Cultural Review of the ‘Sri Lankan Genocide 2009…’ Photo Exhibition and Forum, 30 April 2014, Victoria Hall, Fremantle, Western Australia

A man, perhaps in his mid thirties, sits with his back against a dirty pile of rubble, legs splayed haphazardly in front of him. He cradles a loose pile of his own innards in his lap. His eyes are clear, but death inevitably follows.

Standing in front of this portrait at the ‘Sri Lankan Genocide 2009…’ photo exhibition at Victoria Hall in Fremantle, Western Australia I cannot help but ruminate on Hannah Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil – how can this suffering, obviously at the hands of another, be anything but evil?1 Arendt, writing on the trial of Nazi official Otto Adolf Eichmann, found no outward indication of evil in Eichmann as he stood trial for crimes against humanity, despite his role in coordinating the deportation of Jews from Germany and elsewhere to concentration camps.2 As a witness to the trial Arendt stated that ‘the deeds were monstrous, but the doer … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous’.3 But confronted with photos of tortured and penned human beings I am loath to accept that any such genocidal perpetrator is banal. And with every subsequent photo, I search for something to indicate explicitly that this particular genocidal perpetrator who has mutilated, twisted and mauled the bodies of even small children is evil. But I do not find anything explicit. Like Arendt’s Eichmann, the soldiers standing with automatic weapons appear neither demonic nor monstrous; they look simply as though they are doing their job. As I continue to look and still cannot find, I am forced to consider Arendt’s conjecture that evil is indeed banal.

Organised by Action for Human Rights In Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka, both the exhibition and forum have a clear political agenda designed to elicit support for a cause that has been allegedly overlooked by Australian leaders. The photographers responsible for the images play a minor role in the event – they are quickly acknowledged as ‘the photographers’ (though not present) and are not a focal point of the exhibition. The forum that opens this three-day exhibition both validates and refutes Arendt’s position on evil (although not explicitly). Forum panelists include Prof. Raj Rajeswaran (Australian Tamil Congress chairperson), Melissa Parke (federal Labor member for Fremantle, WA), Scott Ludlam (WA Greens Senator) and Aran Myalvaganam (Tamil Refugee Council Spokesperson). Throughout the discussion it becomes clear that, according to this panel, my search for one evil

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genocidal perpetrator is fruitless. I am presented instead with two perpetrators. The first is the Sri Lankan government. The second, unexpectedly, is the Australian government.

Without any political delineation between Australian Liberal and Labor, Aran Myalvaganam, himself a survivor of human rights abuses during the 80s and 90s, accuses the Australian government of time and time again aiding the Sri Lankan government in its genocidal agenda. Australia’s recent refusal to support the UN Human Rights Council’s proposal for an investigation of human rights abuses in the country is just one example of many that Myalvaganam reads as pro-genocidal. And it is difficult to refute Myalvaganam’s claim when told Australia does this despite its position as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council and the stance of its allies, the US and the UK, in publically supporting the UN’s proposed investigation. It is in the character of Australia as spun by Myalvaganam that I find a thread of Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil. This Australia has turned the Sri Lankan refugees – the so-called ‘boat people’ infiltrating our shores- into a banal political tool. This Australia character uses a humanitarian crisis for its own domestic political agenda, unquestioningly ‘demonizing and dehumanizing refugees’ (Myalvaganam).

As I look again at the photos around me I see them anew, not as a way of vilifying the Sri Lankan government as the genocidal perpetrator, but as a way of vilifying our own government. The ‘politics of stopping boats’ is the basis of Australian apathy on the issue of the Sri Lankan genocide. But it is just this – politics - that makes this banal.

The banality of evil is a complicated theory and one that raises too many questions to answer. Whether evil exists, or whether Australia’s political position regarding Sri Lanka and the UN investigation into human rights abuses makes it a genocidal perpetrator is far beyond the scope of this review. But this event did make me think and I can offer, through the words of Arendt, a position on thinking that did become clear through this forum and photo exhibition:

[T]hinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handy you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now arouse in you, has roused you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other.4

To change the wind of thought - thus is the meaning and purpose of this exhibition and forum. When thoughts become unfrozen, they become positively destructive and have the potential to elicit change. The confronting and gruesome photos at this

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exhibition document the many human rights abuses suffered by the Sri Lankan Tamils at the hands of their own government but also reveal that we often wander unthinkingly through the day-to-day. This exhibition encourages us to do something we often forget or choose not to do when confronted with difficult topics like genocide – think.

Colleen Harmer, The University of Western Australia