

Tracing *Shoah*

For our parents

ROBERT BRINKLEY is associate professor of English at the University of Maine, Orono. His recent publications include essays on Shelley, Wordsworth, and critical theory, and he is co-editor, with Keith Hanley, of *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge UP, 1992). STEVEN YOURA is director of the engineering communications program and adjunct assistant professor of English at Cornell University. He has published essays on Hawthorne, documentary film, technical writing, and computers and composition.

... everywhere and always
go after that which is lost.
There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.

Carolyn Forché, *The Country between Us*

1. "So I went into the gas chamber"

Many years later, this is the way that Filip Müller, one of the few survivors of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz-Birkenau, remembered the last moments of the Czech family camp:

[T]hey tried to force the people to undress. A few obeyed, only a handful. Most of them refused to follow the order. Suddenly, as though in a chorus, like in a chorus, they all began to sing. The whole "undressing room" rang with the Czech national anthem, and the *Hatikvah*. That moved me terribly, that ... [pause].

This recollection occurs near the end of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. We watch Müller recall—then relive—the moment. Lanzmann films Müller in extreme close-up; Müller's voice—which has been intense, dramatic, angry—breaks. Müller begins to weep:

Please stop! [Pause. The film does not stop.] That was happening to my countrymen, and I realized that my life had become meaningless. Why go on living? For what? So I went into the gas chamber, resolved to die. Suddenly, people who recognized me came up to me. ... A small group of women approached. They looked at me and said, right in the gas chamber, one of them said, "So you want to die. But that's senseless. Your death won't give us back our lives. That's no way. You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering. ..."¹

As Müller bears witness to Lanzmann in the film and Lanzmann bears witness to the viewers of the film. As viewers bear witness. The woman's words turn out to be addressed to anyone who hears them. The transmission, which began in the gas chamber, has yet to end.

2. "The sheet of paper"

We begin with a context, the Shoah, the annihilation, one that constrains interpretation by intensifying the burden that evidence places on language. What we are calling evidence has the character of an irreducible otherness; it requires that interpretation respond to a prior significance that is by no means transparent and at best only partially interpretable. Nevertheless, the interpreter's responsibility to the evidence produces an obligation that defines witness, an imperative like the "ethical responsibility to the other" of which Emmanuel Levinas writes (Levinas and Kearny 30).

We feel constrained not least because manipulations of language and of reference were of considerable practical value in the production of the Shoah. Here is Oswald Pohl, for example, writing to Heinrich Himmler on 16 September 1942:

Employable Jews who are migrating to the East will have to interrupt their journey and work in war industry. (Hilberg, *Destruction* 3: 917)

Pohl's words serve to implement an objective while erasing any reliable sense of the events to which they refer and in which they participate. There will be no reliable testimony, no witness. The objective is implemented, and the referent disappears; readers are free to interpret what they will. Or this, in any case, is the design: to employ a language that is at once reliable for those who understand it and unreliable for those who do not, to destroy without a trace for those who will not understand, or perhaps with only the elusiveness of traces. That and the pleasure (however slight) that the correspondents may have felt at the turn of phrase. This pleasure can easily turn into heroic utterance:

Most of you will know what it means when a hundred corpses are lying side by side, or five hundred,

or a thousand are lying there. To have stuck it out and—apart from a few exceptions due to human weakness—to have remained decent, that is what has made us tough.

In the same address, delivered to senior SS officers at Poznan on 4 October 1943, Himmler speaks of "a glorious page in our history . . . that has never been written and can never be written" (Noakes and Pridham 1199), the unrecordable account of these events without a trace, a history, as Primo Levi recalls, that the SS also took pleasure in presenting to its victims:

[N]one of you will be left alive to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. (Drowned 11–12)

And against this uncertainty (which fosters pleasure, heroism, sadism) there is the strategy of the witness. Survivors who bear witness assert that their language is sufficiently reliable to make testimony possible:

I want the world to read. . . .

I believe it is my duty to let the world know on the basis of first-hand experience. . . .

There were things I had to do, words I had to speak. . . . (qtd. in Des Pres 51, 39)

It has turned out that material like Pohl's memo also bears witness, that the language is far more reliable than was intended. The referent did not vanish after all, and the memo refers to it, becomes evidence, supports the testimony of victims by turning readers into witnesses of the Shoah. As Raul Hilberg suggests,

These materials are not merely a record of events, but artifacts of the administrative machinery itself. What we call a documentary source was once an order, letter, or report. Its date, signature, and dispatch invested it with immediate consequences. The sheet of paper in the hands of the participants was a form of action.

(*Destruction* 1: x)

The sheet of paper passes into the historian's hands. The historian witnesses the action.

3. "No trace must be left"

Shoah is premised on the persistence of evidence, the reliability of signs, the endurance of traces. A resident of the town of Sobibor recalls that

they planted pines that were three or four years old, to camouflage all the traces. . . . [Y]ou couldn't guess what happened here, that these trees hid the secret of a death camp. (10)

In the film, the trees that were intended to obliterate evidence become markers of extermination.

When Lanzmann asks Franz Grassler to remember the time when Grassler was deputy commissioner of the Warsaw ghetto, Grassler claims that the memories are vague:

I recall more clearly my prewar mountaineering trips than the entire war period and those days in Warsaw. . . . The bad times are repressed. (175)

When Lanzmann offers to "help you remember" by showing him the diary of Adam Czerniakow, the president of the ghetto's Jewish council, Grassler is surprised that this daily record of events in the ghetto could have survived its author:

It's been printed, it exists? . . . May I take notes? After all, it interests me too. . . . [M]y name is mentioned? . . . He wrote every day? . . . It's amazing that it was saved. (176)

When Lanzmann poses the diary against a man who draws a blank, the film turns blankness into evidence.

The Shoah was dedicated to the fabrication of absence—reducing memory to amnesia, life to death, language to silence. Responding to Lanzmann's inquiry, Frau Michelsohn, the wife of a Nazi schoolteacher in Chelmno, is unable to remember how many died in the gas vans:

Four something. Four hundred thousand, forty thousand. . . . Four hundred thousand, yes. I knew it had a four in it. (94)

Earlier in the film, Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, describes how quickly absence can be produced:

[T]hey told us to make clean the whole place. . . . [I]n no time this was as clean just like never happened, never was people on that place again. There was no trace, not at all, like a magic thing, everything disappeared. (45)

When Bomba asked those in a work detail where all the people had gone, he was told, "Nobody is anymore alive!" (47). Another survivor, Rudolf Vrba, remembers that at Birkenau

whenever a new transport came, the ramp was cleaned absolutely to zero point. No trace from the previous transport was allowed to remain. Not one trace. (46)

Motke Zaïdl and Itzhak Dugin were among those forced to destroy the evidence of *Einsatz* operations in Lithuania, to reopen mass graves with their hands, to remove and incinerate the corpses.

The head of the Vilna Gestapo told us: "There are ninety thousand people lying there, and absolutely no trace must be left of them." (13)

These words, however, are a "trace . . . of them."

Shoah turns absence into evidence by filming even absence as a trace. Initially, Lanzmann recalls, he did not know how to begin, "how I was going to make images of nothing visible":

My problem was the absence. I had to begin with nothing, with the nothingness. The traces of extermination had disappeared, they had been erased by the Nazis themselves.

At first it seemed as if there were "absolutely no image of the reality of the extermination."²

Lanzmann imagined that he would encounter absence particularly in Poland, but what he found there were traces, not absence. The issue then was no longer how "to recount the unrecountable" but "how to recover the trace of anything there." At Treblinka, Lanzmann set out "to film the stones. . . . [T]here was a sort of obstinacy in me that pushed

me.” He filmed “the Treblinka station . . . the confrontation with this single name . . . the Polish peasants who [once] found themselves around the camps, around the places of extermination.” And “suddenly everything came back to life”:

The scars of the extermination are profoundly inscribed in the places, even if they have been defaced, and in the consciousness, the consciences of the people who had been the direct witnesses.³

In Poland Lanzmann found ways to film the particular force of these scars.

4. “Minutiae or detail”

As readers, we may think of ourselves as interpreters, not witnesses. What is the effect, then, of the Shoah’s imperative—that acts of interpretation bear the responsibility of witness? Consider where powerful interpretive concerns, detached from specific evidence, can lead a critic as rigorous as George Steiner. Recognizing the value of history as a “*kaddish* against lies,” Steiner still requires “a different order or framework of thought and speech” (58):

The question of Auschwitz is far greater than that of the pathology of politics or of economic and social-ethnic conflicts (important as these were). It is that of the conceivable existence or non-existence of God. . . . (61)

Steiner’s order of speech can be characterized as a sequence of substitutions: for “Auschwitz,” “the question of Auschwitz”; for “the question of Auschwitz,” the question “of the conceivable existence or non-existence of God.” With each substitution in the sequence, the interpreter (or reader) determines what the next substitution will be. In the process, Auschwitz—the specific historical complexity to which the name *Auschwitz* refers—has been replaced by a series of interpretations. The substitutions that Steiner offers might be regarded as paradigmatic for a reading of a historical event in which interpretation is given priority.

In contrast, here is Hilberg reading a document in *Shoah*:

This is the *Fahrplananordnung* 587, which is typical for special trains. The number of the order goes to show you how many of them there were. . . . [N]otice to how many recipients this particular order goes. . . . [T]here are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and here we are in Malkinia, which is of course the station near Treblinka. But notice that it takes eight recipients for this relatively short distance . . . because the train passes through these stations. Therefore, each one has to know. (138–40)

In Hilberg’s reading, interpretation serves description, and description responds to evidence. Evidence determines the reading. To produce his “*kaddish* against lies,” Hilberg repeatedly returns to details that make him wary of “greater” concerns:

In all my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers; and I have preferred therefore to address these things which are minutiae or detail in order that I might then be able to put together in a gestalt, a picture which, if not an explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired. (70)

Hilberg responds to the evidence, organizes and arranges it. His interpretation is shaped and determined by it. Unlike Steiner, Hilberg avoids “the big questions,” preferring to construct “a more full description,” an interpretation that does its work by bearing witness.

5. “The same track”

Lanzmann shares Hilberg’s mistrust of interpretative generalities: “I think that *Shoah* is a fight against generalities” (Lanzmann, “Seminar” 82).

After ten years of work, I understand better . . . the “how” of the extermination. As to the “why,” I believe above all that it is necessary not to ask the question.⁴

Shoah was shaped not by interpretative generalities but by the details Lanzmann discovered while filming. Of the discovery that locomotives *pushed* death trains into the camp at Treblinka but *pulled* them into Birkenau, Lanzmann says:

There was more truth for me . . . in this small detail, than in any kind of generalization about the question of evil. . . . There wouldn't be any film if for me these details were not so important. ("Seminar" 91–92)

Like Hilberg with a document, Lanzmann repeatedly returns to the specific. Jan Piwonski, who was a railroad switchman in 1942, conducts a tour of the Sobibor station. "Nothing's changed?" Lanzmann asks. "Nothing," Piwonski replies. "Exactly where did the camp begin?" Lanzmann asks. "If we go there, I'll show you exactly," Piwonski says. Lanzmann, Piwonski, and the translator walk onto the tracks. "Here there was a fence," Piwonski says. (Lanzmann walks "inside" the camp and then crosses "outside" its perimeter.) "This track was inside the camp." "And it's exactly as it was?" Lanzmann asks. "Yes," Piwonski says. "The same track. It hasn't changed since then" (38–39). "This film is the film of a surveyor," Lanzmann has said,

of a geographer, of a topographer. I wanted to know exactly how many meters wide the funnel was that led to Treblinka's gas chambers, exactly where there was a bend, where the women waited, naked, in less than twenty-five-degree weather, for the moment of entering the gas chambers.⁵

Shoah functions like a map, at once temporal and spatial; its value, in part, lies in this exactness, this responsibility to detail. *Shoah* bears witness because its interpretations are grounded in the material details Lanzmann encountered. The montage of the film is constructed as these acts of discovery.

6. "The alarming nature of darkness"

As Hilberg explains Fahrplananordnung 587, Lanzmann asks, "But why is such a document so fascinating, as a matter of fact? I was in Treblinka, and to have the two things together, Treblinka and the document. . . ." Lanzmann pauses. Hilberg responds:

[W]hen I hold a document in my hands, particularly if it's an original document, then I hold something which is actually something that the original bureaucrat held in his hand. It's an artifact. It's a leftover. It's the only leftover there is. The dead are not around.

(141–42)

Earlier in the film, Lanzmann reads from another of these leftovers, a French translation of a 5 June 1942 memo proposing that the defense contractor Saurer make specific technical changes in vehicles "now in service at Kulmhof [Chelmno]" or under assembly. Cargo space should be reduced by a yard, because the vehicle becomes unstable when filled to capacity. Simply reducing "the number of pieces loaded" is unsatisfactory because the extra space leads to inefficiency in "operating time," to unnecessary delays while the void fills with carbon monoxide gas (103). Despite Saurer's worry that such changes will affect stability, the proposed modification will not tip the loaded vehicle.

In fact, the balance is automatically restored, because the merchandise aboard displays during the operation a natural tendency to rush to the rear doors, and is mainly found lying there at the end of the operation.

The memo explains why the cargo area must be illuminated: "Because of the alarming nature of darkness, screaming always occurs when the doors are closed. It would be useful to light the lamp before and during moments of operation" (104).⁶ As Lanzmann translates this "artifact," the camera scans factories in the Ruhr valley. In an extended tracking shot from a moving vehicle, the film surveys a large industrial complex, then cuts to a truck on the road—to the cab, the grill insignia, a mud flap, which all bear the name *Saurer*.

7. "From within the darkness"

We wish to define the discourse of the witness in relation to the discourse of the interpreter. Although the witness interprets, there is always a danger in reducing witness to interpretation, because the constraints of the evidence can then be overlooked. In response to *Shoah* and to the details Lanzmann films, a viewer might be tempted to offer interpretation in place of evidence. Interpreting the 1942 memo concerning "changes for special vehicles . . . at Kulmhof," one might imagine that

[a]s soon as darkness sets in, the half-dead and half-living bodies in the gas van rush to the doors—rush to the outside light—in a desperate attempt at once to

II D 3 a (9) Nr. 214/42 G.Rs.

Berlin, den 5. Juni 1942

Einzigste Ausfertigung.

Geheime Reichsache!**I. V e r m e r k :**

- > **Betrifft:** Technische Abänderungen an den im Betrieb eingesetzten und an den sich in Herstellung befindlichen Spezialwagen.

Seit Dezember 1941 wurden beispielsweise mit 3 eingesetzten Wagen 97 000 verarbeitet, ohne daß Mängel an den Fahrzeugen auftraten. Die bekannte Explosion in Kulmhof ist als Einzelfall zu bewerten. Ihre Ursache ist auf einen Bedienungsfehler zurückzuführen. Zur Vermeidung von derartigen Unfällen ergingen an die betroffenen Dienststellen besondere Anweisungen. Die Anweisungen wurden so gehalten, daß der Sicherheitsgrad erheblich heraufgesetzt wurde.

Die sonstigen bisher gemachten Erfahrungen lassen folgende technische Abänderungen zweckmäßig erscheinen:

- 1.) Um ein schnelles Einströmen des CO unter Vermeidung von Überdrücken zu ermöglichen, sind an der oberen Rückwand zwei offene Schlitzze von 10 x 1 cm lichter Weite anzubringen. Dieselben sind außen mit leicht beweglichen Scharnierblechklappen zu versehen, damit ein Ausgleich des evtl. eintretenden Überdruckes selbsttätig erfolgt.
- 2.) Die Beschickung der Wagen beträgt normalerweise 9 - 10 pro m². Bei den großräumigen Saurer-Spezialwagen ist eine Ausnutzung in dieser Form nicht möglich, weil dadurch zwar

keine

But how could anyone write “precisely” of such matters? Certainly not on the basis of any witness but only by speculating about what it must have been like, by imagining what the “half-dead and half-living bodies” must have done and thought. An interpretation can be substituted for an event that was never witnessed, that could not have been witnessed: the dying victims’ experience in the gas vans. The interpretation could then be attributed—as it is by Shoshana Felman—to the film:

Pushing toward the light, the gas vans’ captives strive for some sort of *intelligence* of their own death, or at least for some sort of physical intelligibility. This is what the film, in its turn, tries to provide, at the same time that it attempts to testify from *their* position, to bear witness from the very inside of the gas vans. While testifying from within the darkness, the film also tries to reach, precisely, the intelligibility provided by an outside light.

(Felman and Laub 240)

First page of a 1942 memo concerning “special vehicles” at Kulmhof (Kogon et al. 333)

avoid death and to avoid the very fact of dying in the dark, to avoid, that is, not seeing, and not knowing, their own death. The asphyxiated bodies are attempting not just to prevent their death, but to prevent their death, precisely, from *escaping them*, from taking place without their knowledge or awareness.

(Felman and Laub 240)

According to this reading, Lanzmann’s film is not an attempt to witness what can be witnessed—after the fact, showing what remains—but an attempt to witness what cannot be witnessed, that is, the experience of those who died in a place from which no one returned. This example demonstrates what the discourse of the interpreter may attempt to articulate when it takes the place of evidence.

Another example: among the events the film returns to are the suicides of Freddy Hirsch, a leader of the Czech family camp at Birkenau, and of Adam Czerniakow, the leader of the Jewish council in the Warsaw ghetto. Again the discourse of the interpreter can supplant the evidence. Felman concludes that “both suicides are elected as the desperate solutions to the impossibility of witnessing, whose double bind and dead end they materialize” (Felman and Laub 228). Perhaps if witness were indeed impossible and if the Holocaust were (as Felman also writes) “the unprecedented, inconceivable historical advent of *an event without a witness*,” then one could interpret the suicides as materializations of this impossibility and declare that those who testify in *Shoah* are all “witnesses who *do not witness*, who let the Holocaust occur as an event essentially unwitnessed” (Felman and Laub 211).

An interpretation based on what could not have been witnessed leads to a conclusion that witness itself is impossible. One can also reach that conclusion by radically restricting the meaning of the term *witness*. Alluding to various forms of testimony—diaries, photographs, messengers, and escapees—Dori Laub says that

these attempts to inform oneself and to inform others were doomed to fail. The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence*. The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine.

(Felman and Laub 84)

Indeed, if this extraordinary degree of awareness is the standard, then few human experiences of any kind are ever witnessed. As a substitution that replaces witness with interpretation, such a hyperbolic account of witnessing makes an actual moment of witness impossible, leaving interpretation apart from evidence as the only possibility.

Yet it is possible to interpret *Shoah* in response to what *can* be witnessed. Rudolf Vrba, a member of the resistance who escaped Birkenau, recalls Freddy Hirsch's suicide in this way:

He asked: what happens to the children if we start the uprising. . . . [H]e said to me: “If we make the uprising, what is going to happen to the children? Who is going to take care of them?” . . . [H]e explains to me that he understands the situation, that it is extremely difficult for him to make any decisions because of the children, and that he cannot see how he can just leave them to their fate. . . . I came back in an hour, and I could see . . . that he's dying. (160–62)

Vrba says that rather than the “impossibility of witness,” Hirsch was worried at the time about the children.

Later in *Shoah* Lanzmann films Hilberg working from Czerniakow's diary (Czerniakow committed suicide when the Nazis began transporting Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka; Hilberg edited the diary). Hilberg's historical work is intercut with Franz Grassler's evasions and apparent surprise at the diary's very existence. Hilberg is filmed in extreme close-up, at times glancing toward Lanzmann, at other times looking down to quote from the diary:

The last entry precedes his death by a few hours. . . . “It is three o'clock. So far four thousand are ready to go. The orders are that there must be nine thousand by four o'clock.” This is the last entry of a man on the afternoon of the day that he commits suicide [23 July 1942, the day after the first transport to Treblinka]. . . . [O]n the twenty-second he is called in by Sturmbahnführer Höfle, who has come in there with the express purpose of taking the Jews out of Warsaw. . . . [H]ere, incidentally, is another fascinating point: Czerniakow is so agitated that he doesn't put down the dates correctly—instead of saying July 22, 1942, he says July 22, 1940. . . . “[B]y 4 P.M. today a contingent of six thousand people must be provided. And this at the minimum will be the daily quota.” Now he is told that at ten in the morning of July 22, 1942. . . . He keeps appealing. . . . [H]e is terribly worried that the orphans will be deported, and repeatedly brings up the orphans. And on the next day he still doesn't have assurance that the orphans are going to be saved. Now if he cannot be the caretaker of the orphans, then he has lost his war, he has lost his struggle. . . .

If he cannot take care of the children, what else can he do? Some people report that he wrote a note after he closed the book on the diary in which he said: “They want me to kill the children with my own hands.”

(188–90)

In filming Hilberg, Lanzmann records an interpretation that is responsive to the evidence that Czerniakow committed suicide because he would not “kill the children with my own hands.” As a witness working with a document, Hilberg testifies neither to the impossibility of witness nor to Czerniakow’s death in response to this impossibility but to the evidence that *can* be witnessed. “I have preferred therefore to address these things which are minutiae or detail,” Hilberg has said earlier in the film. Perhaps one should say that Hilberg has preferred to *be* addressed by these things, by these details.

8. “Because I was there”

Details shaped both the filming and the editing of *Shoah*—for example, the discovery of the small village train station at Treblinka and of the sign at the station that says “Treblinka.” In response, as a way of filming the name, Lanzmann finds a locomotive like the ones used to transport Jews to the camp. He has Henrik Gawkowski, who in 1942–43 drove death trains into Treblinka, drive this locomotive into the Treblinka station. What Lanzmann did not expect, however, was that Gawkowski “would suddenly do this gesture—of cutting the throat with the finger across the throat.” Lanzmann could not expect it because he “did not even know at this time that the gesture was made” by Polish peasants at Jews arriving on death trains (“Seminar” 83). As Lanzmann recalls the moment, some of its power survives in his words. Even now, he finds it “extraordinary” to watch the film, “because I was there when he did this” (87). Gawkowski

took this completely out of himself. He took the responsibility on himself to revive the scene completely. We pull into the station. He is looking behind. He has a twisted body, a twisted wrinkled face, and it’s obvious that he is making an extraordinary effort of remembrance. And it comes to him. (88)

At the time, “there were no wagons behind the locomotive” (87), but

he is looking at these wagons, at these imaginary wagons behind him, and he invents this gesture. (88)

As Lanzmann recounts the event, he shifts—like Gawkowski—between past and the present.

9. “A way of forgetting this”

Jean-François Lyotard writes that the Shoah “cannot be represented without being missed, being forgotten anew, since it defies images and words,” and “representing . . . in images and words is a way of forgetting this” (26). To the extent that interpretation is a representation, a substitution of images and words for an event that they displace, what Lyotard suggests may well be the case—for example, if an interpreter were to try to represent what happened in the gas vans after the doors were closed. But to the extent that witness works not by representing but by referring, not through interpretive substitution but by pointing out, perhaps witness is not “a way of forgetting” but a way of finding that a reference can recur. Lyotard distinguishes Lanzmann’s film from representations of the Holocaust:

Shoah is an exception, maybe the only one. Not only because it rejects representation in images and music but because it scarcely offers a testimony where the unrepresentable of the Holocaust is not indicated, be it but for a moment, by the alteration in the tone of a voice, a knotted throat, sobbing, tears, a witness fleeing off-camera, a disturbance in the tone of the narrative, an uncontrolled gesture. (26)

Lyotard says that *Shoah* does not represent, that it indicates. Perhaps what *Shoah* indicates, however, is not the “unrepresentable” but the historical. Perhaps its indications are restricted to the “unrepresentable” and bound by the limits of representation only if viewers approach the film in terms of attempted (and failed) representations. Whereas *Shoah* also indicates what still can be indicated, displaying reference that continues to recur.

10. “An open sign”

Lanzmann recalls that when he filmed Gawkowski’s gesture, the movement of the finger across the throat addressed him as “an open sign” because he did not know how to interpret it (“Seminar” 87). Later Lanzmann recognized that he “had to do



a.



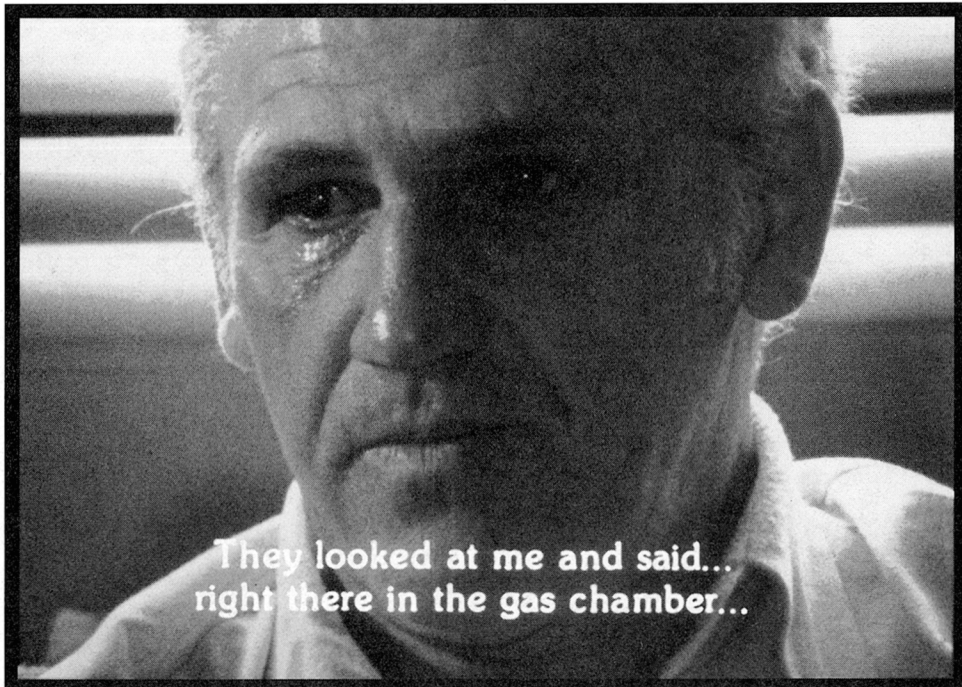
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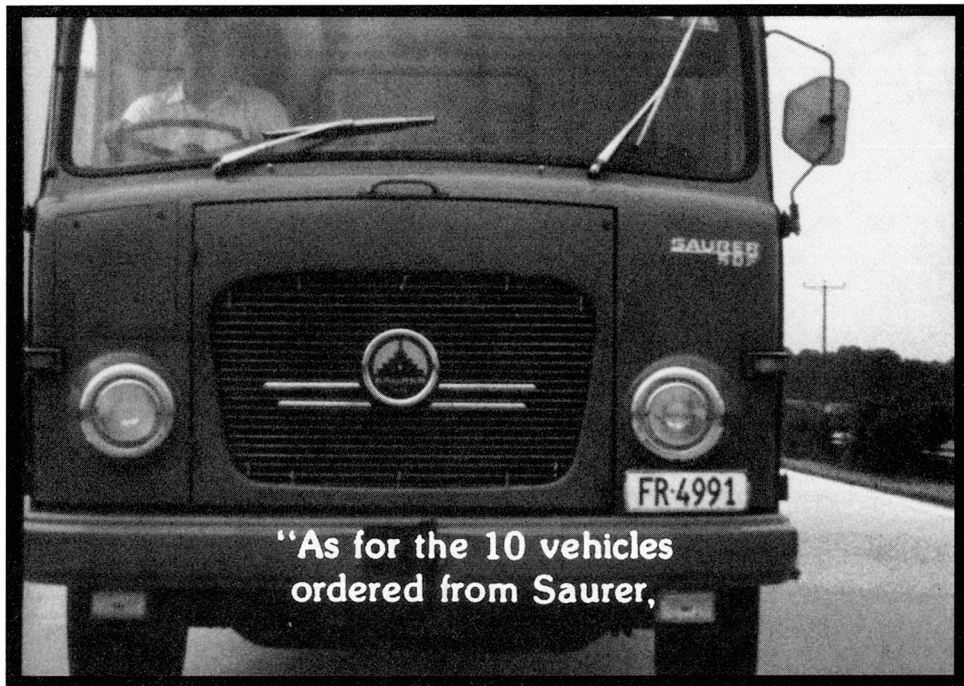
f.



g.



h.



i.

- a. Claude Lanzmann and Raul Hilberg
- b. At Sobibor
- c. At Treblinka
- d. At Auschwitz-Birkenau
- e. Filip Müller
- f. Abraham Bomba
- g. Henrik Gawkowski
- h. Simon Srebnik
- i. In the Ruhr valley

something with this. . . . It was what I call a pillar of the film. The question is where to place the pillar?" (88). Film sequences were edited in response to the gesture, so that its significance would at first be open for Lanzmann's audience as well: "During the editing of the film . . . the real question was what to do with the gesture of the locomotive driver," Lanzmann says. "[T]here was something so strong in [it] . . . that I decided that this would begin the second sequence on Treblinka" (83). *Shoah* is shaped by this sign, among others, whose significance awaits interpretation. "Nobody [watching the film for the first time] knows at this moment the significance of the sign" (87).

Like Lanzmann, viewers feel the weight of the evidence, of a reference that they witness but have yet to interpret. Interpretation, which comes later, responds to additional evidence and to other instances of the gesture. "Glazar [a Treblinka survivor] makes the same gesture" without understanding it. He "shows precisely that he does not understand or that he doesn't want to understand" the sign (86), and "after a while there is a *cascade* of the same gestures by the Polish peasants" (84). Confronted by the repetition, viewers become witnesses first, interpreters later, only in response. *Shoah* is edited to raise the question of response: how to respond to the event that is witnessed. "I was wondering," Lanzmann recalls, "what will the viewer understand from this?" (83).

11. "A sign of a shot"

"In order to bear witness to what happened," Lanzmann says, "I believe I created a new form" ("Spielberg" 14). It is often said that the Shoah cannot be represented, that these events are unrepresentable. But viewers can learn from Lanzmann's film that the events referred to as the Shoah produce a reference to themselves. What is the force of *Shoah*'s references?

In describing the film's accomplishment, one might adopt Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic approach to the different ways a reference can occur. For the most part, Peirce suggests, reference can be approached in terms of the production of interpretations or readings, interpretative references that Peirce calls "interpretants": a sign is "anything

which determines anything else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which [it] itself refers" (169). A sign works by determining an interpretative approach. You say, "Here is a tree," and what you say produces an interpretant, a reference in the terms that the word *tree* offers. I show you a picture of a tree; the picture produces an interpretant, a reference in the likeness of the picture. In each case, the interpretation might be said to represent. Where the production of interpretants is unconstrained by evidence, an interpretant will also substitute for—take the place of—the object or referent. Where this production is restrained by evidence, however, interpretation will be secondary to a different mode of production; it will work in response to signs that are *open* precisely because they have the referential force that Peirce calls the "indexical," a force that exists prior to any interpretative response. One might say that in such circumstances interpretation does the work of bearing witness.

Peirce says that an index is independent of interpretative response because its meaningfulness does not depend on this response. Its referential force is not produced by an interpreter, whether that interpreter is a reader, author, filmmaker, or spectator. In filming Gawkowski's gesture, in editing the film in such a way that the openness of the sign determines the montage, Lanzmann responds to an index that is there to be found. Any sign, Peirce writes,

which signifies what it does by virtue of its being understood to have that signification, . . . would lose that character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant.

An index, however,

is a Sign whose significance to its Object is due to its having a genuine relation to that Object, irrespective of the Interpretant. . . . [While it] would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object [or referent] were removed, . . . [it] would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. . . . [Something] with a shot in it is a sign of a shot . . . whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. (170)

Regardless of interpretation, a bullet hole is a sign that a gun was fired. As an index, the sign is not determined by the interpretation; it is determined

historically, by the event that produced it. Interpretations bear more or less adequate witness to this production.

“[R]eferring to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object,” an index is constituted “in some existential relation to the object” rather than “in . . . relation to an interpretant” (143).

[A] tremendous thunderbolt indicates *something* considerable happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was.

“[A] rap at the door” can signify a visitor—not only because this is a cultural convention but also because the visitor strikes the door, even when no one is home (161). Henrik Gawkowski’s gesture is an index not because of its conventional meaning but because it refers to the past that produced it. It is like Czerniakow’s diary, which Hilberg reads (and which Lanzmann presents to Grassler), or like the memos both Hilberg and Lanzmann hold in their hands.

12. “As it is now”

When speakers repeat songs or gestures in *Shoah*, they are not merely recalling the past but participating in it again. In the presence of those who experienced the Holocaust, Lanzmann—and by extension, a viewer—is made contiguous to the events. One of two Chelmno survivors, Simon Srebnik was sustained by his songs, kept alive largely because his “melodious voice” entertained members of the SS (3). When residents of Chelmno hear Srebnik sing again, they find themselves re-experiencing the event: “I really relived what happened,” one says (5).

Revisiting the fields near Chelmno, Srebnik tells Lanzmann that

it’s hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here. . . . The gas vans came in here. . . . It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now. (5–6)

Where Srebnik remembers crematoriums, viewers see open space, the absence of ovens, together with the absence the ovens produced. The film’s audience hears him refer to a scene that he cannot ade-

quately represent and watches him relive a situation even while he insists that “no one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. . . . I can’t believe I’m here” (6). Viewers watch as a reference is made. Srebnik cannot believe that he is “here,” but “here”—immediately before him—does not need to be re-created. It too has survived. “This is the place,” he says, adding that “no one ever left here again” (5). For the moment, “here” is the place from which Srebnik has never escaped. Later in *Shoah*, as Srebnik picks up a handful of earth and lets it run through his fingers, the film offers as a voice-over something he said at Chelmno:

I remember that once they were still alive, once the ovens were full, and the people lay on the ground. They were moving, they were coming back to life, and when they were thrown into the ovens, they were all conscious. Alive. They could feel the fire burn them. (102)

Here is what was “here,” Srebnik says. He indicates what still can be indicated.

13. “Details”

If the Shoah requires that reference, interpretation, memory serve as acts of bearing witness—and not merely as acts of interpretation—then what, in critical or artistic practice, will reference, interpretation, memory become? *Shoah* engages a practice that bears witness because it is grounded—often unbearably—in the constraints of existential signs. Although the film interprets the events it patiently traces in the evidence that survives, the force of the interpretation depends on the existential connections.

What does the film index?

Settings. The sites of the death camps today refer to the past that produced them as its traces. Their coexistence in the film with other locations—nearby towns, distant cities—connects these locations to the past. Spatial and temporal distances simultaneously separate and connect. Trains, in particular, make connections; as they cross Poland in the film, they are linked to the past—often by rails, railroad beds, cars that have persisted into the present. An engineer who was there repeats a gesture made there.

Witness. Accounts are empowered by their connections with past events. Hilberg's interpretations gain authority from the documents Hilberg has held, railroad schedules, passenger lists, accounting ledgers. Witnesses are constrained by what they can repeat: Hanna Zaidl explains that her father had always been reticent about the Shoah: "I had to tear the details out of him, and finally, when Mr. Lanzmann came, I heard the whole story for the second time" (8). Witnesses are constrained by what they did, the ways they remember, the particular connections they make through memory. As viewers, we watch the evidence of Srebrenik's return to Chelmno, recognize that what can be witnessed is not simply an interpretation or even a recollection but a repetition, the persistence of past events in what is seen, voiced, performed.

Filming. *Shoah* is constructed as a montage whose rhythm exposes the film's complex editing and structure. The film displays its production in extended shots that indicate what the camera does at the same time that they show what the camera filmed—for example, the interview with Abraham Bomba in the Tel Aviv barbershop, where the camera filmed Bomba's image as a series of reflections in mirrors. The technology (equipment truck, monitors, antennae) that allowed Lanzmann to film surreptitiously is displayed, as is the overt staging of scenes that enables witnesses to relive the past. As connections between the filming process and what is filmed are displayed, the ties between viewers and the witnesses, landscapes, and memories become overt. The film itself creates the connection—and through it, other material connections (for example, *Shoah*'s distribution and projection in theaters and its broadcast on television).

Viewing. In this film about conveying, transport, and transmission, early scenes are encumbered by sequential translations that entangle the viewer. Lanzmann poses a question in French; the translator re-creates the question in Polish; the reply in Polish is then translated back into French for Lanzmann. At first, these relays can seem awkward and inefficient, in need of streamlining, but the thicket of language exchanges calls attention to likely or inescapable distortions and omissions in translation. The lengthy interchanges create time to focus on each speaker, to anticipate responses to Lanzmann's

questions—questions that viewers often comprehend before the speaker does. Because viewers frequently depend on translation, they often engage a speaker's gestures before they understand the accompanying words. As viewers watch and listen to *Shoah*, they are marked by what they see and hear. The forms of action or inaction they choose in response to the film index what they have heard and seen. To receive the words of a witness is to find that one has also become a witness, that one's responses are there for others to witness as well. Once the transmission begins, one cannot stand outside its address.

14. "The same gesture"

In a Tel Aviv barbershop, Abraham Bomba goes through the motions of cutting a man's hair. An experienced barber, Bomba was selected to cut women's hair, first "inside the gas chamber," then "in the undressing barrack" at Treblinka (112). Although he knew precisely what the women faced, he was forced to give the impression that they were merely preparing for a shower. As Bomba recounts his story in a flat voice, he automatically performs the gestures of a barber, gestures that connect him to Treblinka. Lanzmann asks a barrage of questions, insisting on unsettling details that press Bomba beyond a routine account:

Can you describe precisely? . . . Excuse me. How did it happen when the women came into the gas chamber? Were you yourself already in the gas chamber or you came in afterward? . . . And suddenly you saw the women coming? . . . How were they? . . . All of them completely naked? . . . All the children too? . . . What did you feel the first time that it happened that you saw all these naked women come in? . . . But I have asked you and you didn't answer. What was your impression when you saw arriving these naked women with children? What did you feel? (113–15)

"To have a feeling," Bomba responds in a monotone,

over there was very hard to feel anything or to have a feeling, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, men and women, your feelings disappeared, you were dead with your feelings. You had no feeling at all. (116)

Women from Bomba's town, Czestochowa, arrived, women he knew; the wife and sister of another barber "came into the gas chamber" (117). "What could you tell them? What could you tell?" (116). Up to this point in the film, the flat, rehearsed tone of his answers has suggested that Bomba is recounting a story he has told many times before. But now, with *these* women, his voice and face change. "I can't. It's too horrible. Please," he says, and stops his story. The camera moves in closer. There is a prolonged silence. Bomba wets his lips with his tongue but has no words. Lanzmann asks him to go on. "I won't be able to do it," Bomba says; "don't keep me on with that, please. . . . I told you it's going to be very hard" (117). Bomba looks away from the camera, speaking to the man in the chair in barely audible Yiddish. Then to Lanzmann: "Okay, go ahead." What did the barber, Bomba's friend, tell his wife and sister? Lanzmann asks. What did Bomba tell them? "They could not tell them," Bomba replies, "because behind them was the German Nazis, the SS men." In what Bomba can hardly say now, there is the recurrence of what he could not say then:

[T]hey knew the moment they will say a word, not only the wife and the woman, which they are dead already, but also they would share the same path with them. (117)

In *Shoah*, Bomba's silence, a silence that the Nazis produced, comes to legibility. As viewers watch the sequence, they may realize that the filmmaker did not find his subject on location but staged the scene and that the barber is only going through the motions of cutting the man's hair. By arranging to film in the barbershop, by placing the scissors in Bomba's hands, Lanzmann has evoked the original event. If he had filmed in another place, Lanzmann recalls, "it wouldn't have been the same at all":

I asked him to imitate, to do the same gesture, and suddenly this man came back. . . . He started to cut the hair of the customer as he did in 1942 in the gas chamber . . . and you have suddenly a kind of explosion of truth. . . . He relives for himself the scene. (*Shoah*)

15. "The never-to-see-again"

How does the past recur? Walter Benjamin writes that

the past can be held only as image, as the never-to-see-again [*das auf Nimmerwiedersehen*] that flashes up in the instant of its recognizability [*im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit*].

("Theses" 255; "Thesen" 270; trans. modified)

Perhaps it is this image, "the never-to-see-again," that Lanzmann learned to film in *Shoah*. The filming and editing of *Shoah* become ways of reading such images; Lanzmann's film, a reading that witnesses the images. Benjamin writes that "what distinguishes [such] images . . . is their historical index" ("N" 8), the "temporal index" that "the past carries with it" ("Theses" 254). In *Shoah* Lanzmann films this reference and offers viewers an approach to reading it. For Benjamin,

the historical index of the images doesn't simply say that they belong to a specific time, it says . . . that they only came to legibility at a specific time.

Images offer themselves as indexes that refer at once to the time when they were produced and to the moment in which they can be read:

It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the past and the present moment flash into a constellation. ("N" 8)

One can approach Lanzmann's film as a sequence of these constellations.

The paradigmatic image (*Bild*) for Benjamin is not a picture (as Benjamin's language might suggest), nor is it a trope, a figure of speech that represents by interpreting. Instead it is a quotation, the display—in a moment of legibility—of signs that can address readers from the past. Regarding his own historical projects, Benjamin writes that "the work must raise to the very highest level the art of quoting without quotation marks . . . of montage" ("N" 3), of quoting not by setting apart between quotation marks, as illustration, but (even when quotation marks are used) by building a "literary montage," where "I have nothing to say. Only show. . . . [I] let it come into its own" ("N" 5). Perhaps Lanzmann's film can be approached in this way, the filming and editing as a work of quotation, its images the quotation of what Lanzmann witnessed and what *Shoah* offers to be witnessed, an extended

montage of the images that unexpectedly appear for a moment, like the sign at the Treblinka station or a finger across the throat, like a man not “able to do it.” Because the montage of quotation is explicit, it will “compel [us],” as Benjamin suggests, “to adopt an attitude vis-à-vis the process” of the work (“Author” 235): “what matters . . . is the exemplary character of [the] production” because “it can turn us into producers [as well]—that is, readers or spectators into collaborators” (233). In tracing what can be traced and in filming what can be witnessed, *Shoah* can turn spectators into producers in the work of bearing witness.

16. “There are no commentaries”

Shoah offers a careful layering of indexical markers, ranging from the film’s procedures to the viewer’s response, to the witness’s address and the events that survive in what is said. “There are no commentaries,” Lanzmann says of the film. “There is no voice-over that explains things. That implies work on the part of the audience.”⁷ *Shoah* inverts a more conventional documentary approach (as in Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog*, for example) that would match commentary and musical accompaniment with illustrative archival footage—footage shot for the most part from the perspective of the Nazis who originally produced much of it (victims did not film the Shoah or willingly play its background music). Lanzmann’s approach contrasts survivors’ recollections with apparently healed landscapes; it emphasizes both the pastness and the proximity of events we can no longer see. Firsthand narration emphasizes that these events recur in living thought, while the camera stresses that the locations persist—somewhat altered, but readable. The visible covering over (of mass graves, of the death machinery) indexes Nazi camouflage and obfuscation. Blankness, amnesia, eradication are left for anyone to see. In full view of absence, *Shoah* provokes viewers to see much more than nothing.

In the tension between narrated past and contemporary images, through arrangements of scenes in which the past recurs, Lanzmann has created an open form. *Shoah* presents a montage of encounters discovered in filming, instances selected and arranged as openings to other encounters not included in *Shoah*. Through its careful choreography, the film

invites unintended discoveries, the return of signs from the past, and unwilling memories, like those that emerge in the Tel Aviv barbershop or at the Treblinka station. The film has been constructed as possible openings to what has not otherwise survived; it offers a way of seeing and invites encounters that—like the filmmaker’s arrangements—are open to the force of evidence as the evidence constrains interpretative response. This openness to a significance that precedes any interpretation provides a model for approaching *Shoah* and its materials, for approaching this otherness that addresses viewers through the film.

Viewers participate in the film’s montage. They participate while witnesses find themselves entangled in the persistence of past events. By focusing on faces for lengthy intervals, then turning away to scan the surroundings, the camera reminds audience members that they are sharing time with the witnesses. Sequences of powerful testimony alternate with wordless stretches of slow scrutiny—long silent pans or sustained tracking shots that provide extended pauses for reflection. Through this cadence, the film’s pacing and internal recurrences also produce a viewer’s memories. As viewers, we witness speakers reconstructing their histories—reconstruction that becomes a model for our own acts of witness. Through the nine and a half hours, we work with these materials for ourselves. In this collaborative project, *Shoah*’s cadence gives us time.⁸

17. “The film made me”

More alarming than the impossibility of bearing witness (the absence of the referent can be reassuring) is the possibility of witness, the survival of the referent in its sign (which is never completely comforting). Signs are evidence, documents, symptoms. The witness also interprets, necessarily—but with the understanding that interpretation can never grasp what it can only barely sustain, the irrevocable connection between sign and referent, the indexical imperative of the sign. Hilberg suggests that Lanzmann could make *Shoah* because “he appreciated the value of an empirical fact” (Conversation).

Shoah ends with Simha Rottem’s memory of the Warsaw ghetto in ruins: “I was alone throughout my tour of the ghetto. I didn’t meet a living soul” (200). Earlier, Simon Srebnik remembers that when

he was a boy at Chelmno, he “dreamed that if I survive, I’ll be the only one left in the world, not another soul. Just me” (103). For Rottem, only the Nazis remained: “I said to myself: ‘I’m the last Jew. I’ll wait for morning, and for the Germans’” (200). For Srebnik, no one will be left to hear him.

Primo Levi recalls a recurring nightmare that many prisoners at Auschwitz shared:

[T]hey had returned home and with passion and relief were describing their past sufferings, addressing themselves to a loved one, and were not believed, indeed not even listened to. In the most typical (and cruelest) form, the interlocutors turned and left in silence.

(*Drowned* 12)

In Levi’s particular version of this dream—the “ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story”—“my sister looks at me, gets up and goes away without a word” (*Survival* 54). *Shoah* might be regarded as an alternative to this dream, Claude Lanzmann being the interlocutor who has chosen not to turn away. Emmanuel Levinas suggests that “to understand a voice that speaks to you [is] to accept the obligation in respect to the one who is speaking,” in an “ethical rapport with the face” of another, where “the epiphany of the other is *ipso facto* my responsibility with regard to the other” (Levinas and Kearney 24). One could say that in *Shoah*, Lanzmann has filmed the survival of an ethical rapport.

The film “did not relieve me of anguish,” Lanzmann explains; rather “the other way around. I have made the film, but the film made me” (“*Shoah*”). In this context, Levinas’s understanding of obligation may accurately characterize the experience of viewing the film, the coming-into-being in the second person that constitutes an obligation. By virtue of being addressed, the witness exists as *you*. Interpretation produces an account, what *I* have to say; but witnesses are obliged by their responsibility to that which addresses them: the sign and its referent; voices, settings, and film; other witnesses and the Shoah those witnesses index. Witnesses are obliged not to replace these things with what *they* have to say but to find *a* place. In the context of the Shoah (that is, the annihilation), existence in the second person becomes the witness’s response to the traces that turn out not to have been annihilated, to the voices of others—images, memories, indexes—that make the witness another as they come to legibility.

18. “They stood in front of me”

It is possible to recover the name of the woman who addressed Filip Müller in the gas chamber (not in *Shoah*, but Lanzmann’s film is open to other testimony—in this case, to the account Müller published after the 1964 Auschwitz trial):

The atmosphere in the dimly lit gas chamber was tense and depressing. Death had come menacingly close. It was only minutes away. No memory, no trace of any of us would remain. . . . Suddenly a few girls came up to me. They stood in front of me without a word, gazing deep in thought and shaking their heads uncomprehendingly. At last one of them plucked up courage and spoke to me: “We understand that you have chosen to die with us of your own free will, and we have come to tell you that we think your decision pointless: for it helps no one.” She went on: “We must die, but you still have a chance to save your life. You have to return to the camp and tell everyone about our last hours,” she commanded. “You have to explain to them that they must free themselves from any illusions. They ought to fight, that’s better than dying here helplessly. It’ll be easier for them, since they have no children. As for you, perhaps you’ll survive this terrible tragedy and then you must tell everyone what happened to you. One more thing,” she went on, “you can do me one last favor: this gold chain around my neck: when I’m dead, take it off and give it to my boyfriend Sasha. He works in the bakery. Remember me to him. Say ‘love from Yana.’ When it’s all over, you’ll find me here.” She pointed to a place next to the concrete pillar where I was standing. Those were her last words. (Müller 113)

The women pushed Müller from the gas chamber. An SS man beat him. “‘You bloody shit, get it into your stupid head: *we* decide how long you stay alive and when you die, and not you’” (114). Later, Müller returned to find Yana by the pillar. “She lay where she had said she would” (118).

Notes

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¹Lanzmann, *Shoah* 164–65. Quotations from the transcript of Lanzmann's film are taken from the English translation (published by Pantheon), but where this text departs from the film, we have followed the film. In correcting the English text, which Lanzmann rejects as inaccurate, we have found it useful to consult the French edition (published by Fayard).

²"... comment j'allais donner à voir des images du néant... Mon problème, c'était l'absence. Il me fallait partir de rien, du néant. Les traces de l'extermination avaient disparu, elles étaient abolies par les nazis eux-mêmes... absolument aucune image de la réalité de l'extermination" ("Intervention" 72). Translations of Lanzmann's "Intervention" are ours.

³"... raconter l'irracontable... Comment retrouver là la trace de quelque chose?... filmer ces pierres... il y avait en moi une sorte d'obstination qui me poussait... La gare de Treblinka... la confrontation entre ce simple nom... les paysans polonais qui se trouvaient autour des camps, autour des lieux d'extermination. Soudain, tout s'est remis à vivre... les cicatrices de l'extermination sont profondément inscrites dans les lieux, même défigurés, et dans les consciences des gens qui en avaient été les témoins directs" ("Intervention" 72–73).

⁴"Après dix ans de travail, je comprends mieux... le 'comment' de l'extermination. Quant au 'pourquoi,' je crois qu'il faut surtout ne pas poser la question" (Lanzmann, "Intervention" 73–74).

⁵"Ce film est un film d'arpenteur, de géographe, de topographe. Je voulais savoir exactement combien de mètres de large avait le boyau qui conduisait aux chambres à gaz de Treblinka, où était exactement son coude, où les femmes attendaient, nues, par moins vingt-cinq degrés, le moment d'entrer dans les chambres à gaz" ("Intervention" 74).

⁶The memo was written by Willy Just, a welder in the Reichssicherheitshauptamt ("Reich security main office") transport department, to SS-Obersturmbannführer Walter Rauff (Noakes and Pridham 1202). The English subtitles that translate the memo in the film are based on Lanzmann's French rather than the original German.

⁷"Il n'y a pas de commentaires. Il n'y a pas de voix off qui explique les choses. Cela implique un travail de la part du spectateur" ("Intervention" 75).

⁸"After making *Shoah*," Lanzmann has said, "it took me a long time to reenter ordinary time" ("On Making").

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