Print view


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Shoah, Claude Lanzmann's extraordinary "documentary" of the Holocaust, consists of interviews with surviving victims, bystanders, and perpetrators as well as visits to the killing fields as they exist today. The film is known, however, almost as much for its length of nine-and-a-half hours as it is for its content. In making Shoah, Lanzmann and his crew shot more than 350 hours of film over a period of some four years. Even limiting the project to this vast sum of film required extensive planning and selection. After another five years of effort, the film was edited down to its final screening time. Lanzmann admits that some of that original footage consisted of setting up scenes and botched shots that were easily excised, but that much "magnificent work" also found its way to the cutting room floor.¹

How did the director and the editors, Ziva Postec and Anna Ruiz, choose what and what not to show on the screen? Among the scenes removed were interviews with several members of the Polish resistance (as well as with additional Warsaw ghetto fighters); Lanzmann has justified their exclusion by arguing that they did not have sufficient filmic presence.² Inclusion was guided, Lanzmann states in his Cahiers du Cinéma interview, by how well a scene comported with his idea of the film's "general architecture"--the exact nature of which he never explicates.³ He has also discussed how he structured the section devoted to the Czech family camp in Auschwitz about the themes of knowledge/ignorance, deception, and resistance. Yet the problematic which Lanzmann repeatedly returns to in his own commentaries on his film--as well as echoed in much of the critical literature, especially the work of Shoshana Felman--is witness: the problematic of witnessing an event whose telos was to eliminate all witness.⁴

The film neither illustrates nor mimetically represents that which was to have been witnessed: there is no archival footage, no docudramatics. Nor does it function merely to transmit the witness of others, of those interviewed; rather it itself acts like a witness. The film bears witness; it testifies for the dead, for those whom Primo Levi called the true witnesses of the Holocaust.⁵ It attempts to incarnate them, to bring them back alive.

The film bears witness, because the Shoah, like all traumatic experiences, was never actually witnessed as such--nor was it ever integrated into the memory, history, or life-experience of modern Euro-Americans.⁶ Further, the Shoah as an event could not be experienced by any one individual since by its very nature it was experienced from incommensurable perspectival positions: those who see but do not understand (victims), who see but overlook (bystanders), who see but try to hide/render invisible (perpetrators). The film acts out the trauma by bringing these
witnesses together—and those of two other, the filmmaker/narrator/interviewer/inquirer Lanzmann and his alter-ego, the historian Raul Hilberg—before the audience. The film would make each member of the audience bear witness.

Yet the bystanders, too, bore witness. In the Cahiers du Cinema interview Lanzmann refers to the Poles as the "les témoins," the witnesses. How do the filmgoers then not become like these bystanders? There is no natural and necessary relationship between knowledge and action, between knowledge and responsibility for that knowledge. Moreover, since the audience experiences the montage of witness in time, its members do not have a synchronic tableau (neither vivant nor mort) before them; they can assume no godlike perches from which each can observe the clash of testimony, watch the false testimony discorborated. Rather the film educates its audience about how to become a certain kind of witness. Since it is the individual who belies the attempt to erase, who becomes the exception that proves and subverts the rule of silence, so, like the individual survivors whose testimony is heard, the viewers are to become such individuals.

The film's heuristic principle derives from an aspect of Lanzmann's background that seems to have been largely overlooked in the literature. In the newest edition of the film transcript, for example, Lanzmann is only described as "internationally known as one of the premier documentary filmmakers of our time." What is left out of this description is that Lanzmann was a protégé of Jean-Paul Sartre and that he wrote for and eventually became the editor of Sartre's house organ, Les Temps Modernes. To an extent following Sartre, Lanzmann is engaged in authentically connecting situationally based knowledge and action.

To an extent, in Shoah Lanzmann cinematically deconstructs the limits of the language of freedom, choice, responsibility, and faith found in Sartre's works written contemporaneous with the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath and still popularly associated with Sartre, specifically, and in existentialism, generally. In pan, Shoah is a monumental disavowal of Sartre's 1944 essay "La République du Silence" which opens


4. Shoah has generated an extensive critical literature (and literature on the literature) since its first screening in 1985. In addition to Au sujet de Shoah and significant portions of such monographs devoted to Holocaust film and representation as James E. Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust. Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), and Omer Bartov, Murder in Our Midst. The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), influential articles and chapters include:


6 See the much discussed work of Cathy Caruth on the epistemology of trauma: Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, History (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and her edited collection Trauma.

7 "Le Lieu," 297: "Les Juifs, les nazis, et les témoins (les Polonais)."

8 The major exception is Felman, "Return of the Voice," 244-45. While she does not directly examine a possible relationship between Shoah and Sartre, she does devote the chapter immediately preceding in Testimony to an examination of Sartre's relationship to witness and responsibility, "Camus' The Fall, or the Betrayal of Witness," 172-92.


Situation III with the audacious claim: "We were never more free than under the German Occupation." Sartre's "we" includes the "Jews" among those who "had to remain silent" for the sake of their comrades and who were "alone and naked before torturers who were clean-shaven, well-fed, well-dressed...," but for Lanzmann, unlike Sartre, that radical solitary silence was not "a revelation of [their] freedom." The Holocaust changed the terms of freedom for the intended victims. They were confronted with, following Lawrence Langer, choiceless choices—for example, Bomba had to choose between comforting his friend's wife before she enters the "shower" or telling her what awaits on the other side of the doorway. Further, how could the victims act in good faith when confronted by a world that was either radically unknowable because it was filled with meaningless signs or radically false due to perpetrator deceit. And they were radically alone, thanks to the bad faith of the knowing bystanders.

But in choosing to attend Shoah the members of the audience—occupying, perhaps, the largely off-screen position of the allies and non-Jewish, anti-Nazi resistance—are not confronted with their own choiceless choices nor are they presenting others with such (non)options. Rather for nine-and-a-half hours Lanzmann confronts the viewer with a montage of incommensurable witnesses that dialectically develops all of the combinations of knowledge and action—or inaction. These testimonies are interwoven with scenes, images, words that repeat in divergent contexts. This visual and aural onslaught forecloses identification but nonetheless disciplines the members of the audience trying to make sense of it all. "Lanzmann's film does not let us know, i.e., does not permit us merely to know." Realizing that knowledge without action results in the death of the other, the viewer transforms from well-positioned onlooker—bystander—to engaged participant who bears responsibility for the consequence of witness.

This essay focuses upon the underlying dialectic of knowledge and action with occasional indicators of the repetitions and displacements that together insert the viewer into the film as a kind of witness Who largely failed to emerge during the Shoah: those individuals (and collectivities) who both were in a position to know and did and, tragically, were in a position to act and did not. Lanzmann divided his film into two halves which bear the titles: first era and second era. No other information qualifies these designations. This paper argues that an appropriate subtitle for the first era is "getting knowledge," and for the second: "what to do with that knowledge."

SECTION I.

The First Era: Getting Knowledge

The film begins with a rather long written text scrolling before the viewer. The first words, "L'action commence!", "The story begins," clearly refer to the opening scene of the film: the survivor Simon Srebnik's return to Chelmno. Lanzmann's opening phrase no less alludes to two other scenes. First, an action, Aktion, was a roundup of Jews. Second, the phrase focuses on action that can counter the Aktion; following Lanzmann's self-proclaimed circular ordering principle,
death-producing action will conclude with the action of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance. The abyssal structure of Lanzmann's performative opening already inserts the viewer into the performance of witness.

The text that follows provides the historical details, the information or database—both about the death camp and about Srebnik's own fate—for the first scene.

At Chelmno 400,000 Jews were murdered in two separate periods: December 1941 to Spring 1943 and June 1944 to January 1945.... Of the four hundred thousand men, women and children who went there, only two came out alive: Mordechaï Podchlebnik and Simon Srebnik.

There is a necessary ambiguity to "only two came out alive." The viewer might understand this to mean those who survived or escaped Chelmno, but this is not the case. Later in the film Lanzmann reads a letter from the Rabbi of Grabow in which he (the Rabbi) recounts the report of an escapee from Chelmno. While the audience might assume the escapee to have been Podchlebnik, Lanzmann does not name names. Indeed, that report is known as the Grotjanowski Report after the Chelmno escapee who made it. Similarly, in the second period of Chelmno's existence there was a rebellion of the Sonderkommando in which 3 or 4 escaped. Yet neither of these details make their way into the film. Perhaps Podchlebnik and Srebnik were the only two to have survived liberation. But the "facts" are less important than their relationship to the "general architecture" of the film. Their individuality is paramount; and whether that singularity is understood as the necessary remainder that undermines any totalistic scheme of annihilation or as the proleptic anticipation of Hegel's philosophic apocalypse in which the absolute individual unites action and knowledge, the objective and the subjective, the individual is the site of truth that must not be overcome. Conversely, no less significant to the film is Podchlebnik and Srebnik's representativeness of a kind of (non)knowledge that must be overcome (aufgehoben).

Once the scrolling ends, the audience can commence reading the "page of glory in our history which has never been written and which is never to be written." The film starts with the dead and with the attempt to destroy the evidence so that not even the dead will bear witness to their own deaths. The perpetrators' goal is the oblivion of forgetting that something has been forgotten. How can one gather knowledge to inform action when there is the possibility that there is no knowledge to be gathered—worse: that there is no knowledge that there is knowledge to be gathered? To foreclose this possibility the film begins with Srebnik, the lone survivor of Chelmno's last period of mass extermination.

The camera closes in upon Srebnik as he attempts to break through, to separate himself from, the naive innocence of his song—"A little white house/lingers in my memory./Of that little white house/I dream each night."--the irony of which signals

12 Jean-Paul Sartre, ""La République du silence," in *Situations III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 11-14; partial translation: Cumming, "The Resistance," in *Philosophy of Sartre*, 233-34. Rather than conserving the "austere virtues" of "the Republic of Silence and Night" (Sartre, 14) such as remaining silent to protect one's comrades from arrest and death, the solitary witnesses of *Shoah* speak in order to protect their comrades from "a double dying"; see Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980); and the discussion below about the efforts to obliterate the memory of Jewish existence.


15 "Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in a relation with the most insupportable aspects of power." Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, tr. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 82.


17 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

18 This passage from Heinrich Himmler's notorious 4 October 1943 speech to SS major generals at Poznan (Posen) (cit. Michael Berenbaum [ed.], *Witness to the Holocaust* [New York: HarperCollins, 1997]) is the locus classicus of one of the most uncanny aspects of the Shoah: the extermination of the Jews was intended to be a double extermination; the presence of both the crime and its victims were to be wiped off the face of the earth and the pages of history. The abject horror provoked by the possibility that our identities could have been (and perhaps are) structured by an experiential/epistemological black hole may well be a primary motivation for the contemporary obsession with remedying trauma and recovering witness. On this double forgetting and double annihilation, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); and Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*; and "N'oubliez pas!" *La Quinzaine littéraire* 459 (16-31 March 1986). Peter Haidu, "The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the narratives of Desubjectification," in *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* , ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Dominick LaCapra continually returns to it in his discussions of unrepresentability and the "negative sublime" in Holocaust historiography (most recently in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001]) as well as Shoshana Felman's work on witness; Saul Friedländer, The 'Final Solution': On the Unease in Historical Interpretation," in *Lessons and Legacies*; Jill Robbins, "The Writing of the Holocaust." On the Holocaust as "like a black sun" for Lanzmann, see Felman, "The Return of the Voice," 252.

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that there is something that has been forgotten. As Srebnik walks along the fields in which the gas vans had deposited the corpses for Srebnik and his fellow prisoners to cremate, he begins the process: "It was hard to recognize, but it was here." Yet even as he has pointed to "it," this recognition is extremely difficult to interiorize, integrate, render useful: "No one can describe it. No one can recapture what happened here. Impossible?" This ignorance that does not know that it does not know is figured by the field itself: not only the markerless expanse panned by the camera
but also the place described by Srebnik, "It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now."

This obliviousness is dialectically juxtaposed by the unidentified and unseen chorus of bystanders, the villagers of Chelmno: "They still talk about it around the family table. It was public so everyone knew of it" (4). They knew it then, and they know it now. Out of the tension between these two poles--of the simple, undifferentiated ignorance of innocence and of nature, on the one hand, and of (inauthentic, empty, abstract) knowledge of the bystander who does not act, on the other--the film proceeds.

Next are two modes of active ignorance: that of the victim and that of the perpetrator. Podchlebnik, the other Chelmno survivor, wants to forget and thus does not tell his story, does not impart his knowledge to the next generation. If he cannot forget the forgetting, his descendants will. The Podchlebnik interview is followed by scene after scene of cleaning up after the fact. First, are examples of the various means of removing traces of the killing: planting a forest of pines over the graves at Sobibor (6), not only physically eliminating the corpses through disinterment, but also verbally erasing them with the use of the language of Figuren (that is, puppets or dolls) to describe the bodies at Vilna (9), fueling the pyres at Treblinka (10), and finally crushing the unburned bones of the victims into powder and dumping it into the river at Chelmno (10-11). Then the film turns to postwar Poland and the removal of all traces that there had been a people who had been killed: first the abandoned Jewish cemeteries in Lodz (11) and Auschwitz (12); then the destruction (Auschwitz; 12) or abandonment of synagogues (Wlodawa; 13); followed by the appropriation of homes and stores (13ff).19

Yet amid all of this silencing, erasing, the chorus of bystanders’ knowledge returns. In talking of the former residences, of the traces of dead Jews, they admit their knowledge of the previous inhabitants--and of their departure. Yet to mitigate their complicity they attempt to include Jews in knowledge: Pan Filipowicz recounts the Jewish premonition of their imminent destruction (15).

As Shoah’s dialectical dynamic unfolds it again shifts topic and attends to the ignorance of the victims--those that do not know that they do not know--and their coming to knowledge. This is a different kind of knowledge than that of either the perpetrators (who know and attempt to efface that knowledge by hiding like the Germans in Kolo; 16) or the bystanders who attempt to ignore their knowledge, even as they are constantly flaunting it. The farmer Czeslaw Borowi and others relate their surreptitious observations of the Jews in Treblinka and justify their indifference. In this portion of the film victims do not understand signs while the Poles unself-consciously embody those signs. The barber survivor Abraham Bomba mentions that he had never in his life heard the name "Treblinka" (17). Borowi remarks that he had lived there his whole life (17-18). Richard Glazar did not understand the throat-cutting gesture (27); whereas the villagers, Borowi, and the engineer Henrik Gawkowski readily make it.

When the witnesses’ narratives enter the camps, the ignorance of the victims is paired with the active ignorance (through cleaning of the train ramp; 38) or deceit of the perpetrators as the arrival accounts of Rudolph Vrba (34-35, 38), Bomba (36-37), and Filip Müller (48-49, 58) all attest. Yet once the threshold of the camp is crossed, if an individual is to be one of the--at least temporarily--saved, the zero degree of knowledge is learned: people are exterminated here. Glazar recounts asking the "Squad Leader": "What's going on? Where are the ones who stripped?" And he replied: 'Dead! All dead!'" (38). Similarly Bomba reports the answer he received from the inmate workers at Treblinka: "What do you mean what happened? Don't you know that? They're all gassed, all killed" (39). Yet such knowledge is as it were sucked into a black hole; this knowledge will be
utterly useless because all will be killed: following Glazar, "for everyone behind whom the gate of Treblinka closed, there was Death, had to be Death, for no one was supposed to be left to bear witness. I already knew that, three hours after arriving at Treblinka" (41).

Next comes the epistemic ambivalence of the onlookers of death. Of course, Inge Deutschkron remarks, they saw what had been happening, but on the day Berlin became Judenrein, officially emptied of Jews, they did not want to look, or rather looked out surreptitiously (42). These actions gave them the right to deny their possession of knowledge. At Sobibor Lanzmann illustrates a comparable dialectic between the bystanders' hearing and not hearing the Jews in the camp: orders shouted in German, the screams of the prisoners, shots ringing out, and then silence. To Lanzmann's question as to whether "It was the silence that tipped them off?" Former rail switchman Jan Piwonski responds, "That's right" (56-57).

The next permutation of the knowledge/action dialectic Lanzmann explores is that of possessing knowledge but being unable or unwilling to share it. The action which such "secret" knowledge allows is circumscribed by the circumstances of the possessor. Müller notes how the crematoria's special detail (Sonderkommando) were classified as bearers of secrets (57). This statement is juxtaposed with Chelmno guard Franz Schalling's description of his "top secret mission" (63). The effects of secrecy on action are prefaced with Lanzmann's encounter with the secret life of Christian Wirth's driver, Joseph Oberhauser, who was hiding his past in plain sight (53-54).20

Next Lanzmann focuses on a form of knowledge that is shrouded in a different form of secrecy or mystery. He reads a letter from the rabbi of Grabow in which the death camp at Chelmno is described. As already mentioned, the author was not Podchlebnik, but Grotjanowski.21 What is significant here is not

19 Later Lanzmann will reiterate the erasure of the Jews from the Polish urban landscape in order to frame the displacements of the Jews from the mental geographies of the Polish residents of Grabow

20 Lanzmann makes a special point of inserting a lingering camera shot on the sign bearing the name of the beer hall that employed Oberhauser.

21 I would like to note Lanzmann's use of irony. The letter is dated 19 January 1942; i.e., prior to the top secret meeting at Wannsee when the Final Solution officially began. That is, this is an event that did not officially exist (72).

just that Chelmno was no secret to its intended victims, but that, given this information, the rabbi places action in the hands of the deity. Lanzmann's codicil demonstrates the fate of those who accept information and leave it to the divine to do something about it--death (72).

Then Lanzmann investigates the kind of knowledge that motivates the bystanders to active inaction and which bears little or no relation to empirical reality: the equivocations of the wife of Chelmno's Nazi schoolteacher Mrs. Michelsohn and the stereotypes and mythic narratives of the
Polish residents of Grabow and Chelmno. These phrases, euphemisms, and anecdotes have replaced--or, perhaps, have always mediated--the memories of their earlier experiences with Jews. Mrs. Michelson combines a hyperpositivism with a technical indifference. When asked whether she saw the gas vans, she responds: "No ... Yes, from the outside.... I didn't look inside; I didn't see Jews in them. I only saw things from outside--the Jews' arrival, their disposition, how they were loaded aboard" (71). After admitting that she sometimes mixes up Poles and Jews, suggesting that they are but ciphers of what is other and less than German ("Superprimitive"; 70), she then offers an "external" differentiation of the two groups: "The Poles weren't exterminated, and the Jews were" (71). The determination of internal differences is left to the disciplines of psychology and anthropology (72). The dead are just so many numbers--inexact ones, at that: "Four something. Four hundred thousand, forty thousand" (83).

By contrast, the Poles draw upon centuries-old traditions and narratives of Jewish representation to repopulate their memorial landscapes. Lanzmann records their descriptions of idle, rich, beautiful Jewesses and ugly, stinking 22 "tanners, tradesmen, [and] tailors." They also recount tales of Jewish pre-Shoah domination: "The Poles had to serve them and work.... All Poland was in the Jews' hands" (78). 23 Emphasis is placed upon the concluding "Now you know" delivered by a resident of Chelmno after Mr. Kantarowski repeats a story which implies that a rabbi accepted his people's murder as expiation for the death of Christ. Lanzmann also employs irony to demonstrate how productive the stereotypical and mythic knowledge is: he is filming the parade out of the Church's doors on Mary's birthday while its complement, the Assumption (of Jews into the gas vans), took place decades before (89-90). 24 The camera reveals the violence of such knowledge as it closes in on Srebnik who is surrounded by these well-wishers. Lanzmann then contrasts the realm of mythic knowledge with the realm of technical knowledge: the memo to the truck makers regarding suggested improvements for the killing capabilities of their gas vans and its empirical correlate the Saurer truck--still in existence. Visually, Lanzmann is stating to his audience: "Now you know!"

SECTION II.

The Second Era: What to Do with Knowledge

The first era concluded with the consequences of "false knowledges," whether supernatural or stereotypical, that guide the actions of bystanders. The second and final era is concerned with the empirical knowledges of the event and the kind of action or nonaction they motivate. This is the world of victims and perpetrators in which their situations generate those knowledges which in turn condition those situations. This era begins with knowledge when no one is around to use it. Lanzmann continues his interview with the Treblinka guard Franz Suchomel and structures this segment as a parallel to the opening scene of the first book: Srebnik's song of idyllic memory against the background of natural landscape is perversely coupled with Suchomel's song of death-camp destiny and the invocation of "History--I'm giving you History" (95). Since this is knowledge that cannot be tested through action, Suchomel continually addresses Lanzmann with phrases like: "believe me" (96) and "I can assure you" (98).

The film's focus shifts to a situation in which the communication or noncommunication of such knowledge places its possessor in a double bind; whichever option chosen results in the death of the victim-addresssee and the guilt of the victim-addressser. Lanzmann illustrates this dilemma by
juxtaposing Bomba's account of the arrival of his friend's wife at Treblinka (107-8) and his decision not to tell her with the dire consequences suffered by Müller's Sonderkommando when one of the prisoners did tell the passengers their fate (116). For victims, the choiceless choice is silence (or, at best, a few seconds of illusory comfort for those who are about to die).

Perpetrators constantly speak their knowledges—but do not communicate them to their victims (or, perhaps, to their consciences either). Lanzmann, in part with the help of Raul Hilberg, in part with the "help" of the former Reichsbahn official Walter Stier, exposes how perpetrators hide behind their words through informed, intentional euphemisms such as 'special trains', 'resettled', 'final solution.' Lanzmann clandestinely—even employing a pseudonym "Sorel"—films his interview with Stier about his work as head of the department responsible for the deployment of the "special trains," the trains which transported the Jews to Auschwitz and Treblinka. From the outset of the interview Stier insists that he "never left [his] desk" (123); later he repeats that he "was glued to [his] desk" (126). Stier thereby asserts that he was never in a position to see one of these trains, its cargo, or its ultimate destination. In other words, he was not in a position to know the effects of his "work." Throughout the interview he employs the then-operative euphemisms like "resettlement" and "criminals" (qualified on occasion by "so-called") and emphasizes that he heard not a word of what was happening: "And we knew nothing. Not a clue" (128).

Then, as if staging a dramatization of Poe's "The Purloined Letter" with the historian Hilberg in the role of Auguste Dupin, Lanzmann follows his encounter with Stier with Hilberg's decoding of the document Fahrplananordnung 587, a train-routing order such as would regularly have been generated at Stier's desk. This document lists the itineraries of a fifty-freight-car-long "special train"—originating stations, stations passed inbetween, and final destinations—as it travels first from Radom to Treblinka, then from Treblinka to another Polish site, then back to Treblinka, and so on. Since the charges are different—no

22 Perhaps employing the exception to prove the ruling substitution of stereotype for memory, Lanzmann follows up one Pole's reference to stinking Jews by asking him why they stunk. The man prosaically responds: "Because they were tanners, and the hides stink" (77).

23 One comment, initially untranslated, that "capital was in the hands of the Jews" (78) suggests a post-World War II provenance.

24 Mary's Assumption or Himmelfahrt returns during the Second Era when both Suchomel and Bomba refer to the path to the gas chamber as Himmelfahrtsweg or Himmelweg (100, 103).

25 The cinematic structure of this scene, the use of masks (secreted camera work and use of pseudonym) that are transparent to the audience, mirrors the desired effect of the Stier-Hilberg juxtaposition: the data are all there for the audience to draw the proper conclusions.

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passengers, no fare to be recovered—the form indicates whether the train is carrying its" freight" or is empty. The trains always arrive full to Treblinka and leave empty. The word 'geheim, secret," Hilberg notes, does not appear on the order; rather, it is stamped "Nur für den
Dienstgebrauch—Only for internal use" (129). Indeed, if Stier had left his desk, he would not have been able to access it. Hilberg meticulously demonstrates how an innocuous routing order, left in plain sight for all resident bureaucrats to observe, provides sufficient information to deduce the extermination of ten thousand Jews. The particular forms of such perpetrator knowledge both act--they kill--and they inhibit choice.

But once the victims cut through the ignorance, the deceit, and the double binds, they are then confronted by the shame of their inaction. They feel that by their inaction, by accepting their situation, they have denied or transgressed human nature. Recognition of this shame of inactions generates a number of responses: Müller describes how many in the Sonderkommando lived on the hope of outliving the situation--that the actions of others would remedy the situation (135), while Glazar recounts how he and his fellow inmates in Treblinka finally realized the necessity of their pursuing future action to overthrow the situation (138). The career of the Auschwitz survivor and escapee Rudolf Vrba dialectically conjoins these two responses. As a camp clerk he employed information to organize resistance, understanding survival as a form of resistance. He eventually recognizes that such survival, in particular, that of the non-Jewish prisoners who by definition were not subject to the Final Solution, would entail the deaths of many--with no dead workers needing to be replaced, the trainloads of Jews would be immediately selected for death--and he chooses to escape in order to inform others who might help (152/53).

The film also depicts a third response to the shame that comes with the knowledge of what Vrba calls the "machinery of mass annihilation" (141): unable to deal with their knowledge several attempt suicide. Lanzmann chronicles two successful suicides: Freddy Hirsch (149), "a sort of spiritual leader" (145) of the family camp in Auschwitz, who was recruited by Vrba and the resistance to lead an uprising, and Adam Czerniakow (163), the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Jewish Council. And an attempt: Müller, who forced to recognize that he still had choice, is shamed into bearing witness for those who no longer had such choice (151-52). 27

The final scenes of the film deal with the Warsaw Ghetto—the hallmark of Jewish resistance, of choice in the face of knowledge, of meaninglessness, and of certain death. Here the Polish bystander rises above his situation of ignorance, preconception, and prejudice and authentically attempts to intervene. The focus of the former courier of the Polish government in exile Jan Karski's transformation is his acquisition of knowledge after having agreed to sneak into and witness the horrendous conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto, The Bund leader outs it to him directly: "Mr. Vitold [Karski's cover name], I know the Western world. You are going to deal with the English. Now you will give them your oral reports. I am sure it will strengthen your report if you were able to say 'I saw it myself'" (158). His learning process reaches a climax as his guide, pointing to a woman, like so many others, dying in the streets of the ghetto, insists "Look at her" (161). Even though "It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity. I was not part of it. I did not belong there. I never saw such things, I never ... nobody wrote about this kind of reality. I never saw any theater, I never saw any movie ... this was not the world. I was told that these were human beings—they didn't look like human beings" (161). Even though his experience exploded his assumptions about the world, "I reported what I saw" (161).

Karski is contrasted with former Nazi deputy commissioner of the ghetto Franz Grassler's self-justification of his administration of the ghetto and the transports through his denial of knowledge as well as his refusal to recognize the contradictions of his own testimony (esp. 176-79). Where Karski appears haunted by the knowledge, Grassler ingenuously responds to
Lanzmann's comment that he appears in a Warsaw Judenrat President Adam Czerniakow's diary entry: "July 7 1941? That's the first time I've relearned a date. May I take notes? After all, it interests me too. So in July I was already there!" (162). As the interview concludes Lanzmann expresses his frustration at Grassler's blithe refusal to admit knowledge. When Grassler concludes that "I didn't know then what I know now: (178), Lanzmann insistently attempts to remind Grassler that he fulfilled all of the usual criteria for knowledge: position (deputy to the Nazi commissioner of the ghetto), age (thirty), education (doctor of Law), all of which the smiling Grassler sloughs off.

The film concludes with the victims who knew and acted: surviving members of the Warsaw Ghetto's Jewish Combat Organization, Itzhak Zuckermann (Antek) and Simha Rottem (Kajik). Yet the stories they tell reveal the tragic irony--implicit to Karski's experience--of the dialectic of knowledge and action: the witness and work of such actors are for naught if their intended dialogue partner or audience neither is nor is willing to become likewise engaged and responsible. Antek recounts the failure of his efforts to solicit help from the Polish Resistance prior to the Uprising. Rather in the film, the narrator recounts; the text as printed adds a different perspective--an aspect of his story that may account both for Antek's comment "If you could lick my heart, it would poison you" (182) and for his postwar alcoholism, the consequences of which close-ups reveal written across his face. Antek recalls his wife Zivia's response to his letter reporting his unsuccessful mission as well as his desire to return: "You haven't done a thing so far. Nothing" (182). Her indictment of his apparent non-action left him eternally condemned, one of the undead. Kajik, for his part, testifies to the active ignorance and refusal to commit by the Poles even as the Uprising was taking place: "In Aryan Warsaw, life went on as naturally and normally as before..." (184). But he also testifies to the impotence of his own efforts. He concludes his account of unanswered passwords and a woman's immaterial voice during his lonely tour of the burnt-out ghetto with the serene fatality of "I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning, and for the Germans"(185).


27. Filip Müller's testimony may also have functioned as an entry in the Institute of Historical Review's perverse contest: they offered a $50,000 reward to anyone who could prove that the gas chambers existed and were employed in the murder of Jews. The implicit paradoxical precondition of that proof was that the witness would had to have survived his or her death in the chambers. Müller describes throwing himself into the chamber--and being thrown back out by its future victims. A survivor, Mel Mermelstein, took the IHR on its offer in 1980. When the IHR refused to accept his proof, Mermelstein took them to other denier organizations and individuals, including the Liberty Lobby and Willis Carto, to court. Facing imminent defeat, the IHR settled in 1985; the settlement included a public apology: "Each of the answering defendants do hereby officially and formally apologize to Mr. Mel Mermelstein, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald, and all other survivors of Auschwitz for the pain, anguish and suffering he and all other Auschwitz survivors have sustained relating to the $50,000 reward offer for proof that 'Jews were gassed in gas chambers at Auschwitz'" (http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/m/mermelstein.mel/ftp.py?people/m/mermelstein.mel/mermelstein.order.072285). Mermelstein also received a sum in excess of the initial reward ($90,000), A film, Never Forget, dramatizing Mermelstein's life and lawsuit and starring Leonard Nimoy, was produced in 1991.

28. Karski notes that at the meeting with the two Jewish leaders outside the ghetto, "I took, so to
say, to the Bund leader, probably because of his behavior--he looked like a Polish nobleman, a gentleman, with straight, beautiful gestures, dignified." Did Karski decide to enter the Warsaw Ghetto with the Bund leader because he did not embody Karski's discomforting image of Jews, but rather looked like one of his own kind? Once in the ghetto, Karski reports, "What struck me was that now he was a completely different man--the Bund leader, the Polish nobleman... He is broken down, like a Jew from the ghetto, as if he had lived there all the time. Apparently, this was his nature" (158-59).

29 But, although neither Karski nor Lanzmann mention this in the film (perhaps Lanzmann thought it would be redundant), the British authorities, including foreign secretary Anthony Eden, did not even want to listen; see E. Thomas Wood and Stanislaw M. Jankowski, Karski. How One Man Attempted to Stop the Holocaust (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1994).

Each era of Shoah ends with a protagonist having acted and resisted death, but who ultimately is bereft of community, radically alone, and wearing his anguish and nausea on his face. At the end of their tours neither Srebnik nor Kajik, unlike Sartre's lone Résistant, has experienced a revelation of freedom. More choiceless choices? Is knowledge's demand for action a vain ethical salve unless the actor is always already one of those in power? Shoah has not educated the audience to witness by means of mimetic identification with these last Jews or last men. The haunted looks of Srebnik, Karski, Antek, and Kajik suggest that they are condemned to traumatic repetition of their (ultimately inconsequential) actions. Audience identification with them could only lead to more repetition. Rather Shoah positions the audience off screen. Neither as victim, perpetrator, nor bystander, neither as expert, interrogator, nor translator, the audience assumes the alluded-to place of those who defy such labels, who, in a position to act, stood by: an Anthony Eden30 or a Polish resistance leader. Disciplined by the film's dialectic of knowledge and action, of bad faith and shame, the viewer transforms from such a well-positioned, nonresponsive stander by to an engaged, responsible actor.

Shoah: A Brief Summary

Claude Lanzmann's film Shoah is nine-and-a-half hours of interviews and landscapes. The director, Lanzmann, interviews victims, bystanders, and perpetrators of the Holocaust as well as the historian Raul Hilberg. The interviewees come from fourteen countries and speak in seven tongues (English, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, Yiddish). The Hebrew, Polish, and Yiddish interviews are conducted with the aid of a translator who accompanies Lanzmann. Several interviews with perpetrators are surreptitiously conducted with a hidden camera. The landscapes include the sites of mass murder in Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz (Oświęcim), several Polish towns now Judenrein, emptied of their former Jewish population, and the homes and home countries of the interviewees (from New York to Basel to Corfu to Berlin to the Ghetto Fighter's Kibbutz in Israel). The camera is also directed at the transportation of death: trains and trucks. Unlike other Holocaust documentaries, Shoah employs neither newsreel footage nor stills from the period.
Shoah is divided into two parts called "Eras." The first era focuses on the killing grounds in Poland: Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, and several towns from which the Jewish population were sent to the death camps. Testimony is split among onlookers of the deportations and killings, former camp guards (and the wife of the Nazi teacher in Chelmno), and their surviving intended victims. While several survivors of Auschwitz are interviewed in the first era, their stories form the centerpiece of the second, together with the revolt in Treblinka and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. (There is also a sidetrip to the Greek island of Corfu and its survivors.) While a Treblinka guard, a Nazi railway bureaucrat, and a German ghetto administrator are questioned, the only onlooker (and non-Jewish Pole) interviewed in

30 See note 29.

this part is a former courier for the Polish Government in Exile who attempted to inform the Allies of the unfolding genocide. Raul Hilberg also plays a prominent role as a decipherer of period documents. The film concludes with the silhouette of a train travelling in the night.

Shoah won awards from, among others, the Los Angeles Film Critics, the National Society of Film Critics, the New York Film Critics Circle, and the International Documentary Association as well as French César and British Academy Awards.

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