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Lying and history

The reports on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction decided that the US invasion of Iraq could start. Today, we know that these weapons were fiction, an image produced to justify the war. Discussing Hannah Arendt and the Viet Nam war, Cathy Caruth shows that this type of political imagery has a long tradition in the US.

I would like to address the problem of violence in the political realm by focusing on a question that, I believe, emerges out of several late works by the twentieth-century political thinker Hannah Arendt: What is history in the time of what Arendt calls "the modern lie"? In "Truth and Politics" (1967) and "Lying in Politics" (1971), Arendt reflects on what she considers a profound philosophical conundrum at the heart of politics and the political: an intimate and foundational relation between politics and the lie that, I would suggest, has momentous implications for the way we think about political history (and more widely, I would argue, about history as such). Beginning from a reflection on the nature of political action in the context of lying, Arendt ultimately, I will argue, enables a rethinking of the very nature of history around the possibility of its political denial. What does it mean, she asks, for political history to be fundamentally linked, at certain points in modern times, to its erasure or lack of witness? And how might it be possible to witness from within this history?

Politics and the lie

The question of history arises, in "Truth and Politics," in the context of Arendt's concern with the pervasive role of lying that she perceives, in the modern world, taking place within the political sphere. As Arendt suggested in her earlier work, *The Human Condition*, the sphere of politics is important because it is the exemplary place in which man displays his essential capacity, as man, to act and thus to bring into the world "something new [...] which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before."¹ This concept of political action arose specifically in the Greek polis, she says, when words and deeds replaced the mute force of violence and created a public sphere in which men appeared before each other and created the world anew in unpredictable and unexpected ways. But the political sphere maintains itself, Arendt adds, not only as the site of action but also as the site of its remembrance, for "speech and action [...] possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance."² More specifically, they create political bodies that establish the conditions for remembrance, "that is, for history."³ History thus seems central to the functioning of the political world, both as its memory and as the ground upon which the political world builds a future.

In the modern world, however, Arendt will point out in "Truth and Politics," the public realm has become a realm of deception, a place dramatizing, in effect, the "clash of factual truth and politics, which we witness today on such a large scale."⁴ Arendt draws on a number of examples, remarking, for instance, on the disappearance of Trotsky from the history books of the Soviet Union, and the German and French representations of their actions during World War II. Unlike the ancient world in which the notion of politics first appeared, she suggests, the public realm in the modern world is not only the place of political action that creates history but also, and centrally, the place of the political lie that denies it. Focusing on the ubiquity of the lie in the modern world, then, Arendt ultimately, in my interpretation, asks the following question: what kind of politics is possible in a world in which history is regularly and systematically denied?

The topic of the denial of history emerging after the great wars had been analysed, in the work of another great writer, Sigmund Freud, in terms of the psychological forms of denial in the face of catastrophic events, and especially those of the First World War.⁵ But Arendt's explicit concern in her essay is of another nature, a form of deliberate political deception that also emerges after WWI but, in a surprisingly brazen way, arises directly and consciously in the political sphere and attacks the fundamental facts of history that had previously been considered indestructible:

During the twenties, so a story goes, Clemenceau, shortly before his death, found himself engaged in a friendly talk with a representative of the Weimar Republic on the question of guilt for the outbreak of the First World War. "What, in your opinion," Clemenceau was asked, "will future historians think of this troublesome and controversial issue?" He replied, "This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany." We are concerned here with brutally elementary data of this kind, whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism.⁶

The responsibility for the outbreak of WWI — a matter of profound political significance between the wars — is a factual truth that, in an earlier period, might have seemed unassailable even in the contested world of politics. But in the political world that emerged in the ensuing period, even this crucial and well-known fact had come under debate:

It is true, considerably more than the whims of historians would be needed to eliminate from the record the fact that on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of Belgium; it would require no less than a power monopoly over the entire civilized world. But such a power monopoly is far from being inconceivable, and it is not difficult to imagine what the fate of factual truth would be if power interests, national or social, had the last say in these matters.⁷

In her allusion to the totalitarian states that arose after WWI, Arendt suggests that the world in which facts could be agreed upon is in danger of changing forever and that not only individual facts, but the fate of "factual truth" as such is in danger in this new and emergent reality. The danger to the political world in modern times is the loss of the factual world that emerges, paradoxically, at

the heart of the political realm that ordinarily creates, and depends upon, historical remembrance. What is, indeed, of interest to Arendt is that the lie comes not from without, but precisely from within, the realm of political action, and is in fact tied to it by a fundamental similarity between action and lying. Facts are fragile in the political sphere, she says, because truth-telling is actually much less political in its nature than the lie:

The hallmark of factual truth is that its opposite is neither error nor illusion [...] but the deliberate falsehood or lie. Error of course is possible. [...] But the point is that with respect to facts there exists another alternative, and this alternative, the deliberate falsehood, does not belong to the same species as propositions that, whether right or mistaken, intend no more than to say what is or how something that is appears to me. A factual statement — Germany invaded Belgium in August 1914 — acquires political implications only by being put in an interpretative context. But the opposite proposition, which Clemenceau, still unacquainted with the art of rewriting history, thought absurd, needs no context to be of political significance. It is clearly an attempt to change the record, and as such it is a form of *action*.⁸

If the lie "changes the record" of history, it does so, Arendt suggests, not as a falsehood that negates a truth (a falsehood that could be a mere error without being a lie), but as an act of speech intended, like political action, to make a change in the world. The liar thus prevails in the political world because, like the actor, he is exercising freedom:

While the liar is a man of action, the truth teller [...] most emphatically is not [...] The liar needs no accommodation to appear on the political scene; he has the great advantage that he always is, so to speak, already in the midst of it. He is an actor by nature; he says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are — that is, he wants to change the world. He takes advantage of the undeniable affinity of our capacity for action, for changing reality, with this mysterious faculty of ours that enables us to say, "The sun is shining," when it is raining cats and dogs [...] In other words, our ability to lie — but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth — belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom. That we can change the circumstances under which we live at all is because we are relatively free from them, and it is this freedom that is abused and perverted through mendacity.⁹

Like the political actor, the political liar wishes to change the world, to be free from things as they are given. Since his denial of the world is also a form of action, the act of lying is, in itself, a demonstration of freedom. The lie does not appear in the political realm only as the denial of the historical acts of the past, then, but also as a kind of *action of beginning* that, potentially, has its own political and historical unfolding.¹⁰

It is this independent historical unfolding that, in fact, Arendt describes as the site of the danger of the lie when she narrates the passage of the lie from its traditional role, within politics, as another means of effecting true political action, to a wholly independent and all consuming activity that replaces action

(and its history) altogether. Thus at first, Arendt argues, lying serves the interest of politics: it is used by and aimed at individuals; it concerns particular facts and serves specific political ends. In this sense the lie works within political history and is subordinated to particular political purposes. But over time a fundamental change takes place. The lie is now aimed at facts everyone knows, it deceives not only particular individuals but also everyone in society (including the liars themselves), and is aimed not at particular facts but at the entire framework of factuality as such. The lie moves out of its subordinate position, in other words, to become an absolute framework in which nothing but the creation of the lie acts in the world.¹¹ In this sense, Arendt appears to suggest, there is a certain reversal in the course of political history, in the relation between the lie and politics: if the traditional lie worked within the realm of action defined by politics — —and thus served to confirm and further its history as freedom — — politics now works within (and serves) the modern lie. At this point the lie is no longer limited to traditional acts of lying by individuals but rather takes over and exceeds individual intention, driving forward a political process no longer serving purely political ends.

The danger of the lie is thus not a covering over of history but a substitution of its own action (and history) for that of true political beginnings. Indeed, in totalitarianism, as Arendt suggests in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the "mass rewriting of history" not only denies the history of the past but also moves forward as the creation of an "entirely fictitious world."¹² (This world is made to be fictitious both in the sense that its fictions are enforced upon reality and in the sense that through "organized" propaganda and terror it eliminates the capacity for human beings to act and makes a world of marionettes acting in entirely predictable and mechanical ways.) The action of lying is thus not simply a covering over of reality (as in traditional deception) but a replacement of reality altogether with the fiction of an overarching lie:

All these lies, whether their authors know it or not, harbour an element of violence: organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate, although only totalitarian governments have consciously adopted lying as the first step to murder. [...] In other words, the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.¹³

The violence of the modern lie consists in the absolute loss of the reality that it denies. But we could also say that the violence of the lie, in this process, consists in substituting the action of destroying the facts of reality for the action of beginning, replacing a history of beginnings with a history of their total erasure.

The historical newness of the lie, as Arendt describes it — — its unfolding as a true history — — consists thus, I would suggest, in the conversion of the process of political action into the action of this substitution. But how do we understand the historical moment that leads to this kind of usurpation? In Arendt's repeated reference to the outbreak of WWI, she hints at the possibility that this shift takes place when the massive destructiveness of this war — — a kind of destruction that, she will say elsewhere, inaugurated a new world of technological violence — — is itself denied. The denial of the responsibility for the beginning of WWI, which she refers to repeatedly in her examples, may be the first lie, in fact, that leads to this modern world. To understand the nature of the historical progress of the lie we must understand then, the way in which the violence of war becomes entangled with the violence of its denial. The

question of history in the world of the lie thus ultimately becomes, as I interpret Arendt: what does it mean for the historical violence of war to become the history of the violence of the lie?

Lying and war

It is this question that, I will suggest, lies at the heart of Arendt's analysis of the Viet Nam war. "Lying in Politics" was a response to Daniel Ellsberg's release of the so-called Pentagon Papers, the "top-secret" history of the decision-making processes in the war that was leaked to the NY Times in 1971 at the height of the conflict, and which created shock waves throughout the public sphere because of their revelation of the systematic and pervasive use of lies on all levels in the war. As Arendt notes, this lying involved, among other things, "the phony body counts of the 'search and destroy' missions, the doctored after-damage reports of the air force, and the 'progress' reports to Washington from the field written by subordinates who knew that their performance would be evaluated by their own reports,"¹⁴ among other kinds of deception. For Arendt, it is the centrality of this deception (as opposed to error or illusion) that constitutes the major lesson of the Papers: the centrality of deception as not only a secondary but also a fundamental factor in the decision-making process shaping the development of the war:

The Pentagon Papers [...] tell different stories, teach different lessons to different readers. [...] But most readers have now agreed that the basic issue raised by the Papers is deception [...] The famous credibility gap [...] has suddenly opened up into an abyss. The quicksand of lying statements of all sorts, deceptions as well as self-deceptions, is apt to engulf any reader who wishes to probe this material, which, unhappily, he must recognize as the infrastructure of nearly a decade of United States foreign and domestic policy.¹⁵

To the extent that deception appears in the war, it appears not only as a secondary matter in a larger political and military process — a "gap" between the public version of the war and its political realities — but as an "abyss" that opens up within the infrastructure of the policy-making process itself. Drawing on the currently popular description of the war as a quagmire in her own figure of the "quicksand" of lying statements, Arendt shifts the centre of action from the actual process of military engagement — presented, in the quagmire model, as a well-intentioned but misguided step by step entrance into the conflict — to the process of lying itself, which thus usurps the place of politics as the fundamental action driving the decision-making process of the war.

The process of deception in the war, as Arendt analyses it, can thus be understood as a new, non-totalitarian version of the *modern* lie. This "more recent variety" of lying she refers to specifically as "image-making."¹⁶ This involves two different, but apparently related, kinds of images: those that change or distort the facts (the images disseminated by the mass media describing the war) and those that guide the war-making decisions themselves. Both kinds of image-making are part of a new phenomenon, and here Arendt seems far-sightedly to be touching quite on the specificity of a world that is dominated by the mass media. I will suggest, however, that while both kinds of image-making are new, the essential feature that appears to constitute the image as a form of the modern lie is the way in which the image-making involved with the selling of the war is transformed into the image-making that

guides the decision-making process itself. It is in the transformative process that takes place *between* the two kinds of image-making, in other words, that the war is not only *hidden as a fact* but also *created as a history*. We can discern this dynamic relation between the images in Arendt's first description of the two kinds of image-making, that of the "public relations managers" and that of the "problem-solvers". On the one hand, Arendt tells us, are the "public relations managers" who "learned their trade from the inventiveness of Madison Avenue," and believe that half of politics is "image-making" and the other half the art of making people believe in the images.¹⁷ These image-makers thus *make images*, in effect, *to sell the war*. The problem solvers, on the other hand, are intellectuals who were brought to Washington to calculate scenarios with "game theories and systems analyses" in order to solve the "problems" of foreign policy.¹⁸ The problem solvers, who are "different from ordinary image-makers," are striking because they lie, "not so much for their country — certainly not for their country's survival, which was never at stake — as for its image."¹⁹ The problem solvers thus lie, in other words, *in the service of an image*. Arendt's description of the structure of image-making at the heart of the war, as I interpret her argument, thus seems to operate around a reversal that repeats, somewhat differently, the one that governed the transformation from the traditional to the modern lie: if the public relations managers *make images to sell the war*, the problem solvers *make war to sustain an image*. The war is thus created and sustained, Arendt seems to suggest, for the production of its own image.

Arendt's analysis of the progress of the war in terms of its shifting goals can indeed be understood as a reflection on the way in which the images that sell the war come to take over the decision-making process that guides it. Since "nearly all decisions in this disastrous enterprise were made in full cognizance of the fact that they probably could not be carried out,"²⁰ Arendt notes, the goals had constantly to be altered. At first these shifts involve the way in which the war is presented to the public. For example, the goal of the war is described originally as "seeing that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their future" but also "assisting the country to win their contest against the [...] Communist conspiracy."²¹ As the war worsens, however, the image-making is not only aimed at convincing the public to support the war but is also incorporated into the conception of the war itself as a kind of image-making process:

From 1965 on, the notion of a clear-cut victory receded into the background and the objective became "to convince the enemy that he could not win". [...] Since the enemy remained unconvinced, the next goal appeared: "to avoid a humiliating defeat" — as though the hallmark of a defeat in war were mere humiliation. What the Pentagon papers report is the haunting fear of the impact of defeat, not on the welfare of the nation, but on the reputation of the United States and its President.²²

What emerges as the war grows more difficult — and the goals themselves become less reality-oriented — is not a decision-making process concerning the winning of an actual war but the creation of an "image of omnipotence" that ultimately appears to drive the entire process:

To convince the world"; to "demonstrate that US was a 'good doctor' willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied and hurt the enemy badly;" [...] to keep intact an image of omnipotence, "our worldwide position of leadership;"

[...] in short to "behave like" the "greatest power in the world" for no other reason than to convince the world of this "simple fact" [...] — this was the only permanent goal that, with the beginning of the Johnson administration, pushed into the background all other goals and theories.²³

What lies behind the decision-making process is not, as one might expect, an adjustment to events but rather the production of, and adherence to, an "image of omnipotence" that increases in dominance, paradoxically, as true power is lost. It might seem that the image of omnipotence could itself operate as another traditional form of the lie created in the service of wielding additional power. From this point of view it would remain part of an ultimately military and political process in which the image would serve as a traditional political tool. But Arendt argues that the creation of the image of omnipotence actually *undermines* power and puts itself in its place:

The ultimate goal was neither power nor profit. Nor was it even influence in the world in order to serve particular, tangible interests for the sake of which prestige, an image of the "greatest power in the world," was needed and purposefully used. The goal was now the image itself, as is manifest in the very language of the problem-solvers, with their "scenarios" and "audiences," borrowed from the theater [...] Image-making as global policy — not world conquest, but victory in the battle "to win the people's minds" — is indeed something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history.²⁴

The "image of omnipotence" has, in fact, no relation to actual power or any other interest to which it might be subordinated, but rather becomes the principle *in itself* that subordinates all other realities to it. And this is what then constitutes it, paradoxically, as "new" (the hallmark of all true political action): that political decision making would not serve as a true action but as the action of creating an image that empties this process of any power except that of the image itself.

The "image of omnipotence," then, is not created in this war in order to wield more power — as it might be for instance, says Arendt, in "a third-rate nation always apt to boast in order to compensate for the real thing" — but operates in spite of its actual effect of undermining effectiveness in the real world. Wishing to show "how considerable were the chances for a global policy that was then gambled away in the cause of image-making and winning people's minds,"²⁵ Arendt notes two incidents revealed in the Pentagon Papers. The first involved Ho Chi Minh, who had written President Truman in 1945 and 1946 to request support from the United States; the second involved Chou En Lai, who in 1945 had approached President Roosevelt to establish relations with China so that China could "avoid total dependence on the Soviet Union." Both overtures to the US were ignored because, as Arendt writes, citing one scholar on the China incident, they "contradicted the image of monolithic Communism directed from Moscow".²⁶ This image would, presumably, be necessary to sustain the converse image of a United States omnipotently winning over such a monolithic antithetical power. The creation of the image of omnipotence thus involves the undoing of actual power.

The sustaining of the image is, in this manner, tied to what Arendt calls the process of "defactualization" at the heart of the war by which the decision-making process simultaneously loses its grounding in reality and

becomes unable to observe the loss of its own ground. The Viet Nam war is, thus, a war whose very genesis and history serve the establishment of what Arendt calls an entirely "defactualized world".²⁷

History of the image

What kind of history (and what kind of witness) is possible in the movement toward an entirely defactualized world? Arendt's description of the transformation of the image from the tool to the framework of the decision-making process seems to involve a machine-like mechanism that makes reflection (and truly historical action) increasingly unlikely. Arendt indeed describes a process in which both aspects of the image-making activity have already been essentially cut off from reality. Thus, she explains, the attempt to sell the war becomes, for the image-makers, a battle in which the war is displaced onto the selling process: in thinking of the image-making process as "the battle for people's minds",²⁸ the public relations managers essentially allow the image-making itself to take on the properties of the war. The war, for the public relations managers, thus disappears into the image as its advertising becomes the primary site of the action.

On the other hand, in the case of the problem-solvers (those who lie for the image), the image-making has left the realm of deception and self-deception entirely, since "disregard of reality was inherent in the policies and goals themselves".²⁹ *The war itself*, for these policy makers, *has taken on the properties of image-making*. In this quasi-mechanical manner the world — and the war — thus come to sustain the image that empties this world of any true political significance and ultimately serves only the image's own ongoing and ruthless perpetuation. "One sometimes has the impression," Arendt says, "that a computer, rather than 'decision-makers,' had been let loose in Southeast Asia."³⁰ The violent history of the war thus itself becomes, in this process, subordinated to the violent historical unfolding of the image.³¹

It is the unfolding movement of this self-erasing image that, indeed, seems to mark the war as an event — a new event — within the larger context of the modern lie. The new aspect of the lie as image-making can itself be traced back, in fact, to an earlier event in history that Arendt will go on to describe. Thus the problem-solvers, Arendt says, were preceded by the Cold War ideologists who had once been communists and needed a "new ideology to explain and reliably foretell the course of history."³² The "sheer ignorance of facts" in this process produced the "theories" of the younger generation (the problem-solvers) that "shielded men from the impact of reality."³³ And this history — a history not of *facts* but of *defactualization* — has a beginning in the occurrence of a specific event that is a crucial event in history but also an event in the history of the modern lie:

There are historians today who maintain that Truman dropped the bomb on Hiroshima in order to scare the Russians out of Eastern Europe (with the result we know). If this is true, as it might well be, then we may trace back the earliest beginnings of the disregard for the actual consequences of action in favour of some ulterior calculated aim to the fateful war crime that ended the last world war.³⁴

At the "earliest beginnings" of defactualization — at the beginning, Arendt implies, of the kind of image-making that usurps the decision-making process in the Viet Nam war — is a single and inaugurative act, the decision to drop

the atomic bomb. If this decision is the beginning of a new mode of the modern lie, however, of image-making of the kind she has analysed in the war, then the "action" of this decision (and its violent consequences) — as a "beginning" — is subordinated to the image it creates. Rather than taking place as a historical event that provides a framework in which the modern lie will develop, the dropping of the bomb (within the logic of Arendt's analysis) would rather seem to convert the frame of political and historical events into the framework of the lie's own self-generation.

The dropping of the bomb, as I would expand on what I discern in Arendt's argument, would not be meant to wield real power but rather to create the image of power, an event that replaces itself with its own image. The bomb is not only a "beginning" of the nuclear age but also the beginning of a certain mode of image-making, a beginning that erases itself as such in this very process. This is particularly striking in the case of the bomb since as actual, technological power the bomb would seem to embody precisely the omnipotence it would represent as image. Yet this technologically destructive power (and its political potential) is instantly transferred into the image-making that subordinates its present, factual reality (including the reality of its destruction) to the image of a future omnipotence ultimately related only to its power to destroy itself as a fact. The bomb is not dropped in order to wield power that would allow for victory but rather for the "pursuit of a mere image of omnipotence" that lies in the future.³⁵

And yet, it would seem, "image" of itself is also an actual image, insofar as the bomb, in its technological function, is associated with the production of a blinding light (it is often compared to a sun) as well as an image that represents its power, the "image of omnipotence" in the shape of the "mushroom cloud" in which the explosive power of the bomb appears. The bomb thus posits its own image as something that — like the modern lie — is seen and not seen at the same time. The decision to drop the bomb, we could say — which is, or starts as, a true form of action — is covered over, or erased, by the power of the image produced in the actual falling of the bomb, the "mushroom cloud" that gives the falling of the bomb a kind of inevitability (and becomes the term used to make future wars seem inevitable rather than acts of decision-making). The erasure of the act of decision-making (the process by which a true decision took place) in the dropping of the bomb — the way in which the decision is erased by the image — could be considered the creation of a new kind of fact, one that erases itself in its own production, and in so doing moves forward toward a blinding future. The beginning — and hence futurity — constituted by the "decision" to drop the bomb thus becomes the future "of the image", a history determined by a technological image-making power that determines the future as an explosion annihilating both past and future history.³⁶

The end of WWII is ultimately the beginning of the image, a dark (or blindingly light) doubling, perhaps, of the historical process encapsulated at the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in Arendt's claim that "every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning."³⁷ The history of the lie, in its new form as the history of the image, would be a history constituted by its own erasure. And this is also how we would have to understand its violence: not only as the actual destruction made possible by the bomb but also as the means by which destruction and violence are made, in their very appearance, inaccessible as knowledge. This is indeed the absolute destruction of fact that Arendt names in the very first section of "Lying in Politics" as another mode of omnipotence:

Total lying can be done only through radical destruction [...] the power to achieve it would have to amount to omnipotence [...] to kill all contemporaries and to wield power over the libraries and archives of all countries of the earth.³⁸

Explosive histories

If the dropping of the bomb is the advent of the image, however, Arendt's own writing also bears witness to the trace of another explosion, an explosion, moreover, associated with an exemplary fact. This fact — mentioned in the quotation from "Truth and Politics" with which we began — also marks the beginning of a war and is repeated four times in the essay as representative of both the coerciveness of facts and of their fragility: "The fact that on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of Belgium." In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, however, this fact has a complicated structure, since it marks, as it turns out, the transition from the pre-totalitarian to the totalitarian world[s] and opens the famous chapter ("The decline of the nation state and the end of the rights of man") that pivots between them:

It is almost impossible even now to describe what actually happened in Europe on August 4, 1914. The days before and the days after the First World War are separated not like the end of an old and the beginning of a new period, but like the day before and after an explosion. Yet this figure of speech is as inaccurate as are all others, because the quiet of sorrow which settles down after a catastrophe has never come to pass. The first explosion seems to have touched off a chain reaction in which we have been caught ever since and which nobody seems able to stop. [...] Every event had the finality of a last judgment, a judgment that was passed neither by God nor by the devil, but looked rather like the expression of some unredeemably stupid fatality.³⁹

The "fact" (which is also a date) of 4 August 1914 derives from an event of a special kind, a transitional event between two worlds that constitutes a radical change in political history, from the post-revolutionary world to the world in which much of European politics was ultimately subordinated to the totalitarian movements. As such it heralds something new in history, although, Arendt notes, it is not the newness of a beginning but rather of an "explosion", a gap in time that does not produce a future but rather appears to annihilate it. Indeed, the atomic nature of the explosion (related to a chain reaction) suggests, on a figural level, a link between this historical event marking the beginning of WWI and the literal event of explosion that marks the end of WWII, a chain of explosions in which the beginnings and the ends are equally destructive and seem to produce a history constituted only as the repeated erasure of the histories that precede them.

The explosion of 4 August 1914 indeed marks a transition, specifically, between the world of the traditional lie and the world of the modern lie. As such, the explosion is precisely the advent of the modern lie as an historical event, but an event of a new kind: an event heralding the possibility of its total erasure. The history of explosions would thus constitute the historical unfolding of the modern lie as a repetition of erasures, each both eliminated and passed on by the one that follows.

The figure of explosion that Arendt uses here, however, also delineates this repetitive history in its *difference from* the pure mechanicity and determination of the bomb, insofar as it reverses the order of explosion and chain reaction: "Yet this figure of speech is as inaccurate as are all others, because the quiet of sorrow which settles down after a catastrophe has never come to pass. The first explosion seems to have touched off a chain reaction in which we have been caught ever since and which nobody seems able to stop." Whereas in an ordinary, single event of atomic explosion the chain reaction would precede the explosion, here the explosion precedes the chain reaction, which then causes another explosion and another into the future. The explosion, that is, does not take place except insofar as it creates another one, a figure not so much of purely mechanical processes as of a repetition of explosions whose impact always lies in the future of explosions to come. If the advent of the modern lie, in history, is also the advent of history's erasure (as event), this reversal suggests that this erasure never quite occurs, that it is only half-erased and transmitted to the future, where it leaves its traces in the violent imprint (and in the technology associated with it) that accompanies the bomb. In Arendt's text, then, the violent and blinding light of the bomb, *as an image*, bears with it the *trace of a figure* that is passed on through the very process of its (partial) erasure.⁴⁰ The distinction between the image and its figure would permit, here, a non-mechanistic, non-deterministic historicity of the modern lie — and the possibility of its witness — to begin to emerge.

The possibility of bearing witness

It is the trace of this self-erasure of the historical fact that Daniel Ellsberg might indeed be understood as describing when he says, in *Papers on the War*, that he leaked the Pentagon Papers in order to reveal an "invisible war"⁴¹ not only a war that was invisible to the public but also, perhaps, a war constituted by its self-elimination as a traditional fact. Ellsberg's revelation of the Pentagon Papers is indeed not the revelation of a simple secret, as Arendt notes at the end of her essay:

What calls for further close and detailed study is the fact, much commented on, that the Pentagon Papers revealed little significant news that was not available to the average reader of dailies and weeklies; nor are there any arguments, pro or con, in the "History of the US Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy" that have not been debated publicly for years in magazines, television shows, and radio broadcasts.⁴²

While Arendt emphasizes the availability of the facts because she wishes to insist on the importance of a free press, I believe that her recognition that the Pentagon Papers do not reveal new facts points to a reinterpretation of the way in which the media could be understood as working in the disclosure of the Papers. If the Pentagon Papers have the force of a revelation, it cannot be because they reveal any facts that are not known (including the facts of the lies themselves) but rather because they produce, from within the very medium of the image (the public press), the force of an explosion that transmits and makes legible the explosion of the fact in the modern world. It is, perhaps, the performance of a kind of *explosion of the frame* of the media through the very media that create this frame.⁴³ Ellsberg himself, in fact, describes his decision to leak the Pentagon Papers not in terms of revelation or truth but in terms of the breaking of a promise — the breaking of the secrecy oath that, in an essay on the subject, he identifies as a promise to lie.⁴⁴ Ellsberg's decision is a peculiar kind of speech act, then: not a promise — a central kind of political

action in Arendt's work — but the *breaking of a promise to lie*. This new kind of action would have to be understood as an action that foregoes the possibility of straightforward truth-telling yet serves, nonetheless, as a form of political witness. What occurs here is not the telling of truth, that is, but the testimony to erasure: the exposure, in Ellsberg's words, of an "enigma,"⁴⁵ the enigma of an "invisible war" — that is, a *witness to invisibility*.

In Arendt's response to this witness, I would propose, we may also discern, not so much the truth of the lie's history, but the possible outlines, and performance, of a certain historicity — passing through the beginning of WWI, the end of WWII, the endless war in Viet Nam, and a future of wars (and of lies) that Arendt could not know would arise out of the post-Viet Nam era but about which she seemed to write so presciently — a historicity that does not submit itself entirely to the absolute violence of the lie. Only by thinking through the possibility of total erasure, Arendt shows us, can we also conceive of the possibility of a decision to bear witness that itself, *as* an action, has political and historical consequences — the possibility to bear witness from *within* the world of the lie. In Arendt's own writing, as we have seen, it is at the point at which we discern the radically self-annihilating historicity of the bomb that we may also trace the figure of an explosion not entirely determined by its self-erasure. The trace of this figure would not necessarily be a promise, but might serve, instead, as testimony to the possibility of another history.

¹ Hannah Arendt *The Human condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 177–8.

² *Ibid.*, 207.

³ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁴ "Truth and Politics" in Hannah Arendt *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954) 236.

⁵ Freud's extended analysis of this phenomenon is to be found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1963–74), Vol. 18.

⁶ "Truth and Politics," 239. For an excellent analysis of deception in Arendt see Peg Birmingham, "A Lying World Order: Deception and the Rhetoric of Terror," *The Good Society*, Volume 16, Number 2, 2007, pp. 32–37.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250–1.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the performative dimension of the lie and its relation to historicity in Arendt (and others) see Jacques Derrida, "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," in Peggy Kamuf, ed., *Without Alibi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ "Truth and Politics," pages 252 ff.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1976), 262.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 252–3.

¹⁴ "Lying in Politics" in Hannah Arendt *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972) 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

- 25 Ibid.,28.
- 26 Ibid., 29.
- 27 Ibid., 39, 36.
- 28 Ibid., 35.
- 29 Ibid., 42.
- 30 Ibid.,37.
- 31 It should be noted that Arendt is in part responding, in her essay, to Daniel Ellsberg's own analysis of the Pentagon Papers in, "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," which had been published earlier; its final version appears in his *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972). In this essay Ellsberg describes a "stalemate machine" at the heart of the war process that oscillates between deception and self-deception on the part of the government; Arendt argues, on the contrary, that "the deceivers started with self-deception" ("Lying in Politics," 35).
- 32 Ibid., 39.
- 33 Ibid., 40.
- 34 Ibid., 43.
- 35 Ibid., 39.
- 36 There is interesting work on the atomic bomb and its effects in relation to the images it produced as well as the kind of technology invented in order to make images of it. One interesting book on the former topic is Akira Mizuta Lippit's *Atomic Light* (*Shadow Optics*) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), and one could examine as well the history of rapatronic photography and its effects on later photographic image production. One might also examine the relation between this technological history and the theoretical history of the notion of simulacra in a thinker such as Baudrillard or of related notions in other writers concerned with virtuality, technology and image-production in the late 20th century. See also Jacques Derrida on the notion of the "performativo-mediatic" in "History of the Lie," cited above.
- 37 Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1976) 478.
- 38 "Lying in Politics,"13.
- 39 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 267.
- 40 On half-erasure in a literary context see Paul de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
- 41 Daniel Ellsberg *Papers on the War* (Simon and Schuster 1972), 36.
- 42 "Lying in Politics," 245.
- 43 It is interesting that Neil Sheehan, a reporter who published the Pentagon Papers articles in the New York times and then later published a book compilation of them, said that reading the Papers the first time "was like an explosion going off in our mind". In: "Remembering the Viet Nam War: Conversation with Neil Sheehan," interviewer Harry Kreisler, University of California at Berkeley, Institute of International Studies, available online at: <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/Sheehan/sheehan-con0.html>
- 44 Daniel Ellsberg, "Secrecy Oaths: A License to Lie?" *Harvard International Review*, 2004.
- 45 *Papers on the War*, 80.

Published 2009-03-09
 Original in English
 Contribution by Glänta
 First published in Glänta 4/2008
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