

‘L’obscénité absolue du projet de comprendre’: The Communicability of Traumatic Knowledge in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*

Le vœu de tous là-bas, le dernier vœu: sachez ce qui s’est passé, n’oubliez pas, et en même temps jamais vous ne saurez.¹

Claude Lanzmann’s monolithic film *Shoah* presents an exception amongst films on the Holocaust: instead of re-creating the Jewish genocide by means of archival footage, Lanzmann relies solely on images of the present. Intimate interviews and extensively long takes showing close-ups of different sets of witnesses – victims, perpetrators and bystanders – are followed by slow images of landscapes in present-day Poland, which now hide every trace of the atrocious past they provided the settings for.² The decision to visually represent only the present is a conscious one, as Lanzmann conceives of it as one means to prevent the film from asking *why* these monstrous crimes could have happened. He refuses to give general answers, but is instead interested in the traumatic memories of each particular witness, as each testimony seemingly re-confirms that a classification of trauma is irreconcilable with an attempt to understand the witnessed atrocities. Any such attempt would reveal, what Lanzmann calls ‘une obscénité absolue du projet de comprendre’.³ And in order to resist the pitfall of understanding,

1 Maurice Blanchot, *L’écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 131.

2 *Shoah*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann (Les Films Aleph, 1985).

3 Claude Lanzmann, ‘Hier ist kein Warum’, in M. Deguy (ed.), *Au Sujet de Shoah, le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Belin, 1990), 279.

Shoah is therefore composed as a public record of Holocaust testimonies and endeavours to remain true to Lanzmann's conviction that these events must be known without – paradoxically – that knowledge giving rise to the question of why these crimes were committed.

This forceful prohibition of traditional narrative structures and the avoidance of images have caused many unresolved discussions in recent years. And it is particularly the problem of representation that has come to the fore, as Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière and Georges Didi-Huberman have pointed out in different though related arguments.⁴ I would like to look at a slightly different angle of the discussion, namely the gap between Lanzmann's prohibition of understanding and the reaction to the film that surprisingly often stresses the more accurate understanding of the Holocaust *Shoah* has provided the spectator with. Simone de Beauvoir for example, asserts that the experience of the Holocaust prior to *Shoah* always remained unfathomable to her, whereas through the film 'pour la première fois, nous la vivons dans notre tête, notre cœur, notre chair. Elle devient la nôtre'.⁵ And Timothy Garton Ash even declares that 'à la fin du film de Lanzmann, j'ai eu la sensation que je commençais à comprendre enfin ce qu'il semblait par définition impossible de savoir: "comment c'était" pour ceux qui se trouvaient dans "l'entonnoir" menant à la chambre à gaz à Treblinka'.⁶

This tension between Lanzmann's aspiration to avoid any structured discourse and the often opposed effect the film has on its spectators, occasions the question of how, and of how far, *Shoah* communicates the traumatic memories of the Holocaust to an outsider. My aim is therefore to ask how – and whether – Lanzmann manages to translate the impossibility of testifying to a traumatic event into a film, and whether the particular aesthetics of *Shoah* succeeds in resisting knowledge. By simultaneously

4 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), Jacques Rancière, *Le destin des images* (Paris: Fabrique, 2003).

5 Simone De Beauvoir, 'Préface au texte intégral du film', in *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 7 (hereafter abbreviated as *Shoah*).

6 Timothy Garton Ash, 'La vie de la mort', in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 242.

avoiding rational conclusiveness and playing with the spectator's desire to understand, Lanzmann's exploits the possibilities *Shoah* offers as a film and thereby attempts to resist the temptation to give absolute explanations. However, this *Spiel* – despite Lanzmann's contention – crucially relies on the spectator's desire and attempts to understand, and it is only in denying the spectator answers to his omnipresent questions that Lanzmann achieves to fight off narrative closure.

Testimony's challenge to knowledge

In analyzing how Lanzmann attempts to resist understanding, it is testimony, the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, which first deserves our attention. Filip Müller, who was forced to work as part of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz, most clearly expresses the role of testimony in one of his interviews with Lanzmann. In a scene of breakdown, he tells of his own resolution to die, when he had to lead his countrymen into the gas chambers. His decision was challenged by a woman urging him not to succumb just now:

Un petit groupe de femmes s'est approché. Elles m'ont regardé et m'ont dit: 'Tu veux donc mourir. Mais ça n'a aucun sens. Ta mort ne nous rendra pas la vie. Ce n'est pas un acte. Tu dois sortir d'ici, tu dois témoigner de notre souffrance, et de l'injustice qui nous a été faite.'⁷

Death is the lynchpin of testimony, as it is not only the prospect of being able to bear witness, which kept Müller alive, but it is in fact the 'imperative need to tell and thus come to know one's story which grants him survival'.⁸ Sharing the traumatic experience by trying to put it into words is

7 *Shoah*, 180.

8 Dori Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival', in S. Felman (ed.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 78.

thus a deeply shattering exposure, a re-traumatisation, as testifying revives the desire to die with the others inside the gas chamber.⁹ And death is also at the heart of testimony, because the ones who died in the gas chambers are paradoxically nonetheless closer to the witness than those who never experienced the gas chamber from within. This creates a challenging situation for both spectator and witness, because, as Emmanuel Levinas observes, in addressing the other, the self becomes conscious of the distance between self and other, which calls the dialogic process itself into question.¹⁰ Both witness and spectator are thus conscious that the other is out of reach for the self and the witness is painfully aware that in testifying he is trying to build an impossible bridge between inside and outside the gas chamber. This leads to the inherent dilemma within testimony, which Sarah Kofman sums up, when she asks, 'Comment parler, alors qu'on éprouve un "désir frénétique" de dire, tâche impossible, telle quelle, cette expérience, de tout expliquer à l'autre, que l'on est proie à un délire de paroles, et qu'en même temps il vous est impossible de parler?'¹¹

Yet it is not only the difficulty of formulating a narrative which widens the distance between self and other. As Derrida remarks, 'l'essence du témoignage ne se réduit pas nécessairement à la narration, c'est-à-dire aux rapports descriptifs, informatifs, au savoir ou au récit; c'est d'abord un acte présent'.¹² Bearing witness is thus intrinsically connected to the present, and

- 9 In fact this illustrates the whole dilemma within testimony, as Primo Levi has famously formulated it: 'The survivors who speak are not the true witnesses, as the true witnesses have not returned or have returned mute from the gas chambers'. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1990), 63–64.
- 10 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (Paris: Kluwer Academic, 1971), 43. 'Aborder autrui dans le discours, c'est accueillir son expression où il déborde à tout instant l'idée qu'en emporte une pensée'. Dori Laub makes a similar claim in 'Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony*, 57–75.
- 11 Sarah Kofman, *Paroles suffoquées* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 45. In her book *Unwanted Beauty – Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), Brett Ashley Kaplan gives a very useful reading of Kofman's text (57–58).
- 12 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 44.

in fact doubly so, as it implies being present now to tell that which happened in one's presence earlier on. Thereby the act of bearing witness to trauma distorts linear time. Time structures are reversed, as telling trauma is not remembering the past, but reliving the past as present, because trauma is resistant to a 'full presence', an unmediated presentation to a conscious subject. The event therefore becomes present only belatedly.¹³

This traumatic time structure which *Shoah* is embedded in has crucial effects on the relationship between the witness, Lanzmann and the spectators of the film. Instead of being 'digested' or transformed by memory, remembering here is not the recalling of an earlier experience, but the act of remembering repeats the event, whereby it preserves and protects the very kernel of the witnessed trauma. This brings about a unique atmosphere of intimacy, because Lanzmann and the spectators of *Shoah* become part of this traumatic present. And even if the spectator is ultimately excluded from the past of the witness, the testimonies of *Shoah* create a 'traumatic time zone', which temporarily includes the spectator, because as Derrida observes,

Par-delà toute preuve, perception ou monstration, le témoignage promet la vérité. Je demande à l'autre de croire l'autre que je suis, que je suis capable de témoigner de ma bonne ou de ma mauvaise foi. C'est une fiduciaire élémentaire: il faut se fier à ce que je dis (même si je mens).¹⁴

There is an undeniable distance between inside and outside the gas chamber, and yet the possibility of – and will to – testimony subtly shortens this distance. Spectator and witness take a step towards each other, because testimony demands trust and promises truth. And this trust, which must not be understood as an appropriation of the other, nevertheless allows the spectator to desire to understand the other, because this abstract other has come closer through the act of testimony.

13 See Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Foi et Savoir, suivi de Le Siècle et le Pardon* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 96–97.

It is of course crucial to point out that even if the spectators are integrated in this traumatic presence, they nonetheless remain cut off from the experience of the witnesses. As Laub claims, the spectator 'preserves his own separate place, position and perspective, a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task'.¹⁵ It is Laub's notion of a 'battleground' which I would like to retain here, as it is seminal to the enquiring of what understanding comes to stand for in *Shoah*. Lanzmann creates a shared 'traumatic time zone', and yet there is a distance between spectator and victim, which allows this battleground of traumatic memories told and un-told to unfold. The spectator is thus in a position to realise that testimony consists not merely in that which has been said, but also of 'the irretrievable surplus of what remains to be said'.¹⁶ This awareness that what we hear is not a 'final text', but an 'oral history', urges the spectator/listener to mentally re-construct the missing pieces of the testimony or to acknowledge them as missing. And even if the attempt to reconstruct always fails as the other's interior cannot be penetrated – as Levinas recognises, 'grâce à la dimension de l'intériorité, l'être se refuse au concept et résiste à la totalisation'¹⁷ – this distance functions as a catalyst in the attempt to make sense of the different fragments. The dynamics of testimony itself create the desire to understand within the spectator, and as I shall argue, this desire is even further promoted by Lanzmann's own crucial role in the film and the aesthetic transformations and ethical implications this role brings about.

15 Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony*, 58.

16 Burkhard Liebsch, 'Giving Testimony', in A. Rosenberg (ed.), *Contemporary Portrayals of Auschwitz – Philosophical Challenges* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 75.

17 Levinas, 51.

Investigative Aesthetics

It is not a coincidence that the Abraham Bomba interview is one of the most discussed sequences of *Shoah*. The reason for this being that Bomba's testimony is not only a particularly painful one, but also because the interview illustrates the role Lanzmann himself plays within the film. When Bomba, who was forced to work as a barber inside the gas chambers, tries to tell the story of a befriended barber, who had to cut his own wife's and sister's hair before they were gassed, he is suddenly unable to continue to speak:

BOMBA: Lorsque sa femme et sa sœur sont entrées dans la chambre à gaz ...

LANZMANN: Continuez, Abe. Vous le devez. Il le faut.

BOMBA: Trop affreux ...

LANZMANN: Je vous en prie, nous devons le faire. Vous le savez.

BOMBA: Je ne pourrais pas.

LANZMANN: Il le faut. Je sais que c'est très dur, je le sais, pardonnez-moi.

BOMBA: Ne prolongez pas cela ...

LANZMANN: Je vous en prie. Continuez.¹⁸

Bomba is anxious and unwilling to relive his past, and his reactions here strikingly exemplify trauma's resistance to narrative memory, but the dialogue also outlines in what way Lanzmann actively partakes in the film, and that the role he holds within *Shoah* must therefore be read as part of the development of the film itself.¹⁹ Marcel Ophüls' role as a filmmaker in his 1969 film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* can certainly be regarded as a model for Lanzmann, because Ophüls equally oscillates between a range of attitudes

18 *Shoah*, 130.

19 Shoshana Felman observes that Lanzmann holds a number of different roles throughout the film – the narrator, the interspectator and the inquirer (Felman, 217), but Dominick LaCapra is to my knowledge one of the few who also points towards the problematic aspects of this role, see 'Lanzmann's *Shoah* – "Here there is no why"; in Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), also reprinted in Stuart Liebman (ed.), *Claude Lanzmann's Shoah – Key Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 191–222.

of personal involvement. But Susan Rubin Suleiman is perhaps right to point out that the parallels between and inverse influence of the two filmmakers becomes even more prominent in Marcel Ophüls' *Hôtel Terminus: Klaus Barbie, Sa Vie, Son Temps* (1988). She terms the instances in which Ophüls transcends his own role and grants himself subjective interventions, subjective expression or simple self-representation, 'expressionist moments'.²⁰ This is an important and very applicable notion for *Shoah*, as it is precisely the moments when Lanzmann enters the film, which are the aesthetically most original parts of the *Shoah*, yet they are also the most ethically problematic.

The filmmaker's intervention in the Bomba sequence is problematic because it leads to a collision between the aesthetics of *Shoah* and his own ethical prohibition to rationalise the Holocaust by evoking the spectator's desire to understand. Lanzmann asserts that he never asks the 'why' question in *Shoah*: 'Diriger sur l'horreur un regard frontal exige qu'on renonce aux distractions et échappatoires, d'abord à la première d'entre elles, la plus faussement centrale, la question du pourquoi'.²¹ And yet, without asking the forbidden why, Lanzmann moves clearly beyond his precept when interviewing Bomba: his voice insists,²² the camera is not turned away, the witness is denied any privacy or interiority. The impassive 'il le faut' produces an atmosphere of investigation, in which Lanzmann – by following his unyielding imperative that these events have to be made known – turns into a legal collector of crucial evidence, a dominating and intrusive investigator.

This role informs a problematic meta-narrative in *Shoah*: the story about Claude Lanzmann, a man who himself attempts to understand.

20 See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 77–106. Lanzmann himself is briefly interviewed by Ophüls in *Hôtel Terminus: Klaus Barbie, Sa Vie, Son Temps*.

21 Lanzmann, 'Hier ist kein Warum', in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 279.

22 Michel Deguy describes Lanzmann's voice in the following terms: 'Sa voix veut savoir. Il est l'instance de l'instance', in 'Une œuvre après Auschwitz', in *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 21. Suleiman equally discusses Ophüls' changing involvement with regard to the expressiveness of his voice. (*Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, 89).

What this story highlights is the blurred distinction between Lanzmann's aesthetics and his ethical choices. Lanzmann's resolution to leave an imprint of Bomba's trauma while attempting to respect the Levinasian resistance to 'totalisation' is as much an ethical as it is an aesthetic choice. Whereas Laub and Caruth focus on the individual and attempt to assist the victim to 'work through' trauma, Lanzmann's ethical aim is to create a public record of the Holocaust atrocities, which is why Lanzmann uses the aesthetic possibilities of the film in order to make the transition from the private to the public.

And this insistence on getting answers is not only a feature of the Bomba interview, but it is even further emphasised in Lanzmann's 1997 film *Un vivant qui passe* – which consists of an interview with the former Swiss Red Cross delegate Maurice Rossel, who was granted a visit to Theresienstadt during the war.²³ The camp prepared this visit for months, hard work was put into hiding its mechanics, and as a result, Rossel described it as a normal Jewish city in his report. Yet, he acknowledges that there was something disturbingly passive and staged in the attitude of the Jews he actually met, upon which Lanzmann remarks:

On voulait vous tromper et tout était fait pour cela. Mais vous dites que l'attitude des Juifs vous a gêné, enfin, leur passivité ... Pourquoi ne vous en avez pas parlé de ça dans votre rapport? ... Vous ne pourriez pas inventer des choses, que vous n'aviez pas vues, mais vous auriez peut-être pu ...²⁴

Lanzmann here goes as far as to suggest that Rossel could have acted otherwise, and this challenging of the witnesses, particularly of perpetrators and bystanders, with bits of knowledge they claim to have forgotten contributes to the investigative aesthetics of the film. In scenes like this one, Lanzmann is clearly more than a listener.

Yet, the unsettling the spectator experiences also derives from the crucial choices Lanzmann made in editing and structuring the footage of

23 *Un vivant qui passe*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann (Les Films Aleph, 1999).

24 Claude Lanzmann, *Un vivant qui passe* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une nuits, 1997), 51.

the film. These choices reveal both Lanzmann's ethical and aesthetic convictions – what he cuts and leaves out, how he relates sound and image-track, are all means to construct the enigmatic tone of the film. One way of creating and yet clearly channelling this mood of enigma, is to be found in the way the camera moves very slowly, and indeed searchingly, over the faces of the people Lanzmann interviews. Especially, if the witnesses get seemingly lost in trying to remember and absentmindedly turn silent, the camera moves ever so slowly towards them, presumably wanting to capture what is beyond words and inaccessible to Lanzmann and the spectators. These slow wanderings of the camera drag the spectator into an ambiance of scrutiny and alert examination. As the film unfolds, the spectator learns to pay more and more attention to bodily movements – minute facial expressions and ambiguous gazes – accompanying the testimony, as they are manipulative hints towards what remains unsaid. And the long take is not only employed when Lanzmann films the witnesses, but equally when the camera pans over the Polish countryside – the former stages for the atrocious crimes that today seem empty and deserted. In an interview Lanzmann himself compared *Shoah* to a Western, depicting the return of the law and justice to the places of evidence.²⁵ Lanzmann's allusion to the Western is even reinforced, if we take into account André Bazin's claim that the long take – which Lanzmann employs abundantly in *Shoah* – is a means to force the spectator to take a more active role in interpreting the images he is confronted with.²⁶ The spectator is therefore no longer guided, but joins Lanzmann in this return to the places of evidence, and this subtle luring into the 'aesthetics of inquiry' allows the spectator to formulate questions from within.

25 Claude Lanzmann, Interview Session (2000).

26 André Bazin, 'Le réalisme cinématographique et l'école italienne de la Libération', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1985), 271: Bazin writes about Orson Welles' use of the long take in *Citizen Kane*: 'Ce n'est plus le découpage qui choisit pour nous la chose à voir, lui conférant par là une *signification* à priori, c'est l'esprit du spectateur qui se trouve contraint à discerner, dans l'espèce de parallélipède de réalité continue ayant l'écran pour section, le spectre dramatique particulier à la scène'. [Italics in the original.]

Lanzmann's technique of switching between interviews of witnesses and images of present day locations to which these testimonies relate represents a further step towards the film's investigative atmosphere. Through these cuts the testimonies experience a sort of visual grounding, because even if what has happened, happened in the past, the settings have survived into the present and therefore constitute a species of silent witnesses. In *Sobibor*, the 2001 film on the revolt and escape of 300 inmates of the extermination camp Sobibor during the Second World War, Lanzmann uses the same technique of switching between interviews and landscape images as in *Shoah*.²⁷ In a memorable scene, the camera pans over a gaggle of geese, forlornly staggering about and bumping into each other in panic. The significance of this shot dawns, as Peter Lennon describes, once the spectator remembers that the Nazis in Sobibor kept a gaggle of geese which they set loose to camouflage screams of the terrified women they led into the gas chambers.²⁸

Comparable to sequences in *Shoah*, this shot is a veritable culmination of what I have termed Lanzmann's 'investigative aesthetics': the spectator is presented with fragments of testimonies, which find their repercussions in images of the present. The spectator knows that geese used to hide deathly screams, and by putting the spectator in the position of attributing an image to this piece of knowledge, this functions not only as an aid for the imagination, but moreover makes the spectator's mind wonder what other means of camouflage he might discover as the camera travels slowly and cautiously across the Polish countryside. This could be compared to what Sergei Eisenstein calls intellectual or dialectical montage: the editing practice of cutting individual images and juxtaposing them with other either confirming or conflicting images, in order to create a third idea or

27 *Sobibor, 14 Octobre 1943, 16 Heures*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann (Why Not Prods/Les Films Aleph/France 2 Cinema, 1991).

28 Peter Lennon described this scene in an interview with Lanzmann and claims that Lanzmann uses this simple device to 'recreate the demented terror of the past', whereby he makes clear that Lanzmann despite his proclaimed *Bilderverbot*, uses other aesthetic means to recreate the past. Peter Lennon, 'The Ghosts of Sobibor', *The Guardian* (Friday Review Section), 27 July 2001, 6.

expression in the mind of the spectator.²⁹ This has the effect, as Suleiman observes, of forcing 'the viewer into an uncomfortable subject position in relation to the material',³⁰ which equally applies to *Shoah*, as the montage of the film is construed as a series of minute acts of discovery, which force the spectators to critically evaluate the material themselves and never remain indifferent or uninvolved.

Closure and imagination

The French 'comprendre' deriving from the Latin 'comprehendere' is etymologically defined as 'saisir par la pensée', 's'emparer de',³¹ which illustrates the conception of 'understanding' Lanzmann emphasises in his writings on *Shoah*: It is the sense of possession and closure, of structured thinking and finalised answers. It essentially aims to produce historical veracity – a veracity which is incommensurate with the enormity of the Holocaust question and which Lanzmann therefore vehemently rejects. 'Ces historiens, je me disais parfois, qu'ils étaient en train de devenir fous, à vouloir comprendre. Il y des moments où comprendre c'est de la folie même. Tous ces présupposés, toutes ces conditions qu'ils énumèrent sont vrais; mais il y a un abîme, passer à l'acte, tuer'.³²

But even if Lanzmann rejects a form of understanding which does not allow for chasms and blanks that break through a linear narrative form, he does not necessarily keep the spectator – enthralled by *Shoah*'s feel of investigation and discovery – from trying to make sense of what

29 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, (trans.) Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), particularly 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form' (45–64) and 'Methods of Montage' (72–83).

30 Suleiman, 87.

31 See A. Dauzat (ed.), *Dictionnaire étymologique et historique de la langue française* (Paris: Larousse, 1971), 126.

32 *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 289.

he is confronted with. Lanzmann's constant circling around the 'why' question does not entirely destroy this question, and his refusal to give answers does not prevent the spectators from searching for themselves. But perhaps Lanzmann works intentionally towards this contradiction, because, as Caruth notes, 'the act of refusal is therefore not a denial of a knowledge of the past, but rather a way of gaining access to a knowledge that has not yet attained the form of "narrative memory"'.³³ Caruth is right, a refusal to answer does not necessarily amount to a denial of knowledge, and yet Lanzmann cannot refuse the spectator to partake in the 'project of understanding', but must grant the spectator an attempt to make sense of the fragments he is presented with, as it is in fact only via the experience of this misconceived totality that he will come to know what 'knowledge that has not yet attained the form of "narrative memory"' means.

Shoah rejects, but in fact relies on the spectator's desire to understand, because only when this desire remains unsatisfied will knowledge beyond words become graspable: 'Quand le savoir n'est plus un savoir de vérité, c'est alors de savoir qu'il s'agit: un savoir qui brûle la pensée, comme un savoir d'infinie patience'.³⁴ If understanding is no longer concerned with historical veracity and turns into an open concept respecting the Levinasian Other, the incommensurable and infinite secret in the faces of Lanzmann's witnesses, then *Shoah* is successful in making the spectator realise that traditional concepts of knowledge do not apply here. Only then will the spectator realise the gap between an open and a closed concept of understanding, the impermeability of the living face, only then will he empathise with Jan Karski, who worked as courier for the exiled Polish government, when Lanzmann asks him whether he knew that the Jews of Warsaw were being killed, and he answers – 'Je savais, mais je n'avais rien vu ... Les statistiques, c'est une chose'.³⁵

This collision of engagement and unresolved disappointment within the spectator is thus perhaps what makes *Shoah* into an unprecedented

33 Caruth, 155.

34 *Ibid.*, 73.

35 *Shoah*, 185.

film on the Holocaust. The wandering camera, the switch between spoken word and place of evidence, Lanzmann's intense questioning and his investigative omnipresence all function as means to entice the spectator into an attempt to understand and the resulting frustration of failing to do so. The questions the spectator formulates are not – or certainly not straightforwardly – answered with representations either in music or images, whereby Lanzmann creates the clash between the desire to understand and the unfathomable essence of the material he is trying to make sense of. He thereby urges the spectator to depart from traditional models of understanding – 'Le film est fait aussi pour que les gens continuent à travailler... Il fallait garder des mystères, faire travailler l'imaginaire: il n'avait pas à tout expliquer'³⁶ – and pushes him towards a concept of understanding which integrates the imagination and thereby fights off closure.

The model of understanding *Shoah* defends is what might be called an 'aesthetic understanding', comparable to the Kantian notion of a 'free play' between the imagination and the understanding. Lanzmann's conception of 'understanding' as an 'obscene project' must necessarily be revised, as much of the film's success in proving that an 'understanding' of the Holocaust is impossible depends on the integration of the desire to understand within the imaginative space the film creates. As Felman recognises, 'what constitutes the general impact of the film is not the words but the equivocal, puzzling relation between words and voice, the interaction, that is between words, voice, rhythm, melody, images, writing and silence.'³⁷ Or, taking Felman's statement a step further, *Shoah*'s great achievement might derive from there being no 'relation' between its various elements at all. Because these elements are all being scattered around haphazardly, the spectator can never settle for any image or explanation, as aesthetic choices and ethical convictions are in constant conflict. And within this conflict emerges the fertile grey zone of a meta-narrative that tells of a man's attempt to relive that which he is ultimately excluded from. These clashes, conflicts, frictions and grey zones are no longer part of the narrow model of understanding

36 *Au Sujet de Shoah*, 305.

37 Felman, 278.

Lanzmann has in mind when he denounces it as obscene, instead they manage to keep the desire to understand alive without ever fulfilling it, they integrate rather than exclude, they are never finite or conclusive, but always remain processual, a constant evolution without deadlock.

Recommended Reading

- Caruth, Cathy, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- Deguy, Michel, *Au Sujet de Shoah* (Paris: Belin, 1990).
- Felman, Shoshana, *Testimony, Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and history* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- Insdorf, Annette, *Indelible Shadows, Film and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1983).
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