remembrance, a predictable narrative, with a surefire ending. And popular culture, as Mintz notes, also takes that shape, universalizing the Holocaust into a lesson on morality and human nature. As if to fuel the already rampant global system of commerce, these institutions provide exactly what we consumers are conditioned to crave: closure and clarity. “Buy this, and everything will make sense. Tour this museum, and you will find some deeper meaning. Watch this film and understand the world around you, but don’t forget to buy your popcorn at intermission.”

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