

## "Reflections on Shoah: Thirty-five Years Later"

William Faulkner observed: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." For many of us, the film "Shoah" affirms this observation. It is essentially the past re-enacted by interviewees who Lanzmann refers to as actors.

While pursuing hundreds of scholarly articles in preparation for this presentation I was somewhat surprised to see the extent of the discourse on the subject of the film. It is interesting to note that what has been written on the film is much larger and longer than the 350 hours of unedited film which would eventually result in "Shoah." Therein lies the dichotomy between knowledge acquired through the written word and knowledge acquired through the medium of film.

The advantage of the written word is that it allows us to definitively say or mean something. We are able to cite, make reference to previous research, to clarify, and absolutely develop a hypothesis. With film we are subject to the subtleties of the filmmaker's intentions, cinematic techniques, such as sound, lighting, camera angles, and finally editing. Shoah is further nuanced due to the three roles Lanzmann assumes in the film-narrator, interviewer, and inquirer.

With both film and text our pre-existing understanding of the topic will serve to inform knowledge gained.

Interpretation plays a much greater role in viewing a film than in reading text. By way of example I offer the following:

Naomi Mandel claims that because Hilberg articulates, the testimony of the head of the Warsaw ghetto *Judenrat* or Jewish Council, Adam Czerniakow in Shoah, *he is there to embody, to give flesh and blood to, the dead author of the diary and adds that unlike the Christian resurrection, the vision of the film is to make Czerniakow come alive precisely as a dead man.*

A corollary of this is to make the dead writer come alive as a historian, and to make, in turn, history and the historian come alive in the uniqueness of the living voice of a dead man, and in the silence of his suicide. Hilberg seldom hypothesizes about his subjects in his writings. However, in the film he allows himself to speculate about what Czerniakow knew of the fate of the Jews.

As the Nazi regime developed over the years, the whole structure of decision-making was changed. At first there were laws. Then there were decrees implementing laws. Then a law was made saying, "There shall be no laws." Then there were orders and directives that were written down, but still published in ministerial gazettes. Then there was government by announcement; orders appeared in newspapers. Then there were the quiet orders, the orders that were not published, that were within the bureaucracy, that were oral. Finally, there were no orders at all. Everybody knew what he had to do.

Hilberg notes, *In all of my work I have never begun by asking the big questions....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.*

Witness testimony can be viewed as one of the minute details like Hilberg's Nazi documentation that can be integrated into a description of events taking place during the genocide.

Without Raul Hilberg we may not have understood, and certainly not in the same way, debates about when that 'Final Solution' was designed, about what the essential conditions for genocide were, about the extent of criminality and complicity within the organised German community, about the responses of the bystanders, or notoriously about the reaction of the Nazis' Jewish victims. To this day historians of the Holocaust invariably salute *The Destruction of the European Jews* as a 'masterly analysis' and an 'unsurpassed landmark', agreeing that amongst Holocaust historians 'none is more influential than' Hilberg in having set the agenda for Holocaust research.

If nothing else, Hilberg reminds us why that bureaucracy produced the Holocaust, in a manner that avoids the simplicities of explanations indicting either antisemitism or simply the depersonalised structures of government and occupation.

In the film, Hilberg discusses one particular deportation that crossed so many borders and involved so many foreign currency exchanges that a branch of the Reich Security Headquarters Administration got stuck with the bill. Most of the time the rail bills were paid for with the seizure of the doomed Jews' property. Hilberg in this scene makes reference to the power of the written word that it is indeed an artifact of the genocide.

Hilberg writes that the Holocaust was a vast, single event, for which he would never use the word *unique*, because, *I recognize that when one starts breaking it into pieces, which is my trade, one finds completely recognizable, ordinary ingredients.* Thus, his discourse probed the bureaucratic means for implementing genocide, in order to let the implicit horror of the process speak for itself. Lanzmann uses the testimony of witnesses to reveal the horror.

Brad Praeger and Michael D. Richardson claim *film is not always suited to explore the dark corners of the mind: it depicts surfaces—especially faces and voices—and, as a rule, it leaves viewers to speculate about its subjects' inner lives.*

A “fiction of the real” Lanzmann’s term, does not attempt to represent reality as it was allegedly experienced but instead, respects the limits of representation and the inherent impossibility of representing horror itself. It refuses to substitute for or cover over the remaining material evidence of annihilation or to create narratives, representations, fictions, or dramas that would hide or mitigate the effects of the “nothingness” still evident in the present.

In fact, understanding never was Lanzmann’s purpose. He provocatively laid claim to an epistemological stance whose precise definition was provided by an SS guard: “Here, there is no why” a comment referred to by Primo Levi in “Is This A Man.”

From Lanzmann’s success, Vidal-Naquet draws the conclusion that a historian has a dual obligation to both art and the truth: If fiction risks deforming or even assassinating authentic memory and historical truth, art on the contrary is a necessary support for and supplement to history, a way of ensuring that the elements of the truth that are not simply “factual” will not be lost. The obligation to historical truth prohibits fictional representation of the Shoah.

Film can convey a sense of time not possible through academic discourse.

*One does not kill legends by opposing them with memories but by confronting them, if possible, in the inconceivable “present” in which they originated. The only way to do this is to resuscitate the past and make it present, invest it with a timeless immediacy. Lanzmann’s view of the Holocaust is one of “timeless immediacy.” By relying on the testimony of the participants, Lanzmann brought the past into the present - the eternal present, renewed in the act of existential recreation before the camera. The viewer then becomes a bystander to the Holocaust in the present tense most poignantly felt in the interview with the barber, Abraham Bomba’s relived experience.*

Now that we take for granted that most people feel sympathy with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, we might ask how far this truly brings us to some moral understanding of the event itself. Perhaps it would make more sense as a thought experiment, for those of us who were not in fact victims to also try to identify with the bystanders? By standing is what people generally do when others are in peril. It is precisely due to the medium of film that we are thrust into the role of bystander in the present. If there is any hope for Holocaust education to fulfill the slogan “Never Again” it is necessary to identify today with victims. Perhaps this is the greatest achievement of Lanzmann—that by way of association as a bystander while watching the film we are able to take the historical leap to today and avoid that which we are all too often guilty of-action through inaction, as bystanders.

Silence is a fence to wisdom as Rabbi Akiva warned us and today is an invitation to perpetrators of current and future horror.

Retrospectively, it is not difficult to locate *Shoah* in its own *zeitgeist*: a transitional moment in Western culture shaped by the emergence of memory as a privileged approach to the past.

Much of the discussion and criticism of Shoah centres around the difference between a phenomenological and metaphysical approach to understanding.

Phenomenology is the philosophical name for the method of investigating or inquiring into the meanings of our experiences as we live them.

Metaphysical studies generally seek to explain inherent or universal elements of reality which are not easily discovered or experienced in our everyday life. As such, it is concerned with explaining the features of reality that exist beyond the physical world and our immediate senses. Metaphysics, therefore, uses logic based on the meaning of human terms, rather than on a logic tied to human sense perception of the objective world.

Despite its gravity and sobriety—naked testimonies, without embellishment—*Shoah* launched a decade-long flood of rhetoric which depicted the Holocaust as an event neither representable, nor transmissible, nor comprehensible. In other words, a mystical experience and an object of worship, not of historical interpretation. Thus, Lanzmann's anthropological approach, based on the victims' recollections, paradoxically aligned with Elie Wiesel's famous hyperbole, which posited the metaphysical, nonhistorical character of the Holocaust.

*Well-known through the memoirs of, Rudolf Hess, the commandant of Auschwitz, is that "a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning.*

To go on teaching and writing without acknowledging the fact that high culture and barbarism have co-existed is at least irresponsible, and more likely, reprehensible.

George Steiner states in 'To Civilize Our Gentlemen' in the text. "A Reader,"

*And yet the problem is not simply the co-existence of good and evil, but the terrifying possibility of the collusion and collaboration.*

References available on request.

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