



Speak, You Also Jeremy Millar

'(...The life of one or two generations of men may fill one sentence or two pages. The gross outline of four particular or ordinary lives: "He was born in... He died in..." Yes, but between the scream of life and the scream of death? "He was born in... He was insulted for no good reason... He was misunderstood... He died in..." Yes, but there must be more? ... "He settled in the south of France with his wife... He was an antique dealer... He was called 'the Jew'... His wife and son were called 'the wife and son of the Jew'..." Yes, but there must be more? "Sometimes, he spoke in public to brand racism, to affirm the rights of man..." Yes, yes, but there must be more? "He died in a gas chamber outside France ... and his wife died in a gas chamber outside France ... and his daughter came back to France, out of her mind..."¹

Like an aside, whispered from behind the cupped hands of parentheses, the life of a man begins to emerge and starts to dissolve. But how should one tell of a life? What should be said, and what should remain unspoken? What can be remembered, and what... one cannot remember what one has already forgotten... Can one even trust one's own memories or, like the recollections

of Georges Perec in *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, would one have to annotate them subsequently, the clarifications of 'No, in fact...'; '...there's no basis for any of this...'; or 'I would not put things that way now, obviously'?

Each life is worthy of remembrance, worthy of being told, as a political act as much as anything: that this person lived. Such has been the project of much art of the past two centuries, that the life of the common man, so-called, is of as great import, as epic, as that of a King or warrior (one thinks, most readily, of the Irish Jew, Leopold Bloom, wandering through the streets of Dublin that fine June day). One might even write of one's own life, of a life lived — but what of one's death? One certainly cannot write that, or have a relationship to it as one can to one's life, however uncertain that may prove to be. Our deaths are events that lie at the very edge of our understanding, at the very edge of our experience; on these, we must hope others will speak for us.

These are some of the issues that one must consider with regards to these works by the artist Ori Gersht, as he has considered them also. The works have been inspired by the experiences of the Jewish population of Kosov, in what is now Ukraine, during World War II, a period of almost unspeakable

horror. But, of course, speak of it one must: the lives — and perhaps more so, the deaths — of those involved now mutely demand it. The account given to Gersht was written by Baruch Engler, a Zionist activist and prominent member of the Jewish community in the town, and one of the most active members of the ‘Help Committee’ founded by the community to act as a point of contact to the authorities, in the hope of lessening the suffering inflicted by Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators; he was also the last person to go into hiding when Kosov became ‘Judenrein’, cleansed of Jews, in November 1942. In fact, Engler wrote two accounts: ‘Holocaust Days in Kosov, July 1941–November 1942’, and the more personal ‘Kosov Judenrein — Life in the Bunkers and other events, from the day Kosov became Judenrein until I left town at the end of the war’, which records his own experience of going into hiding with his two sons.³ Written simply, with little anger, and an unmistakable urgency, these are accounts, quite often, of other accounts, a story that, in the certainty of being told, must also tell those which might not otherwise have been heard: of those found in bunkers but who, through the bribery of the Committee, were released, one subsequently to live in Vienna, four others in Israel; of the wife and daughter of Haim Hirsch, chairman of the Committee, who settled in Israel also, although the chairman himself was captured in Hungary and turned over to the Germans; of Simha Schneider, who escaped from the first of the Nazis’ ‘aktions’, in which 2180 Jews were taken to the mountain overlooking the town, in the forest of Moskalovka, and let out next to two large pits; they were ordered to undress and then, at the end of a whip, forced to jump into the pit, being fired upon one by one; the children were thrown in alive to save bullets. The killing continued the next day in front of perhaps thousands of local spectators; the schools were closed in order that the pupils could watch too.

Yes, the deaths, the manner of the deaths, make their silent claim. In such cases (the plural is appallingly necessary), the importance lies not only in marking the life that preceded it, but in confirming the death also, as if remembrance could act as a form of resurrection from an anonymous mass. If Engler had not spoken of Hirsh Ernest, his wife and two children, all of whom were murdered in a savage attack upon the bunker in which they were hiding, would their names be known at all now? Perhaps, but Engler could not rely upon it. In this regard, the stuttering biography of Solomon Schwall

(quoted at the beginning), and of Perec’s attempted recording of the early life of his Polish mother, in which he makes three mistakes in the spelling of her surname (and catches himself subsequently), is all the more poignant. She was deported on 11 February 1943 for Auschwitz, and this written trace of her is all that remains.

Between remembrance and forgetting, there is perhaps a middle ground emerging from the half-light in which some are remembered solely for the fact that they had been forgotten. ‘Who remembers the extermination of the Armenians?’ Hitler asked, in a perverse justification for his actions against the European Jews (and others). The question is posed in, indeed posed by, the Canadian filmmaker Atom Egoyan’s 2002 film, *Ararat*. A complex film, even by Egoyan’s relatively elliptical standards, *Ararat* attempts not only to tell the story of the Armenian genocide by the Young Turk government during World War I, but also considers, self-critically, how such a story might be told. This is not to say that a ‘straightforward’ historical recreation might not be enough — the genocide is denied by the Turkish government to this day, and the writer Orhan Pamuk is currently awaiting trial for even discussing it on Turkish radio — but rather to question what a ‘straightforward’ historical recreation might be; a matter of some aesthetic, and ethical, urgency following *Schindler’s List* in 1993. Egoyan’s film is based around the making of another film, also called *Ararat*, by the veteran Armenian director Edward Saroyan (played by Charles Aznavour, a man of Armenian descent like Egoyan himself). Saroyan’s film is itself based upon the (actual) memoir of Dr. Clarence D. Ussher, *An American Physician in Turkey* (1917), and in particular his eye-witness account of the siege of the Armenian population of Van in 1915. Upon learning, at a lecture at the Art Gallery of Ontario, that the young Arshile Gorky was present at the siege, Saroyan and his screenwriter Rouben (Eric Bogasian) decide to write him into their story (enlisting the art historian Ani [Arsinée Khanjian] as a consultant in the process); the painter in his New York studio is a motif that returns throughout the film, as we see him working on a painting based upon a small photograph of himself with his mother. As Ani remarks, ‘He saved her from oblivion, snatching her at last out of a pile of corpses to place her on a pedestal’.⁴

There is certainly a great deal of respect paid to Saroyan, and his *Ararat*, throughout the film — Ani describes him as ‘one of the greatest directors in the world’, although her son, Raffi (David Alpay), counters with ‘Maybe

twenty years ago’; that is, before he was born. In one sense, the respect is only correct, given the gravity of the subject being undertaken, yet Saroyan’s film is quite different from what we would expect of Egoyan himself. Melodramatic, manipulative, bombastic even, it is plainly effective rather than truly affecting. Difficult as some of the scenes of torture, murder and rape are to watch — one can see this on the face of the lead actor Martin (Bruce Greenwood), as he squints, with a degree of narcissism no doubt, at the screen during the film’s premiere — one detects a certain redemptive quality in their presentation also. There is a restrained pride in Saroyan’s manner during the premiere, a pride in his achievement, certainly, and in its remembrance of his own mother, a survivor of the genocide; but there also seems to be a pride in showing such horror. Such an attitude, and the weak empathy of liberal humanism that is its response, that ‘if we think right, feel right, somehow things will be better, even if we do nothing’,⁵ is at the very centre of Egoyan’s self-critical position. In making what is said to be the first film on the subject, perhaps it is enough for Saroyan to show, within the genre of melodramatic historical reconstruction, what is said to have happened; Egoyan knows that while such a response is understandable, it is a response of little understanding. As the French film critic Serge Daney wrote, in comparing Alain Resnais’ documentary masterpiece on Auschwitz, *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog, 1955) with the footage taken by George Stevens upon the liberation of other camps: ‘Justness is the burden of the one who comes “after”; innocence is the terrible grace granted to the first arrived, to the first one who simply makes the gestures of cinema.’⁶

With regard to the horrors of Nazism, we all come ‘after’, and justness is our burden; it is made no lighter in the sharing, and we each carry it alone. Engler clearly felt this, the responsibility that comes with ‘speaking’, and Gersht clearly feels it also, aware that such incidents continue to affect our lives. This awareness is no doubt particularly acute, as Engler’s youngest son, Gideon, is now Gersht’s father-in-law. What must it be like, then, to read in Engler’s account of his obtaining three ropes so that his two sons and himself could take their own lives should their capture become imminent? Indeed, of young Gideon’s anxiety, as a six-year-old boy, that he would be too small to hang himself? At such moments one becomes painfully sensitive not only to the horror of a life taken, but also the lives that could not then be brought to life, including, now, Gersht’s own child. In these works, Gersht must act

with respect to, and in respect of, an event that has not simply passed, but rather continues to pass, and will continue to continue.

‘How do I make it matter?’ The question is asked in *Ararat*, and it finds its reply in the suggestion, ‘You just go there’. It is a question that has surely played through Gersht’s mind, with the insecurity of an artist and the necessity of a son. There is an ambiguity here, though: is the act of ‘going there’ enough, enough to make it matter? Or is this merely a prerequisite, that such a place will not come to matter until it has been visited? What does it mean to visit such a place in an attempt to find one’s own meaning, to find the meaning of oneself, particularly when it is then seen for the first time? Is not what is being attempted here a journey to another time as well as another place, a journey to Gersht’s own past? If so, one must consider the status of such a past, that is, a past that has not actually passed. ‘Places remember events’, as James Joyce wrote in his notebook for *Ulysses* (1924), but are these memories actually perceptible to anybody? Does one not then simply project upon the place the memories one knows of it, rather than *has* of it? The projection screen is certainly suggested by the whiteness of many of Gersht’s photographs, and although this is obviously due, in a number of cases, to the snow-draped landscape, one should recall that such a strange lightness is a formal device that the artist has used previously, most noticeably in *White Noise*, his series of photographs taken in Poland in 1999–2000. Such an approach is not simply the making invisible of the visible, or even its inverse, which would operate under the same representational logic, but rather the necessary representation of the impossibility of the representation that is necessary. Through his use of deliberate overexposure, Gersht not only introduces a sensual tactility to the photographs — a quality that the medium finds notoriously difficult to generate — but also suggests that that which is initially necessary (in this instance, the presence of light in the exposure of a photographic negative) can, in excess, begin to destroy that which it had started to bring about. In his essay on his friend, Paul Celan, Jabès refers to the poet’s work as ‘a language of silence’⁷; one suspects such a language being created in these photographs also.

Is this to say that the Shoah is unrepresentable? Not exactly, although it is to suggest the immense difficulties in doing so. It is not that nothing is known of it; on the contrary, the amount of information that is available, and that continues to be collected, archived, analysed and cross-referenced,

is overwhelming. Rather, there seems to be a conceptual crisis in relation to our understanding of this event which such details do not alleviate; indeed, as Josh Cohen has remarked, 'they seem to exacerbate it — the more facts accumulate, the more stubbornly they resist accommodation to any rule of reason'.⁸ (The same might also be true of Hiroshima, the name of which, like Auschwitz, has been transformed from a topological description to an ethical assault. As Marguerite Duras writes in the preface to her screenplay for Resnais' *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959): 'Impossible to talk about Hiroshima. All one can do is talk about is the impossibility of talking about Hiroshima'.⁹) Perhaps what we are approaching, then, is a sense of the sublime as defined by Immanuel Kant, the attempt to represent something of such overwhelming power that it exceeds our very conceptual abilities. (Of course, the development of the sublime was extraordinarily important to the development of German Romanticism, and in particular to the painter Caspar David Friedrich [1774–1840], whose pictures of mountains and forests have, in turn, been an important influence upon Gersht.) And yet despite these difficulties it is imperative that we — we who were not there — are able to find a means to establish an ethical position, however provisional, from which we can engage with these terrible events. Not to do so, and to insist on the necessity of 'having been present', leads not only to a logical absurdity, but would also be to condemn once again those no longer present.

However, this is not to say that the position of the witness is without its difficulties, far from it; as Primo Levi has written, '[t]here is [a] lacuna in every testimony'.¹⁰ That Levi, whose testimony on surviving Auschwitz has attained an irreproachable integrity, made this statement may seem somewhat startling, yet it does make one aware of the complexities involved in any act of bearing witness; it calls into question the meaning of testimony without necessarily questioning the testimonies themselves. Levi has reflected further upon this position, and it is worth quoting at length:

'I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses... We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would

have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception... We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse "on behalf of third parties," the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy.'¹¹

For Levi, the witnesses, 'the complete witnesses', are those who are no longer able to bear witness, a difficulty that has been explored in recent decades with considerable thought by philosophers and others, Giorgio Agamben and Jean-François Lyotard amongst them. And indeed, when Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub elaborate upon the Shoah as an 'event without witnesses',¹² one cannot help but hear the distant echo of Bishop Berkeley's philosophical conundrum, whether a tree falling in the forest make a sound if there was nobody there to hear it? We can no longer rely on God to act as our proxy, as Berkeley did, to hear in our stead; we are forced to turn, instead, to our own ethical resources, and to maintain our own vigil.

If the conviction of the witness seem rather less certain as a consequence, then this is but one of the many certainties that have been shaken since World War II. However, if the horrors of Nazism were the ruin of all that provided the stable ground upon which we built our ethics, theology, and aesthetics, then perhaps it remains worthwhile to search amongst the debris. As Lyotard has written:

'Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings and objects, but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly or indirectly. The impossibility of qualitatively measuring does not prohibit, but rather imposes in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force. The scholar claims to know nothing about it, but the common person has a complex feeling, the one avowed by the negative presentation of the indeterminate.'¹³



Perhaps the destruction of the instruments allows the greatest possibility of renewal, however. No longer obliged, no longer even *able*, to recreate the conceptual structures that ultimately brought about their own destruction, we are placed in a position where we must conceive of new possibilities of meaning, and of redemption. In art, also, we are encouraged to create a new form of engagement with the terror, and not allow it to be assimilated into our previous representational space, thereby creating what Theodor Adorno referred to, somewhat scathingly, as 'a photograph of the disaster'.¹⁴ Instead, art should 'turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fibre'.¹⁵ Any attempt to represent adequately the disaster in art would traduce the truth of the event. Art as a form of knowledge has collapsed, and in the uncertain hesitations of his photographs and film, Gersht knows this also. Through the subtle — yet forceful — manipulation of colour and density, as well as the dissipation produced by the fast-moving scenery across the open shutter, Gersht is attempting to reduce the level of information contained within the photograph — what one might consider its communicative potential — in order to heighten that which one might consider far more important: that is, its emotional potential. For Adorno, art's refusal of the merely communicative, which he saw as integral to the 'pseudo-scientific' ideology of modern culture was not just imperative for its continued existence in the future, but the source of its power in the present also. Similarly, Gersht's photographs become less evidential — though they undoubtedly require upon veracity of the place existing, and having been visited — and rather more speculative; a place not simply where Gersht has been, but one where he will hope to become again.

Perhaps the second-most well-known reference to Auschwitz by Adorno, after his supposed proscription on the writing of poetry, is to be found in his book *Negative Dialectics*: 'A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler on unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.'¹⁶ If such a challenge to modern thought was indeed made, then it is a challenge that Adorno both took up and clarified for those who followed. What can easily be overlooked upon first consideration is the uncertain terrain in which the addressee is placed. The demand's construction conspires against it ever actually be achieved, as such a judgement lies of necessity in an

unapproachable future. At no point can we ever say, with assurance, that 'Auschwitz will not repeat itself', as to do so would demand an infallible prescience; instead, we are able only to confirm our failings, and the horrors of Rwanda, the Balkans, or more recently Sudan, are historical instances of this (shamefully, there are many others). If we are hoping to arrive at a thought that provides a point of redemption for us as human beings, Adorno seems to say, then such a point lies upon a horizon that must retreat from us as we approach. This is not to render our situation as without hope, however, but rather to give a more accurate sense of the task at hand. Indeed, Adorno seems to take us further and say that there is no single point in history *at all* at which we might find redemption for humanity's sins, nor will there be, and that if we are able to accept this then we may be able to turn our attention elsewhere. Where might this be? Not in a return to Reason, as if Auschwitz were some irrational aberration; the horror of Nazism demonstrates quite clearly the vulnerability of Reason to murderous inversion ('Children were not shot at — to save bullets — they were thrown alive into the pit'¹⁷), the 'essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself';¹⁸ as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas noted. Instead we must consider a new conception of the philosophical Absolute: not one that can be inverted, perverted, to genocidal ends, but rather one that denies the possibility of ends, or, to invoke a term from Maurice Blanchot, 'a *measureless end*'.¹⁹ It is an Absolute that, according to Levinas, "'absolves" itself from the relation in which it presents itself',²⁰ and in doing so prevents its ever coming to completion.

How might one consider this perpetual deferral, of an Absolute that resists its own fulfilment? Perhaps such a demand can be more clearly understood with regards to aesthetics (especially after Romanticism) than ethics, and such a turn is surely more relevant in the present context. According to G.W.F. Hegel, the philosopher with whom we might most closely identify Western philosophy's dream of Absolute Knowledge, the boldness of Romantic art's refusal to conform to 'the essential nature of art proper (i.e. of the Ideal), where the important thing is both a subject-matter not inherently arbitrary and transient, and also a mode of portrayal fully in correspondence with such a subject-matter' led him to question 'whether such productions in general are still to be called works of art'.²¹ Hegel was unable to conceive that

Romanticism might not share his Universal ends and, as such, its practitioners were condemned never to achieve his Absolute. If we allow the Romantics a different path to the Absolute, indeed a different conception of the Absolute *altogether*, then their project can be seen to be far more important than Hegel would ever allow. Such a conception is posited by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in their study of German Romantic literature, although I think it is clear that their notion of a *literary Absolute* is not restricted simply to such works, or even to literature, but can quite easily, and usefully, be applied to artistic practice more generally. For them, 'literature, as its own infinite questioning and as the perpetual positing of its own question, dates from romanticism and as romanticism ... the romantic question, the question of romanticism, does not and cannot have an answer. Or, at least ... its answer can only be terminally deferred, continually deceiving, endlessly recalling the question.'²² (One might consider the questions prompted by Gersht's view through the train window — where are we? Where are we to be found? — as prompting a similar response, a response that is endlessly delayed.)

Central to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's study are the writings of Schlegel, in particular his *Athenaeum Fragments*. Here one can find an elaboration of Romantic poetry as a process of self-reflection, as in an 'endless succession of mirrors'; a process, therefore, without end: 'Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare to try to characterize its ideal.'²³ Romanticism's lack of completion, it should be clear, is not due to the fact that at the time of Schlegel's writing it was the most recent development in artistic production and could, in time, reach such a state of finitude. As Josh Cohen makes clear, within Romanticism the Absolute is *necessarily* incomplete, and 'realizes itself only in not realizing itself'.²⁴ What remains, instead, is the 'incompletion of completion', a state of becoming (rather than being) in which the two seemingly opposing forms are brought together in a manner that is productive rather than counter-productive.

It is this unsteady state, I would suggest, that can be found in the works of Gersht under consideration here, and in the photographs that make up

the series *Liquidation* perhaps most of all. Taken from a train moving through the area surrounding Kosov, these photographs possess a distinct lack of clarity, the blurred movement of the camera transforming trees and buildings into the atmospheric effects so beloved of the German Romantic painters, the mists of Friedrich in particular. These mists were signs of bounteous creation, however, and one can be certain that such divine invention is not to be found here. Instead the scene seems to disappear, hiding in the light, retreating into the shadows, as though it cannot properly be apprehended by that which looks upon it. Would a thickening of the light result in an intense luminosity, or rather a congealed gloominess? Perhaps both, one after the other, the one becoming the other.

In the circumstances, one cannot help but be reminded also of the transportation by train of Jews to the Nazi death camps. This is certainly the case if we are aware that most of the Jews dragged from the attics and cellars of the Kosov Ghetto, on that bright November morning when the town became 'Judenrein', were soon marched the 30 kilometres to Kolomyja, where they were to board a train to their own terminus, the gas chambers of Belzec. The sequence of photographs in this series does not suggest that Gersht has undertaken some macabre re-enactment of this journey, however, and for this we should perhaps be thankful; indeed, the viewer cannot be certain of their situation at all, in the sense of both the location and circumstances in which they have been placed. There certainly seems to be little coherence, whether spatial or temporal: if the broad establishing shot of an horizon at the sequence's start leads one to suspect the gradual unfolding of a narrative, this is denied by the third picture, a spectral vision of a place undergoing a process of liquifaction itself, before retreating further into the distance once more. As we move further on in the sequence, we might see this third photograph as a form of premonition; perhaps, by this time, it is already too late.

I would suggest that this is not actually the case, but rather the manifestation of a narrative impulse one finds hard to suppress when meaning itself is uncertain. Rather, the lack of a point of arrival, even any clear sense of departure, would suggest that such a journey is not only ongoing, but that it was always already underway. As such, one might relate it to the new conception of the Absolute considered previously, a journey necessarily incomplete, of a 'measureless end', and a measureless beginning also.

If this sense of ongoing movement can be said to relate to the impossibility of finding a stable Absolute — whether it be redemption, or meaning — then this is also true of Gersht's film, *The Forest*. Here our view drifts across a density of trees, a density that one cannot but help sense is enveloping. Sunlight disturbs the surface of their trunks, as if some mystical apparition, or a watercolour by Samuel Palmer, and for a moment, amongst the dazzle of pattern, one cannot be entirely sure what it is that one looks upon. And then we are confirmed in our confusion: amidst an explosive cracking of timber a tree falls heavily to the ground, and we cannot see why. What is it that is happening here? Where, indeed, is here?

Here is the woodland near Kolomyja, a remaining fragment of the ancient forest that covered much of continental Europe, and scene of some of the atrocities committed in 1941 and 1942; what is happening here can be spoken of with far less certainty. The slow, ceaseless drift of the camera does suggest the 'state of becoming' referred to by Schlegel with regards to Romantic art, and it is here that we might find its moral sense also. To do so, however, we must turn to a previous discussion on such matters to help us find a way out of the undergrowth.

In 1959, a group of members of the editorial board of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* — Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer — took part in a round-table discussion on the state of French cinema, which was recorded and subsequently published in the journal. The discussion was prompted by the recent release of Resnais' *Hiroshima, mon amour* and it was following a question on the moral and aesthetic nature of the film that Godard made the following provocative statement: "Tracking shots are a question of morality."²⁵ The discussion then turned immediately to the 'literary' nature of the film (usually a pejorative statement, but here a compliment) and the matter is left hanging, so we cannot be completely sure what Godard meant by such a declaration. Perhaps Godard himself was uncertain, and was simply paraphrasing a line from an article by Luc Moullet's on Samuel Fuller (who as a Corporal had filmed the liberation of Falkeneau) recently published in *Cahiers*, that 'morality is a question of tracking shots'²⁶; we cannot be certain, but Godard's dictum (because it became Godard's) was to become an important point of reference on the refusal to distinguish between form and content. As Serge Daney was later to reminisce (he was only fifteen in 1959), 'Godard's famous formula

about a tracking shot being a "moral issue" was in my eyes one of those truths which one could no longer question.'²⁷

The film that prompted this reminiscence for Daney is one that he has not seen: Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo*, a film about concentration camps from 1960. 'Am I the only one who has never seen this movie and yet hasn't forgotten it?'²⁸, Daney asks, speaking of a film 'whose title like a password has accompanied my life of cinema'. Daney came to know of *Kapo* through a short review, 'On Abjection', written by Jacques Rivette and published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 120, in June 1961. As Daney recalls: 'In his review, Rivette did not tell the story of the movie. He merely described one shot in one sentence. The sentence, engraved in my memory, said this: "Look however in *Kapo*, the shot where Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbwire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body — carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final framing — this man is worthy of the most profound contempt." Thus a simple camera movement was the one movement not to make. The movement you must — obviously — be abject to make. As soon as I read those lines, I knew the author was absolutely right.'²⁹

How might one represent such a violent death, a human catastrophe, without a descent into abjection? Daney was to find the means in a film that had, the previous year, been awarded the accolade of best film of 1959 by the editorial board of *Cahiers*, just ahead of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari*. (The film was actually released in Japan in 1953, the year in which it won the Silver Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival). Mizoguchi was renowned, amongst other things, for his extraordinarily graceful tracking shots across landscape scenes, like an eye gliding over the surface of a Chinese scroll; it was such a shot, as he remembers it at least, that for Daney was exemplary of the morality of camera movement. Fleeing with her young son from an attack on her village (the film is set during the civil war of the sixteenth century), Miyagi comes across some starving soldiers upon a country back road and is attacked, their meagre rations taken. It is only then, as if inadvertently, or 'by a stupid reflex', that one of the soldiers, stumbling with hunger, stabs and kills her with his spear. As Daney was to recall, this event seems so accidental that the camera almost misses it. Rather than a failure of the director, or a diminishing of the death, however, the shot possessed a nobility unattainable by Pontecorvo:

'By dissociating the movement of the camera from the movements of the actors, Mizoguchi did the exact opposite of *Kapo*. Instead of a petrifying glance, this was a gaze that "seemed not to see", that preferred not to have seen and thus showed the event taking place *as an event*, ineluctable and indirectly. An event that is absurd and nil, absurd like any accident and nil like war — a calamity that Mizoguchi never liked. An event that doesn't concern us enough for us not to carry on, shameful. For I bet that at this precise moment, every spectator knows *absolutely* what the absurdity of war is. It doesn't matter that the spectator is a Westerner, the movie Japanese and the war medieval: it is enough to shift from pointing with the finger to showing with the gaze for this knowledge — furtive and universal, the only knowledge cinema is capable of — to be given to us.'³⁰

In fact, Daney's recollection of the shot is not entirely accurate: the camera follows Miyagi's movements quite closely, and it is the stumbling uncertainty of the soldier's movements, and the fatal thrust being blocked from our view by Miyagi's body itself, that gives the event its undeniable ambiguity. These literal inaccuracies led Daney to discover an important interpretive truth, however. If death is one of those subjects that must be approached, in Rivette's view (and with Daney's concordance) with 'fear and trembling', then this is the difference between Mizoguchi and Pontecorvo. The Japanese director is scared by war and it 'is this fear, this desire to vomit and flee, that triggers the stunned panoramic shot'. The Italian, on the contrary, is appalled by the camps purely on an ideological level: 'This is why he can make his presence felt in the scene with an extra pretty tracking shot.'³¹

The relevance of this excursion into the film criticism of the *nouvelle vague* to a consideration of Gersht's film installation, *The Forest*, should now be clear. In this work, too, we see a pan that glides with a shamed grace across the scene, regardless of what occurs before it, the rending fall of a tree or the dappling of light across leaves and branches. Are such events comparable, and deserving of an equal response? One immediately thinks not, that death — and its representation — is more worthy of our attention, of an attention more worthy, than the ongoing event of life. Such a response is understandable, although we should understand, also, that it is wrong. To represent the falling of the trees in a manner different to their continued

standing, to shift the camera's gaze as they fall out of frame, would be to suggest such an event, this symbolic death, lies not at the limit of our understanding but can be heightened in some way, its experience augmented. On the contrary, Gersht's steadily moving camera is not indicative of a lack of compassion, as one might initially suspect, a disregard for the suffering of others, but rather an acknowledgement of extremity of the catastrophe within human experience, and the 'fear and trembling' that it provokes in Gersht, as in Mizoguchi and Resnais previously. It is this that prevents the shot becoming a demonstration of an individual's overcoming of death — the excess of Pontecorvo's tracking shot which might be considered, to use a term from earlier, a new Absolute — and instead a collective movement, smooth yet trembling, towards an absolution that can never come to completion. In Daney's fine phrase, it is 'this fear that makes this moment just and therefore able to be shared'.³² To attempt to go beyond this place would be a profanity visited upon those who can only remain.

It is with such a practice that Gersht takes up the challenge identified by Adorno that we considered previously, a challenge that does not allow us to arrive at a state of Absolution, but rather compels us to an ongoing moral vigilance. This paradox reminds me of the 'terrible tenderness' Jean Domarchi identifies at the centre of Resnais' work, something I think that we can find in Gersht's practice also. Indeed, Domarchi's comments on Resnais, made during the discussion prompted by *Hiroshima, mon amour* cited earlier, seem to possess an extraordinary relevance, indeed a descriptive quality even, to *The Forest* and as such they demand to be quoted at length:

'Essentially it is explained by the fact that for him society is characterized by a kind of anonymity. The wretchedness of the world derives from the fact of being struck down without knowing who is the aggressor. In *Nuit et bouillard* the commentary points out that some guy born in Carpentras or Brest has no idea that he is going to end up in a concentration camp, that already his fate is sealed. What impresses Resnais is that the world presents itself like an anonymous and abstract force that strikes where it likes, anywhere, and whose will cannot be determined in advance. It is out of this conflict between individuals and a totally anonymous universe that is born a tragic vision of the world. That is the first stage of Resnais' thought. Then there comes the second stage that consists of channelling

this first movement. Resnais has gone back to the romantic theme of the conflict between the individual and society, so dear to Goethe and his imitators, as it was to nineteenth-century English novelists. But in their works it was the conflict between a man and palpable social forms that was clearly defined, while in Resnais there is none of that. The conflict is between man and the universe. One can then react in an extremely *tender* way towards this state of affairs. I mean that it is no longer necessary to be indignant, to protest or even to explain. It is enough to show things without any emphasis, very subtly.³³

Such subtlety is perhaps one of the most obvious characteristics of Gersht's work, the photographs and film that form this project, but more than this, the manner in which he approaches the subject, with a sensitivity born of respect for that which has come — and gone — before. From the midst of an almost unimaginable horror, we are able to find the means, indeed the imperative, to begin the ongoing development of a new moral engagement. Such a journey will entail the passage through darkness and light, as through night and day, and we must attempt to create a tone appropriate to both. As Celan writes in the poem that gives this essay its title:

'Give it shade enough,
give it as much
as you know has been dealt out between
midnight and midday and midnight.
...
He speaks truly who speaks the shade.'³⁴

- 1 Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, Volume 1: *The Book of Questions, The Book of Yudel, Return of the Book*, trans. R. Waldrop (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1991), pp.166–7, quoted in Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz — Art, Religion, Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.134. I am indebted to Cohen's book for its insights into how one might think of, and represent, the horror of the Shoah specifically, and the catastrophe more generally.
- 2 Georges Perec, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, trans. David Bellos (London: Collins Harvill, 1989). The examples quoted can be found on pp.31 and 39.
- 3 Unpublished documents. These were kindly passed on by the artist.
- 4 This line of dialogue is actually taken from a biography of Gorky that acted as an important source point of reference for Egoyan's film: Nouritza Matossian, *Black Angel — A Life of Arshile Gorky* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), p.217
- 5 Halla Beloff, *Camera Culture* (Oxford: Basil, Blackwell, 1985), pp.120–1
- 6 Serge Daney, 'The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*', trans. Laurent Kretschmar, <www.senseofcinema.com/contents/04/30/kapo_daney.html>. Originally published in *Traffic*, no.4, Autumn 1992, reprinted in Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, *Persévérance* (Paris: P.O.J., 1994), pp.15–39. I am grateful to Michael Newman's essay, 'Interrupting the Pan: Marine Hugonnier's "Arianna"' for bringing this essay to my attention. Steven Bode and Katrina M. Brown (eds.), *Marine Hugonnier* (London and Dundee: Film and Video Umbrella, and Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2004), pp.31–41
- 7 Edmond Jabès, *Le Memoire des Mots — Comment je lis Paul Celan* (Paris: Fourbis, 1990), p.14, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.113
- 8 Cohen, *ibid.*, p.1
- 9 Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p.9
- 10 Primo Levi, *Conversazioni e interviste* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), pp.215–6, quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz — The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p.13
- 11 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Random House, 1989), pp.83–4, quoted in Agamben, op. cit., pp.33–4. The 'Muslims, to whom Levi refers are not followers of Islam, but rather the literal translation of *Muselmänner*, a term used in Auschwitz to refer to those who were not only 'giving up', physically and mentally, but were 'given up on', by their fellow inmates: the 'living dead'. Agamben explores the position of the *Muselmänner* at the lacuna of testimony at some length in the chapter *The Muselmann*, op. cit., pp.41–86. In it he states that although there is little agreement on its origin, '[t]he most likely explanation of the of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God' (p.45), the supposed fatalism of Islam here becoming the *de facto* fatalism of those who must accept their fate as they are no longer in a position to alter it. As Agamben remarks: 'In any case, it is certain that, with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews.' (*ibid.*) Agamben's consideration of the term is made solely from within the confines of the camp; how the use of this term might be considered from a contemporary viewpoint could make a fascinating study.
- 12 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony — Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), quoted in Agamben, op. cit. p.35
- 13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend — Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.56
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.19
- 15 *Ibid.*, p.2
- 16 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p.465, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.4
- 17 Baruch Engler, 'Holocaust Days in Kosov, July 1941 – November 1942'
- 18 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Prefatory Note — Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', trans. S. Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1990), quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.5
- 19 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. E. Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.92, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.5
- 20 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.50, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.5
- 21 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Volume Two of *Werke*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), p.2 and *Aesthetics*, trans. T.M. Knox (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press), p.596, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., pp.19–20
- 22 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute — The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. P. Bernard and C. Lester (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), p.83, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.20
- 23 F.W. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), pp.29–30, quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p.20
- 24 Cohen, op. cit., p.21
- 25 Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, 'Hiroshima, notre amour', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 97, July 1959, extracts reprinted in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma — The 1950s • Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.62
- 26 Luc Moullet, 'Sam Fuller — sur les brisées de Marlowe', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 93, March 1959, reprinted as 'Sam Fuller: In Marlowe's Footsteps', in Hillier, op. cit., p.148
- 27 Daney, op. cit.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Jean Domarchi in Hillier, op. cit. p.68
- 34 Paul Celan, 'Speak, You Also', in *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p.101