

Mourning and Mania

Roe Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun*

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Live and Die as Eva Braun is comprised of a brief text and sixty black-and-white works on paper. In exhibition, the text is printed in white letters on black, column-like strips which run from floor to ceiling. The paintings, clustered in a salon-like fashion, hang between each of the text-columns.

The text, divided into ten discrete "scenes," presents itself as an incongruous advertisement brochure. Written in the second person, it purports to offer its prospective client an unlikely entertainment experience: to become, by means of virtual-reality, Hitler's mistress. The following VR scenario is described: the viewer transforms into Eva Braun, experiences moments of romantic intimacy with the dictator, commits

suicide, and then takes a short trip to hell.

Whereas the text guides the viewer from one event to the next, the paintings do not follow a linear narrative. Instead, they present a delirious array of images, and draw from a multiplicity of sources. Altogether, the project aims to address the memory of the Holocaust in a bizarre, perhaps even obscene, manner. It seems to insist that we identify not with the victims of the extermination camps, but with the victimizers. Instead of horror we are given humor. In place of morbidity we find sexuality. In almost every way, *Live and Die as Eva Braun* presents us with an act of memorialization that seems to have been turned inside out.

I.

Memorials and Melancholy

In 1986, Primo Levi put forth, in the simplest terms, the fundamental predicament faced by those who take it upon themselves to memorialize the Holocaust.

On many occasions, we survivors of the Nazi concentration camps have come to notice how little use words are in describing our experiences... In all our accounts, verbal or written, one finds expressions such as "indescribable," "inexpressible," "words are not enough...." This was, in fact, our daily thought [in the camps]: that if we came back home and wanted to tell, we would be missing the words.¹

If for a survivor the experience was "inexpressible," then the problem is doubled for those of us who did not endure it. How are we to memorialize this event? How do we express an experience that even the survivor finds inexpressible? This is the paradox that confronts all creators of Holocaust memorials. Without

facing up to this impossible predicament, without acknowledging the inevitable failure to express what was not experienced, the memorialist faces a far graver danger – that of vulgarizing the event. This amounts to the recognition (still unheeded in some of the most visible quarters) that memorials which claim to express the experience are, by definition, corrupt. Thus, since no expression can hope to identify with the experience, all respectful Holocaust memorials struggle to place themselves in the impossible space between these two mutually exclusive postures: between expression and identification. One cannot have both. It is here as well that Roe Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun* struggles to place itself.

But its placement within the context of mainstream memorials is clearly unique. And, thus, although Rosen's project treats a number of complex issues, it seems to me that the theme most in need of elaboration at this moment is the aspect of the project that addresses itself to the question of mourning and memorializing the Holocaust. To do so, we will have to situate *Live and Die* within the context of recent memorials.

When we look at the history of Holo-

¹ Primo Levi, "Revisiting the Camps," in *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, edited by James E. Young (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), p. 185.

caust memorials, we find, with great consistency, a considerable respect for the claim of unspeakability put forth by those like Levi. In fact, it is this respect alone that unites the vast array of recent monuments.

Consider, first, the *Monument Against Fascism* by Esther and Jochen Gerz. In 1987 the artists erected a twelve-meter high, four-sided column in the center of Harburg, Germany. Residents and visitors were invited to scratch whatever they wished into the soft, lead-covered surface of the steel monument. After some time, the “defaced” portion of the column was lowered into the ground, thereby silencing the inscribed words and images and replacing them with a newly pristine surface of lead. This process of scratching and lowering was performed seven more times, until the monument was sunk entirely underground. No longer visible at all, the monument will forever register the now mute identification of those who

passed by it and deposited something of themselves onto its surface.

A similarly mute monument appears on the low hill at Yad Vashem: *The Children's Memorial*, created in 1987 by Moshe Safdie Architects, Ltd. The grid of four-sided columns of Jerusalem stone stand in silent identification with the children who were cut down before reaching maturity (the stones identify themselves with children in being of unequal height and rough-hewn at their tops – where we would expect to find finished capitals, we find instead the trace of an absence). Here, as with the *Monument Against Fascism*, the memorial presents us with mute identification, the remains of an experience without an expression.²

A third example comes from the United States Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C. As designed by the principal architect of the museum, James Ingo Freed, the heart of the building (as well as the final site explored by the museum's

² The use of the grid is probably the most frequent form taken by recent Holocaust monuments. If I had the room I could cite many more, of which one of the most paradigmatic is Sol Lewitt's *Memorial to the Missing Jews*, erected in 1989 in the Platz der Republik, in Hamburg-Altona, Germany. Here, a black wall of faux-concrete bricks blocks the view and direct access to the square's most prominent building. Both in its form and position, Lewitt's monument manufactures blindness, promotes silence. For an account of the grid's particular propensity toward silence – a propensity that we can now understand as well-suited for use by Holocaust memorials – see Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 8–22.

visitors) is configured as an enormous empty space, framed on its six sides by a double row of wax candles. Again, the structure is coordinated around expressionlessness and repetition.³

A complete account of such memorials would be long. It would include the vast empty space devoted to the memory of the Holocaust in Daniel Libeskind's architectural plan for the "Extension of the Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department," and the unbuilt proposal by Louis Kahn (a grid of six cubes for the six million killed), as well as works such as the "*Negative-Form*" *Monument to the Aschrott-Brunnen*, 1987, by Horst Hoheisel, a sculpture that reads as non-existent from the town square.

The unifying feature of these monuments should be clear by now: the primary *injunction*, "Never forget," is enacted with regard to the primary proscription, "the experience is inexpressible," by adopting the following position-of-memorialization: *Identify without Expression*. Build the blank monument. Of course, strictly speaking, like any other utterance, blankness is an expression. Yet blankness is unique in that it offers an

empty space meant to be filled with the viewer's own self-projection – in other words, an expression of its own will to silence. The principal philosopher of this position-of-memorialization is Theodore Adorno, who, in what is probably his most well-known claim, insisted that in the face of the Holocaust only silence is appropriate. That Adorno later became frustrated with this position is a sign of the impossible bind placed upon those who insist on responding to both the injunction and the proscription that frame our modes of remembrance. (How much more satisfying it would be to ignore one or the other...)

What we find when we think of these memorials in terms of their unifying attributes – when we highlight the connections between the manifest will-to-silence, the propensity for blank identification, the inclination toward endless repetition, and, in those who have reflected upon the paradox of this position, a sense of frustration that accompanies such gestures – is that this predicament, this paradox, has a clear and articulate correlate in the field of psychoanalysis. That correlate is *melancholy*.

³ See the comments by Freed on his desire to maintain a sense of inexpressibility through the use of "ambiguity," and even "banality" in the museum's various components. *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (see above, n. 1), pp. 89–101.

In "Mourning and Melancholia,"⁴ Freud presented the two as typical responses to the loss of a loved object. Both responses exhibit nearly identical emotions: "painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity." The only difference between normal mourning and pathological melancholy is that the latter also experiences "a lowering of the self-regarding feeling to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment." Subsequent analysts and physicians have come to see the dividing line between mourning and melancholy as less sharply distinguished; today, melancholy is seen as a particular *moment* within the mourning process. In other words, it makes sense to bypass Freud's pathologization of melancholy and speak instead of the condition in a neutrally descriptive manner. Melancholic-mourning is that form of mourning which manifests a composite of emotions, including painful dejection, loss of interest in the outside world, a loss of a capacity to love (to *feel*), and lack of activity on the part of the mourner.

With Freud's description in mind, we find that melancholia closely resembles the position taken by mainstream memorials. The lack of affect implied in the blank grid, the evocation of painful dejection, the will-to-silence that serves to sever our relations with the world outside, as well as the drive for a kind of self-punishment – all these components lead us to figure the discourse of mainstream Holocaust memorialization as determined by the position-of-mourning defined by melancholia. In other words, it is through the melancholic position that Holocaust memorials have found a way to follow both the injunction to remember and the condition that this remembrance must respect the inexpressibility of the experience.

II.

The Manic Memorial

So where does this leave us with respect to the project under discussion here? How is it that *Live and Die as Eva Braun* relates the memorials above, for surely it exhibits little in the way of melancholy? Indeed, at first glance we seem to be faced with an utterly inverted memorial: where main-

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," [1917] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, vol. 14 (1947), pp. 243–58.

stream memorials identify with the victims, Rosen has us identify with the victimizers; where the mainstream memorials forgo expression, here we have something hyper-expressive. Where the former are austere and reserved, the latter is obscenely excessive. Indeed, at the very core of the text's scenario (the fifth scene, right in the middle of our travel-through-Eva) we are actors in a pornographic film. This inversion of the position-of-mourning is manifest as well in the very structure of the paintings' display: by alluding to and yet resisting the expected grid-format, the work signals its inverted relation to the mute identification of mainstream modernist memorials. Instead of regular repetition, the paintings of *Live and Die* employ a wide range of images and associations, from appropriations of Nazi propaganda to the artist's own family photos. And although the paintings are united in being limited to black, white, and gray, they employ a number of different techniques and recall a variety of historical styles, from the meticulously prepared to the childishly scribbled, from the simple line-drawings of amateur illustrators to the fine details of complex surface patterns.

In all, *Live and Die* seems to resemble everything that a legitimate act of memorialization is not. In fact, in some of its

most conspicuous features, it calls to mind what is probably the most prominent memorial of this century – Picasso's *Guernica* – only to disavow this connection at the very same moment. Both works restrict themselves to black and white, but whereas *Guernica's* self-imposed limitation serves to suggest classical restraint and moral authority, there is something ironic, if not gratuitous, about *Live and Die's* coloristic stricture: by referring to banal family photos, outmoded, monochrome computer screens, and mass-produced illustrations and cartoons, Rosen's use of black and white leads us about as far from classical rectitude and moral authority as one can imagine. Another crucial distinction between these two works concerns their expressiveness. In *Guernica*, grief, pain and death are visible on the painting's uppermost surface, and these emotions are presented as direct and sincere. In *Live and Die*, all expression is diverted, inverted, travestied, tickled and ironized; we glimpse grief and pain only indirectly. Where *Guernica* is made of riven images, individual fragments united within the frame of the canvas, *Live and Die* works with individual unities taken from other sources only to make them fragmented and dispersed along the wall. And whereas Picasso's project seems to have aimed

at a cathartic release of emotion, Rosen's work insists that no such catharsis is possible.

Having detailed the most conspicuous ways in which *Live and Die* presents itself as an inversion of mainstream memorials we can return to Freud's text to make more sense of its anti-melancholic position. Although Freud chose to title his study "Mourning and Melancholia," he could well have titled it "Mourning, Melancholia and *Mania*," for it was clear to him that all three belong to the same complex of emotions, all three stem from the same experience of loss and grief. In fact, near the close of the essay, Freud insists: "the content of mania is no different from that of melancholia... [both] are wrestling with the same 'complex.'" Moreover, the "tendency of melancholia to change round into mania – a state which is the opposite of it in its symptoms," was for Freud, "the most remarkable characteristic of melancholia."⁵ With

this observation we find the means to understand the peculiar components of *Live and Die*. It reengages the act of mourning at the moment when the melancholic position "changes round into mania," which nonetheless "wrestles with the same complex."

With mania thus understood as the paradoxical complement to the mainstream melancholic position we can now lay bare the consequences of adopting one or the other. Where melancholy produces silence, mania produces loquaciousness. Where the former presents itself through repetition, the latter manifests itself through wild flights of incompatible notions and actions. Where melancholy is non-expressive, mania is ironic. Where one is the response of an identification without expression, the other is the response of an expression without identification. We can tabulate the distinctions between the two positions in the following way:

⁵ Ibid., p. 253.

Melancholic

Identification without Expression

Necessary but Insufficient

Motionless

Mute

Depressed

Anti-social

Non-expressive (directionless)

Non-sense

Leads to Repetition

Accepts Frustration

(This last distinction is perhaps the most provocative; we will approach it at the end of this essay.)

Manic

Expression without Identification

Sufficient but Excessive

Hyperactive

Chattering

Giddy

Gregarious

Ironic (indirect)

Absurdity

Leads to Delirium

Accepts Obscenity

In rejecting the will-to-silence of the melancholic position, *Live and Die* adopts in its stead the gregarious, ironic, absurd, excessive, obscene position we understand as characteristic of mania. This is the position that insists upon *expression*, but knows full well that its expression is in no way an *identification*. Rosen's work responds to the need for memorialization, but does so "from the other side," something like the way in which Alice sees the world from the other side of the looking glass. From this other side, the grief is real even while the experience itself is virtual. Hence *Live and Die*'s subtitle: "An Illustrated Proposal for a Virtual-Reality

Scenario Not to Be Realized."

The scenario takes place in a bunker, underground – a fitting site. We are forced below ground, in a maze where nocturnal animals dwell (rats most prominently). Under ground we live in an artificial world. Our light is electric, our living quarters are cell-like. Our internal clocks, which, above ground, guide us between wakefulness and sleep, are now subject to manipulation and artificiality. We are led to the core of the bunker through a labyrinth of swastika-shaped tunnels. Our identification with the victimizers is drummed into us as we march downward and away from the

death that piles up above us. Like a figure in a dream, the bunker is a condensation of a number of images. To mention only some of its connotations, the bunker may stand for: (1) that part of us which lies buried beneath the light of reason, the part of us that is invisible even to ourselves; (2) the past, buried beneath the accretions of history; (3) the site of the repressed, of that which is too painful to expose to the light of day, that which we can neither live with nor do without; (4) a figure of individual and collective development (the underground is the primitive, the primal. To go down into the bunker is to regress); (5) a burial site, the plane of death, of absolute loss.

Thus, the bunker is an “impossible” locus; it cannot be made single, whole, uncontradictory. But if the bunker is our first confrontation with the “impossible” – the manic figure in which a field of non-rationally coordinated images and referents collide – it is only the first. There are many more that populate the images of *Live and Die as Eva Braun*. We find other such figures in the twisted appropriation of German Romantic landscape painting (the pissing mountain symbolizes a revolt of the land against its abuse as *Heimat* [homeland], even as it serves as a twisted illustration of a sex scene between the lovers). We find it as well in the delirium

of images that take us through nightmarish German children’s illustrations (*Max and Moritz*, *Red Riding Hood* and more), Japanese pornography (Utamaro), Nazi art and emblems (by Arno Brecker and others), esoteric Christian imagery, family photos laboriously translated into paint, to the obsessively produced panoply of decorative designs. And we find it in the text as well – in Scene 4, for example:

You lie on your side, your eyes open. Adolf’s back is heaving in front of you. The bluish-white, bespeckled skin is covered with thick, black hairs, stemming and streaming with haunting regularity, like trees in a man-made forest. In between the trees the ground is covered with pink crannies, brown mushrooms, bushes and pores, and all of this magnificent turf is rising and falling rhythmically, slowly.

The false power that is characteristic of the manic position – the false sense that one has overcome the loss – appears in *Live and Die* as well. As our VR experience concludes in Scene 10, the delirium fades under the grip of a benign pair of masseur’s hands: “Hell is fake, Hirrohisso [the masseur] is real. No harm was

meant. You are you. Please come again.”

But of all the figures of mania at work in *Live and Die*, there is one that floats above the rest: it is the little mustache that Hitler wore and that appears almost everywhere throughout the paintings: gracing a childhood photo of the artist as a toddler, beneath the button-nose of a cuddly teddy bear, on the smiling faces of dancing sunflowers, as well as on the various portraits of bats, cats and household utensils. Like the bunker, the mustache is a multiple cipher. It is the condensation of a mass of incommensurate components. As it migrates from face to face, it recalls the wild flights of thought and action that are characteristic of mania. It is a sign of the delirium of the mourner who has lost contact with the “real” world – now all things remind him of the lost object. Everything has Hitler’s mustache. All things have the same face. And yet the mustache also signals something quite different. It stands as a primal means of negation, a wild cry of “No” against a crime for which no greater articulation makes sense. It is also an act of childish defacement, impotent, like the plea which comes too late, is too weak to be heard, too frail to effect change. And it is also something altogether different: as it stands out against the pristine surface in which it is superimposed, the rapidly

scrawled mustache functions as the expressive stroke of the modern artist, a sign of artistic presence. And yet it is also *not* the sign of the presence of the artist, but of modernist painting, of the discourse into which all painters are indoctrinated: it is an utterly conventional and therefore *impersonal* sign. It is the sign of abstraction, of painterliness, of the flat surface of post-cubist painting. With this last association, the floating mustache seems to assert that no “true” language exists in which to mourn the Holocaust. For we are *taught* how to mourn, just as we are taught how to paint. There is nothing “real” or “natural” about it. The language of our mourning is not our own, it is given to us. This is perhaps the most repugnant of all the implications of *Live and Die*. Our mourning is clichéd. It is not real. It is virtual. It is a game. A game we know how to play well by now. We are good at it and we know it. And we teach it to others so they will be good at it, too. This is the “obscene” aspect of Rosen’s work. But it is also the obscene aspect of Holocaust mourning, an aspect all-too-often ignored or suppressed in mainstream memorials.

III.

Risking the Obscene

In reflecting on *Shoa*, Claude Lanzmann remarked: "It is enough to formulate the question in the simplest terms, to ask, 'Why were the Jews killed?' The question immediately reveals its obscenity. There is really an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the years of the elaboration and the production of *Shoa*."⁶

This injunction against the "obscenity" of understanding is one that will not hold. We cannot avoid the struggle to understand. And thus, we cannot avoid the obscenity that is the consequence of this task. To submit to Lanzmann's "iron law" – to repress the obscene – is to repress the conditions in which we continue to mourn. There is no resolving this riven state. In *Live and Die*, obscenity appears in a multiplicity of figures – in pornography, in humor, in elation, in identification with the victimizer. And like the underground bunker, the migrating mustache, the obscene is a multiple cipher. It is the figure of the obscenity that was the Holocaust, the obscenity that drives the desire

to make sense of this event, and finally, the obscenity that is the never-ending work of mourning. Never Forget – an obscene injunction.

Now, a half-century after the Holocaust, we are no longer ignorant of the paradoxes involved in mourning and memorializing it; what *Live and Die as Eva Braun* insists is that we no longer ignore the consequences of these paradoxes. To do so would only be to replace one obscenity with another.

⁶ Claude Lanzmann, "Hier ist kein Warum," in *Au sujet de Shoa: le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), p. 279. Cited in translation in Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 209.