

The Architecture of Erasure

How Ordinary Systems Manufacture Extraordinary Cruelty

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‘The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.’

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963)

Abstract

*This essay investigates the structural mechanisms through which institutional systems transform ordinary people into perpetrators of systematic harm. Drawing on historical evidence from Unit 731, contemporary cultural analysis of Brandon Cronenberg’s *Possessor* (2020), and the psychological examination of Nazi war criminals documented in the 2025 film *Nuremberg*, it argues that cruelty is not an individual pathology but a manufactured outcome of specific institutional architectures. The argument is grounded in 45 years of embedded observation inside British bureaucratic systems and connects directly to the *Transcription Error* installation — the second element of the *Liminal Mind* trilogy — which investigates film noir characters as figures of resistance who refuse institutional capture through their fundamental illegibility.*

The essay identifies a five-step architecture through which the transformation from ordinary person to institutional instrument is accomplished, examines the implications of Douglas Kelley’s rejected findings at Nuremberg, and argues that resistance to institutional cruelty operates not through moral exhortation but through strategic illegibility — the refusal to resolve into the stable data a system requires in order to process a human being.

I. The Question That Haunts Systems

In 1945, U.S. Army psychiatrist Douglas Kelley arrived at Nuremberg with a question that would ultimately destroy him: what makes people capable of systematic evil? Kelley examined 22 captured Nazi leaders — Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess, Karl Dönitz among them — administering Rorschach tests and conducting hundreds of hours of clinical interviews. His conclusion, detailed in his 1947 book *22 Cells in Nuremberg*, was devastating in its implications: these men exhibited no diagnosable mental illness and fell within the normal range of human personality.

Kelley’s findings were rejected in favour of psychologist Gustave Gilbert’s more comfortable diagnosis of narcissistic psychopathy. Gilbert’s version was preferable because it contained the problem: if the perpetrators were abnormal, the rest of us were safe. Kelley insisted on the opposite. He warned that the personality patterns he had observed existed in every country, and that people in America would

willingly climb over the corpses of half the population to gain control of the other half. The warning was rejected along with the diagnosis.

In 1958, Kelley committed suicide by ingesting cyanide powder — the same method used by Göring in his Nuremberg cell twelve years earlier. The parallel was deliberate. What Kelley had understood, and could not live with understanding, was that the system he had studied had not required monsters. It had required architecture.

The comfortable version of the Nuremberg story requires the perpetrators to have been abnormal. Kelley's version — the rejected version — requires us to understand the architecture that made ordinary people capable of what they did. That is the harder and more useful inquiry.

II. The Five-Step Architecture of Institutional Cruelty

The transformation of ordinary people into instruments of institutional harm is not a random process. It is a systematic, replicable architecture — one that operates across radically different historical contexts and at radically different scales of harm. The same structural steps are visible in Unit 731's biological warfare programme, in the corporate assassination logic of Brandon Cronenberg's *Possessor*, and in the everyday operations of British bureaucratic systems that process human beings as case files. The intensity differs. The mechanism is identical.

1. Linguistic and Categorical Dehumanisation

Systems replace human complexity with administrative categories. At Unit 731, victims were called *maruta* — logs. In *Possessor*, corporate assassin Tasya Vos 'extracts targets' after 'possessing hosts'. In British welfare administration, human beings in crisis become 'non-compliant claimants' or 'case escalations'. The linguistic substitution is not merely euphemistic. It performs a categorical operation: the thing that has been renamed can now be processed by the system without the processing agent encountering a human being.

2. Institutional Framing That Legitimises Harm

Violence is reframed as necessity, science, or protocol. Unit 731 operated as the 'Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Department'. In *Possessor*, murder is 'corporate security services'. In the institutions I have worked inside, the removal of services from vulnerable people is 'demand management' and 'prioritisation of resource'. The framing does not deceive the institution. It protects the individual agents within it from having to name what they are participating in.

3. Career and Operational Incentives

Systems reward participation. Unit 731 doctors received promotions and academic recognition for their research. In *Possessor*, Tasya's willingness to kill is presented as career advancement — she is being considered for greater operational responsibility. In corporate and bureaucratic contexts, the reward structure consistently favours those who process cases efficiently over those who resist processing people as cases. The incentive architecture does not require explicit instruction to produce compliant behaviour.

4. Isolation from External Moral Reference Points

Systems create sealed environments where the ethics of the outside world do not penetrate. Unit 731 was physically isolated in Manchuria. Possessor uses consciousness-separation technology to create what the film calls an ‘ethical quarantine’. The isolation need not be geographical. Institutional culture, specialised language, the shared understanding that external judgements do not apply to people who do not understand the operational reality — these create a hermetic environment in which the moral reference points of ordinary life become inaccessible.

5. Gradual or Sudden Severing of Empathy

Unit 731 used gradual desensitisation: doctors began with observation, moved to assistance, and eventually to direct participation. Possessor uses engineered trauma, forcing Tasya to kill her own family in a simulated environment to ensure that she becomes a consciousness capable of killing without emotional consequence. In both cases, the severing of empathic connection is not incidental to the institutional process — it is its explicit goal. A person who can still feel what they are doing to other people is not yet a reliable institutional instrument.

The five steps are not a sequence that requires conscious design. They emerge from the institutional logic of processing human complexity at scale. Any system that must handle large numbers of human beings efficiently will tend toward these mechanisms, because they work. That is the most disturbing finding.

III. The Banality of Evil and Its Discontents

Hannah Arendt’s concept of the ‘banality of evil’ — the observation that Eichmann was not a monster but a bureaucrat performing ordinary tasks that resulted in atrocity — remains the most productive framework for understanding institutional cruelty at scale. But Arendt’s formulation risks being read as describing passive participation: ordinary people who failed to resist a system they were swept along by.

What Kelley’s clinical evidence and the five-step architecture make visible is that the participation is not passive. The participants are products of designed institutional environments that manufacture the psychological conditions enabling cruelty. The progression is: normal person → institutional process → capacity for systematic harm. This is not a failure of individual moral character. It is a designed outcome of specific institutional architecture.

The distinction matters because it changes the location of the problem. If institutional cruelty is a failure of individual moral character, the solution is better people. If it is a manufactured outcome of specific institutional architectures, the solution is different architecture — and the recognition that any of us, placed inside the five-step process described above, would be at risk of becoming what we currently find it comfortable to imagine we could never become.

IV. 45 Years Inside the Machinery

The analysis above is not theoretical for me. I have spent 45 years working inside British institutions — the military, telecommunications, housing administration — observing how the five-step architecture operates at what I have called elsewhere a lower intensity than Unit 731 but through an identical mechanism.

The categorical substitution is constant. People in housing crisis become ‘complex cases’. People who cannot navigate the administrative requirements of the benefit system become ‘non-compliant’. The same mechanism that called victims maruta calls a family sleeping in a car an ‘intentionally homeless household’. The linguistic operation performs the same function at every scale: it removes the person from the encounter so that the system can process what remains.

The institutional framing is equally consistent. Removing services from vulnerable people is ‘prioritising resource’. Enforcing targets that cause demonstrable harm is ‘maintaining quality standards’. The gap between what the institution says it is doing and what it is actually doing is managed through language, and the people inside the institution who maintain that language are not lying. They have been absorbed into the institutional frame sufficiently that the language is, for them, accurate.

What I have not observed, in 45 years of embedded witness, is a single institution that was immune to this process. The question is not whether it operates. The question is at what intensity, and at what point in the five-step process the particular institution currently sits.

Every institution I have worked inside was somewhere on the five-step architecture. The intensity varied. The mechanism did not. The most dangerous moment is when the language has been internalised so completely that the gap between it and reality is no longer visible from inside.

V. Film Noir as Analytical Framework: The Transcription Error Project

The Transcription Error installation — the second element of the Liminal Mind trilogy, deferred behind Quantum Memory in the current funding sequence — uses film noir aesthetics to model a particular form of resistance to institutional capture. The noir protagonist is not a hero in any conventional sense. He is a figure who has become illegible to the system — who cannot be processed because he refuses to resolve into stable data.

Detective Dave Bannion in Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat* (1953) is the exemplary case. The system attempts to neutralise Bannion through the standard mechanism: the murder of his daughter Joyce, a human ‘attachment’ whose elimination is calculated to remove his operational motivation and return him to a manageable state. The system has misread its target. Bannion does not respond with the predictable grief and withdrawal. He becomes ungovernable — a transcription error in the institutional genome, a piece of data the system cannot process because it keeps producing unexpected outputs.

Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (1947) and Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* (1958) function as related figures: identities that cannot be overwritten because their complexity exceeds what the system’s categorical architecture can hold. They are not good men, in any simple moral sense. They are human beings whose irreducible complexity — whose capacity to surprise, to contradict, to refuse the expected response — makes them resistant to institutional processing.

The Transcription Error installation takes this resistance as its subject: not heroic defiance but the quieter, more durable resistance of the person who refuses to become fully legible. Who maintains enough complexity, enough unpredictability, enough genuine human irreducibility that the system cannot complete the five-step transformation.

The noir protagonist is not a hero. He is a person the system cannot finish processing. That is a different kind of resistance — not moral opposition but ontological refusal. The refusal to resolve into data is the refusal to become an instrument.

VI. The Payload: Strategic Illegibility as Resistance

We cannot eliminate the personality patterns that enable institutional violence. Kelley established this, and the evidence of the subsequent eighty years has confirmed it. The patterns exist in every population. What can be disrupted is the architecture that transforms those patterns into systematic harm.

Resistance operates, in practice, through what might be called strategic illegibility — the maintenance of enough human complexity that the institutional processing cannot be completed. This is not passivity. It is active refusal: the administrator who strategically misunderstands a protocol in order to prevent harm; the professional who insists on seeing the person behind the case file; the institution-builder who designs systems with enough friction that the five-step architecture cannot run smoothly.

The butterfly test at the end of *Possessor* measures whether the transformation is complete: when confronted with beauty, do you feel anything? The test identifies the point at which a human being has been fully converted into an institutional instrument. What it implies is that the preservation of aesthetic response — the maintenance of the capacity to be moved by something that serves no operational purpose — is a form of structural resistance. The person who can still feel beauty is not yet fully processed.

VII. Conclusion: The Irreducible Human

Systems attempt to encode humans as stable, reproducible data. The ambition of the institutional architecture described in this essay is the production of reliable instruments: people who will perform the required functions without the interference of personal moral response, aesthetic sensitivity, or attachment to the specific human being in front of them.

Real human beings are transcription errors in this system. We mutate. We produce unexpected outputs. We maintain attachments that the architecture has calculated should have been severed. We feel things that serve no operational purpose. These are not weaknesses to be engineered out. They are the properties that make complete institutional capture impossible — not for every person in every system, but enough to ensure that the architecture never runs cleanly.

The Quantum Memory project and the Transcription Error installation are both, in this sense, arguments about irreducibility. Quantum Memory insists that the embodied knowledge of the South Wales industrial communities cannot be fully encoded into the administrative categories through which those communities have been processed and managed. Transcription Error insists that the human beings who resist institutional capture do so through properties that cannot be fully named or replicated. Both projects are attempts to hold open the space where the irreducible human refuses to resolve into data.

The categorical systems fail because of human complexity. That failure is not a weakness of the systems. It is proof of the irreducible presence that refuses, finally, to become information.

Note on Sources

This essay draws on clinical psychology, historical documentation of Unit 731, and close reading of film texts. The account of Douglas Kelley's findings and subsequent fate draws on El-Hai (2013) and Dimsdale (2016). References to *Possessor* (2020) and *Nuremberg* (2025) are to the films as analytical texts; the *Nuremberg* film's dramatisation of the Kelley/Gilbert dispute is taken as a useful framing device rather than a primary historical source. The first-person institutional observations in Section IV are drawn from the author's own experience across 45 years of embedded institutional work, as documented across the Liminal Mind Research Notes series.

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