Thoughts on Trauma and Representation in Lanzmann's *Shoah*

Mimi Ash

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) remains one of the most radical and perhaps the most important cinematic representations of the Holocaust.

Before *Shoah*, most non-fiction films about the Holocaust were compilations of Nazi propaganda footage with an omniscient narrator and a specific agenda. The most prominent of these is Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955/56), which did not even mention the fate of the Jews explicitly, but promoted a universal message, while warning of future atrocities, clearly referring to the Algerian struggle for independence.

Lanzmann rejected the compilation genre, calling the Nazi propaganda images used in the films »images without imagination«[1]. Lanzmann also found the compilation genre tendentious, thus distorting the truth, declaring that »the voice-over imposes a knowledge that does not surge directly from what one sees ...The structure of a film must itself determine its own intelligibility. That is why I ... decided very early on that there would be no archival documents in the film.«[2]

Lanzmann's primary critique of Nazi propaganda footage was that, in his view, it showed nothing of what I would call the Holocaust's »heart of darkness«: the industrialized mass murder of Jewish men, women and children in the gas chambers. In this context it is important to point out that while Lanzmann did interview two members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, or »mobile killing units« who perpetrated the »Holocaust by Bullets« which preceded mass murder by gas, Lanzmann chose not to include excerpts from these interviews in Shoah, although, according to Sue Vice, he regretted this choice.[3]

1 | Marc Chevrie/Hervé Le Roux: Site and Speech: An Interview with Claude Lanzmann about Shoah. In: Stuart Liebman (ed.): Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*: Key Essays. Oxford 2007, p. 40.

2 | Ibid., pp. 40-42.

3 | Sue Vice: Representing the Einsatzgruppen: The Outtakes of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah. In: Nicolas Chare/Dominic Williams (ed.): Representing Auschwitz. At the Margins of Testimony. London 2013, pp. 130 f., online at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137297693_7.

Yet, while Lanzmann rejected archival footage, he declared, paradoxically, »If I had found an existing film – a secret film because filming was highly forbidden – shot by an SS-man, that shows how 3000 Jews, men, women and children die together, choking, in a gas chamber or crematorium, then not only would I not have shown it, I would have destroyed it. I cannot say why. It speaks for itself.«[4]

Whether or not Lanzmann would really have destroyed such a »secret film«, what is more important is that he would not have shown it, since it would be »a certain absolute kind of horror«[5] that »cannot be conveyed.«[6] Such a scene, shot by definition from the perpetrator POV, would be a radical desecration of the memory of the dead and the dying, as well as the ultimate in Holocaust pornography, arousing as much voyeuristic fascination as pity.

Lanzmann eschewed the dramatic genre as well, with great vehemence, as epitomized by his critique of the 1978 CBS TV miniseries *Holocaust*, as well as Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994) – two works which were showered with praise and industry awards, impacting millions around the globe. Some have linked the CBS miniseries *Holocaust* to the 1979 decision by the Bundestag to lift the statute of limitations on murder cases, including crimes committed by the Nazis[7]. In a similar vein, Spielberg is credited with changing the level and extent of global »holocaust awareness« in an unprecedented manner.

However, according to Lanzmann, in the CBS television series *Holocaust* »the characters [...] never lose their ›humanity‹, even in the gas chambers [...] to show what really happened would have been unendurable.«[8] This is coherent with Lanzmann's firm opposition to showing footage of murder in the gas chambers, should such footage ever come to light. He continues: »[...] because reality defies the resources of any fiction, *Holocaust* perpetrates a lie, a moral crime; it assassinates memory.«[9]

Lanzmann is equally condemnatory of *Schindler's List*. Regarding both *Holocaust* and *Schindler's List*, Lanzmann declares: »The series or the Hollywood film, they transgress because they trivialize, and thus they remove the holocaust's unique character.«[10]

---

4 | Claude Lanzmann: Why Spielberg has Distorted the Truth. In: Guardian Weekly, April 3, 1994.

5 | Ibid.

6 | Ibid.

7 | Elizabeth Pond: Why ›Shoah‹ didn't Shock W. Germany like Film ›Holocaust‹. The Christian Science Monitor, March 13, 1986, online at www.csmonitor.com/1986/0313/oshoah.html.

8 | Claude Lanzmann: From the Holocaust to ›Holocaust‹. In: Liebman, Claude Lanzmann's Shoah, p. 30.

9 | Ibid.

10 | Lanzmann: Why Spielberg has Distorted the Truth.

Having rejected the archive-based compilation film as well as the dramatic genre, Lanzmann felt compelled to create what he referred to as »a new form«, based on testimony, not just any testimony, but that of former members of the *Sonderkommando*, male Jewish prisoners of extermination camps forced to deal with the bodies of those who were gassed. This choice evolved, to a large extent, in conjunction with Lanzmann's decision to make the focus of *Shoah* the industrialized mass murder of Jewish men, women and children in the gas chambers.[11] Lanzmann explains: »In *Shoah* there is not a single personal story. The Jewish survivors in *Shoah* are not merely survivors, but people who were at the end of a chain of extermination [...]. *Shoah* is a film about the dead and not at all about survival.«[12] Or, as stated even more emphatically by Lanzmann towards the end of his life:

> No one returned alive from the gas chambers [...]. Within three hours of arrival, 3000 people were murdered by gas without ever knowing where they had been, so that they were not conscious of their own death [...]. The gas chambers are the subject of *Shoah*, and the fact that no witnesses remained.[13]

The unique nature of Lanzmann's choice of subject as well as his means of representation cannot be overstated. No one else in the history of Holocaust film has succeeded in creating a monumental work of non-fiction about the »heart of darkness« of the Holocaust, in which ethical sensibilities determine aesthetic choices in the most powerful way.

But there is an inherent problem, referred to in the discourse about *Shoah* and the Holocaust in general, as »the impossibility of testimony«.

As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have pointed out, the Nazis wanted the annihilation of the Jews in the gas chambers to be »an event without a witness«; they were not only killing Jews, but, as a result, doing away with any eyewitnesses. We are reminded of Primo Levi, who wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved* that »the true witnesses, those in full possession of the terrible truth, are the drowned, the submerged, and the annihilated.« Those who survived »speak in their stead, by proxy.«[14] At the heart of Lanzmann's chosen mode of representation in *Shoah* is, therefore, a paradox involving the impossibility of witnessing and the necessity of witnessing.

At the core of the impossibility of witnessing even by those who speak »by proxy«, is the inscrutable and unrelenting nature of trauma itself: an experience that is so out of the ordinary, so terrifying and life-threatening, so unexpected, that it cannot be taken in all at once by the soul attempting to defend itself. Cathy

11 | Ibid.

12 | Ibid.

13 | Interview with Lanzmann in the documentary film *Spectres of the Shoah*, 2015, directed by Adam Benzine.

14 | Primo Levi: The Drowned and the Saved. London 1988, p. 64.

Caruth, inspired by her understanding of Freud's writings on trauma,[15] asserts convincingly that »[...] what returns to haunt the victim [...] is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.«[16]

Caruth asks: »Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?«[17] Perhaps it is both: the shock, terror, and guilt of having suffered and witnessed atrocities, and, at the same time, of having remained alive. Yet if trauma is never fully integrated into the psyche, how can it be communicated to others?

This question arises as we see Simon Srebnik in *Shoah*, pacing slowly next to Lanzmann, at Chelmno, and then continuing on alone. Lanzmann has brought Srebnik back to this now pastoral setting where he, Srebnik, was forced to be part of a special unit of Jewish prisoners who dealt with the bodies of the dead. Chelmno was the first stationary facility where gas vans were employed in the mass murder of Jews, primarily from December 1941 until March 1943, and again, briefly, in June and early July of 1944.[18]

Lanzmann walks alongside Srebnik, as he tells him quietly and almost without affect – almost – because his facial expressions when he ceases speaking suggest a vague sorrow or confusion – about what happened here at this »non-site of memory«. »They burned people here [...] Yes, this is the place,« Srebnik affirms, »No one can describe it [...] and no one can understand it. Even I, here, now [...] I can't believe I'm here.«[19]

Soon after Srebnik has spoken these words, we see him from afar in an extreme long shot, crossing the vast, empty green field at Chelmno, as if he is headed towards the dense forest up ahead. Srebnik seems to be getting smaller and smaller (from our point of view) as he trudges on. What is striking is not only how peaceful the countryside is, how absolutely different from the inferno of mass murder that once lit up the skies here, but as we watch the diminishing Srebnik almost disappear into the landscape, with the immense forest before him, we realize how lost he is, still unable to comprehend what happened here.

Lawrence Langer's understanding of the impossibility of testimony (although he does not use this term) involves a distinction between chronological and durational time. To Langer's mind, the survivor-witness is caught up in »[...] the dura-

15 | Cathy Caruth: Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History. Baltimore (MD) 1996, pp. 3–5.

16 | Ibid., p. 6.

17 | Ibid., p. 7.

18 | The Holocaust Encyclopedia, USHMM, online at https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/chelmno.

19 | Claude Lanzmann: Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust: The Complete Text of the Film. New York 1985, pp. 5 f.

tion of Holocaust time, which is a constantly re-experienced time.«[20] He explains further: »It is clear [...] that durational time relentlessly stalks the memory of the witness, imprinting there moments immune to the ebb and flow of chronological time [...].«[21]

»Holocaust time«, then, is »constantly re-experienced«, so that it is a kind of eternal present. In a similar vein, Lanzmann has said on many occasions that *Shoah* is a film about the present: »The film is not made out of memories, I knew that right away [...] The film is the abolition of all distance between past and present; I relive this history in the present.«[22] The comment about memories might sound odd, since the mode of representation of *Shoah* is testimony, primarily of Jewish survivors. However, as we watch *Shoah* more attentively, we understand that though Lanzmann wants us to learn what happened, and, indeed, in great detail, his deeper focus is on the way the past determines the present, that is, how the survivor-witness lives with trauma.

In one of the most controversial sequences in *Shoah*, Lanzmann interviews Treblinka survivor Abraham Bomba, who was forced to cut women's hair at the camp before they were gassed. Lanzmann has placed him in a men's barber shop in a small Israeli town, and has directed him to give a man a haircut. Although he is cutting a man's hair, in Israel in the 1970's, this activity and this setting compel Bomba to play a role, as it were, and serve to clarify Lanzmann's statement that »*Shoah* is a fiction rooted in reality.«[23] By this Lanzmann means that in the film, he has staged what he calls a »fictional [...] or theatrical situation,«[24] in which witnesses become »actors«[25] who »recount their own history«.[26] This history is, of course, real, it is not a fiction, but, according Lanzmann, »They (the witnesses – MA) have to be put into a certain state of mind but also into a certain physical disposition [...] so that their speech can [...] become charged with an extra dimension.«[27]

What is the »extra dimension« for which Lanzmann strives?

In the sequence in the barbershop, after Bomba has explained that he was forced to cut the hair of women at Treblinka, Lanzmann asks him: »What did you feel the first time you saw all these naked women?«[28] Bomba avoids the question, and instead of answering it, describes, rather laconically, how he cut the wom-

20 | Lawrence L. Langer: Memory's Time: Chronology and Duration in Holocaust Testimonies. In: Idem (ed.): Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays. Oxford 1995, p. 14.

21 | Ibid., p. 22.

22 | Chevrie/Le Roux: Site and Speech, p. 45.

23 | Ibid., p. 44: »A fiction of reality« or »A fiction of the real«.

24 | Ibid.

25 | Ibid.

26 | Ibid.

27 | Ibid., p. 45.

28 | Lanzmann: Shoah, p. 114.

en's hair. Lanzmann goes along with him briefly, and then, firmly but gently asks again: »But I asked you, and you didn't answer: What was your impression the first time you saw these naked women arriving with children? What did you feel?«[29]

Bomba pauses, and then answers, »I tell you something [...] working there day and night [...] between bodies [...] your feeling disappeared, you were dead.«[30] At this point the camera moves into a medium closeup, revealing the mounting tension in Bomba's face. Bomba recounts how women he knew from his town (Czestochowa) were brought to the gas chamber one day, that they hugged and kissed him and asked what was going to happen to them. »What could you tell them?« He asks, and then repeats this chilling rhetorical question.[31]

After telling Lanzmann that, one day, a friend's wife and sister arrived in the gas chamber, Bomba suddenly shuts down. The camera is in a tight closeup, and Bomba, now mute, continues to testify, as it were, through his body language: his growing distress is transmitted through facial contortions; he perspires and wipes his brow, and begins pacing like a caged animal. Lanzmann asks him to continue but he refuses: his face is flooded with terror and anger, and he seems to mouth something, then shakes his head. Lanzmann entreats him, quietly: »You have to do it. I know it's very hard. I know and I apologize.«[32] Bomba replies: »Don't make me go on please.« He has tears in his eyes, he mumbles something unintelligible in Yiddish, perhaps a curse (I have listened to this passage many times and still cannot decipher what Bomba says at this crucial moment.) It sounds like he says (in Yiddish) »Just like the hateful ones, like the Germans too,« apparently referring to Lanzmann. He finally continues briefly but without ever answering Lanzmann's question about what he felt.

What happened to Bomba when he broke down and fell silent? According to Lanzmann, as quoted by Libby Saxton: »The past was resuscitated with such violence that all distance (between past and present – MA) collapsed, producing a pure present, the very opposite of recollection.«[33]

Why did Lanzmann trigger Bomba's trauma? Surely Lanzmann is neither a sadist nor a *provocateur*.

One of Lanzmann's greatest critics is historian Dominick LaCapra, who takes Lanzmann to task for »triggering trauma« in the case of Bomba as well as others in *Shoah*. And yet, when LaCapra brings citations from Lanzmann's writings in order to deconstruct them, he helps us to understand better what Lanzmann was

29 | Ibid., p.116.

30 | Ibid.

31 | Ibid.

32 | Ibid., p.117.

33 | Libby Saxton: Anamnesis and Bearing Witness: Godard/Lanzmann. In: Michael Temple/James S. Williams/Michael Witt (eds.): Forever Godard. London 2004, pp. 364-379 (Note: I do not have access to this book because of the pandemic so, unfortunately, I cannot cite the exact page on which this quotation occurs).

trying to do, since, to my mind, what an artist says about his or her creation is at least one of the most reliable readings if not the most reliable reading of it. One of the most the most striking examples of this is the following:

»The idea that always has been the most painful for me is that all these people died alone [...] A meaning for me that is simultaneously the most profound and the most incomprehensible in the film *(Shoah – Ma)* is in a certain way [...] to resuscitate these people, to kill them a second time, with me; by accompanying them.«[34]

What is Lanzmann saying here? Clearly, he does not want to kill anyone, including himself, but, rather, by guiding the witness back to the place (physical and psychological) of trauma, Lanzmann is creating the conditions for radical empathy with the witness. Lanzmann is not playing the role of the therapist, but, as an artist, he is displaying what Milan Kundera refers to as »emotional telepathy«,[35] that is, true compassion. Since the nature of compassion is in abundance, the attentive viewer of *Shoah* partakes of it as well, so that he or she connects not only with the survivor who bears witness, but with those who were murdered, in some way effacing their loneliness. This is not catharsis, but a deeper level of awareness and understanding. This is what marks *Shoah* as *sui generis*.

34 | Dominick LaCapra: Lanzmann's *Shoah*: »Here There Is No Why«. In: Critical Inquiry 23 (1997), p. 265.

35 | Milan Kundera: The Unbearable Lightness of Being. New York 1999: »[...] to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion – joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion [...] therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme.« (P. 20)