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Spectacles of Truth-Telling

Part I: The Word

Chapter One: ***Eichmann on the Stand: Self-Recognition and the Problem of Truth***

Eichmann told the Court in Jerusalem that his highest moral obligation was to uphold the oath of allegiance he had taken to the Führer; and this oath, he claimed, he honored faithfully to the end, unlike many of his colleagues who lacked “the courage of their convictions.” When pressed by Judge Reveh about whether maintaining such loyalty in the face of orders that unambiguously entailed mass murder, especially after the Wannsee Conference in 1942, did not provoke an “an inner conflict between [his] duty and [his] conscience,” Eichmann conceded that he had at moments experienced such a conflict. But, in the end, he determined, he had done everything that could be done and was thus without guilt: “I was a tool in the hands of forces stronger than myself.” The Judges pressed on with their questions, but with each response to their queries Eichmann appeared only to confound, deflect, qualify, or deny the facts before the court. Although he claimed, repeatedly, that he was now facing the truth and indeed telling it, from the perspective of the bench there was no real insight to be gained from the account he was willing to give of himself: it was all empty talk and great subterfuge.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt claimed to have heard and seen something altogether different in Eichmann’s account of himself. For Arendt, Eichmann’s “empty talk”—his apparent “thoughtlessness” as she put it—represented a certain logos. And while it may have escaped legal resonance, in this logos Arendt found the beginnings of an answer to a set of political questions about genocide’s preconditions. What I propose in this paper is to offer a reading of the exchange between Eichmann and Judge Reveh that develops along the trajectory of two questions: What is required to interrupt the practices that enable individuals to ignore and mis-recognize (and thus participate in) the processes that produce superfluity rather than plurality as the norm and given of human life together? What is required to interrupt practices of life that destroy its very condition of possibility?

Chapter 2: ***The Problem with InJustice: David Iglesias and the Now Forgotten U.S. Attorney Controversy***

In spring, 2009, former United States Attorney for the District of New Mexico

David Iglesias was invited to the University of California, San Diego to give the DeWitt Higgs Memorial Lecture, an annual event that brings together prominent individuals and publics to consider critical legal issues of contemporary social consequence. The issue about which Iglesias was speaking was the sudden and unprecedented dismissal of eight U.S. Attorneys – of which he was one – by the Bush administration over the course of several months spanning late 2006 and early 2007. When he took to the podium in San Diego to deliver his power-point driven talk – titled “Do the Right Thing: When Good Organizations Do Bad Things” – Iglesias offered listeners a three-fold moral lesson: (1) sooner or later one will find oneself, as Iglesias did, at a moral crossroad; (2) even while the personal and professional consequences of “*doing the right thing*” may be considerable, the consequences of compromising oneself will be even greater; (3) although one is free to choose one’s own path at such a crossroads, from Iglesias’s experience a clear admonition emerges: “*right is right even if no one is doing it and wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it.*”

That Iglesias spoke truth to a power he had devoted much of his adult life to courting, and “*did the right thing*” because in his words, “*it was the right thing to do*” earned him the praise of many in the San Diego audience and, of course in the months preceding his appearance, scores of news pundits and journalists. However, as a member of the San Diego audience and as one of three commentators asked to reflect on his remarks, I confess to having been disappointed and skeptical. And my question to him that night as it remains today is whether the former federal prosecutor ended up “*doing the right thing*” because, as he wants now to insist, *right is always right and wrong is always wrong*; or whether he did the right thing because, in the end, there was really nothing left for him to do? Was it principle that compelled him to act as he now reports or a something altogether less spectacular? – and why might it matter?

Chapter 3: *Wikileaks*

Regimes of truth: what are the conditions that render truth-telling an act of treason?

Part II: The Image

Chapter 4: *Moral Will and the Work of the Image*

Atrocity images have become a mainstay of contemporary human rights discourses. Abject bodies, tortured bodies, bodies in pain, constitute (or at least circulate as) the face of human rights or at least their violation. They provide an evidentiary text that records the absence or suspension of such rights; they entail a rhetoric of justification that works in many useful and adaptable ways to shock, accuse, argue, educate and presumably mobilize on behalf of some universally recognized set of claims by stimulating what journalist Mark Danner has referred to as the “moral will to act.” And, finally, paraphrasing Susan Sontag, they issue a certain challenge: to wit, “can you look at this [...] without flinching?” – even as

both looking and flinching, in Sontag's view, have their own pleasures. (Sontag, 2003, 41). Giorgio Agamben suggests that ours is an age inclined to "put up with anything while finding everything intolerable." (Agamben, 2000: *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, 124-5.) The proliferation and circulation of atrocity imagery in the context of human rights claims and struggles— including, centrally, Holocaust imagery— clearly have something to do with what makes or marks this as such an age. Precisely what this 'something' might be— precisely how atrocity image contributes to this being an age that tolerates what it also finds intolerable— is the central question I want to explore in this essay.

Chapter 5: *A Film Unfinished: Re-rendering the Real*

A Film Unfinished is a documentary, directed by Yael Hersonski and released in 2010 to much critical acclaim. Described as "profound," moving," "mysterious," and "intellectually provocative," the documentary presents to viewers raw, Nazi-era footage that was recovered in 1998 and subsequently identified as "outtakes" from the never-completed propaganda film on the Warsaw ghetto. While nowhere explicitly articulated, the aim of the Nazi propaganda film, known as *Das Ghetto*, appears to have been to capture the daily life of economically privileged, urbanized Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, underscoring the conceits and sharp callousness of the privileged towards the abject misery of their starving compatriots. However, what the newly recovered raw footage from the propaganda film reveals— and what Hersonski's film presents— is precisely how these conceits were manufactured and in what ways many of *Das Ghetto*'s most emotionally charged scenes were staged.

There is much to say about the Hersonski's film and its contribution to efforts that insist that setting the historical record straight must be an on-going project and generational responsibility even as the filmmaker modestly queries the evidentiary value of the documentary form which she herself marshals to tell this story. And it is with questions regarding the evidentiary value of documentary that my discussion of this film begins. But what especially interests me and what this essay is devoted to examining is the pedagogic value which the film claims for itself (in the study-guide that accompanies the DVD)— specifically, its insistence that the lesson to be learned from Hersonski's documentary and the Holocaust more generally concerns empathy. The Warsaw Ghetto in particular and the Holocaust more generally represent what happens or can happen when we fail to empathize with or acknowledge the essential humanity of the other. I take critical aim both at this widely accepted explanation for state-sponsored mass murder and the way in which often grotesque images of human suffering and cruelty are employed to foster and support it. I argue that the presence or absence of particular emotional responses or faculties is not an antidote to genocide or

totalitarian terror. To treat it as an antidote fundamentally depoliticizes (indeed individualizes and privatizes) genocide and renders what is a political failure (a question of solidarity) as primarily a moral one (a question of sentiment).

Chapter 6: *“AIDS is a Mass Murderer”: On Remixing the Past*

In fall 2009, an AIDS awareness and prevention ad campaign was launched in Germany in anticipation of World AIDS Day. This campaign featured richly colored posters that rendered the likenesses of Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Joseph Stalin provocatively engaged in what appears to be sexual intercourse. Situated across the nubile breasts or backs of the women with whom the dictators were engaged was the campaign’s slogan, “Aids is A Mass Murderer.” These posters most critics found tactless and disturbing. But notably absent from the cacophony of responses to them was attention to the particular ways in which the campaign’s iconography mobilized a set of not altogether coherent histories, spanning decades and rife with fossilized if nevertheless still resonant meanings. In this paper, I sort through these histories and argue that while sponsors of the campaign may have intended to reinvigorate a conversation in Germany about AIDS by promoting one set of disruptive meanings, the visual rhetoric of the images calls upon a logic that, in the end, promotes quite another.