

*Resurrection*

*CLAUDE LANZMANN*

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

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CLAUDE LANZMANN was born in Paris in 1925 and grew up in rural France. He joined the French Resistance during the Second World War and was deeply involved in a number of dangerous operations. Following the war he was educated at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand and the Sorbonne, and he soon became a member of the intellectual circle of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. He began his career as a filmmaker in the early 1970s and released *Shoah*, his masterwork, in 1985. Critic Richard Brody has written that the film was “instantly historic” and stands among “the most distinguished works of art to come out of the late twentieth century.”

In the later 1980s Lanzmann became editor in chief of *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded by Sartre in 1945, and he still holds this position. He has continued to make films on the Shoah, and in recent years he has been widely recognized for a lifetime of literary and artistic achievement. In 2011 he received the French Legion of Honor, his country’s highest decoration, and in 2013 he was awarded the Honorary Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. Lanzmann continues to live and work in Paris. His latest release, *The Last of the Unjust*, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2013.

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

In June 2013 the trustees of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values held their annual meeting in Paris. It was the thirty-sixth meeting of the board and the first in France. The gathering culminated in a reception and dinner hosted by U.S. Ambassador Charles H. Rivkin and Ms. Susan Tolson. The eminent French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, whose 1985 film *Shoah* is recognized as a landmark of world cinema, addressed the audience after dinner. In his introduction of the speaker, President Richard C. Levin of Yale University noted the extraordinary arc of Lanzmann's life, including his role in the French Resistance, his long association with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and his sustained work on the Shoah from the 1970s to the present. Lanzmann graciously agreed to write and deliver his address in English, and we provide the text of it here. Some of the punctuation in his lecture notes has been altered for this presentation of the speech in published form, and a few emendations in vocabulary have been made. But the syntax, diction, and rhythms of Lanzmann's English remain essentially intact.

In his opening remarks, Lanzmann expressed his sense of honor in joining a distinguished line of figures from French culture who have delivered Tanner Lectures, a list that includes Michel Foucault, Raymond Aron, and Marcel Ophuls. Lanzmann brought to the occasion his deep knowledge of the Shoah as a stunning and systemic collapse of human values, as well as his personal experience as an artist struggling aesthetically, ethically, and psychologically with the materials of devastation. As Lanzmann reached the summation of his speech, the audience at Ambassador Rivkin's Residence had the collective sense that his address was moving into a higher register, an experience of the moral and aesthetic vision that informs the nine and a half hours of *Shoah*. In his remarkable final sentence, Lanzmann envisions a profoundly moral but completely undidactic art, the purpose of which is not to teach lessons but to forge in the imaginative order, across cultures and time, a humane community. This is the rightful community of the dead of the Shoah, which was utterly denied them, and for Lanzmann it was clearly a moral imperative to create a film that could evoke this communal empathy in its audience. He understands this aspect of *Shoah*—this restoration of the dead to their full humanity in the imaginative experience of the living—as both deeply reparative and of moral consequence for the human future.

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Your Excellency, Mr. Ambassador, honorable members of the Tanner Lectures Board of Trustees, it is definitely a great honor for me to have been chosen as the speaker for your annual gathering, after so many high figures of French culture. But I must say that in the meantime I am as frightened as proud, because I feel rather far from specific problems of higher education, including fund-raising matters. I don't know if my very singular experience may be any help and an incentive for the extremely important mission that has been entrusted to you. The best way is to follow frankly and without bias my own path—hoping that, at the end, your way and mine will merge into a single rich river.

The most important challenge of our time, in the field of education, is the question of transmission. How will we convey, how will we transmit to the following generations, not only the memory of the iron and cruel twentieth century, but the truth of what happened, the reality as such?

You are probably aware that it took me twelve years, day after day, to create my film *Shoah*, about the mass murder of six million Jews. I remember the words of my Israeli friend the great scientist and kabbalist Gershom Scholem. After I told him shyly what I was undertaking, he had only one answer: "But it is impossible!" He was right; I did not know at the time how right he was. I discovered it and convinced myself at every step of the creation process that it would surely be better and wiser for my personal balance to give up and to return to "normal life." But with the passing of the days, to retreat appeared more and more difficult, till the moment it became clearly impossible. One day I knew that I was condemned to go to the very end, without knowing how many more years it would take or how long this film would be. And it was precisely at this moment that I understood with a sunny clarity what would be, what should be, the subject of *Shoah*.

*Shoah*, in its entirety, is shaped around the absence of traces. The Nazis did not want only to destroy the Jews, but to destroy the destruction itself—in other words, to erase the traces of the crime, at the very moment of its perpetration. It is the greatest attempt at annihilation in the history of mankind. The challenges are expressed immediately during the first thirty minutes of the film. "No one can describe it. No one can re-create what happened here. Impossible. And no one can understand it," says the first survivor of Chelmno, the gas-vans extermination camp. "And let's not talk about that," commands the second survivor. The disappearance of the human beings and the disappearance of the traces of the murder go together, and *Shoah* is built—completely based—on the

concept of the “perfect crime.” The testimonies of the members of the Sonderkommandos, special details of Jews assigned to the maintenance of the death factory and regularly killed, hardly a handful of men, were essential, because they had been, with the killers, the only witnesses of the death of the Jewish people as a whole. *Shoah* elaborates and does nothing else. It avoids carefully the use of any archival material. This is because there is none relating to the subject of the film—those who died in the exterminations and their actual deaths—and because I did not want to use those archives that have been seen everywhere and are not images of extermination camps, but of concentration camps, found when the Allied forces liberated them, and showing corpses of people dead from typhus in Bergen-Belsen or elsewhere.

I have to repeat here that the extermination camps were located on the territory of Poland alone and that there were in Germany only concentration camps, without gas chambers. And it was never my purpose to make a film in order to answer the negationists or so-called revisionists. As my friend Pierre Vidal-Naquet wrote: “One does not have discussions with these people; one may talk about them, but converse with them—never.” *Shoah* overflows through and through the field of proof, and there is an unbearable obscenity in anyone’s saying: “Prove to me that this happened.”

The reality of the extermination by the Nazis of six million Jews—men, women, and children—does not require proof from us. A visit in the Jewish areas of the Parisian cemeteries is the most eloquent proof. It is not rare to see a picture, a photograph placed on a grave, with this legend: “Dead, murdered, killed in Auschwitz (or in Treblinka) in 1942 (or 1943).” Sometimes the date is more complete, but always with the same overwhelming meaning: the graves are empty of mortal remains, of any bones. The ashes of the dead Jews scattered seventy years ago in the rivers or the lakes of Poland turned into these photographs on cemetery graves, as if the living could not accept the brutal fact of the disappearance. I didn’t need any proof that the Shoah had happened; the proof was here, under my eyes, irrefutable, and would be transmitted inconsolably till the end of times. There is not a single corpse in my film *Shoah*, but this is precisely the truth of the extermination itself, the sign of its success, of its achievement. Three hours after the arrival of a “transport” of three, four, or five thousand persons in the extermination camp—Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno, Belzec, or Auschwitz—death had already struck: all had been choked by the gas, their bodies burned in ovens or pyres; the biggest bones had been crushed, the ashes thrown in the wind.

*Shoah* escapes the classical, poor, and abstract dichotomy between fiction and documentary. I started my work in 1973, and from the first day I was sure that I would never make a journey to Poland. I refused with all my strength, all my soul. Poland was the place of the destruction, not only of the Polish Jews, but also of a vast number of Western European Jews. I was convinced that there was nothing to see there and that it was possible to talk and to think about the Holocaust from any part of the world. I was even more radical: if Poland had been the core of the extermination, there shouldn't be anything over there that deserved to be recorded, either by film or by audio system. A documentary usually records something that preexists the filming. How could it be possible to film the nothingness? Right or wrong, these were my ideas. I was stubborn and sure that there was no other way. I conducted my research and interviews throughout the world, and it was only after four years that it became clear to me that it was impossible to avoid Poland. For a very simple reason: I could not understand what some of the future protagonists of my film were telling me. The first time I met Simon Srebnik, the singing Jewish boy who opens *Shoah*, it was between us the contrary of a dialogue. The only thing extraordinary for me during our first meeting at his home in Israel was when he started to sing in Polish "Male biale domek" ("My Little White House"), the song he used to sing on a Polish river, in a flat-bottom boat, when he had to go with an old German guard to cut grass for the rabbits of the SS poultry. I knew, at this very moment, that this song would be the opening of my film. I didn't ask Srebnik at that point if he would agree to this. It took me months to persuade him, but I succeeded. This is what I call the logic of creation, in other words, the logic of art. I had to create, to invent at every moment, every minute of the construction of *Shoah*. And it is absolutely clear in my mind that if I had obeyed a classical documentary logic—starting the shooting in Poland, for instance—the film would have been completely different and without doubt much too weak for the immense subject it intended to treat. The whole question of art lies in such dilemmas.

When I landed in Warsaw, after a difficult battle with myself, in the winter of 1978, I met an interpreter, and we decided to go the following morning to Treblinka, on the site of what had been the camp. It was a cold, peaceful landscape, covered with monumental and symbolic stones, arranged like tombs in a graveyard. It was impossible to realize that between July 1942 and August 1943, during the peak period of camp activity, seven hundred thousand Jews had been gassed, first buried and

then exhumed, and burned on this rather small, rhombus-shaped piece of Polish land. I stood there one hour, one hour and a half, not particularly moved, took again my rented car, and started to circle around what had been the camp, discovering to my extreme surprise villages, the names of which I will remember forever: Prostyn, Poniatowo, Wolga Ogonblick. In these villages there were people of all ages, children and old men and women, adults who had without doubt clear eyes and fresh brains thirty-six years before. The big massacre had very close witnesses, and each of those villages had at least one church as impressive as a cathedral. I did not talk to anybody, went on circling again, until the moment I saw on the road an indication panel, with a name in black letters on a yellow background, a simple name, at the entrance of a hamlet: Treblinka. It was for me an extraordinary shock, as if I had been struck by the force of lightning.

I never doubted the existence of Treblinka, but this name for me was so much connected with horror that it had also a kind of double meaning, one of them being like a legendary one. The Poles themselves, when they talk about these years of their lives, have the same legendary tone. But Treblinka, with its peasants, its railway station and its panels, its ordinary railway traffic, was, in this winter of 1978, absolutely real, and the man I was after almost five years of hard work exploded suddenly. Until this very moment—the discovery of the name “Treblinka” at the station—I was like a bomb, a bomb loaded with knowledge, the knowledge I had acquired through all the books I read, my travels, and interviews and meetings. The bomb was loaded to the brim, but until then the fuse and flame were missing. Treblinka, the encounter of a name and a place, became suddenly an irresistible explosive force that knocked the breath out of me. I hallucinated; the temporal distance between 1942 and 1978, between the past and present, was abolished, vanished brutally, and an extreme conviction overtook me, with which there was no possibility of compromise. I knew that I had from now on to obey one unique law: to shoot, to start filming as fast as I could. This is what I call the logic of creation, and it is clear that if I had started flatly by inquiring and shooting in Poland, *Shoah* would have been an absolutely different film. Such are the impenetrable ways of creation.

There are thousands of examples of such moments in my work on *Shoah*, my hunt for the Nazi figures, for instance, and the objective dangers it implied, the mixture of emergency and patience without which it is impossible to create a work of art over so many years, my specific relationship to time. *Shoah* is a combination of different genres of cinema:

it is a criminal investigation, with all the subterfuges, twists and turns, and tricks; it is also a western (a western of the East!), since I am the first man to return to the crime scene; it is most of all an epic film with the irremediable presence of tragedy.

There are in *Shoah* moments that are today regarded as classic scenes of cinema, such as the whole sequence of the barber of Treblinka Abraham Bomba. With seventeen other barbers, professional barbers of his hometown of Chestokowa, he had been deported to Treblinka during one of the German "Aktions" against the ghetto of Chestokowa. Don't forget that a ghetto was never emptied at once and that the process could last months and even years. Bomba, in the time of my research, was extremely important for me and for the film, because I knew that he had been a key witness of the last minutes of life for women inside a gas chamber at Treblinka. For two weeks, the women's hair was cut *inside* the gas chamber by the barbers, who, immediately afterward, had to leave the place where the gas would choke to death their wives, sisters, mothers, and children. Nobody returned alive from a gas chamber. There is no testimony about death by gas in the Nazi factories, since only the living are able to talk and to tell the story. The unique thing I could do was to approach as much as possible, as closely as possible, the terrible battle that occurred in the big gas chambers of Birkenau. In crematoria II and III, three thousand people were choked together, and the most frightening and exact description of this struggle (struggle for life, struggle for death) is given in *Shoah* by Filip Müller, a member of the Sonderkommando, who left the chamber at the very last minute and was among the first to open the doors after the gassing.

It is easy to understand why Abraham Bomba, like Filip Müller, was so essential to me. He stood also with the victims till the ultimate second, before the closing of the gate. I knew that Bomba lived in the United States, but I had not a single further hint of his whereabouts. It took me months to locate him; I lost him and I found him again, but in Israel. The first time we met in the Bronx, I discovered that his dominant wife would interrupt him and not let him speak. I told Bomba that we had to be alone; I had no camera, no tape recorder, hardly a pen—I was in the process of inquiry. Bomba answered that he possessed a small hut in upstate New York, in the mountains. I rented a car, came to fetch him on a Saturday morning, and listened to him for forty-eight hours. I did not know at the time if, for money reasons, I would have the possibility to shoot with him; I did not know when, and I couldn't give him any guarantee. It was the beginning of a long odyssey, but I learned something of great importance: I needed



to know in advance as much as I could about the Jewish protagonists of my future film, in order to be able to help them, when the moment would come, to talk in front of a camera and cinema crew. It was completely different with the Poles and with the Germans also, since at times I had to trick them and to film them without their knowledge.

But let's return to Bomba, because he is a paradigmatic example of the difficulties of transmitting extreme and painful experiences. When we began to approach the crucial sequence of the barbers' cutting the women's hair inside the gas chamber, just before their death, I felt that Bomba was becoming more and more anxious, more and more nervous. I proposed filming the scene in a barbershop, thinking that cutting the hair of a customer, repeating the gestures of his whole life, would generate feelings and words that would make it easier for him to bear the terrible burden and responsibility of being publicly an actor and a witness to the world of one of the greatest horrors of the Shoah. He liked the idea, but immediately a moral, an ethical, question emerged: what shop should it be, a barbershop or a hairdressing salon for women? The second solution would have been unbearable, obscene. The women in the gas chamber were not shaved, but their hair was cut with scissors and fell on the floor; to show such a thing on the screen would have been a monstrous transgression and the contrary of the help I intended to provide. I met innumerable conflicts of this type during the shooting and the editing of *Shoah*, which attest to the identity of the ethical and the aesthetic.

Well, it was a real barbershop, with barbers who ignored what was at stake, with a customer chosen by Bomba himself—a friend of his—and Bomba became naturally an extraordinary actor, who did not stop using the scissors all around his friend's head as he was answering my questions. But this scene is complex, subtle, not simple at all. Bomba starts to answer in a completely neutral, objective voice, as if this didn't happen to him. He evades precise questions, and I have to stop him and start again, from another angle or outlook. I filmed *Shoah* in its entirety with a sixteen-millimeter Aaton camera, which requires reloading every eleven minutes. There is, behind the camera, a film meter that indicates how many minutes remain before the need to reload. At this moment of filming Bomba, I saw that I had still five minutes of virgin film in the camera, but I felt a tension in the barbershop, in Bomba's voice. I said very fast, with a low voice for my cameraman, "We reload immediately." The process went at full speed, Bomba ignored it, and I started again with a question he had avoided: "I have asked you, 'What did you feel the first time you saw arriving in the

gas chamber all these naked women with children?” He answered, “Oh, you know, sir, to live day and night among bodies, among dead people, you don’t feel anything; you were dead with your feelings; you had no feelings at all.” And one minute later, Bomba has tears in his eyes, cannot talk anymore, refuses to continue, and begs me to stop. But I don’t stop the camera: these tears of Bomba were for me the seal of truth, precious like blood. It was not as some stupid people said a sadistic scene, but its absolute contrary: a brotherly achievement. Bomba wanted to testify. It was my duty to help him. But let’s imagine that, at this very moment, the camera had not been reloaded and we had run out of film. It would have been an absolute and irreparable loss, because I never would have dared, it would have been practically and ethically impossible for me, to say to Bomba, “Please, sir, wait one second and start again to cry!”

To make such a film is dangerous; what happens cannot be repeated; it is by no means theater. And believe me, everybody was highly conscious of such danger. Similar situations happened many times during filming, and I could give several examples. The reason is that such a work is above all an incarnation, and this may be the most difficult thing to understand. I remember people of goodwill asking me, “But why did you make a film? You could have written a book.” I always answered: I did not make this film to deliver new information, in spite of the fact that there are new discoveries in *Shoah* and thanks to *Shoah*, which had been unknown to historians. For instance, not a single historian, before the testimony of Abraham Bomba, had been aware of the fact that during two weeks the women’s hair had been cut inside the gas chamber at Treblinka. The professional historians had to confront the smiles or the tears of the protagonists of *Shoah*, the reverberating voice of Filip Müller describing what he called “le combat pour la vie,” “le combat de la mort,” that took place in the huge gas chambers of Birkenau, where three thousand victims—women, children, and men—were struggling in the dark against each other in order to breathe a few seconds longer. The protagonists of *Shoah*, to transmit the most horrible truth, had to relive the extreme experiences that marked them forever, and this is the reason it is so difficult and almost impossible for them to testify. It is what I call the incarnation: to watch *Shoah* is to experience this incarnation for the viewer too! I’ve always said that *Shoah* is like a resurrection of the dead—not in the Christian religious meaning of the word, but that my main purpose was to resurrect the dead in order to have them killed a second time, but with a radical difference: this time they will not die alone in complete abandonment, but we will die with them.

