

Remembering “Planet Auschwitz” During the Cold War

IN THE SUMMER OF 1961, Auschwitz survivor and author Yehiel Dinur, who wrote under the pseudonym Ka-Tzetnik 135633, took the witness stand at the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Since the end of the war, Dinur had published several novels describing his experiences during the Holocaust. The first, *Salamandra*, written while the author was living in a displaced persons camp in Italy, takes its name from a mythical, lizard-like creature capable of surviving exposure to fire. His second book, the graphic and controversial *House of Dolls*, was published in 1953 and remains one of the most widely circulated novels written in Hebrew about the genocide of Europe’s Jews. When asked at the Eichmann trial why he chose to publish under the name Ka-Tzetnik, the witness presented himself as a kind of mystic-anthropologist back from a world he called “the Auschwitz planet” with its own inhabitants, atmosphere, and natural laws. The name, he explained, “is not a pen name.”

I do not regard myself as a writer writing literature. This is actually a history of the Auschwitz planet, the chronicles of Auschwitz. I myself was at the Auschwitz camp for two years. The time there is not a concept as it is here on our planet. Every fraction of a second has a different wheel of time. And the inhabitants of that planet had no names. They had no parents and they had no children. They were not clothed as we are clothed here. They were not born there and they did not conceive there. They breathed and lived according to different laws of nature. They did not live according to the laws of this world of ours, and they did not die. Their name was a number, “Ka-Tzetnik” number so-and-so.¹

ABSTRACT During one of the most famous moments of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, author and Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur took the witness stand in the summer of 1961 to deliver a brief and enigmatic testimony about what he termed “the Auschwitz planet.” Over the next two decades, as international Holocaust consciousness re-emerged in the shadow of the Cold War, writers, thinkers, and filmmakers would elaborate on the topography of “Planet Auschwitz,” figuring the Holocaust as an alien world at the limits of modernity. Drawing on a number of sources not always included in canons of art and theory of Holocaust memory, this article shows how the genocide of Europe’s Jews, ongoing global racial conflicts, and the penetration of the “final frontier” became overlapping sites of philosophical speculation during the 1960s and 1970s about the nature of modernity and what it means to be a human being. REPRESENTATIONS 144. Fall 2018 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 124–53. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2018.144.5.124>.

Referring to a prison uniform exhibited as evidence, he went on to declare,

This is the garb of those who lived on this planet called Auschwitz. And I believe wholeheartedly that I must carry this name as long as the world will not awaken after the crucifying of a nation to erase this evil. As humanity has arisen after the crucifixion of one man, I believe wholeheartedly that just as in astrology the stars influence our destiny, so is this planet of the ashes, Auschwitz, facing our planet, and influencing, radiating toward our planet.²

Dinur's agitation and tendency to speak in a highly symbolic register made his story untellable within the confines of the courtroom. After the judges urged the witness to focus on the questions posed to him by the attorney general, Dinur lost consciousness and had to be carried from the stand. To many spectators in the court and audiences following the proceedings on radio and television, his collapse was a devastating shock; ultimately it would become the most remembered moment of the trial. In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman has argued that Dinur's inability to describe his past serves as a testament to the trauma that constitutes the heart of the law. Though his testimony failed to produce evidence viable for the court, history still "uncannily and powerfully speaks" through the very collapse of the witness's body.³

Because Dinur's silence seems the most fitting testimony to the nightmare he tried to describe, it is tempting to gloss over the words he *was* able to say as a mere prelude. Today, the vulnerable and all too human witness who fails to convey a trauma that still haunts him seems the more appropriate figure of memory than the alien "Auschwitz planet" that radiates toward Earth on a different wheel of time. The mix of symbolic systems that the author referenced to make meaning of the past and comment on the destiny of humankind may come off to contemporary readers as confused and even offensive, and, outside of the courtroom, Dinur's books have been criticized as kitsch and pornography.⁴

Yet Dinur was not the only public figure to draw on such metaphors to describe Jewish persecution in the broader "univers concentrationnaire."⁵ Otherworldly descriptions of victims at Auschwitz appear early in Dinur's postwar novels, and in his later work, such as the novella *Star Eternal* (1966), he revisited the topography of "Planet Auschwitz" in increasingly surreal terms.⁶ Omer Bartov has argued that in the early decades after World War II this language of otherworldliness spoke to the deep ambivalence that many Israelis felt about the compatibility of Jewish victimization with nationalist identity.⁷ Outside of Israel, as the Holocaust became differentiated from other crimes of fascism in the wake of international coverage of the Eichmann trial, artists and authors in Western Europe and North America also frequently figured Auschwitz as an alien world at the limits of

modernity. Implicit in these works are questions not just about the inclusion of survivors in the nation but also about how to restore anyone touched by the Holocaust into the category of the human—and what “Planet Auschwitz” might reveal about the evolution of mankind. Through the 1960s and 1970s, authors and artists from Primo Levi to Stephen Spielberg evoked the memory of the Holocaust together with meditations on life beyond earth, using “Planet Auschwitz” as a vehicle for reimagining the status of humanity in the shadow of an other somewhere “out there.” In philosophy, Hannah Arendt characterized both totalitarianism and space travel as dangerous abstractions of man, while Emmanuel Levinas celebrated the technological capacity to escape earth’s atmosphere as consistent with a particularly Jewish conception of humanity, not rooted in blood and soil. With strange frequency during this stretch of the Cold War, Jewish identity, racial violence, and the penetration of the cosmos were thought together in sources that cannot all be dismissed as kitsch.

Most of these materials have not endured in the canons of art and literature of Holocaust memory. This is partly because the figure of “Planet Auschwitz” reflects a set of cultural intuitions anathema to many of us now. In 1978, the release of NBC’s miniseries *Holocaust* in the United States and abroad and the President’s Commission on the Holocaust renewed public attention to the experience of victims and provoked debates about representing the past. In 1979, the Holocaust Survivors Film Project gave survivors themselves a highly intimate format for narrating their own stories: video testimony. (That project was the basis of Yale’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimony, which was founded in 1981.)⁸ In his extraordinary documentary art film *Shoah*, journalist Claude Lanzmann also relied on personal interviews, overlaying the oral testimony of survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators onto contemporary shots of empty extermination sites. Lanzmann’s refusal to circulate archival footage of murdered Jewish victims and his pairing of the graphic word with the barren image became highly influential in broader debates about appropriate aesthetic approaches to the Holocaust. Authors and critics from Theodor Adorno to Elie Wiesel had long characterized the Holocaust as presenting fundamental problems to poetry and literature, but in the 1980s and 1990s, the limits of representation as such were a major preoccupation for the French and American academies. Even as depictions of the Holocaust markedly increased, the conventions of its representation narrowed and became highly articulated. As a result, the most widely respected literature, art, and memorials to the Holocaust today tend to resist allegory or catharsis and either focus on personal portraits of victims or emphasize absence through the use of visual minimalism.

My aim here is to analyze a wider range of representational strategies and associative matrices that, for better or worse, also shaped how the

Holocaust was remembered before such conventions became predominant. In debates about the documentary value of *Shoah* over the sentimental realism of *Schindler's List*, or the virtues of abstraction over figuration in memorial design, how are we to understand literature and art that does not fit neatly onto the axes of realism or that addresses philosophical questions other than the ethics of representation. Taken together, the literary, legal, and film sources examined in this article can be understood as an alternative pattern of Holocaust representation particularly common before the 1980s. Before the Holocaust became an unimaginable trauma recounted by witnesses in quiet interviews at their homes, its memory was staged elsewhere. Outside of the intimate frames of documentary testimony, those who survived Auschwitz often appeared to be from a different world. The sources in this essay reveal that in the early years of international Holocaust consciousness, Jewish victims and Nazi perpetrators emerged in the shadow of the Cold War as figures of identification somewhere between human and other, inhabiting a region imagined as both a distant and an inevitable destination in the evolution of mankind. In the two decades following the Eichmann trial, memory of Europe's murdered Jewish populations, ongoing racial violence in the postcolonial world, and the penetration of the "final frontier" became overlapping sites of critical speculation about the nature of modernity and what it means to be a human being.

April 1961: Eichmann, Gagarin, and the Elastic Limits of Humanity

Why would a survivor like Dinur try to convey the radical difference of his experiences at Auschwitz by projecting the camp onto a newly permeable galaxy? Conversely, how did the Holocaust's re-emerging visual iconography in the 1960s and 1970s affect representations of what life might look like in future worlds? To answer these questions, we must remember 1961 as a year when the Eichmann trial and the Space Race vied for headlines on the pages of the world's newspapers. On 11 April, Adolf Eichmann, imagined by Hannah Arendt as a new and specifically modern type of banal antihero, appeared on a global stage in the first courtroom trial ever to be internationally broadcast. One day later, Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to enter space and orbit the earth, marking a new phase in the American and Soviet proxy war taking place beyond the atmosphere. These two men represented very different and distinctly twentieth-century modes of warfare (fig. 1).

Consider the front page of the *New York Times* from 12 April 1961: The headline reads "Soviet Orbits Man and Recovers Him; Space Pioneer

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times.

LATE CITY EDITION
17th Street News Desk (Up to 10:30)
17th Street News Desk (Up to 10:30)
17th Street News Desk (Up to 10:30)
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NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 12, 1961

ESTABLISHED 1857

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SOVIET ORBITS MAN AND RECOVERS HIM; SPACE PIONEER REPORTS: 'I FEEL WELL'; SENT MESSAGES WHILE CIRCLING EARTH

HEAD OF RESERVE URGES PRICE CUTS TO RELIEVE SLUMP

Marlin Assails Postoffice Would Mean Many Jobs and Demand for Grants

By RICHARD E. HOONAY
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, April 12.—The chairman of the Federal Reserve Board made a strong appeal today for price reductions as a means of reviving the ailing economic picture.

Wide College Aid Is Adopted by State

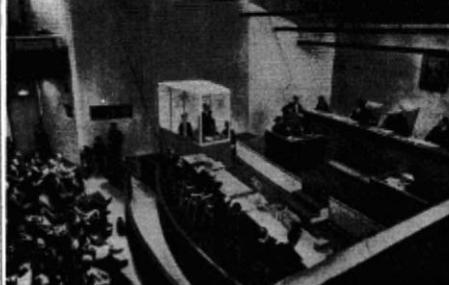
By WARREN WEAVER
Special to The New York Times
ALBANY, April 12.—A higher-education program that will make \$100,000,000 in new financial assistance available in college and university studies in New York this year was approved by Governor Rockefeller today.

ISRAEL DEFENDS TRIBUNAL'S RIGHT TO TRY EICHMANN

Ex-Nazi Is More Confident as Jerusalem Hearing Enters Its 20 Day

By ROBERT HEGARTY
Special to The New York Times
JERUSALEM (United Press), Wednesday, April 12.—The Attorney General of Israel, Elisha Shapira, resumed this morning his defense of the right of the country to try before its courts the man charged with the murder of millions of Jews.

Former Nazi Hears Indictment Read as Trial Begins in Jerusalem



Adolf Eichmann, charged with crimes against the Jewish people and against humanity, standing in special booth in Jerusalem courtroom yesterday. Spectator at bench seen from left, Raymond Finkel, Joseph Lichten, Vladimir Borovik.

187-MILE HEIGHT

Yuri Gagarin, a Major Makes the Flight in 5-Ton Vehicle

Yuri Gagarin, a major in the Soviet Air Force, was the first man to orbit the earth in a 5-ton space vehicle. He was launched in a special space launch vehicle from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. The flight lasted 108 minutes and covered 108,000 miles. Gagarin reported that he felt well and sent messages to his family and friends.

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U. S. IS DISTURBED BY DELAY ON LAO

By WILLIAM J. HENNEY
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, April 12.—Officially said today the United States Government was disturbed by the delay in the passage of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which would provide \$1.5 billion in military aid to Laos.



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FRANCE DECLARES ANTI-U.N. STRIKE

By HENRY GERBER
Special to The New York Times
PARIS, April 12.—France proclaimed today a general strike against the United Nations. The strike was called by the French Communist Party and other groups. It was the first time since the formation of the United Nations that a major power has declared a general strike against the organization.

Population Center Moves West; Census Puts It at Centralia, Ill.

The population center of the United States has moved westward, according to a new census report. The center is now located in Centralia, Illinois, which is a small town in the Midwest. This is a significant shift from previous years, indicating a trend of population migration towards the western United States.

BRITISH CONSIDER TRADE UNITY STEP

By ANNE BRONN
Special to The New York Times
LONDON, April 12.—The British Government is seriously considering a proposal to join the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). The proposal would allow the United Kingdom to trade more freely with other European countries.

ADENAUER IN U. S. TO SEE KENNEDY

By ANNE BRONN
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, April 12.—Conrad Adenauer, Chancellor of West Germany, is expected to arrive in the United States today to meet with President John F. Kennedy. The meeting is expected to be a significant event in the relationship between the two nations.

Kenedy Plans London Visit After Geneva Meeting

By ANNE BRONN
Special to The New York Times
WASHINGTON, April 12.—President Kennedy will visit London after his return from Geneva. The visit is expected to be a key part of his foreign policy agenda.

White House Confirms Firing; Fact Hailed by U. S. Scientists

The White House has confirmed the firing of a missile from the Soviet Union. U.S. scientists have hailed the fact as a significant development in the arms race.

Centennial of War Rocked by Dispute

The centennial of the American Civil War is being celebrated with a series of events. However, the celebration has been rocked by a dispute over the location of the war's end.

Head of Reserve Urges Price Cuts to Relieve Slump

The chairman of the Federal Reserve Board has urged price cuts to help the economy. He believes that lower prices will encourage spending and lead to a recovery.

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FIGURE 1. New York Times, 19 April 1961.

Reports: 'I Feel Well'; Sent Messages While Circling Earth." Meanwhile, almost by way of illustration, just below this headline a photograph appears of Adolf Eichmann in a bulletproof glass booth hovering above spectators at his trial in Jerusalem. At a moment when human boundaries appeared to be

both expanding and collapsing, opinion writers for the paper would wonder whether the limits of justice had been reached and whether the earth itself might be reimagined as just another missile-launching pad. Eichmann's involvement in crimes against humanity on a massive scale and Gagarin's space flight were testaments to the astonishing capabilities of modern civilization—capabilities that seemed simultaneously to diminish the status of humanity itself. The day Eichmann's trial began, the *Times* described his "historic crimes" as "so monstrous they shatter the bounds of legal procedure and dwarf both the criminal and any punishment that may be inflicted on him."⁹ This perplexing contradiction of scale—that so monstrous a crime could be committed by a person who seemed unremarkable—was a motif in the American and French coverage of Eichmann. The curious question of his humanity was implicit in *Times* journalist Homer Bigart's compulsive attention to the defendant's physiognomy. His daily reports, organized with subheadings like "Eichmann Fidgets" often come off as notes from an explorer on safari. Was the accused man or beast (or bird), Bigart seemed to wonder, and what was he feeling beneath that inscrutable exterior? In one dispatch, Bigart remarked that Eichmann's normally impassive figure came alive during an exchange with his lawyer, Dr. Robert Servatius. "For the first time he seemed to recognize the existence of an audience. As his thin, hawklike face swiveled toward the thronged auditorium, his eyeglasses shone with reflected light." But this glimpse of life would be short-lived, and when Dr. Servatius turned back to the courtroom, "Eichmann sat back in his seat, ramrod straight, his face again frozen into a mask."¹⁰ The perpetrator here is marked by an ethical otherness that translates onto the body in alternately robotic or animal terms. Meanwhile, in the same 12 April edition of the paper, Robert K. Plumb responded philosophically to Gagarin's launch with an editorial that took in a sweep of astronomical discoveries, from Copernicus to Isaac Newton, that had both awed and humbled the scientific world. The Space Race was just "another great blow to man's concept in the scheme of things. . . . Perhaps," he speculated, "other worlds are inhabited by more advanced creatures than we. . . . Looking at things this way, it is possible to think that space travel is the next and the inevitable step in human evolution."¹¹

Across the Atlantic, in the 13 April edition of *Le Monde*, stories about the war in Algeria, Gagarin's launch, and the Eichmann trial revolved around each other on the first ten pages (fig. 2). Special envoy to the trial, Jean-Marc Théolleyre, repeatedly characterized the court proceedings as spectacle, writing that the press sat in "an inclined plane of twenty rows of chairs, like the audience in a theatre of an orchestra premier," to watch prosecutor Gideon Hausner and defense attorney Servatius play out their parts.¹² In an article entitled "Before the Eichmann Trial," which provided

Le défenseur d'Eichmann a engagé la bataille de procédure

Jean-Marie COLLEVILLE

Le défenseur d'Eichmann, le Dr Servatius, a engagé la bataille de procédure en déposant un acte de procédure en vertu duquel il demande l'annulation de l'arrestation d'Eichmann par les autorités israéliennes. Le Dr Servatius a également demandé l'annulation de l'arrestation d'Eichmann par les autorités israéliennes.

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L'AFFAIRE LAWLESS

La Cour européenne des droits de l'homme rendra son arrêt à la fin du mois de juin

NORMAN LABOURN

La Cour européenne des droits de l'homme rendra son arrêt à la fin du mois de juin. La Cour européenne des droits de l'homme rendra son arrêt à la fin du mois de juin.

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UN JOURNAL DU CAIRE AFFIRME QU'EICHMANN EST UN « VIEL AMI DE CEUX QUI LE JOUENT »

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Le conseil de sécurité invite Israël à s'abstenir d'employer du matériel

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LES DIFFICULTÉS DU RETOUR

Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour.

Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour.

A BORD D'UN "VAISSEAU COSMIQUE" SOVIÉTIQUE

Comment le premier astronaute a affronté les multiples dangers de l'espace

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LE LANCEMENT ET L'ENVOL

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Le lancement et l'envol. Le lancement et l'envol. Le lancement et l'envol.

LES DIFFICULTÉS DU RETOUR

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Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour.

Troubles cardio-vasculaires

Troubles cardio-vasculaires. Troubles cardio-vasculaires. Troubles cardio-vasculaires.

Troubles cardio-vasculaires. Troubles cardio-vasculaires. Troubles cardio-vasculaires.

LES DIFFICULTÉS DU RETOUR

Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour.

Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour. Les difficultés du retour.

Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille

Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille. Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille. Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille.

Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille. Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille. Centrifugeuse et descente en vrille.

LES DIFFICULTÉS DU RETOUR

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FIGURE 2. Two pages from *Le Monde*, 13 April 1961.

a biographical account of the defendant's early career failures and eventual rise to prominence in the emerging Nazi field of Jewish affairs, Eichmann was characterized as an essentially backstage but zealous official, who ascended to a position of not inconsiderable power through the passionate execution of his bureaucratic duties.¹³

Both Théolleyre and the American Bigart puzzled over the alternately stoic and comical postures struck by Eichmann during his trial. Théolleyre noted the striking size of the defendant's forehead, "wide but elusive,"¹⁴ and in his 13 April dispatch he framed the court proceedings with a characteristic comment on the disconnect between the body of the man who stood accused and the enormous crimes he had allegedly committed:

On that first day, each had the impression of following a dis-incarnated affair. The man is there in his glass cage, silent, still, coquettishly skilled, virtually without a gesture. We know what he is. We know what he was. But an intense effort is required to convince oneself that this is the opening day of a trial motivated by six million dead.¹⁵

If the Eichmann trial was "une affaire désincarnée," the miracle of the concurrent space launch for the French paper was that Gagarin managed to leave the earth very much inside of his own body. *Le Monde's* coverage focused particularly on the physical stresses that exiting the earth's atmosphere would put on the human form and described the launch as an extraordinary feat not just for engineering but also for medical biology. The paper devoted a full page to analyzing "how the first astronaut faced the many dangers of space," with subheadings like, "Paralyzed muscles, dizziness and nausea," "Cardiovascular trouble," and "Protection against atmospheric overheating."¹⁶ Special commentator Dr. Escoffier-Lambiotte explained that overcoming earth's gravitational pull would mean suspending the human body over the threshold between life and death.

The fact that the first astronaut returned alive from his revolution around the earth signifies for engineers an exceptional mastery of techniques for launch, flight and return of the spaceship—and for biologists, an in-depth knowledge of the dangers that present themselves to a living being in an extraterrestrial environment. But above all, it means that doctors have succeeded in overcoming these dangers and have allowed man to surmount the terrible hardships inflicted both by a formidable environment and by the machine that took him there.

Each of these tests represents the limits of human tolerance, and they were endured in a state of semi-consciousness, the life of the astronaut preserved at every moment by many complex devices.¹⁷

The drama here is generated by a kind of dynamic sublime, which overwhelms the reader with the contrast between humanity's extraordinary

scientific achievements and the fragility of flesh. Human travel is limited only by the species' genius; yet humans can also never entirely escape their irreducible earthliness.

A similar piece on the biological dramatics of space flight, by Dr. Wolfgang Cyran, appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) coverage of the Vostok 1 flight. In this piece, the connections between the advance of the Space Race and the inhuman calamities of World War II are not just implicit. The first sentence of the article situates the height of Gagarin's achievements against the nadir of warfare just a generation back.

The same twentieth century that brought mankind greater losses through war and human cruelty than any century before has also penetrated the microcosm and the macrocosm in areas considered completely inaccessible a generation before: the world of the atom and outer space.¹⁸

Again, the oscillation of scale in this single introductory sentence—which brings mass murder, the penetration of the structure of the atom, and space exploration into the same field of historical comparison—is dizzying. Cyran goes on to list some of the technical achievements, in rocket propulsion and navigation, that led up to this moment, only to remark how the borderline miraculous has become borderline banal. “All of this has been put to the test for years now on dozens of artificial satellites, and already penetrates human consciousness as self-evident.”¹⁹ What makes this day revolutionary, however, is what it has revealed about the effects of space travel on the human organism. Animal experiments in the past could only show so much. “Spaceship experiments up to this point with lower and higher animals (beetles, mice, dogs, and monkeys) had satisfactory results and revealed no lasting damage, but whether man might also fly safely into space remained undetermined.”²⁰ Cyran was particularly concerned with how this environment might warp human psychology:

It must be counted on that the immense psychological burden of space flight—with its uncertain outcome, infinite loneliness and physical strain and danger—will have different consequences for man, whose psychic-nervous reactions and regulation processes are intricate, highly differentiated and emotionally influenced.²¹

These questions about the limits of the human psyche do not appear in FAZ's coverage of Eichmann—nor do his physiognomy or motivation seem to be points of implicit fascination, as they were in some French and American coverage. FAZ's commentary on the trial is noteworthy as a counterexample. Commentators for this German paper were concerned with Eichmann's Germanness more than his status as a human being; to what extent did the German nation share in his crimes, and to what extent would this internationally broadcast coverage of a Nazi criminal define German

identity to the rest of the world? On 11 April 1961, a statement released by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer expressed unqualified support for the trial and friendship with Israel—and emphasized the innocence of German youth for the crimes of their fathers.²² Eichmann was a relic of the Third Reich and could not be said to represent Adenauer’s Germany; he was a man from another era—but not from a different species or another world.²³ Included with the statement were remarks made by the bishop of Brandenburg, F. K. Otto Dibelius: The nation would have to accept that the perpetrators of these crimes came from the very heart of the people. Nonetheless, the bishop concluded, “God does not want to visit upon our entire people what this mass murderer and his collaborators have done.”²⁴ In an article entitled “Behind the Glass Wall,” Joachim Schwelien commented, “Mankind holds its breath and asks itself, how this could have happened—what in recent weeks has once more been brought to light in connection with the name of the German Adolf Eichmann—the German Eichmann—first and foremost let us not forget this.”²⁵ Ultimately, though, Schwelien emphasizes both Eichmann’s Germanness *and* the German identity of his Jewish judges, and claims that the trial will determine for the rest of the world the relationship between the German and the Jewish peoples. “Nobody has the right to expect Germans to throw themselves into the dust again and again and publicly confess collective complicity now. But everyone can demand that we avow our responsibility.”²⁶

“The Age of the Crisis of Man”

The most infamous press coverage of the Eichmann trial would come out two years later in the *New Yorker*, where German-Jewish political philosopher Hannah Arendt first published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Rather than delving directly into her controversial arguments here, it’s revealing to compare the book instead to an essay that Arendt published just a few months later, “Man’s Conquest of Space,” which appeared in the *American Scholar*. While her essay never mentions the trial directly, it shares some of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*’s primary concerns. What both terrified and bemused Arendt about Eichmann—what she deemed his “banality”—was in part his alienated relation to the German language and to speech more generally. During one famous moment in the trial, Eichmann apologized to the judge for the way he expressed himself, saying, “Officialese [Amtssprache] is my only language.” Arendt noted in response, “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.”²⁷ In a related vein, in “Man’s Conquest of Space,” Arendt warned

about the eclipse of meaningful speech by the abstractions of math. The “main problem” she saw in the supposed gap between the hard sciences and “lagging” social sciences was that “man can *do*, and successfully do, what he cannot comprehend and express in everyday human language.”²⁸ Ultimately, the scientist had given up a Kantian epistemological project concerned with the limits of human perception and cognition. The perfected abstractions of science had to be purged of “anthropomorphic categories” so that human beings might gain access to the radical otherness of the universe and its laws. But if accessing this kind of power meant severing oneself from the worldly language of mutual obligation, human dignity would be not just diminished but ultimately eliminated. For Arendt, the commonsense speech of civic life and political debate provided the medium for defining our ethical relation to the world. Untethered from this ground, what would humanity ultimately become? The public sphere, she worried, would collapse into irrelevance against the sublime horizons of space. “The very integrity of science demands that not only utilitarian considerations but even reflection on the stature of man be left in abeyance.” In such an epistemological arena, “Valid and plausible arguments against ‘the conquest of space’ could be raised only if they were to show that the whole enterprise might be self-defeating in its own terms.”²⁹ The fate of man in the wake of his own discoveries could not be advocated for in the language of science; in Arendt’s view, this was an apocalypse that humanity had already begun to enact—but could only dimly imagine.³⁰

Not every phenomenologist took Arendt’s bleak view of man’s penetration of the galaxy. In an essay explicitly connecting Gagarin’s space flight to the Jewish condition, Emmanuel Levinas pitted himself against “Heidegger and the Heideggerians,” with their suspicion of technology and pagan calls to rediscover “enrootedness” in the world.³¹ “One’s implementation in a landscape, one’s attachment to *Place* . . . is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers,” he warned.³² Levinas celebrated Gagarin’s space flight, claiming that it made him a figure of ultimate exile, rationalism, and universalism—and thereby, Judaism. “What perhaps counts most of all is that he left the Place. For one hour, man existed beyond any horizon—everything around him was sky or, more exactly, everything was geometrical space. A man existed in the absolute of homogenous space. Judaism has always been free with regard to place.”³³ Judaism’s essential “vandalism” against the pagans, Levinas argued, was the religion’s destruction of the connection between myth and nature.³⁴ If technology “does away with privileges of enrootedness and the related sense of exile” in a march toward universal enlightenment, Judaism could be said to have achieved something similar.³⁵ “Like technology, it has demystified the universe. It has freed nature from a spell. Because of its abstract universalism, it runs up against

imaginations and passions. But it has discovered man in the nudity of his face.”³⁶ In the absolute abstraction and nonorientation of space flight, human beings would be forced to develop a radical new measure of themselves—and by consequence, their ethics.

Mark Grief has demonstrated that what constituted the human and who might be included in that category was a fruitful, if destabilizing, question at the center of American intellectual life in the midcentury. In *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, Grief aims to complicate the story of a simple rejection of universalism for the sake of identitarian politics by focusing on authors like Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison who, he claims, used racial difference as a means of exploring and creatively interrogating universalist anthropology. (Grief just briefly mentions the re-emergence of Holocaust memory in the public sphere, and then only to claim that this was a false moment of climax in the American intellectual crisis he describes—a puzzling conclusion, since for some of the Jewish literati and thinkers who play primary roles in Grief’s book, the destruction of Europe’s Jewish populations was a source of both profound personal devastation and philosophical debate.) Matthew D. Tribbe’s *No Requiem for the Space Age* provides an account of how the Cold War’s technological advancements contributed to these creative tensions over the status of the human. In his examination of cultural attitudes toward the Apollo missions, Tribbe demonstrates that the Space Race, the atom bomb, Nazism, and the invasion of Vietnam formed a major constellation of trans-Atlantic thought during the 1960s and 1970s, with many authors and journalists “thinking” the spectacular achievements of rocket science against the backdrop of the twentieth century’s unprecedented violence.³⁷ Would the great beyond provide a release for alienated families of man who seemed incapable of encountering each other as human? Or would the untethering of human beings from earth and the power of scientific abstraction culminate in man’s ultimate alienation from himself?

In 1966, Primo Levi took up these themes in *Natural Stories* (*Storie naturali*), a collection of science fiction written under the pen name Damiano Malabaila, on topics ranging from lunar travel, the medical formulation of human-animal hybrids, and the recreation of humans by bureaucratic committee (fig. 3). The collection opens with a brief vignette about a Proustian chemist and doctor who, after isolating the chemical components of memory, manages to bottle the essences of various moments from his life so that he can access them purely by smell. Later, in the much darker story “Angelic Butterfly,” English, French, and Russian occupation forces in Berlin come across an apartment reeking of guano. There, they discover the remains of an experiment by a Nazi doctor who attempted to give human beings the power of flight. A neighbor reports having witnessed four very thin prisoners delivered into the building in 1943; later, after a bomb blast,



FIGURE 3. Cover art for Damiano Malabaila [Primo Levi], *Storie naturali* (Turin, 1966).

she spotted through a broken window four enormous vultures chained to perches. Recovered on site is a medical treatise dedicated to a founding ideologue of the Nazi Party, Alfred Rosenberg.

The references to the Holocaust here are clear. Many of Levi's other technological fables, however, take a broader historical focus, particularly in his next collection of science fiction, *Structural Defect*, published in 1971. In "The Hardsellers," Levi imagines the process by which souls are installed into human bodies. Sales representatives for the planet Earth pitch the option of human life to an Unborn Soul, but in one of their advertisements, the Soul catches a glimpse of a black man trying to escape the police. When the Soul asks about the ultimate fate of this man, the Hardsellers brush him off. Should the Soul choose to be born, they can guarantee him access to a privileged body. He refuses. This particular Soul, Levi writes, "seemed to be very sensitive on the subject; perhaps someone had influenced him beforehand." The Soul does agree finally to go to Earth but with this qualification:

“I prefer to be born black, Indian, poor, without indulgences and without pardons. You understand me, don’t you? . . . I prefer to be the only one to fabricate myself, and I prefer the anger that I will need if I will be capable of it; if not, I will accept everyone else’s destiny. The path of defenseless and blind humanity will be mine.”³⁸

Adrift Between Two Worlds

In Levi’s story, the Unborn Soul must decide whether to descend to Earth, and he embarks upon this project with a sense of profound moral orientation on the question of race, derived implicitly from his own experience in another lifetime. In a related vein, Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story “Cafeteria,” written originally in Yiddish and translated for the *New Yorker* in 1968, also provides a comment on American racial divides from the perspective of a survivor—but the past in this case is a source not of moral clarity but chronic disorientation. While Levi’s Unborn Soul resolves to live, Bashevis’s narrator isn’t sure whether the Jewish refugees who surround him in New York are alive or dead; he experiences the city as a postapocalyptic landscape, where a dreamlike rip in the space-time continuum allows for inexplicable phenomena, such as Hitler’s appearance at meetings of the KKK on the Upper West Side.

The story begins with an encounter in a cafeteria between the narrator, a Yiddish writer living in New York, and Esther, a Jewish refugee who fled Warsaw in 1939 and survived the war in a Soviet gulag. Shortly after their meeting, the cafeteria burns down. The writer loses track of his charming but out-of-place acquaintance until years later, when they run into each other once more at the rebuilt dining hall. After their strange reunion, the narrator finds himself staring into the vacant twilight in his apartment as time folds in on itself and the decades overlap.

The sky above the roofs shone violet, without a moon, without stars, and even though it was eight-o’clock in the evening, the light and the emptiness reminded me of dawn. The stores were deserted. For a moment, I had the feeling I was in Warsaw. The telephone rang and I rushed to answer it as I did ten, twenty, thirty years ago.³⁹

It is Esther, who has called to confess to him a vision. Years before, the night the cafeteria burned to the ground, she wandered into the building after hours and found Hitler assembled with a crowd of Nazis, all dressed in white robes. The writer tells her to report her delusions to a psychiatrist in order to collect reparations from the German government—and begins to wonder if the same insanity might have crept into his own mind. What could Esther’s vision mean about the disintegration of the human species as such?

“I have played with the idea that all of humanity suffers from schizophrenia. Along with the atom, the personality of *Homo sapiens* has been splitting. When it comes to technology, the brain still functions, but in everything else denigration has begun.”⁴⁰ Over the course of the story, references to changing skies over the city effect a progression deeper into madness. One year later, on his way to catch a train to Toronto, the writer spots Esther on the street with a ninety-year-old acquaintance of his, who appears to have grown decades younger. Later, in his sleeper car, the writer puzzles,

Do corpses walk around on Broadway? This would mean that Esther, too, was not living. I raised the window shade and sat up and looked out into the night—black, impenetrable, without a moon. A few stars ran along with the train for a while and then they disappeared. A lighted factory emerged; I saw machines but no operators. Then it was swallowed in the darkness and another group of stars began to follow the train. I was turning with the earth on its axis. I was circling with it around the sun and moving in the direction of a constellation whose name I had forgotten. Is there no death? Or is there no life?

I thought about what Esther had told me of seeing Hitler in the cafeteria. It had seemed utter nonsense, but now I began to reappraise the idea. If time and space are nothing more than forms of perception, as Kant argues, and quality, quantity, causality are only categories of thinking, why shouldn't Hitler confer with his Nazis in a cafeteria on Broadway? Esther didn't sound insane. She had seen a piece of reality that the heavenly censorship prohibits as a rule. She had caught a glimpse behind the curtain of phenomena.⁴¹

When the writer tries to understand Esther's experience of the past invading the present, he evokes a fourth dimension, the atomic split of the human personality, a schizoid metropolis, Kantian epistemology, and train travel that follows the revolutionary path of the earth around the sun. New York is the off-kilter center of a world long ago destroyed, filled with ghosts set adrift in the space-time continuum. His train ride into the constellations and inquiry into Esther's bodily reality come to no conclusion, and in the end, he cannot even be sure that he has met this woman—or if she is just another corpse strolling down Broadway on a haunted Upper West Side.

The story of Bashevis's telephone, which rings in 1960s New York but transports the man who answers it to 1930s Warsaw, is redolent of a real-life trip to the city that poet and Hebrew scholar Dan Pagis described in an interview on the radio program “A World Elsewhere.” After surviving the Holocaust as a child in Transnistria, Pagis immigrated to Palestine, where his father had been living since 1934. Decades later, when he visited relatives in New York in 1967, the poet was stunned to find that their apartment was an after-image of the house where he grew up in Bukovina. After his visit to the city, he published *Gilgul* (Metamorphosis), his poetry collection most explicitly devoted to the Holocaust. “For years, I had tried to ignore the

subject of the Holocaust,” he explained in the interview, “but the sight of the room, which appalled me, enabled and even forced me to write poems on this subject.”⁴² Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi has argued that from the 1960s to the early 1980s, pieces of those rooms in Bukovina continued to drift into Pagis’s poetry. She cites in particular “Point of Departure”:

Hidden in the study at dusk,
I wait, not yet lonely.
A heavy walnut bureau opens up the night.
The clock is a tired sentry,
its steps growing faint.
.
Beyond the door begins
the interstellar space which I’m ready for.
Gravity drains from me like colors at dusk.
I fly so fast that I’m motionless
and leave behind me
the transparent wake of the past.⁴³

In poems like these, Ezrahi explains, culture, history, and individual identity dissolve as the poet interrogates the most basic laws of physics. While the study door and walnut bureau give way like trap doors into the galaxy, so too, when Pagis begins to peel away the layers of his mind and body, he finds just the weightless dark. In “Exposure,” he writes,

The skin mask,
underneath it
the flesh mask,
underneath *it* the
skull-bones, and
the black spaces
between galaxies.⁴⁴

Ezrahi attributes to Pagis’s poetry an antigravitational quality and notes that it was only just before his death in 1986 that he finally turned to prose and the specifics of his own biography, allowing the past to take a more particular shape.⁴⁵

For Pagis, the emptiness at the heart of the body makes human beings into a mirror image of the universe that contains them. In Yehiel Dinur’s writing in the 1960s, the survivor’s body becomes a sepulcher for another planet, which is alternately empty and teeming with the un-lived lives of innumerable ghosts. In the novella *Star Eternal* (1966, translated 1971), Dinur revisited the figure of “Planet Auschwitz”: “The ball of fire where he had dwelt—now stretches cold, burnt out, and he stands upon it. Alone.

Alone—A relic.”⁴⁶ The coordinates of the camp shift, and it is no longer where the survivor dwells but a place that he carries inside of himself; “locked in the pupils of his eyes was the planet Auschwitz before it had turned to stone.”⁴⁷ After the war, when the main character of the novella returns to his Polish hometown and begins to wander the streets in his camp uniform, his tattooed arm morphs into a landscape of time.

The blue outlines of the digits streak before his eyes: a blue river. His arm is the bed of the river. All these multitudes of them surge within that river. There they live out their lives. All the vast multitudes of them. There, in the river depths, flow his days, his night. Cities crowded with Jews, Jewish towns and hamlets.⁴⁸

When passersby catch sight of this “denizen fallen from a foreign planet” in his ripped prison uniform, they lower their eyes and quickly file past; meanwhile images flash before this character of those he lost in Auschwitz, processing toward their deaths. As frost melts in the flickering daylight, it occurs to him, too, that the space-time continuum may have collapsed. “His time has broken out of its ambits, and runs on the cogwheels of a separate world. Now, when the two separate worlds converge before his eyes—he suddenly sees the eclipse of his life’s sun.”⁴⁹ For a moment, “Planet Auschwitz” and the streets of his Polish hometown merge; then a stranger slams the door of his childhood apartment in his face, and he realizes there is nothing left for him in the place where he grew up.

Could this encounter between the dislocated denizen of a foreign planet and the person who took his home play out otherwise? Might it be possible to rewind the slamming of the door? As we will see, just such a scenario of redemption was imagined by Steven Spielberg through a film he made long before *Schindler’s List*—in the genre of science fiction.⁵⁰

Redeeming the Humanoid Other: The Films of Steven Spielberg

I’ve been arguing for the existence of a tradition of Holocaust reckoning and representation alternative to the austerity and silence of *Shoah* or the popular realism of *Schindler’s List*. The sources that constitute this tradition organize memory around allegories of otherworldliness, using the language of science and fantasy. But how much reach did these sources have? Millions may have seen the front page of the *New York Times* that illustrates a headline about Gagarin with a photograph of Eichmann hovering above the courtroom in his glass booth—but certainly more readers are familiar with *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *If This Is a Man* than with Primo Levi’s science fiction.

The depth of this alternative tradition's impact becomes apparent in one of the most widely seen films of the 1970s — the plot of which most of us wouldn't recognize as “about” the Holocaust at all: *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. By the mid-seventies, we can see in this “blockbuster” an unconscious and totally integrated iconography of space travel, humanoid encounter, and concentrationary landscapes, images that Spielberg would revisit throughout his career. With galactic illumination cast over Midwestern landscapes, *Close Encounters* shows humans and aliens, surrounded by barbed wire, reconciling with each other. The madness of those who claim to have seen visions from another world is revealed to be insight into the truth (figs. 4 and 5).



FIGURE 4. Still from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Culver City, 1998). DVD. Originally released as a motion picture in 1977.

Close Encounters takes as its major themes alienation, translation, and negotiation of difference. The film is one of the most famous popular visualizations of the gray alien, which entered science fiction at the turn of the century in the early works of H. G. Wells. While a diverse array of species appear in alien encounter stories from the United States and Europe during the twentieth century, the gray alien—a naked, mute, and sexless humanoid with a large head and eyes and small body—starred in one of the most famous American abduction accounts from the midcentury: the case of Betty and Barney Hill, an interracial couple who claimed to have been subjected to alien experiments after encountering a UFO in September of 1961. In Spielberg's film, the gray alien and the Muselmann merge into a single figure, in environments shaped by numerous visual rhymes with

iconographic images from Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen. In the film's climactic final scenes, Roy Neary (played by Richard Dreyfuss) encounters a group of small, silent, naked, androgynous beings with large heads and eyes on a top-secret government site protected by barbed wire, surrounded by the dead bodies of animals reportedly exposed to deadly gas. The outlying area has been forcibly evacuated by government officials who engineer a ruse to force the local population to flee. We see civilians in gas masks and crowds at a train station, where screaming families are shoved into train cars by gruff military officials (fig. 6).

The most overt references to concentration camps in *Close Encounters* make other, subtler connections to memory of genocide resonate as well. In the opening scenes, men shout at each other in a cacophony of languages about the reappearance of a World War II fighter plane thirty years after the fact, which looks as if it hasn't aged a day. Later, the return of the repressed is figured as an inexplicable vision of the future, when Neary becomes obsessed in the wake of his alien encounter with visions of a place he seems to know but cannot name. Neary is one of a select group of Americans who've had a "close encounter of the third kind" and are marked red with sunburn from the bright lights of alien ships. His initial encounter was at a railroad crossing. Afterward, he makes models of his visions in ecstatic and disturbed episodes that drive his uncomprehending family away; at one point he admits in quiet tears to his children, "Well, I guess you've noticed something's a little strange with Dad." The only country in the world where there is widespread acceptance that something from "up there" wants to make contact with Earth is India. There, one scene from the film shows thousands of men with stereotypically "red" faces pointing toward the sky and rapturously chanting an alien melody, while a team of international researchers struggles to interpret their meaning. A French scientist, played by François Truffaut, converts the melody into a universal visual sign language, which he eventually uses to communicate with "the third kind."

The vision that haunts Neary turns out to be Devil's Tower National Monument, and he and select others are drawn there to the government site where aliens land. At the film's conclusion, a massive ship releases back to Earth a group of men and women who disappeared during the war. While it is Truffaut as a scientist who successfully interprets what the aliens are trying to communicate through sign language and song, it will be Neary, marked red by an alien sun, whom the grays invite to venture back into their world.⁵¹ The music that plays over the scene in one version of John Williams's score includes an instrumental quotation from "When You Wish Upon a Star," the signature song from the Disney film *Pinocchio*, a favorite of Neary's according to the script, and a story that has long been important to

Spielberg. It is at this most surreal point in the film, when Neary enters the bright light emanating from the space ship with his humanoid escorts that, Spielberg has explained, Neary “becomes a real person.”⁵²

In the end, the film takes on a kind of inverted logic of Holocaust denial. The “gassed animals” and the evacuation command issued by the government after an apparent episode of environmental poisoning turn out to have all been a cover for an extraordinary victory in transplanetary diplomacy. What we see in these final scenes is a terrifying, sublime, and, ultimately, corrected or redeemed encounter with a benign other from the wartime past—set against the backdrop of galactic exploration (fig. 7).

Scholars and reviewers have interpreted *Close Encounters* as a rehabilitative myth for an American public whose faith in government hit its low point after Vietnam and Watergate.⁵³ Others see in its benign bright lights descending from the sky an expression of a specifically Christian hope for the parousia—and indeed, screenwriter Paul Schrader based an early version of the script on the Apostle Paul’s blinding vision on the road to Damascus.⁵⁴ (Spielberg objected to almost everything in that version of the screenplay and rewrote *Close Encounters* himself.)⁵⁵ While she doesn’t focus on *Close Encounters*, in *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*, Susan Lepselter explores links between alien abduction stories that have come out of the American Southwest and early American “captivity narratives” about white settlers kidnapped by native peoples. She makes a compelling argument that the “fallout of the still-open wound of Native American colonization and genocide” has drifted into twentieth-century stories about aliens from space.⁵⁶ This constellation of tropes has appeared in a novel more specific to memory of the Holocaust: in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1969), Saul Bellow imagined viewing American social disintegration from the vantage point of the moon, through the privileged perspective of a Holocaust survivor. Like *Close Encounters*, Bellow’s novel thematizes the possibility of communicating across difference (although his work is shot through with much deeper racist and misogynistic anxiety than Spielberg’s). The culminating scene is a conversation between an aerospace engineer from India and the novel’s protagonist, a Polish-Jewish intellectual who lectures on the works of H. G. Wells and laments the state of civilization from a dilapidated corner of the Upper West Side. Both men bore witness to genocide in the 1940s but hold out hope that, if Americans can capitalize on their technological prowess to colonize the moon as they did the American continent, the new world might provide some relief from the political turmoil below. Against these other sources, the gas masks, barbed wire, alien ships, and latent references to genocide that flash together in Spielberg’s film with scenes from India



FIGURE 5. Still from Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.



FIGURE 6. Still from Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.



FIGURE 7. Still from Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

and the American West take on a strange cultural coherence that might otherwise elude us today.

Spielberg has approached World War II, Nazism, and the Holocaust through a variety of genres, including comedy, with the film *1941* (1979) and adventure, with the *Indiana Jones* franchise (1981–89).⁵⁷ In what can be interpreted as a mode of displaced realism, *Empire of the Sun* (1987) is a historical film about a child living in an internment camp under Japanese occupation during World War II.⁵⁸ When *Schindler's List* was released in 1993, it was widely understood as a departure for the blockbuster director.⁵⁹ Spielberg saw the film as a deeply personal moral obligation and didn't believe it would be profitable; that he was working on *Jurassic Park* simultaneously has been interpreted by one of his biographers as the ultimate sign of the filmmaker's duality.⁶⁰ Yet, as Nigel Morris has pointed out, *Schindler's List* repeats many of the broader themes from his previous historical films and science fiction, including the separation and reunification of families and the problem of communication.⁶¹ Moreover, as my own analysis demonstrates, *Schindler's List* was not the first of Spielberg's films to draw on iconography of the Holocaust. Mainstream realism has not been his exclusive entry point into this past, nor would he stop revisiting the Holocaust in other genres after he made his "Holocaust film." Some of the most recent visual references in to genocide in his work appear in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. That film includes scenes where "Mechas"—humanoid robots—must flee from human beings who hunt them for torture and execution in "flesh fairs" to affirm the purity of the human race. The film's main character, David, the first "Mecha" built with the capacity for love, gets caught in one of these flesh fairs after coming upon a group of robots who have lost their permits to live among human beings and must scavenge for parts in a pile of discarded robot bodies. Many of the major themes from *Close Encounters* replay here (including the *Pinocchio* references) in a more disturbing key. In *A.I.*'s iteration of the story, though, the "aliens" are not from another planet. Instead, technological development and environmental disaster have rendered Earth itself into another world, leading to the extinction of human beings.

Conclusion: Toward Testimony and the Unrepresentable Sublime

By the late 1970s, Primo Levi was writing about a "tranquil star" in a distant galaxy that became restless with its destiny and eventually destroyed itself—a cosmic event registered only momentarily in the atmospheric logs of planets far away. His short story is one of the last by a Holocaust survivor

that uses sustained galactic metaphors to “think” the limits of the human. By the end of the 1970s, distant maps of “Planet Auschwitz” appear with less frequency. At the same time, when questions of representation became a central preoccupation of “theory” more generally, the Holocaust moved into the collapsed and mystical center of language itself.

“A Tranquil Star” begins with the failure of superlatives to register the scale of galactic events. Only the “slim and elegant language of numbers” can tell stories about stars without falling prey to the deceptions of the poetic sublime. But numbers will never be an appropriate idiom for fable—“a language that awakens echoes, and in which each of us can perceive distant reflections of himself and of the human race.”⁶² Echoing Arendt, Levi writes,

For a discussion of stars our language is inadequate and seems laughable, as if someone were trying to plow with a feather. It’s a language with us, suitable for describing objects more or less as large and as long-lasting as we are; it has our dimensions, it’s human. It doesn’t go beyond what our senses tell us. Until two or three hundred years ago, small meant the scabies mite. . . . The sea and sky were big, in fact equally big; fire was hot.⁶³

Modernity is distinguished by the emergence of phenomena that are observable but break the relational scales of description; it is an era that has moved beyond the human because it has become totally abstract. “Million” can be abstracted from “many,” but its referent is beyond the imagination. It is a pure signifier that functions mathematically but, semantically, may as well be meaningless.

Levi briefly introduces two characters in his fable who record the fluctuations of the star from a distance. The first is “a diligent Arab observer” presumably from the medieval period, who, “equipped only with good eyes, patience, humility, and the love of knowing the works of his God,” could see what Europeans of the time refused to acknowledge—that even the heavens are not eternal. He names the star Al-Ludra, “the capricious one,” after observing for decades the uneven rhythm of its cycles through the sky—a celestial body “at a loss between two choices.”⁶⁴ The star outlives the man who named it just by a few centuries. In 1950, we learn that

the illness that must have been gnawing at it from within reached a crisis, and here, for the second time, our story, too, enters a crisis: now it is no longer the adjectives that fail but the facts themselves. We still don’t know much about the convulsive death-resurrection of stars: we know that, fairly often, something flares up in the atomic mechanism of a star’s nucleus and then the star explodes, on a scale not of millions or billions of years but of hours and minutes. We know that these events are among the most cataclysmic that the sky holds; but we understand only—and approximately—the how, not the why.⁶⁵

It takes a couple of decades for evidence of the cataclysm to reach Earth, where the fate of the star barely registers. The story ends when an astronomer, who lives at an observatory in Peru, notices a speck on one of his photographic plates. It's probably nothing, he surmises, but the aberration is still necessary to record.

While Levi's late-1970s story marks a relative decline in the discursive trends this article describes, references to space travel do keep appearing in some later literature of Holocaust memory. In David Grossman's *See Under: Love* (1986), Momik, a young boy living in Israel in 1959, becomes preoccupied with discovering what happened to his confused and incomprehensible grandfather, Anshel Wasserman, a refugee from "over there." Before the war, Wasserman was an author who wrote a series called, "Children of the Heart," in which a group of young heroes goes on adventures in a time machine with rescued Armenian and Navajo comrades. One of the old manuscripts that Momik recovers by his grandfather describes the children's fearless leader peering through a telescope and being struck dumb at a wretched portent in the clouds; the manuscript ends when his panicked crew turns their vessel and flees toward the moon. Later in the novel, we learn that the author Wasserman spent World War II interned at an extermination camp. His wife and child were murdered there, but Wasserman himself proved to be impervious to gas and bullets, despite his desperate desire for death. In these strange circumstances, the German commandant of the camp, a fan of "Children of the Heart," requests another installment of the series. Wasserman complies—but refuses to set his sequel on the moon. The new story transfers the children, who are now all grown up, into Warsaw and the mines of Galicia. Using this device of ever-deepening *mise en abyme*, Grossman's novel deploys fantastic premises to reimagine the Holocaust at the scene of the crime.⁶⁶

Gilead Morahg describes Grossman's project as part of a broader effort among Israeli fiction writers in the mid-1980s to address the Holocaust, a topic that had long been reserved for accounts by survivors themselves. Morahg contrasts two fictional approaches to the Holocaust in Israeli literature during this period: descriptive realism and the postmodern fantastic. In the hands of "second generation" authors, he argues, fantasy is a tool that both thematizes the problem of representation and allows for imaginative entry into the camp system itself, providing a bridge between a generation of European Jewish refugees and their children. In a novel like Grossman's, the purpose of fantasy is to overcome taboos around the distant other world of the past in order to establish intimacy.⁶⁷

Ezrahi identifies a related shift in Dan Pagis's work before his death in 1986, when the poet took a turn toward prose in his unpublished manuscript "Abba." Marginalia, written in Pagis's first language, German, reveal

that Pagis had planned to include family photographs and his father's will in the text. Noting these details, Ezrahi analyzes "Abba" as a mode of self-portraiture and homecoming that Pagis had avoided in his earlier, more abstract Hebrew-language poetry. "The poetics of self-transcendence," she writes, "yields to the prosaics of memory." The death of Pagis's estranged father demanded a literary orientation away from "interstellar space" and a reckoning with the personal, material relics of the poet's past; this turn, Ezrahi claims, enabled the writer to start (though not finish) the self-fashioning work of an "I."⁶⁸

During the height of the social and political tensions of the Cold War, when the horizon of humanity's future seemed to stretch into infinite space, the survivor was projected "out there," not always in human form, giving signs of what life might look like in worlds beyond. Today, the Space Race is over, and, with the closing of the shuttle program, space itself has become a site of ruin, where satellite wreckage and vintage dreams of modernity drift around the earth. In the meantime, since the late 1970s, we've entered a different chapter of Holocaust memory. In this "era of testimony," intimate interviews with survivors have brought this past down to earth, so to speak. While trauma studies has given us much to understand about the fragmentation of the self in the wake of violence, the human status of victims is no longer an implicit question. The victim of the Holocaust has become a figure of moral consensus, commemorated with secular mourning rites. When we examine a moment before these meanings and gestures of mourning became so pervasive, however, a different tradition of remembrance comes into view—a tradition that has left a deep and barely hidden impact on popular culture.

Notes

1. "Ka-Tzetnik" was a term commonly used among inmates of Nazi concentration camps and is derived from the German word "Konzentrationslager," or "KZ" for short.
2. ABC's telecast of Yehiel Dinur's testimony, with simultaneous English translation, is available to view on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website, courtesy of the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See Leo Hurwitz, "Eichmann Trial—Sessions 68 and 69—Testimonies of Y. Dinur, Y. Bakon, A. Oppenheimer, A. Beilin Film," directed by Leo Hurwitz, recorded on 7 June 1961 by Capital Cities Broadcasting Corporation, <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/fv2285> (part 1, minute 6:00).

3. Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2002), 165.
4. For an account of Ka-Tzetnik's reception inside and outside of Israel, and for an analysis of the similarities—and differences—between his novels and “Stalags,” a type of pornographic literature about the Holocaust available in Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s, see Omer Bartov's “Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-Tzetnik's Other Planet: Israeli Youth Imagine the Holocaust,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1997): 42–76.
5. The term is David Rousset's, which he coined in his dark opus *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (Paris, 1946). Rousset was interned as a communist resister in Buchenwald and Neuengamme. While his classification as a political prisoner would have made his experience in the camp system different from those deemed racial enemies of the Reich, *L'Univers concentrationnaire* was one of the earliest and most widely read autobiographical representations of Nazi atrocities and did much to shape the genre of survivor memoirs.
6. In a scene from *House of Dolls*, Dinur described a van entering his camp section at Auschwitz with corpses from a facility nearby. When the novel's protagonist, Harry Preleshnik, is instructed to load additional dead into the van, he recognizes the bodies. In intermittent flashbacks, we hear about strong and delicate men and women who only shortly before had been filled with a desperate drive to survive. The bodies from the other facility, though, are strangers; Harry wonders about these people, so like himself, whom he will never know. “They give off a strange, alien air, as if they had brought with them the smell of their alien camps. They are near to you, very near, yet strange. You seem to be of the same breed, you look just like them, yet they are a revelation to you. Like fallen denizens of remote planets with whom you've come together on alien soil. You look at them and ask yourself: How did they die, and how had they lived before that? What kinds of torment had they been through there? What does the camp they were brought from look like? And what did they themselves look like? What kind of accent did they have and what language did they speak?” To Harry, these are proximate others from an alternate dimension. As he peers at a pile of bodies not yet emptied of their former lives, the only memorial he can give to them is a series of questions. “Odd. Even on the knotted entangled bones of Mussulmann skeletons you seek the traces of their previous Mussulmannic life: What did this life look like? In what sort of blocks did they breathe? What kind of sky did they have? What sort of Baustelle? What did their Jew-Chief look like? How many portions were cut there from one loaf—”; see Ka-Tzetnik 135633, *House of Dolls*, trans. Moshe M. Kohn (New York, 1955), 218–19.
7. Bartov, “Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-Tzetnik's Other Planet,” 55.
8. Annette Wieviorka has argued that the first video testimony archive, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, developed as a grassroots reaction against NBC's televised melodrama *Holocaust*. In her view, video production gave survivors an “artisanal” means of shaping their own narratives and communicating the unadorned facts. See *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, 2006).
9. “The Eichmann Trial,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1961.
10. Homer Bigart, “Eichmann Called Key Nazi Planner,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1961.
11. Robert K. Plumb, “Space Flight Tied to Man's Advance,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1961.

12. Jean-Marc Théolleyre, "Devant le tribunal de Jérusalem le procès Eichmann: Eichmann a écouté impassible la lecture de l'act d'accusation," *Le Monde*, 13 April 1961. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
13. Jean-Marc Théolleyre, "Avant le procès Eichmann," *Le Monde*, 12 April 1961. The paper's emphasis on the theatricality of the legal arena in Jerusalem and its characterization of Eichmann as an idealistic bureaucrat (neither "cog in the machine" nor evil mastermind) bears a particular similarity to Arendt's later criticisms of the process as a show trial and her assessment of Eichmann as an ambitious "little man."
14. Ibid.
15. Jean-Marc Théolleyre, "Le défenseur d'Eichmann a engagé la bataille de procédure," *Le Monde*, 13 April 1961, 8.
16. Dr. Escoffier-Lambiotte, "Comment le premier astronaute a affronté les multiples dangers de l'espace," *Le Monde*, 13 April 1961, 3.
17. Ibid.
18. Wolfgang Cyran, "Der Mensch im Weltenraum: Die Belastungen und Gefahren der Fahrt ins Universum," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (hereafter *FAZ*), 13 April 1961, 2.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Statement printed in "Adenauer dankt Ben Gurion am Vorabend des Eichmann-Prozesses," *FAZ*, 11 April 1961, 1.
23. A month before the trial, Chancellor Adenauer also stated that Eichmann wasn't representative of Germans during the Nazi era and went so far as to claim that during the war most Germans had been happy to help their fellow Jewish citizens when they could. See "Nazi Case Issues Worry Adenauer," *New York Times*, 11 March 1961, 4.
24. F. K. Otto Dibelius, quoted in "Adenauer dankt Ben Gurion am Vorabend des Eichmann-Prozesses," 1.
25. Joachim Schwelien, "Hinter der Glaswand," *FAZ*, 11 April 1961, 1.
26. Ibid.
27. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 2006), 48–49.
28. Hannah Arendt, "Man's Conquest of Space," *American Scholar* 32, no. 4 (Autumn, 1963): 531.
29. Ibid., 536. In his book *No Requiem for the Space Age*, Matthew Tribbe points out that Arendt shared these concerns about the Space Race with several other German thinkers living in the United States, including theologian Paul Tillich. Both wondered what the penetration of space would mean for the existential condition of man, and worried that scientific abstraction and technical jargon would become the language of the future, displacing authentic human communion and communication in the public sphere. See Matthew D. Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age: The Apollo Moon Landings and American Culture* (Oxford, 2014), 77.
30. Here, Arendt rearticulated a set of concerns she had expressed earlier in reaction to the Sputnik launch of 1957 in the prologue to *The Human Condition* (1958). Bernard Lazier has pointed out that Arendt's fears about Sputnik can be understood in relation to her characterization of totalitarianism. He writes that Sputnik embodied for Arendt "a desire to fabricate an artificial substitute for the living Earth. Totalitarianism, in turn, distinguished itself from every other form of rule in its ambition to create a new world fit to compete with this

- one. . . . Totalitarianism's artful fiction, however, had its all too real apotheosis in the concentration camp universe, a realm inhabited by a population of twilight creatures that Arendt called 'the living dead.' In her view, we did not need to depart from the surface of the Earth to create a death star. Western civilization had already managed it, right here." See Lazier's article "Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (June 2011): 602–3.
31. Emmanuel Levinas, "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, 1990), 231. Originally published in France as *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (1963; reprint, Paris, 1976).
 32. *Ibid.*, 232.
 33. *Ibid.*, 233.
 34. *Ibid.*, 232.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. *Ibid.*, 234.
 37. Norman Mailer's coinage of the term "NASA-ism" is perhaps the pithiest demonstration of these associations. When he covered an event featuring speaker Wernher von Braun, former SS man and head of the US Marshall Space Center, Mailer wondered whether NASA's combination of romantic adventurism and hyperrationalism might not harken back to a very recent fascist past. See Tribbe, *No Requiem for the Space Age*, 105. While Tribbe makes few direct references to Holocaust memory, he does depict the earth-shaking events of the Space Race side by side with what can be interpreted as iconographic after-images of the destruction of Europe's Jewish populations. In one chapter he begins with Anne Morrow Lindbergh's surreal description of the thunder generated by the Apollo 8 launch—and ends with a description of Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (author of *If the Sun Dies*, a new-journalist take on NASA) lying on the bodies of student protestors who were killed during the Tlatelolco massacre. Tribbe tries to mark a political and cultural transition with that succession of scenes. For Fallaci and many others, he claims, universalist enthusiasm for a utopian "final frontier" was ultimately displaced by brutal international conflicts very much on the ground. My focus, by contrast, is on a moment when scenes like these flashed together in popular imagination.
 38. Primo Levi, *The Sixth Day and Other Tales* (New York, 1990), 160.
 39. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Cafeteria," trans. from the Yiddish with assistance from Dorothea Straus, *New Yorker*, 28 December 1968, 30.
 40. *Ibid.*, 32.
 41. *Ibid.*, 33.
 42. Quoted in Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Dan Pagis—Out of Line: A Poetics of Decomposition," *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (May 1990): 339.
 43. From Dan Pagis, *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley, 1989), 112.
 44. *Ibid.*, 111.
 45. Ezrahi, "Dan Pagis—Out of Line: A Poetics of Decomposition," 357.
 46. Ka-Tzetnik 135633, *Star Eternal*, trans. Eli-yah Nina Dinur (New York, 1971), 109–10.
 47. *Ibid.*, 112.
 48. *Ibid.*, 119.
 49. *Ibid.*
 50. Before Spielberg, the Holocaust was an explicit theme in science fiction on the small screen in the United States. In "Aliens in the Wasteland: American

Encounters with the Holocaust on 1960s Science Fiction Television,” Jeffrey Shandler points out that television played a crucial role in universalizing the Holocaust for Americans long before NBC’s 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*. He builds his argument around close readings of two teleplays: “Death’s Head Revisited,” an episode of *The Twilight Zone* that aired the year of the Eichmann trial, in which a sadistic former SS captain returns to Dachau and is put on trial by the ghosts of his former victims; and “Patterns of Force,” an episode of *Star Trek* from 1968 about an alien civilization modeled on the Third Reich. Of the two episodes, “Patterns of Force” focuses most squarely on race: When Captain Kirk and Spock visit the Ekosian civilization, Kirk “passes” as a member of the master race, while Spock is accused of being a member of the oppressed “Zeons” and kidnapped. Viewers “have variously understood Spock’s archetypal ‘otherness,’” Shandler writes, “as analogous to that of African Americans and Asians, among other cultural groups.” He theorizes in the end that the primary message of “Patterns of Force” was to condemn America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. In the episode, the “Earth historian” who helped the Ekosians pattern their civilization after Nazi “efficiency” explains that he didn’t intend to initiate a genocide; his intervention in this alien world spiraled out of control when a “self-seeking adventurer” took over his party. The episode ends with a call for “noninterference” in the civilizations of others—a reference to America’s growing protest movement. Shandler contextualizes these two episodes as part of broader trends in American television in the 1960s, arguing that the Holocaust was one of many “guest topics” introduced into episodic television in an effort to defend the seriousness of the medium, which was increasingly coming under criticism as part of a superficial cultural “wasteland.” See “Aliens in the Wasteland: American Encounters with the Holocaust on 1960s Science Fiction Television,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore, 1999), 33–44.

51. Comparing *Close Encounters* with possibly the most famous alien film of all time, Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), reveals the filmmaker’s evolving attitudes about communication across difference. *Close Encounters* celebrates the possibility of a literally “universal,” enlightened visual and musical language that can transcend the problem of translation between human beings and other civilizations; the film devotes comparatively little time to character development or personal relationships. In *E.T.*, by contrast, the relationship between an individual alien and a boy named Elliot drives the film’s drama. When members of a government medical team (representatives of rational science who have replaced the benevolent Truffaut in this new close encounter story) try to determine how E.T. can communicate through the boy Elliott, they observe, “Elliott thinks its thoughts.” His brother retorts, no: “Elliott feels his feelings”; *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, directed by Steven Spielberg [1982] (Universal City, CA, 2002), DVD.
52. Joseph McBride, *Steven Spielberg: A Biography* (New York, 1997), 283, 287.
53. *Ibid.*, 286.
54. Robert Torry, “Politics and Parousia in ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind,’” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1991): 188–96.
55. Paul Schrader’s version of the film was entitled *Kingdom Come*. See McBride, *Steven Spielberg*, 267.
56. Susan Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor, 2016), 52.

57. Douglas Brode has noted that Spielberg revisited the *mise en scène* of *Close Encounters* just a few years later in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), the first of the Indiana Jones franchise, which focuses on a race between Jones and Nazi archaeologists to recover the Ark of the Covenant; David Brodie, *The Films of Steven Spielberg* (New York, 1995), 98. Like *Close Encounters*, this film culminates with a scene on a secluded mountainous landscape where state officials stage a sublime encounter with an unearthly other, this time explicitly coded as Jewish. There are other visual and thematic parallels between the two films: Truffaut's benevolent French scientist is re-imagined here as the collaborationist French archaeologist Belloq, who uses his expertise to open the Ark. Just as in *Close Encounters*, Nazi officials attempt to film the moment of "contact." In *Raiders*, the encounter ends not with communication but with the explosion of the Nazis' film equipment and the fiery destruction of their archaeological team. Indiana Jones survives because he and his partner close their eyes to avoid viewing the Ark's holy power directly, while filmgoers witness the entire scene; *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, directed by Steven Spielberg [1981] (Hollywood, 2003), DVD.
58. The story is based on science fiction writer JG Ballard's semi-autobiographical novel about his experiences in an internment camp for Europeans and Americans set up during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai.
59. *Premiere* magazine described *Schindler's List* as "different from anything Spielberg has done before, as far from the 'movie' movie universe of *Jaws* as it could possibly be." Quoted by Nigel Morris in *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg: Empire of Light* (London, 2007), 215.
60. McBride, *Steven Spielberg*, 415–16.
61. Morris, *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg*, 232–33.
62. Primo Levi, "A Tranquil Star," from *A Tranquil Star: Unpublished Stories*, trans. Ann Goldstein and Alessandra Bastagli (New York, 2007), 157.
63. *Ibid.*, 156–57.
64. *Ibid.*, 158–59.
65. *Ibid.*, 159.
66. David Grossman, *See Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York, 1989).
67. Gilead Morahg, "Breaking Silence: Israel's Fantastic Fiction of the Holocaust," in *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction*, ed. Alan Mintz (Hanover, NH, 1997), 143–84.
68. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, 2000), 173.