

Unheeded Post-Traumatic Unpredictability: Philip G. Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment as Absurdist Performance

Fred Ribkoff

Our little drama [the Stanford Prison Experiment], it would appear, is now being rewritten by Franz Kafka as a surreal supplement to *The Trial*, or perhaps by Luigi Pirandello as an update of his *Il fu [The Late] Mattia Pascal*, or his better-known play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

— Philip G. Zimbardo (*The Lucifer Effect* 163)

In August 1971, psychology professor Philip G. Zimbardo staged the notorious Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). When reporting on the SPE, Zimbardo and his graduate student colleagues consistently side-step the fact that this “experiment” was a “surreal,” absurdist “little drama” without a script and thus “being rewritten” from start to finish; indeed, this pseudo-scientific experiment exposes the limits and dangers of a rational mind—Philip Zimbardo’s—driven by what appears to be an unconscious, post-traumatic pursuit of mastery over intense feelings of shame that bred more of the same in others. The SPE was supposed to last seven to fourteen days, but on day two a “rebellion” broke out with physical and psychological abuse proliferating until the whole thing had to be called off on day six. By pitting a group of sunglasses-wearing, billy-club-carrying “guards” against a group of smock-wearing “prisoners” without underwear—all student participants, with Zimbardo himself cast as “prison superintendent”—within the specially adapted windowless confines of the basement of the Stanford University psychology building, Zimbardo et al provided the dramatic foundation for traumatic and shame-producing events.

Not surprisingly, however, Zimbardo and his aspiring psychology graduate students framed this event as a highly controlled piece of scientific research, rather than

Fred Ribkoff (Ph.D., Simon Fraser University) teaches at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia. Recent publications include “Resonating Atrocities: Tennessee Williams’ *Not About Nightingales*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and the Holocaust” (*Journal of American Drama and Theatre*) and “On the Dialectics of Trauma in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*” (*Journal of Medical Humanities*). His essay, “Shame, Guilt, Empathy, and the Search for Identity in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*” (originally published in *Modern Drama*) has been reprinted in several anthologies.

an improvisational piece of absurdist theatre, a form of theatre known to “express psychological states by objectifying them on the stage” (259), as Martin Esslin so aptly puts it in his seminal 1961 book, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Indeed, in this same book Esslin quotes the absurdist playwright, Eugene Ionesco, who, in the midst of a discussion of Franz Kafka’s work, defines the absurd in the following manner: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (xix), and, I should add, sometimes violent. As Esslin himself says, absurdist works do not “hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these [absurd dramas] seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares” (xvii). In this essay, I explore how and why the SPE appears to reflect the unconscious, nightmarish world of its lead experimenter, Philip Zimbardo, and thus the way in which real-life dramatic action manifests unconscious psychological states resulting from and producing trauma. Moreover, based on the following reading or re-evaluation of the SPE, I suggest that the primary appeal and value of this “experiment” lies in its absurdist texture.

On the other hand, for Zimbardo, then and now, “the value of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) resides in demonstrating the evil that good people can be readily induced into doing to other good people within the context of socially approved roles, rules, and norms, a legitimizing ideology, and institutional support that transcends individual agency” (“Reflections” 194). He maintains that the “situation,” and not the individual, is responsible for the “evil” actions of those who participated in his 1971 SPE. Interestingly, however, from the 1970s onward, criticism of this piece of social psychological research is consistent and, at times, quite damning. The most thorough and compelling of such critiques emerges early on in a 1973 book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, written by the social philosopher and psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm. Fromm strips the SPE of any justifiable claim to scientific or social scientific value, at one point stating point blank:

The authors [of the SPE] believe it proves that the situation alone can within a few days transform normal people into abject, submissive individuals or into ruthless sadists. It seems to me that the experiment proves, if anything, rather the contrary. In spite of the whole spirit of this mock prison which, according to the concept of the experiment was meant to be degrading and humiliating (obviously the guards must have caught on to this immediately), two thirds of the guards did not commit sadistic acts for personal “kicks,” the experiment seems rather to prove that one can *not* transform people so easily into sadists by providing them with the proper situation. (81)

Fromm concludes that “the difference between the mock prisoners and real prisoners is so great that it is virtually impossible to draw valid analogies from observation of the former. . . . It is merely naive to assume that it must be either this or that. The complex and challenging problem in each individual—and group—is to find out what the specific interaction is between a given character structure and a given social structure. It is at this point that the real investigation begins, and it is only stifled by

the assumption that the situation is the one factor which explains human behavior” (90). Yet despite the obvious conceptual, methodological, and ethical flaws in the SPE and the conclusions drawn from it by Zimbardo et al, the experiment continues to be appealed to in social scientific, pedagogical, political, legal, and popular circles as proof of the “power of the situation” to transform individuals into passive victims or brutal killers.

In fact, in his groundbreaking historical analysis of testimony from members of a killing squad assigned to massacre Jews as the Germans advanced on the eastern front in WWII, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, world renowned historian Christopher Browning claims: “Perhaps the most relevant to this study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 is the spectrum of behavior that Zimbardo discovered in his sample of eleven guards. . . .” (168). Browning is struck by the “uncanny resemblance” between “the groupings that emerged within Reserve Battalion 101” (168) and those of the guards of the SPE. It is, indeed, the “uncanny resemblance”—that is, the strange familiarity—between Zimbardo’s SPE and “real life” which underlies the experiment’s appeal and value. But the experience of the uncanny is, as Freud pointed out in his 1919 essay on the uncanny, a grotesque manifestation of the repressed in everyday life. In other words, occurrences like those enacted in the SPE, or perhaps those experienced by Browning’s Battalion 101 or, for that matter, those presented in the theatre of the absurd, are—as symbolically charged psychic events with psychoanalytic and ontological implications—beyond the reach of behavioral psychological investigation.

In his 1997 *British Journal of Sociology* article, “The Postmodern Experiment: Science and Ontology in Experimental Social Psychology,” sociologist Augustine Brannigan presents a wide-sweeping critique of social psychological laboratory experimentation and its secular-humanistic value within the post-secondary educational system, although he does not deal with the SPE specifically. According to Brannigan, such experiments are “more a philosophical self-reflection than an experimental test of a specific hypothesis. . . . The scientific progress of the experiment may be illusory as science but at a deeper level, it contains an unacknowledged subtext without which the ostensive work of inquiry would hold no attraction. It is a medium for the scientist to confront the pretheoretic perplexity. This is done obliquely through operationalization, and if the moral subtext drives the design, the experiment portrays or poses basic ontological questions about human existence. In such an idiom, the scientific experiments are actually a disguised form of drama” (597). Once seen as an absurdist, improvisational, explosive piece of drama driven by unconscious feelings of shame based in Zimbardo’s traumatic experience of the past, the scientific meaninglessness and “subtextual” dramatic, ontological, and psychoanalytic significance of the SPE materializes.

Moreover, in the light of sociologist Helen Merrell Lynd’s theory of shame; as well as Zimbardo’s own understanding of shame; a close reading of the words and actions of this “experiment” or absurdist piece of improvisational performance; experimenters’ explanations and cinematic representations of it; the lead experimenter’s

website “Autobiographical Recollections;” and absurdist literature Zimbardo refers to in his efforts to interpret his results, it is apparent that Zimbardo’s psyche, and not the “situation,” is the primary source of what Zimbardo describes in 1971 as the SPE’s “sense of terror” (“The Power” 113) and in 2007 as its “inhumanity” (*Lucifer Effect* 235).

Zimbardo’s Kafkaesque Grotesque

In his early writings and 1972 film on the SPE, *Stanford Prison Experiment Slide-Tape Show*, Zimbardo reaches out to absurdist literature to help convey the surreal nature of the SPE experience. This occurs early in his documentation and interpretation of the SPE and its results in his October 25th, 1971 oral and written testimony for a judiciary committee investigating “Prisons, Prison Reform, and Prisoners’ Rights” in California. At one point in both his oral and written testimony on the SPE Zimbardo attempts to describe the cruelty of the “bad guards” and what he sees as their symbiotic relationship with the “good guards” and the overall “sense of terror” generated by the experiment. This repetitive, melodramatic, somewhat ambiguous explanation of the SPE ends with the following statement: “By the end of the week, the experiment became a reality, as if it were a Pirandello play directed by Kafka that just keeps going after the audience walks out” (113). The fact that Zimbardo is compelled to go outside social-psychological discourse and refer to two of the most influential early modernist, absurdist writers reflects the very unusual nature of this “experiment.” Face to face with the judiciary committee, Zimbardo is like Joseph K., the protagonist of Kafka’s novel, *The Trial*. Zimbardo’s work, his sense of self, and the world inside and outside the SPE are on “trial.” Out of his element, he reaches for Kafka and Pirandello to qualify and clarify the strange new “social reality” (“The Power” 113) of the SPE performance.

In his original 1972 film, a highly jarring, unpolished documentary made up of still images and largely voiceover narration by Zimbardo, Zimbardo expands on what he means by the Kafkaesque and why he refers to the plays of Pirandello. The style and content of this fragmented and haunting film supports and informs Zimbardo’s references to and explanations of the Kafkaesque and Pirandellian, revealing a great deal about that which Zimbardo never articulates in his other statements on the SPE.

In this initial documentary film on the experiment, a curious, uncanny, grotesque aesthetic effect is produced by a striking combination of still images of both calm and chaotic action, authoritative narration, haunting music, and distorted sounds. One set of jarring juxtapositions involves a black and white image of the first “prisoner” released due to a “breakdown,” a big X canceling out “prisoner” 8612 in his stocking cap and “dress,” with a sudden cut to a colour image of happy, relaxed family and friends during visiting hour at the SPE. This image is accompanied by Zimbardo’s wistful explanation of how he “manipulated” visitors. In another example of the grotesque, a real priest is seated in a relaxed position while interviewing a distraught “prisoner” in stocking cap and “dress,” advising this “prisoner” to get a real lawyer.

Zimbardo describes being “amazed” to see how seriously and realistically the “prisoners” and the priest treated this “situation” that “added a Kafkaesque element to our prison.” The priest “volunteered to contact their parents if they wanted him to, in order to get some legal aid. Some of them asked him to do so.” At this point Zimbardo offers an explanation of his reference to the Kafkaesque: “The Priest’s visit highlights the growing confusion between reality and illusion, between role playing and self-identity that was gradually taking place in all of us within this prison which we had created, but which now was absorbing us as creatures of its own reality.”

Zimbardo’s reference to Pirandello is part of his clearest statement on the absurdity of the experiment as a whole and, more specifically, that of the priest’s, the parents’, and his own behaviour: “Now our play was being written by Pirandello and we were all trapped in our roles. I call the lawyer that they had requested and indeed the lawyer came down and interviewed each of the prisoners. At this point it became clear we had to end this experiment. We had to do so because it was no longer an experiment. We had indeed created a prison in which people were suffering.” But was it ever a social scientific experiment? From the outset “people were suffering” in a Kafkaesque and Pirandellian world of disorientation, isolation, and dehumanization. In his 1971 oral testimony to the judiciary committee Zimbardo acknowledges such discomfort as a “sense of terror”; in the fragmentary, distorted visual and auditory presentation of the 1972 film, he recreates this “terror”; and in some of his early 70s writings as well as his 2007 book, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*, he momentarily gestures at the works of Kafka and Pirandello and evokes this “terror,” but that is as far as he goes.

The SPE is, however, a Kafkaesque world filled with “gestures of terror” (Benjamin 143) reminiscent of Pirandello’s theatre. According to Eric Bentley, Pirandello’s theatre is filled with “events [that] do not grow in Time’s womb. They erupt in the instant, arbitrarily; just as his characters do not approach, enter, present themselves . . . ; they are suddenly there, dropped from the sky” (Bentley xxiii). Pirandello’s plays, like Zimbardo’s experiment, perform reality rather than represent it—there is no static, stable, objective standpoint from which the author or experimenter can observe and the audience or reader must simply succumb to this state of uncertainty, unpredictability, and chaos like the players caught in the grip of the performance.

Zimbardo’s “prisoners” were unexpectedly arrested, searched, handcuffed, taken to a real police station by real police officers who finger printed them and offered no clear explanation for their actions. The “prisoners” were then placed blindfolded in a holding cell in the police station until they were taken blindfolded to the mock prison where they were stripped naked and “deloused.” For these “prisoners” it was as if they were “dropped from the sky” into a very strange, authoritarian world with strange rules and increasingly improvised, dehumanizing, degrading actions and orders from the “guards.” These same “prison guards”—and the experimenters who witnessed their actions and improvisations and did not often intervene—“were surprised and totally unprepared for the rebellion that broke out on the morning of the second day” (Zimbardo, “The mind”) of the SPE. Following this “rebellion,” the

conditions of the “experiment” worsened and the “sense of terror” heightened: blindfoldings, bags over heads, buckets of urine and feces, chains on ankles, smocks or “dresses” without undergarments, sudden wake up calls in the middle of the night, the spraying of a fire hydrant at the “prisoners” who were in the midst of a “rebellion,” mental or emotional “breakdowns,” etc. The list goes on, and the “experiment” went on for six days.

The Projection Of Shame And The Kafkaesque

Kafka’s stories are an open wound through which the author self-consciously evokes and sustains an uncanny experience. Shame, guilt, and the subsequent abuse of power drive Kafka’s strange tales and Zimbardo’s SPE. In Zimbardo’s 2005 lecture, “Liberation Psychology in a Time of Terror,” in a section entitled “*Confronting and Counteracting Shame*,” he is perfectly clear on the relationship of shame to power:

Shame is the sense of personal loathing one experiences when made to feel you have done something wrong, that you have been caught in a wrongful deed, or behaving contrary to established standards. The ability to imagine feeling shame can have a positive impact on deterring anti-social actions. However, shame can also be induced in people when others who adopt a stance of superiority make them feel inadequate, because they don’t “fit in,” are from the wrong social class, or simply are “different” from the establishment. . . . As a child growing up in poverty in the ghetto known as the South Bronx in New York City, I was often shamed by social workers, clinic doctors and dentists, and other adults who made evident that me and my kind of people were a burden on their society.

In his 1971 SPE Zimbardo clearly did not demonstrate “[t]he ability to imagine feeling shame,” thus he was incapable of “detering anti-social actions” by his mock guards and himself. As he suggests in 1973, the traumatized responses of the subjects of the SPE were simply “unimaginable,” unbelievable, and totally unexpected: “In less than 36 hours, we were forced to release prisoner 8612 because of extreme depression, disorganized thinking, uncontrollable crying and fits of rage. We did so reluctantly because we believed he was trying to ‘con’ us—it was unimaginable that a volunteer prisoner in a mock prison could legitimately be suffering and disturbed to that extent” (“The mind”). Those who were once shamed and controlled by others are more inclined to shame and abuse. Thus, when in a position of control Zimbardo projects his own feelings of shame, inferiority, and vulnerability onto his “prisoners.” The power game is inextricably related to the shame game.

In Kafka’s *Trial* Joseph K. wakes up one morning to find strange powerful men in his lodgings. He is “under arrest” (14) for some unknown crime—which may be the crime of being human—for which he is to stand trial. Moreover, he is an object of shame, “spectacle” (13), or performance as his landlady and neighbors peer through windows in order to see “all that could be seen” (3). K. is eternally speculating on what he is accused of and why, as well as how, where, and when to go about defending himself. His performance—that is, his life or, to use Zimbardo’s favorite word, his

“situation”—resembles that of the SPE subjects. In his 1972 film Zimbardo states that after each mock prisoner was handcuffed and arrested by real police with neighbors looking on, “the suspect was then taken to a holding cell [at the police station] where he was left blindfolded to ponder his fate and wonder what he had done to get himself into this mess.” Before the mock prisoners ever got to the mock prison they were objects of shame and spectacle and confused, if not traumatized, by these initial, unexpected, overwhelming “procedures.” This “situation” was the catalyst for panic, “rebellion,” and “breakdown.” From the beginning Zimbardo was unaware of the extent to which *his* shame and trauma produced shame and trauma in others. It is this very psycho-social “fact” that becomes apparent the more one examines this experimental performance in light of recollections and explanations of it.

Haney’s SPE, Zimbardo’s Fame, And 8612’s Trauma

Craig Haney, one of two graduate students who assisted Zimbardo with the SPE, fills in some significant gaps in the SPE story:

But frankly, we were all somewhat skeptical about how effectively we could create the equivalent of a functional prison environment. . . . I wondered whether the roles we had created would hold together (we had provided some but not many institutional supports for them) and whether the guards and prisoners would take their tasks seriously or, to make things easier on themselves, capitalize on what could have been perceived as a gamelike atmosphere. . . . And all of us shared concerns over whether significant, measurable changes in attitudes and behavior would occur over the relatively short period of time the study was designed to last. (“Reflections” 224)

Haney’s SPE story makes at least partial sense of the big questions: why didn’t Zimbardo predict at least some of the traumatic results of the SPE, and why didn’t he stop it earlier, at least after the first or second “breakdown” of “prisoners”? Answer: Zimbardo and his colleagues did not really believe that they could pull it off—they “were all somewhat skeptical.” Therefore they were “surprised” and “amazed” by the performances of the “actors,” especially that of the fellow who became known as “John Wayne.” Zimbardo and his colleagues were simply too excited to see the problems. The “roles” held together, the “actors” did not “capitalize” on the “gamelike atmosphere,” and there were “measurable changes”! This scientific experiment was working and confirming its behavioral thesis! They were in awe of their own creation and left behind the pretense of scientific objectivity and entered the world of life-in-performance. There was far more invested in this “experiment” than those involved—and especially Zimbardo—ever imagined.

In his website “Autobiographical Recollections” Zimbardo states that he “prefer[s] fame to money.” He was unable to anticipate the abuse or pull the plug on his “experiment” because of his desire for fame and a fundamental need to overcome his own feelings of shame and inferiority through his career. He seems to have intuitively understood that what was happening in the SPE was extraordinary. Here at last was his “quantum leap in national visibility.” His childhood “experience of poverty,” fre-

quent hunger, and responsibility as the eldest child of a family that lived in fear and shame, “moving all the time, in the middle of the night because we couldn’t pay the rent” (“Autobiographical Recollections”) was long gone. Prior to the SPE he already had a very successful book, the best of jobs, thus lots of money, and a “1955 Mercedes 350-SL silver bullet convertible, the most beautiful car in the world” (“Autobiographical Recollections”), *but* that was not enough and his apparent ambition, desire for fame and power, and need to project shame onto others appears to have got the better of him.

On the morning of the second day of the “experiment,” something resembling a “rebellion” took place. “Prisoners” barricaded themselves in their cell in protest of the conditions of the “experiment.” But was this a rebellion in the sense that they were trying to overthrow and overcome the “guards.” No. It was an act of civil disobedience. In the 1972 film, during the “rebellion,” while the “guards” are spraying a fire hydrant at or toward the “prisoners” in the barricaded cell in order to drive them back, there are a series of protests made by the “prisoners” evident in a highly distorted and disturbing recording. In and among the jarring sounds of the fire hydrant being sprayed, one can hear the “prisoners” protest, “No. No. No,” and soon after, “No. No. No.” again, followed by, among other words and sounds, the high pitched voice of “prisoner” 8612, one of the leaders of the “rebellion.” He screams “It’s against the law” twice, followed by another, more deep-voiced “prisoner” reaffirming this view, saying, “It’s against the law, man.” A “guard’s” or the “warden’s” response is: “No it’s not. This is ridiculous.” Following the chaotic “debate” over the legality of the “guards” actions, “prisoner” 8612 asserts, “Fuck this experiment. Fuck Dr. Zimbardo.” This is followed by another “prisoner’s” statement, “Fucking simulation.” “Prisoner” 8612 picks this idea up and expands upon it. He says, “Fucking simulation,” and a “guard” or the “warden” says, for some reason, “violation of the rules,” before 8612 asserts, “Fucking simulation. It’s a fucking simulated experiment. . . .” As 8612 suggests, this “experiment” was a simulation of a simulation, and the source of the problem—the “experiment”—was “Dr. Zimbardo.” 8612 was not submerged in his prisoner role. No one else seems to have understood this, then and now. The denial of the fact that this was not a “real” prison or a “real” “simulation” by “prison” authorities is behind 8612’s extreme responses and at least part of what drove him “crazy.” Speaking to what seems to be the “warden,” 8612 demands, begs, and screams to be let out, to see a doctor, to see a lawyer, to be understood. At one point he exclaims, “I’m fucked up. I don’t know how to explain it. I’m all fucked up inside—and I want out! And I want out now! God damn it! You don’t know. You don’t know. I mean, God. (*Highly distorted recording.*) It’s just the whole thing. (*Distorted recording.*) No more fucking around. I got to have a lawyer. I mean I just can’t take it. I’ve got to have a lawyer. I don’t have a lawyer or anything” and the warden responds, “You will—. You will wait—until (*distorted words*) back. He will be back this evening and you can talk to him about—.” 8612 breaks in and soon says, “I mean Jesus Christ I’m burning up inside, don’t ya know.” His explanation of the “prison” as a “simulated experiment” and his appeals to the law are perfectly sensible, but the prison au-

thorities think they are “ridiculous,” ignore them, or put them off until another authority figure shows up. The uncanny reality of this performance escapes everyone involved but 8612.

8612’s knowledge was taboo and his rage temporary and impossible to sustain in the face of his isolation and dehumanizing treatment. His insight had to be silenced and, if necessary, removed. After he was isolated and his requests for “parole” were put off he was no longer able to cope in a “rational” manner and his “irrational” response to this confusion of “simulations” was the only one that made sense. 8612’s release was necessary not simply because of the threat to his well-being, as Zimbardo would have us believe; he was a threat to the whole project and its unconscious foundations because he understood just how far removed this “experiment” was from anything resembling scientific experimentation as it is normally conceived. Scientific experimentation—especially social scientific experimentation—is a performance with inherent unpredictable psycho-social variables beyond the scope of any given paradigm of thought and accessible only in the act of performance itself.

8612 was essentially acting as a witness to the performance of overwhelming traumatic experience, but once he is removed from the company of his fellow “prisoners” no one is prepared to listen to his story and its obscure meaning. He was, in the words of Shoshana Felman, a “witness to trauma, to a crime, or to an outrage; witness to a horror . . . whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization” (15). “I don’t know how to explain it. . . . It’s just the whole thing,” 8612 tells the first “doorkeeper” in this simulation of institutional buck-passing reminiscent of Kafka’s *Trial*. Each “prison” authority he told his story of trauma to was incapable of listening to him and the *experience* of trauma to which he testified. They were there, or they saw it on film, but they did not “see” what he “saw.” From their point of view, he was testifying to nothing. He was being “ridiculous.” He was just acting.

As we find out from Haney, it was actually Haney who released 8612 after he had already requested release from Zimbardo. Haney:

Zimbardo offered him a Faustian deal: He would arrange for the guards not to bother Prisoner 8612 at all in return for the prisoner’s providing him with a ‘little information’ about prisoner activities from time to time, adding that he need not decide now but could think it over and give his decision later. . . . [Prisoner 8612 became] really confused; and . . . announced to his fellow inmates . . . that they could not get out, that the staff would not release them. He then went into his cell, lay down on his cot, and became increasingly agitated. (“Reflections” 228)

Haney, like Zimbardo before him, did not release 8612; rather than making some kind of “Faustian deal,” however, he recommended that 8612 “rest for a while.” Haney states that it “was obvious that this young man was more disturbed by his brief experience in the Stanford Prison than any of us had expected. . . . So I decided to release him” (“Reflections” 288), but only after confronting a series of conflicting feelings and thoughts of his own.

No wonder 8612 was extremely “confused.” “I was a 2nd-year graduate student,” admits Haney, “we had invested a great deal of time, effort, and money into this pro-

ject, and I knew that the early release of a participant would compromise the experimental design we had carefully drawn up and implemented” (“Reflections” 228). Haney was not lost in his role as night shift supervisor of the “prison”; rather, he was ambitious and understandably conflicted, and his honesty is refreshing. He goes so far as to relate “a terribly realistic dream” he had on a night that he was supervising the “experiment” in which the tables are turned and he is the prisoner with “the unmistakable sense that there was to be no escape”: “The dream . . . should have given me some pause about what we were doing. But it didn’t. I pressed on without reflection” (“Reflections” 226-227), he concludes. His dream was signaling the need for self-analysis, self-control, and empathy. But Haney was clearly ambivalent, and he “pressed on without reflection.” He did, however, eventually risk “compromise [of] the experimental design” by releasing 8612.

Although there is not enough information to speak knowledgeably about the psychology of the “guards” from the SPE, in the case of Haney, and especially Zimbardo, there is sufficient information to suggest that they allowed their personal and professional ambitions, and the need to master or avoid shame, guilt, and vulnerability, to disable their “ability to imagine feeling[s] [of] shame” in others and themselves. Thus they did not anticipate and recognize the extreme cruelty of their own “situation.” Ironically, it is the insistence on the all-encompassing explanatory capacity of the “situationist” (Zimbardo, “A Situationist”) paradigm, in conjunction with appeals to absurdist literature to help “explain” the “sense of terror” and disorientation of this “experiment,” that serve to expose the very parts of themselves they avoid as they continue—“without [sufficient self-analytical] reflection”—the attempt to account for the meaning of their study.

It seems as if Zimbardo did everything in his power to make sure 8612 did not leave *his* “prison.” It took Haney significant time and effort to convince Zimbardo that the release of 8612 was necessary (“Reflections” 229). What was driving or blocking Philip Zimbardo? Were there unconscious sadistic parts of himself that he could not recognize or accept? But he was obviously “normal”? Would most people have behaved the way he did? Haney didn’t. His version of events opens up new dimensions of a very complex “situation.” So too does Christina Maslach’s version.

Maslach, Zimbardo, And “John Wayne”: A Melodramatic And Unconscious Dream Come True

The SPE, and particularly the colorful figure of “John Wayne,” was a dream come true. The problem was and is that this dream was based on—at least in part—fictional representations of “prison.” As Maslach, a recent Stanford Ph.D. in psychology graduate and Zimbardo’s fiancé at the time of the SPE, lets us know:

I was absolutely stunned to see that their [the experimenters’] John Wayne was the “really nice guy” with whom I had chatted earlier [before witnessing the experiment in action]. Only now he was transformed into someone else. He not only moved differently, but he talked differently—with a Southern accent. (I discovered later that he

was modeling his role on a prison movie character.) He was yelling and cursing at the prisoners as he made them go through “the count,” going out of his way to be rude and belligerent. It was an amazing transformation from the person I had just spoken to—a transformation that had taken place in minutes just by stepping over the line from the outside world into the prison yard. With his military-style uniform, billy club in hand, and dark, silver-reflecting sunglasses to hide his eyes (adopted by Phil from the movie *Cool Hand Luke*), this guy was an all-business, no-nonsense, really mean prison guard. (“Reflections” 215-216)

“John Wayne,” apparently the most sadistic (Maslach, “Reflections” 218) of the “guards,” says, in an interview after the “experiment” which appears in Zimbardo’s 1992 film, *Quiet Rage*: “You act the part. That’s your costume and you have to act accordingly when you put it on. . . . I didn’t see where it was really harmful. It was degrading. I was running little experiments of my own.” This “guy” could act, and he knew he was acting, and he knew he was being watched and filmed. Did he lose control while acting? In other words, did his role as “guard” “transform” him into a sadistic monster as Maslach, Zimbardo, and colleagues would have us believe? I don’t think so. As a matter of fact, based on his testimony in *Quiet Rage*, he seems to be one of the few participants who grasped exactly what was desired of him, and consciously performed accordingly, without losing his sense of self in any way, hence the distinct separation between the “guy” off-stage and the “guy” on stage. There was no “transformation,” only good acting. From his point of view, he was making “prisoners” do relatively harmless things—things he had seen in the movies, but more mild versions of them. Of course, Zimbardo and his colleagues saw all this, and were filming it for a movie of their own, and they didn’t think there was anything too wrong with it all. Actually, they enjoyed it. Is this the “situation’s” fault? Or was there something “wrong” with the “normal,” “good people” running the “experiment”? If forced to choose between these two options, I choose the second.

“Normal people,” like Zimbardo, went to see and enjoyed *Cool Hand Luke*. My guess is “John Wayne” not only saw this movie too, he was “modeling” at least one character in it that also impressed Zimbardo. “Interestingly,” says Zimbardo, “in the classic prison movie *Cool Hand Luke*, Karl, the yard-boss, describes the consequences of breaking any of the many prison rules, as ‘then you spend a night in the box’” (“Mind Control” 152). Zimbardo thought a great deal of and emulated this film in his SPE experiment, as Maslach points out. It seems that an unconscious or unstated reason Zimbardo felt that “John Wayne’s” performance was so realistic is because it mirrored that of the actor who played “Karl” in *Cool Hand Luke*. “John Wayne,” like “Karl,” paces up and down “the yard” delivering orders, and he was particularly fond of putting one prisoner, 416, in his own version of “the box,” a closet. But “John Wayne’s” Southern accent and authoritative, relaxed manner and manipulative intelligence are more like those of the warden or “Captain” of *Cool Hand Luke*. The prisoner, Cool Hand Luke, played by Paul Newman, is a modern-day anti-hero who trusts no one and for good reason. Once his chain-smoking mother dies, he is altogether alone and adrift in a brutal world without meaning or god. He is someone Philip

Zimbardo must have identified with on all kinds of levels. But he is very much a fictional character and the film on which Zimbardo and perhaps “John Wayne” base their independent “experiments” is quite romantic.

Based on Zimbardo’s 1971 oral testimony to the judiciary committee, it seems as if Zimbardo had bought into *Cool Hand Luke*’s romantic view of prisoners and identified wholeheartedly with them: “It became clear to me I could have been Calley at Mylai, George Jackson at San Quentin, or I could have been one of the men at Attica. One of the important messages from this study [the SPE], I think, is that every one of you could, too. No one here, I think, can assert that he could not be either brutal or powerless when put in the situation” (113). This is quite a claim. There is no consideration of individual psychology. Zimbardo assigns all determinative influence to the “situation.” Clearly, as the “good guards” of the SPE illustrate, not everyone became even mildly sadistic, and certainly did not show any signs of being capable of actually murdering or leading a massacre. Zimbardo’s challenge to these judges—a defensive tactic—says far more about Zimbardo himself than it does about those he is addressing.

In his “Autobiographical Recollections” Zimbardo describes different times in his life where he was discriminated against because of his ambiguous ethnic looks or “racial identity.” At one point he describes the experience of being the “most popular boy” at one high school in New York and being “shunned” at another in California. During this period of social isolation, feeling like an object of shame “without anyone telling me why,” Zimbardo “did not have a friend . . . and was totally depressed, [therefore he] developed psychosomatic asthma.” Eventually he asks one “kid” why he was “shunned” and gets the following response: “You are a New York Italian, maybe with Mafia connections, so kids are afraid to be around you.” Strangely enough, the “kid” from the Bronx ends up teaching at perhaps the most prestigious university in California, running an “experiment” in which volunteer, “normal,” privileged student “prisoners” are deliberately dehumanized and deindividuated in the name of science.

But Zimbardo did not consciously take revenge on these privileged Californian students; more often than not, others took it for him in the context of an abusive institutional system of his own design. The most telling example of this occurred when 8612 meets with Zimbardo after his meeting with the “warden” and calling the “experiment” a “fucking simulated experiment,” among others things. What we learn in Zimbardo’s 2007 *Lucifer Effect*, is that Carlo Prescott, the “prison consultant,” was not simply present at this meeting, but as the title of this section of the book states, “Our Prison Consultant Mocks the Mock Prisoner” (67). In the midst of this meeting 8612 insisted that those running the experiment “violated the contract” and Prescott quickly cut him off and verbally assaulted him, as if this privileged “white boy” represented everything Prescott hated in the world: “You would not last a day at San Quentin. . . . Snuffy, or some other bad gang boss, would’ve bought you for two, maybe three packs of cigarettes, and your ass would be bleeding bright red, white, and blue. . . .” (68-69). 8612 was thus humiliated, and shamed, and threatened for acting like some-

one who did not appreciate what it meant to suffer in a real prison. Of course, he was not in a real prison and he was not a criminal and there was every reason for him to feel violated prior to this meeting and afterward. Zimbardo allowed Prescott's "harangue" to go on for some time before thanking "Carlo" "for providing this reality check" (69). Previous to relating this scene of abuse, Zimbardo tells the reader that he "was intrigued by this man's [Prescott's] views, especially since we were about the same age—me thirty-eight, him forty—and both of us had grown up in an East or West coast ghetto. But while I was going to college, Carlo was going to jail. We became fast friends" (68), etc. After silencing Prescott during this pivotal meeting with 8612 Zimbardo went on to propose his "Faustian bargain," an offer to 8612 to become a "snitch." This section of the book ends: "Later, Carlo and I retreat to Ricky's restaurant, where I try to put this ugly image behind me for a short time while enjoying Carlo's new stories over a plate of lasagna" (69). Zimbardo not only identified with "Carlo's" displaced rage and vengeance, he created and fostered a "situation" for it to be projected onto someone who may have represented the source of Zimbardo's own teenage shame and powerlessness. Zimbardo's identification with and admiration for Prescott was simply one among many examples of how Zimbardo's traumatic, shame-ridden past appears to have set the stage for the creation and perpetuation of a piece of brutal, improvisational, social scientific, absurdist performance.

At the end of *Quiet Rage* Zimbardo answers a student who asks if there "were . . . any long term negative effects" from the experiment and he responds, "Happily, no." He expands on how he established this position—a problematic process in itself—and another student asks, "Why didn't you stop it sooner. It seems unethical to let it go on so long?" He responds: "It was unethical, there's no question about that. People suffered, ah, in this experiment as subjects. Ah, it went on too long because I got trapped in the dual role of principal investigator of the research. . . . The other issue, the central issue about the ethics of this study, weighs the cost to the subjects which were real and tangible against the possible benefits to them and benefits to science and society." How could Zimbardo treat volunteer student subjects in a way that simulated how he was treated at a California high school and not be aware of the feelings of those suffering from his abuse—to the extent that one of them broke out in a psychosomatic rash reminiscent of his own teenage psychosomatic asthma? The answer: denial of fear, really of an unconscious terror, of shame and powerlessness, and the projection of this "weakness" onto others. In his "harangue" Prescott tells 8612 that "We would all smell your fear and weakness" (*Lucifer Effect* 68-69).

Zimbardo was quite at home in the powerful role that enabled him to make "Faustian deals" and perform on the SPE stage. This "situation" seems to have provided him with a vehicle to master his unconscious and cumulative feelings of shame by expressing his unconscious rage both directly and indirectly. The uncanny familiarity of this "experiment" seems to have escaped everyone, including his fiancé at the time of the SPE, the "whistle-blower," Christina Maslach. Perhaps this oversight is exactly why she managed to convince Zimbardo to stop his "experiment." That is, she did not demand that he feel ashamed of *himself*; she demanded only that he accept

responsibility and guilt for his immersion in his role as superintendent, and leave it at that. She did not penetrate whatever was blocking his “ability to imagine feeling shame.”

As Maslach states, she showed up on the fifth day of the experiment to conduct interviews, but instead she was sickened by the dehumanizing “situation.” Zimbardo and the other experimenters “couldn’t believe [her] reaction.” Zimbardo appealed to her to “look—it’s amazing stuff!” She couldn’t “look” anymore, so she “snapped back with, ‘I already saw it!’” Maslach was made to “feel weak and stupid” by Zimbardo and the group of experimenters (“Reflections” 216). The fact that the experimenters were initially “skeptical” and later protective of and elated by the results that serve to sicken Maslach makes good sense of the sadistic, melodramatic fantasies perpetuating this “evil,” “hellish” “situation.” But things did not end there. Maslach explains:

What followed was a heated argument between us [Maslach and Zimbardo]. That was especially scary for me, because Phil seemed to be so different from the man I thought I knew, someone who loves students and cares for them in ways that were already legendary at the university. He was not the same man that I had come to love, someone who is gentle and sensitive to the needs of others and surely to mine. . . . Somehow the transformation in Phil (and me as well) and the threat to our relationship was unexpected and shocking. . . .

What I know is that eventually Phil acknowledged what I was saying, apologized for his treatment of me, and realized what had been gradually happening to him and everyone else in the study: that they had all internalized a set of destructive values. And at that point, he owned up to his responsibility as creator of this prison and made the decision to call the experiment to a halt. . . . A great weight was lifted from him, from me, and from our personal relationship (which celebrated its 25th wedding anniversary on August 10, 1997). (“Reflections” 216-17)

Once again, the events of the SPE are apparently explained in “situationist” terms: “they had all internalized a set of destructive values” from the outside and had undergone a “transformation” into “something else.” In other words, the “evil situation” (Maslach, “Reflections” 220) was responsible and once an apology was rendered the couple lived happily ever after.

In his written and oral statements Zimbardo consistently expresses feelings of guilt, but not shame. Guilt can be forgiven and forgotten, but shame is different:

An experience that arouses guilt, from a slight misdemeanor to a crime, can be followed by appropriate mitigating or nullifying sequences—confession, repentance, punishment, atonement, condemnation, restoration. . . . At least in our culture, guilt is a culturally defined wrong act, a part of oneself that is separable, segmented, and redeemable.

But an experience of shame . . . cannot be modified by addition, or wiped out by subtraction, or exorcised by expiation. It is not an isolated act that can be detached from the self. (Lynd 50)

Zimbardo's behavioral explanations of the SPE and his admission of guilt or confession enable him and Maslach to separate the experiment and its "horrors" from the self that Zimbardo and Maslach believe in and love. "He was not the same man." He was "transformed."

Zimbardo and Maslach do not understand that the "good" Zimbardo was simply a role—that is, a mental construct or "fiction." They lack the perspective of a Pirandello, who, in his play, *Each in His Own Way*, has one character say: "Shake yourself free from the manikin you create out of a false interpretation of what you do and what you feel, and you'll at once see that the manikin you make yourself is nothing at all like what you really are or what you can really be! Nothing at all like what is in you without your knowing that it is there—a terrible avenger if you resist it; [. . .] Oh, I know . . . to cast aside that manikin, that fiction, seems in a certain way to be a denial of one's self, something unworthy of a man" (338). Zimbardo was helpless in the face of his own creation; it was an "unimaginable" part of himself that he and his fiancé did not recognize and could not accept.

This "situation" has an uncanny resemblance to that which occurs in Kafka's story, "The Metamorphosis." In it, the main character, Gregor Samsa, wakes up one morning to find that he has undergone a physical transformation into a giant vermin. However, this physical "transformation" is simply a symbolic representation of his long-standing shame- and guilt-ridden psychological state. The uncanny, Pirandellian, Kafkaesque, psychoanalytic meaning of Zimbardo's "experiment" surfaces and sinks every time it is explained away by the behavioral paradigm in everyday melodramatic and redemptive terms—terms inadequate to explain Kafka's story as well as Zimbardo's "experiment."

Indeed, the surreal works of Pirandello and Kafka to which Zimbardo momentarily appeals in the early 70s and in 2007 stage or animate the impact of the unconscious, denial, past trauma, shame, and guilt on the present. For example, driving the absurd reality in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is an unavoidable and inexorable traumatic past. At the end of this play, The Son is enraged by The Father's insistence "on showing everyone our [the whole family of characters'] shame" (275). Nonetheless this son is compelled to tell his shame- and guilt-ridden story of trauma. This story explains his ongoing attempts to silence his father and not take part in a "play" that brings his character—and his traumatic past—to life. Given the psychoanalytic nature of works by Kafka and Pirandello it is quite ironic, although absolutely appropriate, that Zimbardo, the behaviorist, is fond of referring to Pirandello and Kafka to help make sense of his "experiment." Behind Zimbardo's experiment in the absurd lies his own traumatic past, something not accounted for in his behavioral conception of himself or the events of the SPE.

For Zimbardo and his colleagues the most shocking and distinguishing feature of the SPE is "the way in which good, normal people . . . turned into something else" ("Reflections" 233), but their sense of the normal is highly limited and misleading. As Erich Fromm makes clear in his psychoanalytic critique of the SPE, this limited sense of the normal ignores the unconscious and the fact that a percentage of the normal

population is sadistic, but this sadism is not detected in the kinds of psychological testing employed by Zimbardo and colleagues in 1971 (*Anatomy* 81-82).

From An Absurd Childhood To An Experiment In The Absurd

In the more absurdist literature Zimbardo appeals to in order to help explain the SPE things happen as if “out of the blue” (Zimbardo, “Autobiographical Recollections”), without explanation or compassion. In his 1973 *New York Times Magazine* write-up of the SPE Zimbardo quotes Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Stoppard is a modern-day absurdist writer whose work is influenced by that of Kafka and Samuel Beckett, among others. Zimbardo’s quotation from Stoppard’s play reads: “We’ve traveled too far, and our momentum has taken over; we move idly towards eternity, without possibility of reprieve or hope of explanation.” This statement is quintessentially absurdist, very much in the Kafkaesque vein, and bears an uncanny resemblance to Zimbardo’s seminal experiences from childhood to adulthood. “Good” or “bad,” for Zimbardo things “come out of the blue” and, ultimately, confirm his overriding absurdist sense of life and the powerlessness and shame of the individual in a world dominated by institutionally endorsed indifference and brutality, except he does not conceptualize the SPE in such terms.

In both his “Autobiographical Recollections” and a September, 2000 *Psychology Today* interview, “Emperor Of the Edge,” conducted by Christina Maslach, Zimbardo describes a “formative experience” (“Autobiographical Recollections”) that occurred at a “formative time” (“Emperor”) in his life. In the 2000 interview he describes it this way:

When I was five and a half, I got double pneumonia and whooping cough—in 1939, before penicillin was discovered—so I was put in Willard Park Hospital for Children With Contagious Diseases. It was a huge ward with a sea of beds. Some kids lived, and some kids died. It was a cruel game of genetic roulette. There was no medication, no therapy, no treatment. We never got out of bed. We were never allowed to touch another kid or touch or kiss visiting parents.

But what I got out of that six-month experience—which was hell—were a number of skills. I learned to read and write before I started school, and that built up a sense of self-efficacy, as Albert Bandura would say. And I learned to ingratiate myself with the nurses, since that’s where the power was, to get some extra sugar, butter, or a smile and a touch. I also learned to cope with the boredom by inventing group games, like imagining that the beds were all rafts floating down the Nile or the Hudson River.

Zimbardo’s “horrendous” childhood “experience” of utter isolation, helplessness, and emotional and physical deprivation is altogether absurd and Kafkaesque. He is literally and figuratively an object of contagion and shame. This “situation” is what Zimbardo would categorize as one of many “total situations in which the processes of deindividuation and dehumanization are institutionalized” (“Reflections” 193).

Conclusion

Zimbardo placed the student volunteers of the SPE in an improvisational, Kafkaesque performance “situation” without sufficient controls and without sufficient self-understanding. On the whole, the student subjects and graduate student experimenters acted out what appears to be Zimbardo’s fantasies of power driven by denial. It is therefore not surprising that Zimbardo felt free to make “Faustian deals.” Denial of his past trauma and shame led to a lack of empathy for the powerless and the perpetuation of an “experiment” that was unethical and Kafkaesque from the start.

In chapter eleven of *The Lucifer Effect*, “The SPE: Ethics and Extensions,” Zimbardo states that he is “sorry” and “apologize[s] for contributing to this inhumanity” (235). Operating within the paradigm of guilt, Zimbardo remains removed, perhaps dissociated, from the shame that animated this mysterious, uncanny, brutal “experiment.” *The Lucifer Effect*, as its title suggests, is “situated” and fixed in a melodramatic moral universe in which “good people [turn] into evildoers” (Zimbardo, *Lucifer Effect* 257) or, in other words, “good apples” are “corrupted by the insidious power of the bad barrel, this prison” (Zimbardo, *Lucifer Effect* 228). In telling the participants of the SPE (in the “debriefing” that followed it) “that any extreme behavior they had displayed was diagnostic of the power of the situation and not diagnostic of any personal pathology in them” (*Lucifer Effect* 181), it is as if Zimbardo was telling himself that he too did not need to examine himself and the personal sources of his behavior in anything but behavioral terms. This was and is a mistake. On the other hand, Zimbardo’s unconscious dream of dominance and denial manifest in the Stanford Prison Experiment continues to captivate scholars of different stripes and the general public largely because the biographical and psychological sources of its violence and trauma remain hidden, thus creating an uncanny and unethical Kafkaesque world reminiscent of Pirandello’s absurdist plays. When performed (in the imagination or on stage) and seen in the light of performance, these plays, much like Zimbardo’s “experiment,” underscore the uncanny, protean nature of reality as it proceeds in all of its unheeded post-traumatic unpredictability.

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